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Hungary Bucks U.S. Push to Curb Russian and Chinese Influence

The NATO ally has resisted approving a defense agreement with the U.S. amid political disagreements

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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been at the forefront of the rise of a newly invigorated nationalism across parts of Europe. Photo: SZILARD KOSZTICSÁK/MTI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

BUDAPEST—Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has told U.S. diplomats that he wants his country to be “neutral, like Austria” as Washington pushes for a tougher line on Russia and China, deepening fears that a longtime American ally is drifting from its orbit.

Aides to Mr. Orban said he wants to remain a troop-contributing member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and values the security Hungary gets from the alliance. But a senior Hungarian official said Mr. Orban strongly objects to U.S. pressure aimed at curbing the influence of Moscow and Beijing in Europe.

[The Hungarian leader](#) made his remarks last month in a meeting with the U.S. ambassador in Budapest, according to people familiar with the discussion. Mr. Orban’s spokesman didn’t respond to requests for comment.

In recent weeks, the U.S. has sought to rally fellow NATO members to take firmer steps to counter potential Chinese cyber-espionage and for months has been pushing the alliance to step up its backing for Ukraine in the country’s running [confrontation with Russia](#).

Mr. Orban has resisted both moves. Like some other European leaders, he has invited Chinese investment in his country’s internet infrastructure. And he is blocking NATO from holding minister-level talks with Ukraine because, his government says, he wants Ukrainian schools to offer more classes in Hungarian for the country’s Hungarian-speaking minority.

Hungary will continue to respect NATO commitments and even increase deployments, the senior Hungarian official said. But Mr. Orban plans to resist efforts to get Hungary to toe the U.S. line on Russia and China, the Hungarian official said.



People at a demonstration in Budapest this month against recent legislative measures introduced by Mr. Orban. Photo: Chris McGrath/Getty Images

As Mr. Orban has pushed back, he has raised objections to what was expected to be a fairly straightforward defense agreement clarifying laws that affect U.S. troops and military equipment passing through Hungary, U.S. officials said.

“The point for Orban is, yes, we want to do business with Russia,” the senior Hungarian official said. “We rebel when they start to educate us about what is a good behavior towards China, as in we are the agents of China and blah, blah, blah.”

NATO was founded to repel a war of the sort few today expect, and that Hungary has sent troops near Russia’s Baltic border to deter. The trouble is that U.S. officials increasingly worry about a more nebulous set of security threats that include investment by Chinese and Russian companies in [sensitive areas like telecommunications](#), energy and banking. Mr. Orban considers those areas his domestic prerogative. Czech President Milos Zeman has made similar remarks.

“In Central Europe, you see there are political elements not just in Hungary but in Czech Republic and Slovakia who take a more neutral stance,” a Trump administration official said. “What you see the Chinese doing that’s significant and worrisome is using a combination of infrastructure projects and telecom deals to try and penetrate a lot of these countries.”

Mr. Orban’s comments—and broader disagreements between Washington and Hungary from extradition battles to friction over the expulsion of a U.S.-accredited university from Budapest—have sparked a new round of diplomatic activity. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo plans to visit Mr. Orban next month, a U.S. official said.

The Hungarian prime minister has been at the forefront of the rise of a newly invigorated nationalism across parts of Europe. A vocal opponent of immigration and a critic of what he considers overreach by the European Union, he has won three consecutive elections.

“He was Trump before Trump,” former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon told a conference of European conservatives in Zurich last year.



*Mr. Orban shook hands with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels in July.
Photo: Sebastien Pirlet/Press Pool*

Yet since President Trump took office, Mr. Orban has continued drifting more toward Moscow than Washington, in the assessment of U.S. officials and some Hungarians close to him.

“This is the challenge Hungary poses,” said a U.S. official with years of experience dealing with Mr. Orban. “You start not being sure you can rely on them.”

Hungarian officials and people close to Mr. Orban say his feelings about the U.S. are complicated. Sovereignty—and freedom from meddling by outsiders—has been Mr. Orban’s central cause since he first came to power in 1998, his aides say.

Trump administration officials have tried to court Mr. Orban by ending what had been frequent State Department criticism of Hungary under President Obama.

Current U.S. Ambassador David Cornstein has said he sees no problems with Hungary’s democracy, which his predecessors castigated as increasingly authoritarian. The State Department last year canceled a grant that would have funded independent media in Hungary, where nearly all newspapers and broadcasters are now owned by Mr. Orban’s allies.

But Washington has still struggled to persuade Mr. Orban to cede ground on both major and minor issues.

Extradition requests have become fraught. In 2016 the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration accused two Russian arms dealers in Hungary who the agency said planned to sell arms to Mexican drug cartels looking to shoot down U.S. law enforcement helicopters, according to documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. Mr. Orban’s government extradited the two men to Russia, not the U.S.

In December, Hungary’s military announced it was buying helicopters from France, tanks from Germany and air force equipment from Sweden, in a snub to U.S. contractors.

Mr. Orban’s wariness toward America’s military strength in Europe emerged during his first four-year term as prime minister, which ended in 2002. On September 10, 2001, Mr. Orban backtracked on an expected deal to purchase American jet fighters, a surprise to U.S. administration officials, who said they felt betrayed.

Trump administration officials say they started with the overriding goal of cementing Hungary's U.S. national-security ties. A key test was the defense cooperation agreement. It would ensure that American soldiers in Hungary are tried by U.S. courts if they commit a crime there, and would ease customs rules on military gear flown into the country.

U.S. officials initially thought the proposed law would sail through, given Mr. Orban's overwhelming majority in parliament. Months passed. Mr. Orban said lawmakers in his party opposed it. He then gave U.S. officials varying and sometimes contradictory explanations for the delay, officials say.

Last week, Mr. Pompeo called Mr. Orban, according to the State Department, which released no details. The two talked about the defense agreement, according to officials familiar with the call. Mr. Pompeo's office is now planning his trip to Budapest, these people said.

—James Marson in Brussels contributed to this article.

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