

## Divided on Trump, EU insists on European unity

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L-R, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel visit a vantage point overlooking Valletta during a break in the European Union leaders summit in Valletta, Malta, February 3, 2017. REUTERS/Yves Herman

By Alastair Macdonald and Gabriela Baczynska | VALLETTA

VALLETTA European Union leaders said they agreed to stick together in dealing with Donald Trump, but at their first summit since he took office they were at odds on how far to confront or engage with the new U.S. president.

Trump and his policies, from questioning the value of NATO and free trade to banning Muslim refugees, came up repeatedly in discussions in Malta on external "challenges" facing the Union.

British Prime Minister Theresa May, about to lead her country out of the EU, briefed peers on her visit to Washington last week and assured them Trump was committed to cooperating in their defense -- just as Britain would also be after Brexit.

Francois Hollande, the outgoing Socialist president of France, led criticism of Trump, calling it "unacceptable" for him to applaud Brexit and forecast the break-up of the EU. In thinly veiled rebukes to May and some eastern states, he warned of trying to cut their own transatlantic deals. "A lot of countries should think of their future first of all in the European Union rather than imagining I don't what kind of bilateral relationship with the United States," he said.

Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, who like many in the east is alarmed by Trump's conciliatory noises to Moscow, poured cold water on May's suggestion Britain could be a link to Washington. Europe did not need a "bridge", she was quoted as saying, because it could communicate with Trump on Twitter.

But her Polish neighbor, Beata Szydło, reserved her main criticisms for her predecessor as prime minister, EU summit chair Donald Tusk, who described Trump this week as a "threat" to the EU, along with Russia, China and militant Islam. "European politicians trying to build this sense of fear ... are making a mistake," said Szydło, whose government, like Trump, has spoken out against Muslim immigration. "One cannot be confrontational in our relations with the United States."

Stressing the need for unity, the bloc's dominant leader, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said Europeans still had common ground with the United States in many areas, while not sharing Trump's scepticism about many international institutions.

"We have again made very clear our common values and our faith in multilateralism," she told a news conference. The Union would, she said, push for free trade deals with more nations as Trump pulls back. But cooperation with the United States against militant threats would continue, she said.

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One EU diplomat said France was clearly pushing to use the Trump presidency to rally Europeans behind a policy of greater distance from Washington and turning to the EU, rather than NATO, for their security. "The Germans are much more cautious," the diplomat said. "There is a clear issue to be decided: whether we seek common ground to engage with the United States, or turn our backs."

Summit host Joseph Muscat, the Maltese prime minister, chose to emphasize balance in summing up the discussions, speaking of "concern" at Trump's policy but "no sense of anti-Americanism". "There was a sense that we need to engage with the U.S. just the same," Muscat said. "But we need to show that we cannot stay silent where there are principles involved."

(Writing by Alastair Macdonald, editing by Larry King)

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