



AUSTRIAN INSTITUTE FOR
EUROPEAN AND SECURITY POLICY

Nr. 2024/3

NATO's Washington Summit

An Alliance Bracing for the Twilight Years

by Ulf M Steindl
July 2024

AIIES COMMENT

NATO's Washington Summit: An Alliance Bracing for the Twilight Years

Introduction

On 9-11 July 2024, the collective leaders of the Global West gathered in Washington for the annual NATO Summit. The celebration of the Alliance's 75th anniversary and its resurgence after a quest for meaning in the 2000s and 2010s were overshadowed by the growing threats of new great power rivalry and internal political fragility. The war of aggression against Ukraine has brought NATO back to its founding mission of countering Russian, back then Soviet, expansionism.

Yet at the same time the collective back-patting for two-thirds of the members reaching the 2% GDP spending goal¹, agreed on a decade ago, conceals how fragile its newfound unity actually is. Simultaneously, the globe's most infamous autocracies, namely North Korea, Iran, and China, are aiding Russia in waging its war of aggression on the European continent. This represents nothing less than a failure of deterrence, for which Western leaders have yet failed to develop a remedy.

The Return of an Old Demon: Interstate War in Europe

"We have a new generation of NATO defence plans in place that make the Alliance stronger and more able to deter and, if necessary, defend against any potential adversary, including at short or no notice."²

Russia's first concealed invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and open warfare against its neighbour since 2022, embedded in the broader ambition of disrupting the post-Cold War security order in Europe, function as the main drivers of NATO's reawakening. With the 2016 Warsaw Summit laying the groundwork for the Enhanced Forward Presence, the 2022 Madrid Summit saw not only the expansion of this assurance and tripwire approach, but also the commitment to a new Strategic Concept and the New Force Model (NFM). The latter entails increasing the troop numbers at high-readiness level from 40,000 to 300,000, pre-positioning of equipment and most importantly regional defence plans³.

When the NFM replaces the current NATO Response Force in 2025, members will permanently commit troops to regionally organised defence. This will mitigate the concerns for the rotating Response Force on logistical effort and adaptation to different climate zones. Additionally, this means that national armed forces will train together and establish more enduring forms of

integration.⁴ Pioneering endeavours like the integration of the Royal Netherlands Army in the German Bundeswehr and the Scandinavian NORDEFCO already point the way for potential regional integration projects, which combined with joint procurement can lead to true interchangeability.

Conversely, force generation lags behind the new plans. Even the redefinition of NATO members' defence spending pledge from a goal of 2% to a minimum requirement cannot solve this conundrum. GDP percentages may be a valuable indicator for budgeting, for military capability though, they are not. According to unofficial sources, the current force posture needed for fulfilling the plans runs 35-50 brigades short.⁵

This will be alleviated with ongoing and upcoming defence investments, however, a stronger national focus on capability goals rather than GDP percentages is essential. Although it is unclear which specific capabilities the missing brigades pertain to, there is a clear understanding of force generation and recruitment challenges as well as persisting capability gaps in the potential "European Pillar" of NATO.

The Alliance also continues to struggle with the heterogeneous threat perception of its members. It is no coincidence, that

the 9 nations¹ not reaching the 2% GDP spending pledge in 2024 are all located in the west and south of Alliance territory. While this contrasts logically with the highest spenders being located on the Eastern Flank, it underscores the different priorities of national electorates and political feasibility. Uneven burden sharing thus exacerbates the task of filling the agreed-on plans with life. The new NATO Action Plan for the Southern Neighbourhood, including a new Special Representative, aims to bridge this gap of East vs. South orientation, but for the new regional planning scheme to work, members must finally fulfil their funding pledges.

Supporting Ukraine: As long as it takes?

Ukraine, with its political aspirations aligned westward, lies at the centre of the new geopolitical storm that has engulfed the Euro-Atlantic. In the third year of the gruesome attritional war waged against it, the perspective on Ukrainian accession remains as cloudy as ever. Unlike at the Vilnius Summit in 2023, observers did not expect a formal invitation for Ukraine to join NATO. Instead, attention was given to “Trump-proof” irreplaceable Western support by moving it under the NATO umbrella. To that end, four initiatives were launched:

1. The NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) will take over the synchronization of arms transfers and training for the Ukrainian Armed Forces, replacing the US-led Security Assistance Group-Ukraine (SAG-U).
2. The Pledge of Long-Term Security Assistance for Ukraine, encompassing at least €40bn. annually, allocated by the allies² according to GDP.
3. The NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training, and Education Centre (JATEC) to improve the learning cycle from the war as well as support Ukrainian interoperability with NATO.
4. The NATO Senior Representative in Ukraine, upgrading Ukraine-NATO relations.

Although these initiatives may bolster support against disturbances through electoral fluctuations and the whim of single political leaders, they cannot mitigate the crucial role single member states play, most importantly the United States. The Pledge's wording, *“Allies intend to provide a minimum baseline funding of €40 billion...”*⁶ and an annual re-evaluation already point the way for the troubles to come. The possibility of a second Trump administration puts both the continuity of funding and realization of Ukraine's accession into doubt. While the Declaration boldly states that

*“... Ukraine's future is in NATO...”*⁷ the execution during the war remains unrealistic, and swift facilitation afterwards doubtful. While Sweden's accession process was rather quick for NATO standards, the lesson learned from the disruptive role of Türkiye and Hungary resonates. Another round of potentially unsuccessful horse-trading to secure ratification by the Hungarian Parliament may last considerably longer and open additional avenues for interference.

*“We reaffirm our unwavering solidarity with the people of Ukraine in the heroic defence of their nation, their land, and our shared values.”*⁸

The looming prospect of a second Trump administration likewise may prove that the efforts of “Trump-proofing” were futile. Beyond the freezing of irreplaceable military support and funding, Trump as 47th POTUS may rattle NATO at its core. The Project 2025 associated with him only calls for US military aid to be fully paid for by Europeans⁹, but other like-minded thinkers even suggest the concept of a “dormant NATO”¹⁰. This would entail freezing NATO at its current membership, stopping any further enlargement, as well as a moratorium on all activities not linked to the eventuality of major war. Thus, this means nothing else than reducing NATO to its Article 5 commitments. Except,

¹HR, PT, IT, CA, BE, LU, SI, ES

² except for Hungary

Trump himself has put this commitment repeatedly into question when threatening to not defend allies spending less than 2% of their GDP for defence.¹¹ Although it is not ensured that any of these approaches will make it into official policy, the spectre of abandonment looms.

The steadfast commitment to Ukraine might thus soon start to crumble. A formal invitation to Ukraine in Washington, and the launch of an extended ratification process, with final accession pending the cessation of hostilities, could have been an innovative approach. It would have triggered discussions on the national level, and bolstered support for Ukraine, while forcing opponents to voice their concerns and state their demands more clearly. Considering that there is as yet no precedence of withdrawing an invitation¹², this approach would have raised the wave-breakers against interference in the accession process from both within and outside of the Alliance. The unpredictable changes in leadership during the run-up to the next NATO Summit in The Hague 2025 will most likely make this a missed chance.

Harnessing Synergies: The EU as Indispensable Partner

“Transatlantic defence industrial cooperation is a critical part of NATO’s deterrence and defence.”¹³

Quite in contrast to Madeleine Albright’s 1998 concern¹⁴ on the “three Ds”³, the collaboration of NATO and the European Union has evolved through overlapping rather than delimitation of activities. During the “War on Terror” years, both organizations started to engage with security issues below the threshold to conventional war, and now they have found common cause in nurturing the defence industrial base and facilitating military mobility. At the Washington Summit members agreed on a NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge¹⁵ to promote defence industrial expansion and standardization.

In March 2024, the European Commission likewise presented its European Defence Industrial Strategy and proposed a European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP) to implement it. Since the EU’s first foray into this policy field with its European Defence Action Plan in 2016 and the subsequent creation of the European Defence Fund, negotiations within the Union have chronically been plagued by dissension on third country participation. This struggle, contested by France and its supporters on one side and more US-oriented nations on the other, also leaves a trace in the Declaration.

The Pledge¹⁶ plainly defines the ambition to *“Continue to reduce and eliminate, as appropriate, obstacles to defence trade and*

investment among Allies.” and establishes that *“reciprocal cooperation and openness are the norm”*. In the same section, though, the EU is specifically mentioned: *“To bolster defence industry, continue to take mutual steps with the European Union to strengthen coherence and complementarity of respective efforts and relevant work.”* This hint at complementarity underlines the demand for administrative, regulatory and financial resources that NATO lacks but the EU can provide. Moreover, free defence trade and investment do not necessarily preclude a dedicated nurturing policy.

The wording could provide the fundament to reconcile the EU’s “buy-(and invest)-European approach” with the broader ambition of even stronger transatlantic defence industrial collaboration. The final form for EDIP, with negotiations to be concluded in 2025, will need to carefully balance not marginalizing NATO partners with achieving its original aims. Indeed, the NATO Pledge repeats many ideas of EDIP, such as opening procurement contracts to allies. Considering that 63%¹⁷ of the EU’s defence procurement value between February 2022 and June 2023 was awarded to US firms, reciprocity would also entail better access for European firms to US defence contracts. In how far any US administration, specifically a Republican one, would

³ Duplication, decoupling, and discrimination.

concede to that remains doubtful. Despite that “NATO-EU cooperation has reached unprecedented levels.”¹⁸ the Cerberus-like critique of duplication-decoupling-discrimination might soon rear its head again.

New Geographies: The Broadening of Horizons

The geopolitical competition that is unfolding, and partly only now becoming apparent, along with the expansion of the Alliance since 2022 bring new regions into NATO's focus. The European High North and the whole Arctic have been upleveled as expanded theatre of competition with Russia. Since 2007 Russia has prioritized the Arctic, staked territorial claims and invested in military infrastructure and capabilities there. Thus, both the Arctic region and the geographically detached Baltic states remain an area where Russia still enjoys benefits of geography and force posture, should it intend to challenge NATO following the conflict in Ukraine. Surprisingly, except for only one reference, it is not mentioned in the Declaration: *“The historic accession of Finland and Sweden makes them safer and our Alliance stronger, including in the High North and the Baltic Sea.”*¹⁹

All Arctic nations except for Russia are now part of the Alliance, which has considerably bolstered its position. As mentioned in the Declaration²⁰, the Allies already plan for a larger NATO presence in Finland. The potential of cross-Fennoscandian reinforcement corridors also

eases the defence of the Baltics, and expands options for interdicting Russian air and naval assets operating out of Murmansk and reduced to some extent the vulnerability of the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap. Additionally, the United States has signed Defence Cooperation Agreements with both Finland²¹ and Sweden²², which clarify the access of troops to their territories. At Summit the US, Finland and Canada further announced a new “ICE Pact” for the collaborative production of polar icebreakers.²³ This addresses a critical capability gap of the Western Alliance in the High North, particularly in terms of polar operational capacity.

GDP percentages may be a valuable indicator for budgeting, for military capability ... they are not.

Its increased accessibility due to climate change, the rising importance of northern sea lanes and China's very own ambitions further underscore the rising importance of the Arctic. China has not only declared itself a “near-Arctic state” but faced harsh criticism from NATO members in Washington. The leadership in Beijing is being called out as an enabler of Russia's war and threatened with consequences: *“The PRC cannot enable the largest war in Europe in recent history without this negatively impacting its interests and reputation.”*²⁴ The “no-limits partnership” of the two autocracies

echoes the shock of the Sino-Soviet Alliance established in 1950.²⁵ However, in light of the stalled negotiations on the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline²⁶, the Beijing-Moscow axis appears to be much less solid and rather focused on short-term common interests.

Nonetheless, the Russian-Chinese alignment presents a major challenge due to their ability, capability and possible intent to challenge the West in different theatres at once. Second to the fear of US isolationism, for Europeans a sudden and protracted war in the Indo-Pacific theatre ranks as the next major worry of abandonment. This underlines

the linkage of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. On the other hand, for the US, the unwillingness of some European nations to detach from their ties with Beijing and their stubborn engagement with it raises further questions about the contentious issue of burden sharing.

The Allies committed at the Washington Summit to deepen discussions and cooperation with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, whose leaders attended the Summit. The military support of these partners for Ukraine – directly by Australia and New Zealand, indirectly by South Korea and Japan – and their proactive engagement, show the clash of systems unfolding in both theatres. While a formal global alliance of democracies or even an “Asian NATO” remain yet improbable,

an informal framework for alignment and reciprocal support is worth aspiring to. The indirect delivery of artillery ammunition by South Korea²⁷ and possibly Patriot interceptors by Japan²⁸ to Ukraine showcase the potential merits of an “arsenal of democracies” with the United States as a linchpin.

Akin to the discussion above on the Trans-Atlantic and European defence industrial bases, like-minded nations should support each other with technological transfers and reciprocal commitment to material deliveries in times of war. While this may be less effective when faced with a synchronized assault on two fronts, it would bolster the global democracies’ preparedness for potential future attritional wars such as the one in Ukraine.

Conclusion

The expansion of NATO in the north, its newfound unity in the face of Russia’s war against Ukraine, and deepening collaboration with the European Union have made the Alliance stronger than ever. But the “German-French axis” is politically weakened, and the US leadership as well as the country’s domestic political stability are unpredictable. Western support for Ukraine remains susceptible to interference and the pathway to accession unclear. The strong foundations NATO currently

stands on could thus quickly turn into quicksand.

In Washington, the Alliance missed a chance for developing a forward-leaning and innovative approach to remedy the key vulnerability of Russia being able to prevent additional states from joining by occupying parts of their territory. This holds as true for Ukraine as it is for Moldova or Georgia. For Europeans, their only option is to fulfil the commitments linked to strengthening the European Pillar of NATO and to address pressing capability gaps. It is essential for them to strengthen their capacity to act more autonomously, but also to become a partner capable of engaging on an equal footing.

The strong foundations NATO currently stands on could thus quickly turn into quicksand.

As Russia uses Iranian and North Korean munitions to pummel Ukrainian cities, and its defence industry is kept afloat with Chinese support, the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres are more closely linked than ever. It is a clear display of a new phase of geopolitics, during which the West may not yet be confronted by a unified alliance but with like-minded autocracies that intend to alter the global order according to their revanchist designs. While important initiatives

have been launched, the West remains unable to develop a grand strategy for the long haul of aggressive competition in the 21st century. In the third year of the war, the slogan of “supporting Ukraine as long as necessary” appears hollow in the face of repeated self-deterrence by European nations and the inroads Russian disinformation has made in Western electoral systems.

Indeed, there is a dire demand for Western leaders and policy makers to remember George F. Kennan’s 1947 article^{29,30} “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” and prepare for extended competition with multiple opponents. They must urgently consolidate their political will and resources to implement a coherent grand strategy that addresses the current, multifaceted challenges. The lessons of the past remind us that the West can only effectively counter the aspirations of revanchist powers through concerted action and a shared commitment.

About the Author

Ulf Michael Steindl, M.A./M.A.I.S., is a Research Fellow at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES). His research focuses on the analysis of politico-military issues of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, the complementarity of the EU and NATO as well as defence industrial policy in Europe and East Asia.

¹ NATO. 2024. "Defence expenditures and NATO's 2% guideline." Last updated June 18, 2024. Accessed July 4, 2024. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49198.htm.

² Washington Summit Declaration 2024. Last updated July 12, 2024. Accessed July 12, 2024. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm, 7.

³ NATO. 2022. „Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government (2022 NATO Summit)". Rede, 29. Juni. Accessed December 11, 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_197288.html

and Biscop, Sven. 2022b. "The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?" Egmont Policy Brief 285, 8. September. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/the-new-force-model-natos-european-army>.

⁴ Bundesministerium der Verteidigung. 2024. "NATO Force Model: Wie Deutschland sich ab 2025 in der Allianz engagiert." Press Release, July 9. Accessed July 9, 2024. <https://www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/nato-force-model-wie-deutschland-sich-ab-2025-engagiert-5465714>.

⁵ Siebold, Sabine. 2024. Exclusive: NATO will need 35-50 extra brigades under new defence plans. Reuters, July 8. Accessed July 8, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/nato-will-need-35-50-extra-brigades-under-new-defence-plans-source-says-2024-07-08/>.

⁶ Washington Summit Declaration 2024, 15.

⁷ Washington Summit Declaration 2024, 16.

⁸ Washington Summit Declaration 2024, 15.

⁹ Dans, Paul and Steven Groves. eds. 2023. „Mandate for Leadership. The Conservative Promise." Accessed February 12, 2024. https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf, 182.

¹⁰ Maitra, Sumantra. 2023. "Policy Brief: Pivoting the US Away from Europe to a Dormant NATO." Center for Renewing America, Policy Brief, February 16. Accessed November 12, 2023. <https://americarenewing.com/policy-brief-pivoting-the-us-away-from-europe-to-a-dormant-nato/>.

¹¹ Brzozowski, Alexandra. 2024. "Europeans spooked by spectre of Trump return

after NATO comments." Euractiv, February 12. Accessed February 15, 2024. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/europeans-spooked-by-spectre-of-trump-return-after-nato-comments/>.

¹² Arnold, Ed. 2024. „The 2024 NATO Washington Summit: A Pre-Storm Gathering?" RUSI Commentary, July 12. Accessed July 12, 2024. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/2024-nato-washington-summit-pre-storm-gathering>.

¹³ NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge 2024

¹⁴ Albright, Madeleine K. 1998. „The Right Balance Will Secure NATO's Future." Financial Times, 8. Dezember. Accessed November 27, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06989.8>.

¹⁵ NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge 2024. Last updated July 10, 2024. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227504.htm.

¹⁶ NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge 2024

¹⁷ European Commission. 2024. "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A new European Defence Industrial Strategy: Achieving EU readiness through a responsive and resilient European Defence Industry." JOIN (2024) 10 final, 4.

¹⁸ Washington Summit Declaration 2024, 29.

¹⁹ Washington Summit Declaration 2024, 2.

²⁰ Washington Summit Declaration 2024, 7.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Finland. 2024. "President of the Republic approves Defence Cooperation Agreement between Finland and the United States." Press Release, July 7. Accessed July 14, 2024. https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/tasavallan-presidentti-hyvaksyi-suomen-ja-yhdysvaltojen-valisen-puolustusyhteistyosopimuksen.

²² Sveriges Riksdag. 2024. „The Riksdag votes in favour of defence agreement with the USA." Press Release June 18. Accessed July 14, 2024.

<https://www.riksdagen.se/en/news/articles/2024/jun/18/the-riksdag-votes-in-fa>

[vour-of-defence-agreement_cms2fa8b58c-5dc6-455f-b909-95d1d9477599en/](https://www.riksdagen.se/en/news/articles/2024/jun/18/the-riksdag-votes-in-favour-of-defence-agreement_cms2fa8b58c-5dc6-455f-b909-95d1d9477599en/).

²³ Ferran, Lee. 2024. „US teams with Canada, Finland on polar icebreakers to chill Russian, Chinese power up north." The Defense Post, July 11. Accessed July 14, 2024. <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/07/us-teams-with-canada-finland-on-polar-icebreakers-to-check-russian-chinese-power-up-north/>.

²⁴ Washington Summit Declaration 2024, 26.

²⁵ Borsani, Davide. 2024. "Why the Sino-Russian Partnership is a Nightmare for NATO." The Diplomat, July 8. Accessed July 9, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/why-the-sino-russian-partnership-is-a-nightmare-for-nato>.

²⁶ Seddon, Max, Anastasia Stognei, Henry Foy and Joe Leahy. 2024. "Russia-China gas pipeline deal stalls over Beijing's price demands." Financial Times, June 2. Accessed June 16, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/f7a34e3e-bce9-4db9-ac49-a092f382c526>.

²⁷ Song, Sang-ho. 2023. "S. Korea indirectly supplied more 155-mm shells for Ukraine than all European countries combined: WP." Yongap News, December 5, 2023. Accessed July 8, 2024. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231205000300315>

²⁸ Takeuchi, Yusuke and Ryo Nakamura. 2023. "Japan weighs allowing Patriot missile transfers to aid Ukraine." Nikkei, December 21, 2023. Accessed July 8, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Japan-weighs-allowing-Patriot-missile-transfers-to-aid-Ukraine>.

²⁹ "X" (George F. Kennan). 1947. "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." Foreign Affairs, July 1. Accessed July 12, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/george-kennan-sources-soviet-conduct>.

³⁰ DeLong, J. Bradford. 2019. "America's Superpower Panic." Project Syndicate, 12. August. Accessed August 16, 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/america-china-superpower-rivalry-history-by-j-bradford-delong-2019-08>.

© Austria Institut für Europa und Sicherheitspolitik, 2024

All rights reserved. Reprinting or similar or comparable use of publications of the Austria Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES) are only permitted with prior permission. The articles published in the AIES Focus series exclusively reflect the opinions of the respective authors.

Dr. Langweg 3, 2410 Hainburg/Donau

Tel. +43 (1) 3583080

office@aies.at | www.aies.at

Layout Design: Julia Drössler