



Fallout from Trump NATO address shows fissure between allies

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WASHINGTON — A key goal of Russia is to weaken U.S. ties with European partners, but experts say Russia is among the least of the U.S.’ worries as European allies begin pulling away after Trump’s brusque NATO address, when he scolded allies for failing to pay enough on defense spending while ignoring the mutual benefits of a strong Western alliance.

“It’s like a friendship or a marriage where you are actually trying to see the other in the worst possible light,” said Constanze Stelzenmuller, a senior foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, who called Trump’s funding fight with NATO members “toxic.”

The fissures came in sharp focus yesterday when German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested that Trump’s diplomacy and the U.K.’s Brexit vote are wake-up calls to Germans and other Europeans that these allies are no longer reliable.

“We Europeans must really take our fate into our own hands — of course in friendship with the United States of America, in friendship with Great Britain and as good neighbors wherever that is possible also with other countries, even with Russia,” Merkel said in a campaign speech in Munich. “But we have to know that we must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans.”

Merkel didn’t mention Trump by name, but her reference to last week’s NATO summit shows the immediate effect of Trump’s speech scolding 23 NATO members — including Germany — who are falling short of the organization’s 2 percent GDP national defense spending benchmark.

Trump touted the success of his speech in a tweet.

“Many NATO countries have agreed to step up payments considerably, as they should. Money is beginning to pour in- NATO will be much stronger,” Trump tweeted Saturday, though NATO does not collect members’ defense funds.

The speech pleased supporters at home who back Trump’s “America First” stance.

“What the American people want is for their allies to be reliant on their own defense and not to be reliant on us forever,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

But Trump’s myopic focus on the spending levels to the exclusion of all the other support NATO members provide — including efforts to deter Russian aggression — could be costly, especially given that the only time NATO invoked its Article 5 collective defense measures was after the Sept. 11 attack.

“That was a speech that did not go down well in Europe,” Stelzenmuller said. “In many ways it was hugely problematic.”