

Tusk Calls It 'Bad News for Enemies': EU Leaders Agree to Integrate Militaries



EU leaders take part in a group photo on the launching of the Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, during an EU summit in Brussels, December 14, 2017.

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) -- European Union nations, now unfettered by Britain's decision to quit, achieved a 70-year-old ambition Thursday to integrate their defenses, launching a pact between 25 EU governments to fund, develop and co-deploy armed forces.

First blocked by the French Parliament in the '50s and later by Britain, which feared creation of an EU army, the pact aims to end the squandering of billions of euros by splintered defense policies.

It is also aimed at lowering Europe's heavy reliance on the U.S. "More than half a century ago, an ambitious vision of the European Defense Community was created but what was

missing was the unity and courage to put it into practice," Tusk, who chairs EU summits, said of the failed '50s attempt.

"The dream was at odds with reality. Today this dream becomes reality," he said in a speech in front of EU leaders and military personnel from each of the 25 countries involved.

Denmark, which has an opt out from EU defense matters, and Malta, were the only EU countries not to sign up, along with Brexit Britain.

The pact, called Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, is meant as a show of unity and a tangible step in EU integration, diplomats said, particularly after Britain's decision to leave.

EU leaders also agreed to extend economic sanctions against Russia for another six months over what they say is Moscow's interference in Ukraine, which is not an EU member.

Tusk said in a tweet that the bloc's members "united on roll-over of economic sanctions on Russia" at a summit in Brussels on Thursday.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said they had had an "intense discussion" on the measures, but "there is not enough progress in order to end the sanctions."

Germany's SPD Agrees to Coalition Talks

BERLIN (AFP) -- Germany's Social Democrats, the country's second strongest party, agreed Thursday to kick off exploratory talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives that could lead to a new coalition government early next year.

The centre-left SPD approved "open-ended" talks expected to start next week that could lead to either a new right-left "grand coalition", the toleration of a Merkel minority government or, if negotiations fail, new elections.

Ten weeks after inconclusive polls left German politics deadlocked, SPD chief Martin Schulz had pleaded with his party to give him the green light for such talks, promising to push key demands from improving social welfare to strengthening the European Union.

"We don't have to govern at any price, but we must not reject governing at all costs either," Schulz told the Berlin congress of 600 delegates, many of whom loathe the idea of once more governing in Merkel's shadow as the SPD has for the past four years.

Schulz, the former president of the European Parliament, vowed to extract a high price if the SPD supports Merkel for a fourth term from early 2018 at the helm of Europe's biggest economy.

He demanded Berlin join French President Emmanuel Macron



The center-left SPD party has voted to kick off exploratory talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative CDU/CSU union.

and other proponents of major EU reforms in boosting the bloc and its currency union, including by raising investment and giving the eurozone a common finance minister and budget.

Schulz was later reelected party chief with almost 82 percent of the vote.

The SPD motion said the party was "aware of its responsibility to our country" and "not indifferent" to whether a new government is formed, but pledged that any government that emerges must drive forward "the fundamental renewal of Europe".

Many hurdles remain on the road to a new government in Berlin. What-

ever the outcome of exploratory and then possible formal coalition talks, any deal will have to be agreed by SPD delegates and, finally, a rank-and-file vote.

Merkel's CDU welcomed the SPD's willingness to talk, with senior party official Klaus Schueler stressing that the goal remained "to build a reliable and stable government for our country".

In his more than hour-long speech, Schulz made a passionate call for a "United States of Europe" by 2025, arguing that a unified, federal bloc is "the only chance we have to keep up with the other great regions of the world."

North Korea Vows 'Merciless' Response to U.S. Siege

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Russia said Friday it is not ready to "strangle" North Korea economically with new stringent sanctions.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov said the degree of pressure on North Korea was approaching "a red line," Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

North Korea says decades of foreign pressure and threats, manifested in repeated joint military drills by the U.S. and its regional allies, have forced it to pursue a sophisticated ballistic missile program and develop deterrent intercontinental warhead missiles (ICBMs).

The U.S. has been pressing for a complete shut-off of oil supplies to North Korea with newer sanctions.

North Korea on Thursday warned that it would take "merciless self-defensive" measures should the United States enforce a naval blockade against the country.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), citing a Foreign Ministry spokesman, said Pyongyang would see the siege as "an act of war".

"Should the United States and its followers try to enforce the naval blockade against our country, we will see it as an act of war and respond with merciless self-defensive counter-measures as we have warned repeatedly," the agency said.

The spokesman stated that U.S. President Donald Trump was taking an "extremely dangerous and big step towards the nuclear war" by seeking such a blockade, KCNA said.

Morgulov urged dialogue instead of harsher sanctions. He said Moscow had not had high-level contacts with the new North Korean leadership but such communication was possible "in theory."

Morgulov said Russia had many other communication channels with North Korea, which "in one way or another are bearing fruit."

On Thursday, the presidents of the U.S. and Russia discussed means of de-escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula over phone.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently said the U.S. was willing to enter into negotiations with North Korea without preconditions.

Washington's special envoy for North Korea on Friday expressed hope that Pyongyang would accept Tillerson's diplomatic offer of unconditional talks.

Joseph Yun told reporters in Bangkok that the talks could take place without preconditions. Yun acknowledged it was unclear whether North Korea would be willing to talk following a period of accelerated nuclear activity, saying, "It's very hard to discern what their intent is without having real dialog."

"Let's see how they respond... I am very hopeful that diplomacy has a long way to go before any next steps are considered," he said.

The White House which under Trump has used fiery and sometimes derogatory rhetoric against North Korea earlier contradicted Tillerson by saying time was not right to talk to North Korea.

Sexual Abuse of Children in Australia 'National Tragedy'



The bronze statue of Cardinal Moran stands by the entrance of St. Mary's Cathedral, in Sydney, Australia.

SYDNEY (AFP) -- The government ordered the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in 2012 after a decade of pressure to investigate widespread allegations across the country.

The commission was contacted by more than 15,000 survivors who detailed claims of child abuse involving churches, orphanages, sporting clubs, youth groups and schools, often dating back decades.

It heard horrific stories during often confronting and emotionally exhausting public and private hearings.

In total, more than 4,000 institutions were accused of abuse, with many of them Catholic-managed facilities.

"Tens of thousands of children have been sexually abused in many Australian institutions. We will never know the true number," the final report said, making hundreds of recommendations to improve children's safety and make it harder for pedophiles to operate unpunished.

"Whatever the number, it is a na-

tional tragedy, perpetrated over generations within many of our most trusted institutions."

It said abuse occurred in almost every place where children resided or attended for educational, recreational, sporting, religious or cultural activities.

And it was "not a case of a few 'rotten apples'". "Some institutions have had multiple abusers who sexually abused multiple children," it said.

"Society's major institutions have seriously failed. In many cases those failings have been exacerbated by a manifestly inadequate response to the abused person.

"The problems have been so widespread, and the nature of the abuse so heinous, that it is difficult to comprehend." More than 2,500 referrals have been made to police, with 230 prosecutions under way.

Among the 17-volume report's recommendations was the creation of a National Office for Child Safety, and for religious ministers to be required to report abuse confided to them during confession. During its hearings, the commission heard that seven percent of Catholic priests were accused of abuse in Australia between 1950 and 2010, but the allegations were never investigated, with children ignored and even punished when they came forward.

There were more than 1,800 alleged perpetrators, with the average age of the victims at the time 10 for girls and 11 for boys. The St John of God Brothers religious order was the worst, with just over 40 percent of members accused.

The inquiry embroiled Australia's most senior Catholic cleric George Pell, now the Vatican's finance chief, who was questioned over his dealings with pedophile priests in Victoria state in the 1970s. Pell is currently accused of multiple historical sexual offences, with a committal hearing in March due to decide if there is enough evidence from the prosecution for the case against him to go to trial.

Russian Ships Could Cause 'Catastrophe' for West



Russian President Vladimir Putin (C), Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (R) and Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Navy Vladimir Korolev visit the Admiralty historical building on the Navy Day in St. Petersburg, Russia, July 30, 2017.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- A UK military chief has accused Russia of developing unconventional warfare, saying it could use its developed submarines to attack undersea cables essential to communications between NATO members.

In a speech at the Royal United Services Institute, the chief of the UK defense staff, Stuart Peach, claimed Russia posed a major threat to the United Kingdom and other NATO members by moving its vessels close to Atlantic cables that are essential in carrying communications between Europe and the U.S.

"There is a new risk to our prosperity and way of life, to the cables that crisscross our sea beds, disruption to which through cable-cuts or destruction would immediately — and catastrophically — fracture both international trade and the internet," said Peach, who was recently appointed as chair of the NATO military committee.

"In addition to new ships and submarines, Russia continues to perfect unconventional capabilities and information warfare," he added.

Peach said the vessels were capable of cutting and interfering with deep-sea cables. Therefore, he added, NATO "must continue to develop our maritime forces with our allies to match Russian fleet modernization."

The British military official made the remarks after a report said 97% of global communications and \$10 trillion in daily financial transactions were transmitted through such cables. The report, issued by UK center-right think tank Policy Exchange also cited U.S. intelligence officials speaking about Russian submarines "aggressively operating" near Atlantic cables.

Last month, NATO announced plans to increase its cyber defense capabilities. It said the move was aimed at deterring what it called threats and hacking attempts from Russia, China, and North Korea.

According to the plan, NATO will be allowed to adapt its command structure to integrate cyber weapons into its military operations.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said last month, "This will strengthen our cyber defenses, and help integrate cyber into NATO planning and operations at all levels."

News in Brief

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- The U.S.'s top media regulator voted to end rules protecting an open internet on Thursday, a move critics warn will hand control of the future of the web to cable and telecoms companies. At a packed meeting of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in Washington, the watchdog's commissioners voted three to two to dismantle the "net neutrality" rules that prevent internet service providers (ISPs) from charging websites more for delivering certain services or blocking others should they, for example, compete with services the cable company also offers. Outside, protesters angrily called on Congress to block the FCC's efforts. Bouquets of flowers and white candles were placed on the grass outside the building, an apparent reference to the "death" of open internet. Posters of the angry-face emoji covered the walkway. And activists carried hand-made signs that read: "Don't make the internet a private toll road"; "Ajit Pai doesn't want you to meet your fiancé online"; and "Don't undermine our democracy — that's Russia's job".

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) -- Two people were killed and three injured Thursday night in two stabbing incidents in the southern Dutch city of Maastricht, authorities said. Police said in a tweet that one suspect had been detained on suspicion of involvement in the incidents. They released no details on the suspect or the victims. Prime Minister Mark Rutte said it was not a terror attack, echoing comments from the police. "It is terrible what happened there. People were killed and others were injured," Rutte said at an EU summit in Brussels. The incidents happened in a residential neighborhood in the north of Maastricht, a city 215 kilometers (133 miles) south of the capital, Amsterdam, and close to the Netherlands' borders with Belgium and Germany.

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) -- At least 6,700 Rohingya Muslims, including many children, were killed in the first month of violence that erupted in Myanmar's troubled Rakhine state in August, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said Thursday. The medical charity said the first major survey on the scale of mortality was the "clearest indication yet of the widespread violence" that began on Aug. 25, which has driven over 600,000 Rohingya across the border to Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar region, MSF estimated at least 6,700 Rohingya — including some 730 children below the age of five — were killed by violence between Aug. 25 and Sept. 24.

The charity said the figures were "the most conservative" estimates. "What we uncovered was staggering, both in terms of the numbers of people who reported a family member died as a result of violence, and the horrific ways in which they said they were killed or severely injured," MSF's medical director Sidney Wong said.

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) -- Human Rights Watch (HRW) has said in a report that Kenyan security forces raped, beat and assaulted civilians during the recent election turmoil across the East African country. Kenya has been in turmoil since September when the Supreme Court nullified the re-election of President Uhuru Kenyatta over "irregularities and illegalities". The court ordered a rerun in October that was boycotted by opposition leader Raila Odinga, handing Kenyatta a landslide of 98% of votes cast by just 39% of the electorate. The leading international rights group on Thursday said it recorded "police use of excessive force against protesters, killings, beatings and maiming of individuals, looting and destruction of property". The report also cited multiple gang-rapes by men in uniform in the slums of the capital, Nairobi, and the opposition strongholds of Kisumu and Bungoma.

MOGADISHU (AFP) -- A suicide bomber from Somalia's al-Shabaab insurgents killed 18 police officers and wounded 15 others on Thursday when he blew himself up inside the country's main police academy, the force's chief said. Witnesses said the police were gathered in a square ahead of their early morning parade when the bomber attacked in the capital Mogadishu.

The assault is the latest in a decade-old battle by the extremists to overthrow Somalia's internationally-backed government. "Eighteen members from the police were killed, and 15 others were wounded, after a suicide bomber blew himself inside the academy," acting police chief Gen. Muktar Hussein Afrah told reporters. The attacker disguised himself in a police uniform to access the camp, Afrah said.

LIMA (Reuters) -- Peru's center-right President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski said on Thursday he would not resign in the face of possible impeachment over payments to a firm he owned by a Brazilian company that has bribed politicians across Latin America. In a defiant national address flanked by members of his cabinet and party lawmakers, Kuczynski said he owned Westfield Capital Ltd when it received deposits from Brazilian builder Odebrecht. But he denied wrongdoing and said he did not manage it while he held senior government roles. Before Kuczynski spoke, the leaders of several parties in Congress vowed to seek his impeachment if he did not step down. Opposition parties control enough seats in the single-chamber body to force him out. He plotted strategy with advisors for hours on Thursday. Several senior officials wanted him to resign to avoid a drawn-out battle for survival, two government sources told Reuters.