

WIN WITHOUT WAR



Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

The big news this week was obviously Donald Trump's meeting with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki (and the accompanying disastrous press conference). For more on that, check out what our friends at the [Truman National Security Project](#) and [National Security Action](#) have to say. For this week's Debrief, we'll be focusing on important news that didn't get as much attention.

TOPLINE TAKEAWAYS

- *More NATO defense spending? Don't get caught in the talking points trap.*
- *European efforts to save the Iran deal are looking less promising.*
- *Afghanistan: Doing the same thing over and over isn't working. Is the Trump administration finally noticing?*

THERE'S NO REASON FOR NATO COUNTRIES TO SPEND MORE ON DEFENSE

As we all know by now, Donald Trump went to Brussels last week for NATO meetings and chastised member states for not spending enough on their militaries (while naturally [spewing a handful of lies](#) about it). While NATO countries already committed to spending 2 percent of their national GDPs on defense last year, Trump ([seemingly](#)) randomly upped it to 4 percent.

The Washington foreign policy establishment grumbled about Trump's approach, but largely agreed with the substance. One analytic duo even said the affair [reminded them](#) "of the words of that great political philosopher Jeffrey Lebowksi (aka the Dude): '[You're not wrong, Walter, you're just an asshole.](#)'"

ACTUALLY, YOU ARE WRONG, WALTER

Even some progressives and Democrats [joined](#) in saying Trump was right to ask NATO to spend more. As the *Atlantic's* Peter Beinart [noted](#), that "underscores just how detached liberal foreign policy has become from the values liberals supposedly prize."

Indeed, increasing NATO military spending makes no sense. Here's why:

- **Linking defense spending to percentage of GDP is completely arbitrary.** As Beinart noted, Greece meets the current target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, but

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they do so to guard against fellow NATO member Turkey, not as some grand plan for greater NATO security. Meanwhile, Germany, for example, could meet the spending threshold simply by giving everyone in their Ministry of Defense a raise.

- **NATO already spends nearly 14 times more on defense than its primary adversary, Russia.** It's highly unlikely Vladimir Putin will start a war with NATO given that NATO's forces grossly outmatch and outnumber Russia's. [Last year](#), NATO allies spent a total of \$900 billion on defense, while Russia spent just \$66 billion. Even excluding the U.S., NATO's next top four spenders — the UK, France, Germany, and Italy — combined to spend more than two and a half times more than Russia.
- **The threats NATO now faces cannot be addressed through military force.** “For Europe,” the Center for International Policy's Bill Hartung [notes](#), “the best route to greater security will involve addressing its most pressing internal problems, from combating the rise of right-wing, and in some cases neo-fascist parties; finding an equitable solution to its refugee crisis; and reforming its political and economic system to give hope to those left behind by European integration.”

[THE IRAN DEAL HANGS BY A THREAD AS TEAM TRUMP CONTINUES PUSH FOR REGIME CHANGE](#)

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the Iran nuclear deal is formally known, celebrated its third birthday last Saturday. We're left wondering whether there will be a fourth.

While the deal is currently working as advertised — blocking Iran from building a nuclear weapon by placing stringent restrictions on its program, in exchange for sanctions relief — Donald Trump's reckless violation of the agreement in May means that a series of American sanctions will be reimposed starting next month.

European leaders have since been scrambling to save the JCPOA, primarily by trying to figure out how European firms can continue to do business in Iran without facing American penalties, or so-called “secondary sanctions.”

Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has said Iran will continue to abide by the terms of the deal as long as Europe can present a viable economic path forward. But several obstacles lie ahead:

1. Big European corporations like Total, Peugeot, and Maersk **have already said they would withdraw from the Iranian market** in the face of U.S. sanctions.
2. A viable EU plan to shield European businesses from American secondary sanctions **has yet to come to fruition.** And despite an EU law designed to protect European firms

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from economic penalties from a non-EU state, it's [unlikely](#) that they'll decide to continue to do business in Iran, as that would mean essentially having to withdraw from the American market. (In a potentially promising move though, the European Foreign Affairs Council [this week endorsed](#) this blocking regulation.)

3. **The European Investment Bank recently cast doubt on the EU effort**, [saying](#) that its global operations would be put at risk if it continued to invest in Iran.

Meanwhile, Iranian leaders have [promised](#) to resume “industrial scale” uranium enrichment “without any restrictions” should Europe’s efforts fail, a move that will surely increase tensions and bolster calls for war in Washington. Just this week, Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran’s atomic agency, [said](#) Iran recently built a factory capable of producing rotors for up to 60 centrifuges per day. He also said last month that Iran has begun working on infrastructure for building advanced centrifuges at its Natanz nuclear site (for more on this, see [this piece](#) by Ellie Geranmayeh of the European Council on Foreign Relations).

BACK ON THE PATH TO WAR

Team Trump’s plan all along has been regime change (see [previous editions](#) of the Debrief for more on this). Trump’s now personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani [admitted](#) as much just days before Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal, and just [last month](#) himself called for regime change. Moreover, a recent report from the European Council on Foreign Relations concluded that the anti-Iran coalition the U.S. is assembling with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE “[views](#) the collapse of the JCPOA as the trigger for a wider policy aimed at confronting Iran” and causing “a deep economic crisis in the country, creating domestic divisions intended to bring about regime change.” (Ironically, the Trump-led pressure could be pushing Iran toward military rule. See [these two](#) pieces for more on that.)

But if the Iran deal ultimately collapses, and Iran re-ups its program as promised, the United States, alone and without its European allies, will firmly be back on the path to war with Iran -- whether for regime change, attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities, or both.

And that’s not just our concern.

“I fear the United States is **on the verge of blundering into another unnecessary war with Iraq’s next-door neighbor Iran**,” Sen. Tim Kaine wrote in an [op-ed](#) last week. “The same warning signs are on the horizon, and I hope we will turn back from the foolish path we seem to be taking.”

FURTHER READING

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- “Why Trump’s Hawks Back the MEK Terrorist Cult,” the New York Review of Books [\[LINK\]](#)

[THE U.S. MIGHT FINALLY TALK DIRECTLY TO THE TALIBAN](#)

Nearly one year after Trump [announced](#) a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan, including sending more U.S. troops, the end to the conflict is still nowhere in sight. And despite Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying recently that that strategy is “[working](#),” the Trump administration has been forced to change gears. In a significant (and welcome) American policy shift, the White House recently ordered U.S. diplomats to begin laying the groundwork for direct talks with the Taliban.

The shift, the New York Times [notes](#), “stems from a realization by both Afghan and American officials that President Trump’s new Afghanistan strategy is not making a fundamental difference in rolling back Taliban gains.” That’s probably because Trump’s new strategy was [nothing new at all](#).

Not only has the Trump strategy failed to make gains, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [reported this week](#) that civilian deaths for the first six months of 2018 increased one percent, “the most recorded in the same time period since UNAMA began documenting civilian casualties in 2009.”

While Trump’s destructive rhetoric and policies continue to dominate headlines, [Americans are still dying in Afghanistan](#). **The latest American KIA was on his seventh war deployment**, and [fifth to Afghanistan](#) with the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.

And as if the situation in Afghanistan wasn’t bad enough, war profiteer and Blackwater founder Erik Prince — the sister of Trump’s Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who himself is also caught up in the Robert Mueller investigation of Russia’s interference in the 2016 election — [re-upped a pitch](#) to senior administration officials to have his mercenaries take over combat operations from U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Senior Trump administration officials rejected a similar pitch last year, but as the Military Times [notes](#), “Prince is likely trying to capitalize on the change of many top administration officials since then.”

BURIED LEDES

Because of President Trump’s [Muslim ban](#), **a Yemeni mother has been banned from coming to the United States to be with her son.**

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It's time to [#DisarmThePatriarchy](#), says Women's Action for New Directions, by "arming women with the information and tools you need to **hold elected officials accountable and build a grassroots movement to end the threat of nuclear war.**"

A [new poll](#) found that **Americans are deeply concerned that America is becoming an embarrassment** and losing respect around the world because of Donald Trump – even before Helsinki.

Speaking of which, "**Trump is depleting the domestic and international systems that are best equipped to protect peace**, prosperity and liberal democracy — and [building up the enemies of those systems.](#)"

This *Democracy Now* [debate](#) on Trump and Russia **is a must watch.**

The Trump administration [announced](#) this week that **it will extend, but not redesignate, Temporary Protected Status for Somalis** (see [here](#) and [here](#) for some reactions).

Congress can [help](#) **stave off a new humanitarian crisis in Yemen**, and there's reasons to believe it may finally act.

The United States has sold more weapons to foreign partners and allies in the first six months of this year [than in all of 2017.](#)

How an American citizen is [trying to survive](#) **despite being on the U.S.'s terrorist "kill list."**

From the [ADL](#) to [BDS](#): **No one is happy with Israel's discriminatory Jewish Nation State law.**

And finally, [stock up on your helium](#): After a successful run in the UK, **baby Trump balloons are coming to America.**