



Rex Tillerson overstates Donald Trump's effect on increased NATO defense spending

Allison Graves

October 15, 2017

President Donald Trump has repeatedly criticized allies for not meeting NATO defense spending targets, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said it's already made a difference.

"The president early on called on NATO member countries to step up their contributions — step up their commitment to NATO, modernize their own forces," Tillerson said on CNN's *State of the Union* on Oct. 15. "He's been very clear, and as a result of that countries have stepped up contributions toward their own defense."

We wondered if NATO countries have stepped up defense contributions and whether the step was a result of pressure from Trump. We found that 25 NATO allies plan to increase spending in real terms in 2017, according to official NATO statistics released in June.

But there are many factors at play that have contributed to the increase — not just Trump's urging.

Countries' defense spending has increased for the past 3 years

There are 29 members of NATO, formally the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which was created in 1949 to provide collective security against the Soviet Union.

NATO leaders reached a collective agreement in 2014 that directed members to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense spending by 2024.

As of June 2017, only five countries met that obligation: the United States, Greece, Estonia, Poland and the United Kingdom. (In 2017, the United States has spent about 3.6 percent of its GDP on defense.)

However, the latest data from NATO shows that 25 countries plan to step up spending in 2017.

NATO expects Romania to meet the 2 percent threshold this year, and Latvia and Lithuania to reach it by 2018. It's also worth noting that all NATO members have been asked to submit national plans on increasing defense spending by the end of this year.

Other countries since 2014 have been contributing more to their defense, even if they are not at the 2 percent mark.

At a June 29 press conference, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that 2017 marks the third consecutive year of increasing defense investment across European allies and Canada, adding that there has been "an increase of almost \$46 billion U.S. dollars more for defense since 2015."

The "Trump administration's rhetoric on defense spending has put pressure on NATO allies to continue the upward trajectory," said Jeffrey Rathke, a senior fellow and deputy director of the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Experts said the trend really started in earnest after the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin after 2014. Specifically, the Russian invasion of Crimea and Russian-backed fighting in eastern Ukraine galvanized countries to focus on their territorial defense capabilities at this time.

At the Wales Summit Declaration in 2014, members of NATO pledged to increase their defense spending to 2 percent of their gross domestic products by 2024.

So some of the increase in defense spending was decided before Trump took office.

Stephen M. Saideman, an international relations professor at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, pointed to the situation in Canada as an example. He said Canada's defense policy review was mostly completed before the 2016 American election.

"They might have changed some of the numbers, but the biggest driver of the big increase in future spending (not in 2017 but down the road) has been the commitment to build 15 frigates/destroyers despite increased costs —and that is mostly due to political competition for votes in Halifax/Vancouver, not Trump pressure," he said.

Since becoming president, there's no doubt Trump has done several things to persuade NATO leaders to get their defense commitments up to the alliance's standard.

But Trump was not the first president to call for a step up in defense spending. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama called for increased spending by countries on defense. The difference is Trump has made the issue a major point at almost all NATO-related discussions.

Christopher A. Preble, the vice president for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, said it's possible countries have stepped up spending to protect themselves from the possibility that the president might not fulfill obligations made under the NATO treaty.

In the past, Trump has questioned defending other countries from attack if they don't spend what he considers to be their fair share.

"They are beginning to question the wisdom of subcontracting their security to a third party over whom they have no control," he said.

Our ruling

Tillerson said that NATO countries are contributing more to their defense as a result of pressure from Trump.

According to NATO, over the last 3 years, European allies and Canada spent almost \$46 billion more on defense, meaning increases in spending have occurred before Trump's presidency. Experts said it's possible that Trump's pressure has contributed to the continuation of the upward trend, but Tillerson's explanation glazes over the other factors that have led to increases, including the conflict in the Ukraine in 2014.

We rate this statement Half True.