
PENCE VOWS EU AND NATO SUPPORT AS PROTESTORS REJECT COOPERATION

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21.02.2017

Deutsche Welle (20 February 2017)

US Vice President Mike Pence's peace mission has assuaged concerns from Europe's political leaders. But human rights protesters say there is no compromise to be had with Washington on Donald Trump policies.

European Council President Donald Tusk wanted to clear the air with Mike Pence in Brussels on Monday. Appearing before journalists, Tusk thanked Pence, who was standing in for US President Donald Trump, for the chat.

"We all truly needed it," Tusk said candidly. "Too much has happened over the past months in your country, and in the EU. Too many new - and sometimes surprising - opinions have been voiced over this time about our relations and our common security for us to pretend that everything is as it used to be."

But Tusk appeared now willing to let bygones be bygones. He said he'd asked Pence three questions about Washington's intentions regarding support for world order, for security centered on NATO and for the European Union's unity - and that he'd been reassured by Pence's answers.

[EU - USA Mike Pence & Donald Tusk in Brüssel (picture-alliance/AP Photo/T. Monasse)]

European Council President Tusk said Pence addressed his concerns

Pence responded in tightly scripted remarks that it was a privilege to be there in EU Council headquarters to deliver Trump's expression of a "strong commitment" to partnership with the bloc.

"Whatever our differences," Pence said, "our two continents share the same heritage, the same values and above all the same purpose to promote peace and prosperity through freedom, democracy and the rule of law. And to those objectives we will remain committed."

Neither leader took any questions from journalists, in line with Pence's meetings earlier with EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and later with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who pleaded for both EU-US collaboration and EU unity.

Former US ambassador to the EU, Anthony Gardner piped in on Twitter to say he hoped Pence's friendly position was both genuine and consistent with the White House's stance.

Protesters not deterred

A livelier conversation took place outside the building, where a group of protesters was less

soothed by Pence's peace mission than EU leaders. Tanja Gohlert, who'd spearheaded the large anti-Trump protest on inauguration day, had rallied forces again. Her main cause is gender equality, but she was joined by those demonstrating for reproductive choice and gay rights, as well as against the Muslim travel ban and the US-Mexico border wall. Bare-chested women braved the Brussels chill to chant against Pence and patriarchy.

Asked whether the protesters should give the new leadership more than this month before concluding the worst, Gohlert said they'd already had plenty of time to get worried.

"The executive orders [Trump] has already passed have really made people fear for their lives and wonder, can they even travel? Can they be with their families?" she said. "This movement of the far right isn't just in the US - it's in Europe as well, the Netherlands and France and Poland and people are afraid of what this tendency is and we don't want to lose our rights."

Call for NATO spending hike

Pence later moved across town to NATO headquarters to deliver a message that was a combination of his EU remarks and his speech over the weekend at the Munich Security Conference: solid support for NATO inviolability but a stern message about money.

Pence said the Trump administration plans to increase its own military budget, already drastically disproportionate compared with other allies, which ups the pressure even more on the 23 countries which are not yet spending the mandated 2 percent of GDP on defense. For those countries, Pence said unequivocally: "This must end."

Finally taking questions from journalists, Pence was asked what the "or else" is for those governments that don't build in a financial boost by the end of this year as Trump demands. He said he honestly doesn't know - and he's presuming there won't have to be any such penalty.

Russia assurances

The vice president was also drawn back briefly to domestic turbulence, making his first public comments on the firing of former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn. Flynn had told Pence he didn't have improper conversations with the Russian ambassador in Washington about sanctions being imposed by former President Barack Obama - when in fact he had done so. Pence said he'd been "disappointed" by the misinformation and that dismissing Flynn was the right thing to do.

He sought to reassure Europeans worried about Trump's closeness to the Kremlin, saying the administration would continue to pressure Moscow to adhere to the Minsk de-escalation process in eastern Ukraine, where a renewed ceasefire attempt is just getting underway.

Summing up from both the Munich and Brussels appearances, former US ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker said Europeans should be pleased with the reassurance from the White House hand-carried by Pence.

"The question now really is what is Europe going to do?" Volker said. "Are they going to continue to be unhappy with Donald Trump and what they don't like about him? Or will they actually step up to the plate on defense spending and have constructive solutions to the common challenges we face so that the US and Europe can get on with things together?"

At the protest site, no one was in the mood for compromise. Belgian lawyer Lieven

Vandendriessche, a gay married father of two adopted black daughters, joked that his life embraces everything the Trump administration hates. Vandendriessche carried a sign telling the religious Mike Pence that "God made me gay AND fabulous" and said he'd be organizing his work life around protests from now on.

Kaynak/Source: