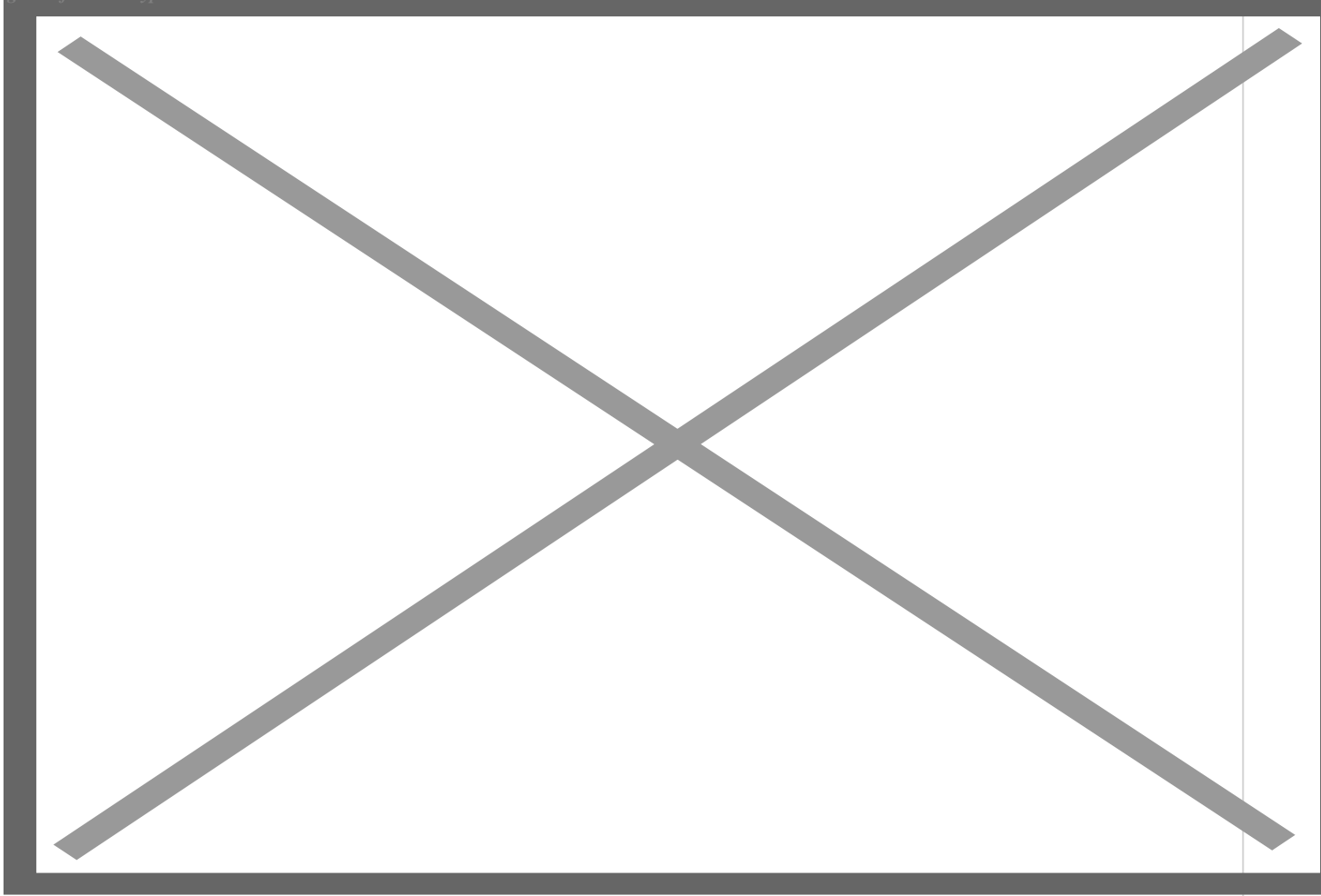


Donald Trump hints at U.S. military action in Panama and in Palestine

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U.S. President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a news conference at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida [Evan Vucci/The Associated Press]

Palm Beach, January 8 (RHC)-- U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has hinted at possible military interventions in the Americas and the Middle East, as well as other items on his foreign policy agenda, during a wide-ranging news conference in Florida.

Trump spoke from his Mar-a-Lago estate on Tuesday, a day after Congress officially certified his victory in November's general elections. The news conference also comes just 13 days before Trump is set to the oath of office for his second term on January 20.

The president-elect touched on several domestic subjects, pledging to roll back environmental restrictions and pardon supporters who stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. But his most consequential statements concerned foreign policy. Trump expounded on a sweeping expansionist vision, with consequences for countries across the world.

He repeated his desire for U.S. control of the Panama Canal, Greenland and Canada, while emphasizing that "all hell will break out" if captives held in Gaza are not released before he takes office.

In one exchange with reporters, Trump was asked if he would rule out the use of military force or economic coercion to take control of the Panama Canal or Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory. He refused.

"I'm not going to commit to that," Trump said. He then pivoted to the canal, an arterial trade route that connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. "It might be that you'll have to do something. The Panama Canal is vital to our country." He later added: "We need Greenland for national security purposes." Both Greenland's and Denmark's prime ministers have ruled out the prospect of the sprawling Arctic island being transferred to U.S. control.

And the government of Panama has likewise maintained that the canal will remain Panamanian, as it has been since the US relinquished control in 1999, following a treaty negotiated under late U.S. President Jimmy Carter.

Trump also made bold statements about his intentions towards Canada, one of the US's largest trading partners. The country shares a 8,891-kilometre (5,525-mile) border with the US, and Trump in recent weeks has suggested it should become the US's 51st state.

But during Tuesday's press conference, he ruled out using military force against Canada, which has traditionally been a close ally — though not "economic force".

"You get rid of the artificially drawn line, and you take a look at what it looks like, and it would also be much better for national security," Trump said, referring to the US-Canada border.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau quickly responded to the prospect on social media. "There isn't a snowball's chance in hell that Canada would become part of the United States," Trudeau wrote.

Trump, meanwhile, renewed his pledge to impose "substantial tariffs" on Mexico and Canada if they do not acquiesce to demands to stem irregular migration and drug trafficking into the US.

Trump had previously threatened to slap 25-percent tariffs on the two countries, despite warnings from economists that trade wars could mangle heavily interconnected North American industries.

In another reference to changing the regional map, Trump said the Gulf of Mexico should be named the "Gulf of America". It has a "beautiful ring to it", he quipped.

Trump spent considerable time discussing Israel's war in Gaza, a conflict that has claimed more than 45,885 Palestinian lives and prompted fears of grave human rights abuses.

The president-elect called his nominee to be Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, up to the podium to give an update on negotiations.

Witkoff, a real-estate investor with no foreign policy experience, had been part of recent ceasefire talks in the Middle East.

In apparently impromptu remarks, Witkoff said, "I think that we've had some really great progress, and I'm really hopeful that by the inaugural we'll have some good things to announce on behalf of the president."

But the president-elect took a harsher line, focusing on the release of the remaining captives held by Hamas after the attack on October 8, 2023, in southern Israel. Israel estimates about 100 people remain in Hamas custody.

Trump vowed that "all hell will break out" in the Middle East if Hamas does not release captives by the time he takes office.

Some observers have interpreted Trump's statement as a threat of possible US military intervention in Gaza, a line that outgoing President Joe Biden has refused to cross, despite surging military aid to Israel.

When asked to explain what he meant at the news conference, Trump balked: "Do I have to define it for you? All hell will break out if those hostages aren't back."

"If they're not back by the time I get into office, all hell will break out in the Middle East, and it will not be good for Hamas, and it will not be good, frankly, for anyone. All hell will break out. I don't have to say anymore, but that's what it is," he said.

Trump gave a characteristically cryptic answer when asked about the future of U.S. troops in Syria. The Pentagon says about 2,000 U.S. personnel remain in the country as part of a mission to curb the armed group ISIL (ISIS). But questions have arisen about long-term U.S. involvement in Syria after former President Bashar al-Assad was toppled in early December.

U.S. troops have supported the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria since 2014, as a multi-pronged civil war unfolded in the country. But that backing put Washington at odds with its NATO ally Turkiye, which considers members of the People's Protection Units (YPG) — the bulk of the SDF's fighters — to be "terrorists."

Turkiye, by contrast, has supported the rebel groups that ultimately overthrew al-Assad.

During his first term, Trump floated the possibility of withdrawing US troops from Syria. And as recently as December, he posted on his Truth Social platform that the U.S. should have "nothing to do" with Syria.

But in Tuesday's news conference, he opted instead for ambiguity about the future of U.S. involvement in Syria. "I won't tell you that, because that's part of a military strategy," he said.

Instead, he heaped praise on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whom he called a "friend" and a "very smart guy." "He sent his people in there [Syria] through different forms and different names, and they went in, they took over, and that's the way it is," Trump said.

Some analysts have speculated that Trump may be more amenable than past US presidents to turning over anti-ISIL operations to Turkiye.

Trump also weighed in on other NATO allies, saying the transatlantic alliance's 32 members should increase their defence spending to five percent of their gross domestic product (GDP). That is a significant increase from the current minimum goal of two percent.

Trump has regularly accused members of the alliance of underpaying and has suggested withdrawing if the spending does not increase. “They can all afford it, but they should be at five percent not two percent,” Trump said.

“If they’re paying their bills, and if I think they’re treating us fairly, the answer is absolutely I’d stay with NATO,” he added. But he warned he might revoke his support if he does not feel the U.S. is treated fairly.

In one anecdote, he compared NATO allies to debtors delinquent on their bills: “If you are delinquent, we will not protect you.” The threat comes as NATO has taken on increased significance amid Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022.

Trump has long maintained Russia’s invasion would not have happened on his watch. On Tuesday, he again pledged to broker a speedy resolution.

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