

Donald Trump

Trump says Russia can do what it wants to Nato allies who pay too little

Likely Republican presidential nominee renews fears for fate of western alliance if he is re-elected



Donald Trump speaks at a 'Get Out the Vote' Rally in Conway, South Carolina, on February 10, 2024. © AFP via Getty Images

James Politi in Washington and **Lauren Fedor** in Columbia, South Carolina FEBRUARY 10 2024

Donald Trump said he had warned Nato allies that he would encourage Russia to do “whatever the hell they want” if alliance members failed to meet defence spending targets, highlighting the risk to the military pact if he wins a new term in the White House.

Trump’s comments came during a campaign rally ahead of the Republican presidential primary in South Carolina this month, which could help him to seal his party’s nomination to contest the [November election](#) against Joe Biden.

The former US president, who has long been a critic of [Nato](#) and who had warm relations with Russian president Vladimir Putin, told his supporters that “Nato was busted until I came along”. He said that during his term in office he had insisted to European allies that “everybody’s going to pay”.

Trump recalled that one president of a Nato member country had asked him if the US would defend it in the event of a Russian attack.

“I would not protect you,” Trump said he responded. “In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You’ve got to pay. You’ve got to pay your bills,” he remembered saying.

Trump's comments are a signal that, if elected president again, he might threaten the commitment to mutual defence that lies at the heart of the Nato alliance, at a time when fears of Russia have [sharply increased](#) in the wake of its war against Ukraine. The former president has recently pressed Congress to oppose the approval of new aid to Kyiv, which would be crucial on the battlefield.

Trump is the overwhelming favourite to win the Republican presidential nomination after victories in the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary last month, and the Nevada caucus this week.

During the South Carolina rally, Trump also mocked the husband of Nikki Haley, his top rival for the Republican nomination. Michael Haley, a member of the Army National Guard, is currently deployed in Africa.

“What happened to her husband? What happened to her husband? Where is he? He’s gone,” Trump said.

Trump's bombastic warning to Nato members, and his barb aimed at a member of the military deployed overseas, are a reminder of the divisive rhetoric that is fuelling his campaign and energising the Republican base, but could be damaging with independent and swing voters.

Haley, who has sharpened her criticisms of Trump in recent weeks, said during a campaign stop in Lexington, South Carolina: “Donald, if you have something to say, don't say it behind my back. Get on a debate stage and say it to my face.”

“If you mock the service of a combat veteran, you don't deserve a driver's licence, let alone to be president of the United States,” she added. Haley did not address Trump's comments about Nato.

A White House spokesman said: “Encouraging invasions of our closest allies by murderous regimes is appalling and unhinged — and it endangers American national security, global stability, and our economy at home.”

Trump, who is 77, has a slight edge in national polling averages measuring a head-to-head match-up against Biden, who is 81. The president's re-election bid was rocked this week by the release of a report by special counsel [Robert Hur](#) on his handling of classified documents while he was vice-president under Barack Obama.

Hur did not issue any charges against Biden but cited the president's “poor memory”, triggering new concerns about the president's age and mental fitness.

On Saturday Jill Biden, the first lady, came to her husband's defence in an email to supporters.

"Joe is 81, that's true, but he's 81 doing more in an hour than most people do in a day. Joe has wisdom, empathy, and vision," she wrote.

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