

# NATO in Disarray After Trump's Disparaging Remarks



Former U.S. president Donald Trump at a NATO meeting in 2019.

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) -- NATO "cannot be an alliance a la carte," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Monday after Donald Trump downplayed his commitment to NATO's security umbrella in Europe if he becomes U.S. president again.

Trump ignited a political firestorm and sent a chill through the United States' European allies on Saturday when he said he would "encourage" Russia to attack any NATO country that does not meet financial obligations.

"Let's be serious. NATO cannot be an a la carte military alliance, it cannot be a military alliance that works depending on the humor of the president of the

U.S." day to day, Borrell said. "It exists or it not exists," he said, adding that he was not going to keep commenting on "any silly idea" emerging from the U.S. presidential election campaign.

The words from Trump -- who, when in power, pulled America out of an international nuclear pact with Iran, and the Paris climate accord -- prompted a broadside from current U.S. President Joe Biden.

Biden called Trump's comments "appalling and dangerous".

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg warned Sunday that "any suggestion that allies will not defend each other undermines all of our security, including that of the U.S."

Trump, 77, is all but assured the Republican nomination for the White House in the November vote against Biden, 81.

The failure of many of NATO's 31 members to meet a military spending target of at least 2% of gross domestic product has long been a source of tension with the United States, whose armed forces form the core of the alliance's military power. NATO estimates have shown that only 11 members are spending at the target level.

Former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, who is Trump's lone remaining challenger for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, said: "The last thing we ever want to do is side with Russia."

As chances rise of a Biden-Trump rematch in the U.S. presidential election, America's allies are bracing for a bumpy ride.

Many worry that a second term for Trump would be an earthquake, but tremors already abound -- and concerns are rising that the U.S. could grow less dependable regardless of who wins. With a divided electorate and gridlock in Congress, the next American president could easily become consumed by manifold challenges at home -- before even beginning to address flashpoints around the world, from Ukraine to the Middle East.

French President Emmanuel Macron's recent verdict was blunt: America's "first priority is itself."

## Pentagon Chief Admitted to Critical Care Ward With Cancer



Pentagon Lloyd J. Austin III came under widespread criticism last month when he went to the hospital for several days without disclosing it to the White House.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was admitted to a critical care ward with a bladder issue after he transferred his duties to his deputy Sunday, the Pentagon said, as he battles prostate cancer.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks "assumed the functions and duties" just before 5:00 pm (2200 GMT), said in a statement, adding that the White House and Congress had been informed.

Austin was "admitted into the critical care unit at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for supportive care and close monitoring," the Pentagon said in a later statement, citing his doctors.

The latest health scare came weeks after it emerged that Austin, 70, had kept previous hospital stays secret and had not immediately informed U.S. President Joe Biden of his cancer diagnosis, sparking criticism as the United States faces crises in the Middle East and Ukraine.

Austin effectively vanished from the public eye for treatment for prostate cancer in December and again in January after suffering complications from the procedure.

This time, the public was alerted around two hours after he was sent to the hospital on Sunday afternoon.

Austin "was transported by his security detail" to the hospital, Ryder said in the earlier statement.

Ryder noted initially that the de-

fense chief brought along classified communications systems and would be retaining "the functions and duties of his office."

However, the announcement that Hicks would instead be taking over came just a few hours later.

"At this time, it is not clear how long Secretary Austin will remain hospitalized," said the latest statement, attributed to Dr John Maddox and Dr Gregory Chesnut of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland.

"The current bladder issue is not expected to change his anticipated full recovery. His cancer prognosis remains excellent."

Austin apologized this month after coming under heavy political fire for keeping the previous hospital stays secret.

At the time, he said he was still in recovery, suffering from leg pain and using a golf cart for transportation inside the Pentagon.

The undisclosed absences -- as well as this current hospital stay -- come at a time when the United States faces a spiraling crisis in the Middle East, with American forces in Iraq and Syria facing near-daily attacks in retaliation for Washington's steadfast support of Israel.

The top U.S. defense official is also a key figure in attempts by the Biden administration to maintain support for Ukraine's fight against Russia, as Republican members of Congress refuse to authorize new funding for military aid to Kyiv.

## North Korea Tests New Rocket Launcher Control System



The new rocket launcher would now be "re-evaluated" and its battlefield role "increased".

SEOUL (AFP) -- North Korea said on Monday it had developed a new control system for a multiple rocket launcher that would lead to a "qualitative change" in its defense capabilities.

Pyongyang's Academy of Defense Science successfully carried out a "ballistic control test firing of 240-mm caliber multiple rocket launcher shells" on Saturday to develop a "controllable shell and ballistic control system" for the launcher, state news agency KCNA reported.

The new rocket launcher would now be "re-evaluated" and its battlefield role "increased", KCNA said.

Nuclear-armed North Korea this year declared South Korea as its "principal enemy", closing agencies dedicated to reunification and outreach, and threatening war over "even 0.001 millimeters" of territorial infringement.

Leader Kim Jong Un repeated on Friday that Pyongyang would not

hesitate to "put an end" to South Korea if attacked, calling Seoul the North's "most dangerous and first enemy state and invariable arch-enemy".

In January, North Korea fired an artillery barrage near two South Korean border islands, prompting a live-fire drill by the South and evacuation orders for residents.

Kim has also ramped up weapons testing, including this year's launch of a flurry of cruise missiles, which analysts said the North could be supplying to Russia for use in Ukraine.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol has vowed a strong response if Pyongyang attacks, calling on his military to "act first, report later" if provoked.

The hawkish Yoon has bolstered defense cooperation with the United States and Japan since coming to office in 2022, including expanding joint drills, to counter Pyongyang's growing threats.

## MPs Rap UK Revival of Plan to Send Migrants to Rwanda



A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's Home Secretary James Cleverly sitting alongside Britain's PM Rishi Sunak, on Dec. 06, 2023.

LONDON (AFP) -- The UK government's latest legislation to revive its controversial plan to send migrants to Rwanda is "not compatible" with the country's rights obligations, a watchdog panel of British lawmakers warned Monday.

The ruling Conservatives introduced the so-called Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill late last year, shortly after the Supreme Court ruled that deporting asylum seekers to Kigali is illegal under international law.

If passed after ongoing scrutiny in both Houses of Parliament, the legislation would compel UK judges to treat Rwanda as a safe third country.

It would also give government ministers powers to disregard sections of international and British human rights legislation.

But after a detailed review, parliament's own Joint Committee on Human Rights said in a new report that it had various concerns.

"By denying access to a court to challenge the safety of Rwanda the Bill is not compatible with the UK's international obligations," the committee concluded in its 52-page report.

The report, compiled by UNEP's World Conservation Monitoring Centre, found that over the past three decades, 70 CMS-listed species have become more endangered, including the steppe eagle, Egyptian vulture and the wild camel.

five Conservative lawmakers among its 12 members, warned enacting it held many pitfalls, including "undermining the rights-compliant culture that should exist in all public bodies" in the UK.

The report criticized allowing ministers rather than judges to determine whether a country like Rwanda is safe or not.

"The question of Rwanda's safety would best be determined not by legislation but by allowing the courts to consider the new treaty and the latest developments on the ground," the report stated.

The draft law is central to the government's policy to combat "irregular immigration" to Britain, in particular via small boats crossing the Channel, by deporting arrivals to the East African country.

It has been criticized by opposition parties as well as various international bodies, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

But Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, facing an uphill battle to win a general election due later this year, has vowed to press ahead, winning a knife-edge parliamentary vote in the lower House of Commons on the legislation last month.

Members of the upper House of Lords chamber, which includes former senior judges, are due to renew their debate on it Monday, with many having already expressed deep unease about parts of the plan.

## UN Report: One in Five Migratory Species Faces Extinction

PARIS (AFP) -- From African elephants searching for water, to turtles crossing seas to nest, and to albatrosses on their ocean-spanning search for food, the world's migratory species are under threat across the planet, according to a landmark report Monday.

The first-ever State of the World's Migratory Species assessment, which focusses on the 1,189 species covered by the UN Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), found that one in five is threatened with extinction and 44 percent are seeing their populations decline.

Humans are to blame, by destroying or breaking up habitats, hunting, and polluting areas with plastics, chemicals, light and noise.

Climate change also threatens to interfere with migration routes and timings, by altering seasonal conditions.

"We are finding out the phenomenon of migration itself is under threat," CMS chief Amy Fraenkel told AFP, adding that the report should be a "wake up call about what's happening".

The report is released as over 130 signatory countries -- with the notable absence of the United States, China, Canada and Russia -- gather for a conference in Samarkand, Uzbekistan from February 12 to 17.

Migratory species often rely on very specialized sites to feed

and mate and their journeys between them can cross international borders and even continents.

Iconic species that make some of the most extraordinary journeys across the planet include the monarch butterfly, the humpback whale and the loggerhead turtle.

"Today's report sets out the evidence that unsustainable human activities are jeopardizing the future of migratory species," said Inger Andersen, head of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).

Among the chief threats are agriculture and fishing. Farming can destroy habitat, Fraenkel said, while "bycatch" by fishing vessels -- when other fish or animals become ensnared by fishing gear -- is the biggest continued threat for whales.

She said that while habitat destruction is considered the main risk to migratory animals, for some species the report found that it was "intentional killing", either for wild meat, or sport, or because the animals are thought of as pests.

"There is a big gap that we've now identified that needs action," she said.

The report, compiled by UNEP's World Conservation Monitoring Centre, found that over the past three decades, 70 CMS-listed species have become more endangered, including the steppe eagle, Egyptian vulture and the wild camel.



BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan (AFP) -- Kyrgyzstan on Monday accused the United States of meddling in its internal affairs after Washington criticized the Central Asian country for mirroring legislation used in Russia. A new bill would require organizations that get money from abroad to register as "foreign representatives", a label with Soviet-era connotations similar to Russia's "foreign agent" law. President Sadyr Japarov responded to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who had written to him to express concern about the bill. "I have to note with regret that the content of your letter has signs of interference in the internal affairs of our state," Japarov wrote in the letter, published by his spokesman. He said there are "tens of thousands" of non-government organizations "successfully working" in Kyrgyzstan and many receive funding "not only from the USA and EU". "Naturally there is a problem directly related to the protection of the legitimate interests of the Kyrgyz state," Japarov said. He went on to say that some foreign-funded groups "often disseminate false and unreliable information".

KYIV (Reuters) -- Ukraine will produce thousands of long-range drones capable of deep strikes into Russia in 2024 and already has up to 10 companies making drones that can reach Moscow and St Petersburg, Ukraine's digital minister said. Mykhailo Fedorov spoke about the wartime drone industry he has championed in an interview in Kyiv in which he revealed new details about the sector, after a spate of Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian oil facilities in recent weeks. "The category of long-range kamikaze drones is growing, with a range of 300, 500, 700, and 1,000 kilometers. Two years ago, this category did not exist ... at all," he told Reuters. Fedorov, 33, has been at the heart of Ukraine's effort to nurture private military start-ups to innovate and build up the drone industry as the war goes into its third year and Ukraine seeks new ways to fight back against well dug-in Russian forces. The recent series of strikes on oil facilities, he said, reflected the government's progress in rapidly deregulating the drone market and increasing funding for it, with the state acting as a venture investor.

SYDNEY (AFP) -- Australia awarded public contracts to firms suspected of money laundering, bribery, arms running, drug smuggling and corruption, according to the findings of a probe into lax procurement practices published Monday. A damning investigation by Australia's former spy chief found that several companies and individuals who won contracts to manage Australia's controversial offshore migrant detention programs were suspected of engaging in unethical or illegal activities. "It's possible that hundreds of millions of dollars was funneled from taxpayers into companies which were using that money in part to conduct criminal wrongdoing," said Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil, who commissioned the report. Under Australia's so-called "Pacific Solution", thousands of people who attempted to reach the country by boat were moved to offshore "processing" centers on the Pacific islands of Manus and Nauru from 2001. Many languished in the camps for years, in conditions described by rights groups as "hellish".

MANILA (AFP) -- The alleged mastermind of a bombing at a Catholic mass in the southern Philippines has died after a clash between members of a pro-Daesh group and government troops, officials said Monday. Four people were killed and dozens wounded in the December 3 attack on worshippers inside a university gym in Marawi, the country's largest Muslim city, that was later claimed by the Daesh group. Eight militants were suspected of carrying out the attack on Mindanao island, army brigade commander Brigadier General Yegor Rey Barroquillo told AFP. Five have been killed in manhunt operations, one has been detained and another two were still on the run, he said. Among the dead was Khadafi Mimbasa, who went by the alias of "Engineer". The Armed Forces of the Philippines said in a statement that he was the "mastermind" behind the bombing.

AMSTERDAM (Reuters) -- Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang said on Monday that every country needs to have its own artificial intelligence infrastructure in order to take advantage of the economic potential while protecting its own culture. "You cannot allow that to be done by other people," Huang said at the World Government Summit in Dubai. Huang, whose firm has catapulted to a \$1.73 trillion stock market value due to its dominance of the market for high-end AI chips, said his company is "democratizing" access to AI due to swift efficiency gains in AI computing. "The rest of it is really up to you to take initiative, activate your industry, build the infrastructure, as fast as you can." He said that fears about the dangers of AI are overblown, noting that other new technologies and industries such as cars and aviation have been successfully regulated. "There are some interests to scare people about this new technology, to mystify this technology, to encourage other people to not do anything about that technology and rely on them to do it. And I think that's a mistake."

ATHENS (AFP) -- Three people died in a shooting at the premises of a shipping company in a coastal suburb of Athens on Monday, a Greek police source said. The shooter was found dead with his weapon next to him, according to ANA news agency and several Greek media, which reported he had barricaded himself inside the building.