

NATO at 75: Time to Deliver on Its Promises: What Has to Happen at the Washington Summit

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NATO at 75: Time to Deliver on Its Promises

What Has to Happen at the Washington Summit



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NATO heads of state and government will meet in Washington on July 11, 2024 to mark the Alliance's 75th anniversary. Not only will the leaders have to elect a new secretary-general, the anniversary will take place in the midst of an explosive global situation. As the war in Ukraine continues, the prospect of a second presidential term for Donald Trump also worries the Alliance. In order to strengthen NATO's ability to defend its members in this time of multiple crises, leaders need to advance seven specific topics. Making headway on these could make the summit historic.

- NATO should swiftly provide Ukraine with a perspective for membership, as there are no reasons for further hesitation.
 - In light of the threat from Russia, it is important to reiterate that members should adhere to the NATO target contribution of 2% of GDP.
 - Future partnership policy should follow three principles: interest-oriented, values-oriented, hierarchical.
 - To unite the role of nuclear weapons in the Alliance under a strategic umbrella, a new political consensus paper is urgently needed.
 - The potential return of Donald Trump shows that transatlantic relations must urgently and sustainably be fortified against attempts from within to weaken it.
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Executive Summary

On July 11, 2024, the heads of state and government of NATO member states will meet in Washington to mark the Alliance's 75th anniversary. For some years now, it has become an inglorious practice to hype every NATO summit as a momentous and historic event. However, this summit is indeed something special, not just because of the anniversary. First, a successor must be found for Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, the former Norwegian prime minister who has served for a decade in the post. Second, it is above all the mass and magnitude of current security crises that distinguish this meeting from others. These include not only Russia's war against Ukraine, but also the upcoming US elections in November and concerns about the return of Donald Trump. Trump recently riled Western allies with threats he might abandon NATO members or even encourage Russia to attack them if they don't fulfill budgetary targets. It would be ironic if Trump were the galvanizing force for NATO allies to finally make headway on contentious issues at the summit and secure the transatlantic relationship for the future.

Seven topics are likely to dominate the summit agenda:

- A new secretary-general for the "community of values"
- An accession perspective for Ukraine
- The military adaptation of the Alliance
- The reform of NATO partnerships
- NATO's role on its southern flank
- The strengthening of nuclear deterrence
- Strengthening transatlantic relations

NATO must elect a new secretary-general in 2024. So far, the search has been difficult, as the highest NATO position not only requires the support of the US, the Alliance's strongest power, but also the wishes of the smaller NATO members. Regional characteristics must also be considered. However, there are currently no obvious candidates or member states that can unite the different preferences of all NATO countries. In addition to the choice of leadership, NATO will also have to address its self image as a democratic

community of values. This has never been flawless. In the 1970s, NATO included military dictatorships in Portugal and Greece. Today, the question of shared values is once again being raised with regard to Turkey and Hungary.

The key summit topic is likely to be the question of Ukraine's NATO membership. No common position could be found at the 2023 summit in Vilnius. Even today, NATO is still a long way from unity on the Ukraine issue. However, three factors speak against further procrastination. First, Ukraine's fight for freedom and democracy demonstrates that it is ready for membership, as it represents the values and goals of the Alliance. Second, Ukraine now has battle-hardened armed forces that can make a significant contribution to its own national defense. Third, Russia is losing more and more soldiers and modern military equipment, which cannot be produced in sufficient quantities due to the international sanctions. In any case, further postponement of the Ukraine issue will hardly be possible given the danger Russia poses and the symbolic significance of the anniversary summit.

NATO had already made fundamental changes to its military planning following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, as Russia was once again seen as a potential military threat. These plans will also be a summit topic in 2024, as military adaptation requires considerable financial resources. For years, many NATO members have ignored their promise to spend two percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, including Germany. However, as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing change of times, or "Zeitenwende," the German government has set the course for meeting the two percent target in the future. For member states still falling short of a sufficient contribution to defense, this target must be repeatedly addressed and emphasized at the highest political level. Only through such "blaming and shaming" can sufficient political pressure be brought to bear.

Another recently neglected area of NATO is partnership policy. This will become even more important in the future, as the next challenge already lurks behind the Ukraine conflict, namely, an increasingly aggressive China. If partnerships are to be used sensibly in the future, a fundamental reform is required. Germany already developed initial ideas for a reorganization of partnerships at the beginning of 2023. This was based on three considerations: First, NATO

partnerships must be fundamentally interest-oriented and viewed from the perspective of usefulness for both sides. Second, partnerships cannot be free of hierarchies. Partners are relevant in different ways due to their geostrategic location, political system or contributions. Third, as the Alliance is a values-based community, special importance should be attached to democratic states. If the heads of state and government in Washington ignite a reform of partnerships along these basic lines, this can strengthen NATO as a whole.

For years, there has been an East-South divide in the Alliance. While the Northern and Eastern Europeans point to the Russian threat as the Alliance's primary area of action, southern neighbors such as Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, and France fear too many resources are being devoted to the eastern flank and that their threat perceptions in the South are not sufficiently appreciated. To alleviate this tension, NATO has long spoken of a "360-degree approach" to address the concerns of all members. However, the threat from Russia is a military one that can be countered primarily by military means, i.e. through deterrence and defense capabilities. This is NATO's core competence. In contrast, threats from the South, such as terrorism or migration, are primarily socio-economic problems for which NATO can at best provide support. Even if these problems are discussed at the summit in Washington, it must be clear that solving them in a way that satisfies everyone will be difficult.

In view of the threat from Russia, the Alliance has strengthened its nuclear capabilities, but has not yet dealt with the issue of strategy. The last nuclear strategy document in which NATO agreed on a common deterrence logic was the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) of 2012, adopted in Chicago. However, the international security situation at that time was fundamentally different. Russia was still considered a NATO partner, China was perceived as fundamentally benevolent, and the illusion of an Arab Spring still prevailed in the Middle East. This shows that NATO urgently needs a new political consensus paper to unite the different ideas on deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons in the Alliance under one strategic umbrella. The upcoming Washington summit would provide the right framework to start formulating this strategy.

At the time of the summit, political Washington will be dominated by the US presidential election campaign

and a possible second presidential term for Donald Trump. Trump recently threatened to not defend NATO allies against attack from Russia. This scenario is triggering existential fears in the Alliance, which is why the summit must focus, among other things, on making transatlantic relations "Trump-proof." Beyond the prospect of a Trump presidency, NATO members must defuse transatlantic points of contention and reach agreement on at least two issues. On the one hand, Europe must significantly increase its military capabilities through higher defense budgets. On the other, Europe must pay more attention to the threats in the Asia-Pacific region and focus on two areas. First, it should contribute to the further development of NATO partnerships with the Asia-Pacific Four (AP-4): Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. Second, the Europeans can take on more military tasks in their own neighborhood so US armed forces can devote more time to the Asia-Pacific region.

If the heads of state and government want to do justice to the seriousness of the situation at the NATO summit in Washington, they must make far-reaching decisions in the areas mentioned. Only a prioritization of these issues will lead to a concise and strong summit declaration. If this succeeds, the Washington summit can become as historic as it is being portrayed in advance.

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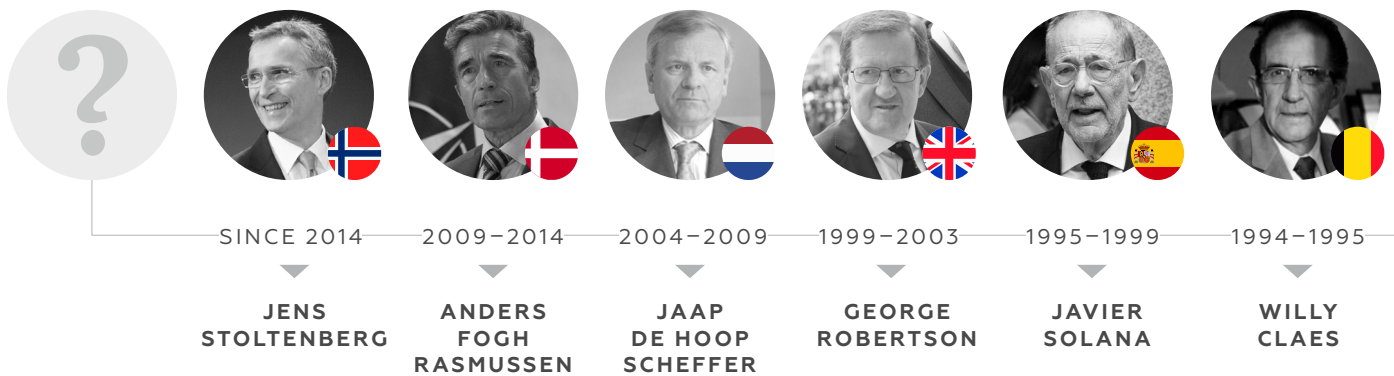
1. A NEW SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR THE “COMMUNITY OF VALUES”

The election of a new NATO secretary-general was already due at the last NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023. NATO had been seeking a successor to the Norwegian diplomat Jens Stoltenberg, whose term was to end on September 30, since the beginning of the year. This proved to be extremely difficult, as filling the highest NATO position not only requires the support of the US, the Alliance’s strongest power, but must also consider both the interests of smaller NATO members and regional particularities. Only a candidate who is accepted by all sides can fulfill the important role of bridge builder between the different positions in the Alliance. Finding a successor in 2023 ultimately failed due to these requirements and rival blockades, meaning that NATO leaders had to persuade Jens Stoltenberg to remain in office for another year. However, there will not be another extension.

In 2024, the discussions are also likely to prove controversial. The secretary-general is traditionally a European, as the position of NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) is always held by the US. The candidate should also have been a former head of government or at least a foreign or defense minister in

order to act with appropriate political weight. There is currently no obvious candidate or member state who fulfills all the different preferences of the other members. The UK is not really in line for the position, as it has supplied three of the 12 secretaries-general to date. In addition, the UK would find little general support due to the Australian-British-American pact AUCUS (which was heavily criticized by France) and London’s tough stance toward China. France has never provided a secretary-general and would have little backing due to its traditional skepticism toward NATO. A Turkish or Hungarian candidate is inconceivable due to the current autocratic governments. A representative from Northern Europe also has little chance, as Denmark and Norway have provided the secretary-general for a total of 15 years. A candidate from Canada could be politically acceptable to both the US and Europe, but the resulting North American imbalance in NATO would be a hard sell and Canada’s low defense spending has been widely criticized. Germany has no suitable candidate with international experience and influence and is also already very prominently represented in the EU. Italy, which last provided the secretary-general in 1964, is also currently unable to present a convincing public figure. The election of an Eastern or South-Eastern European candidate for the first time would send a

1 – Secretaries General of NATO



strong political signal, but the southern NATO members would view this as placing too much emphasis on NATO's eastern flank.

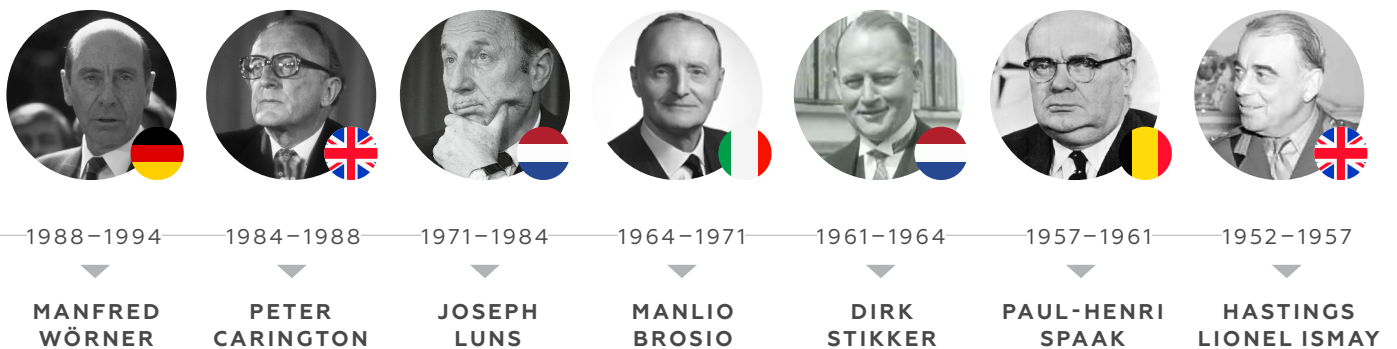
Somewhat surprisingly, former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte expressed interest in the position at the end of 2023 and has already lobbied for it in Washington. Germany would most likely support his candidature, but general approval is uncertain as the last Dutch secretary-general (Jaap de Hoop Scheffer) was not long ago.

In addition to the choice of leadership, NATO will also have to address its self-image as a democratic community of values. This has never been flawless, as founding NATO members Portugal and Greece were both ruled by military dictatorships in the 1970s. Today, the question of common values has arisen with regard to Turkey and Hungary. An autocratic leadership in Ankara that cheers on the terrorism of Hamas is just as shameful for NATO as a government in Budapest that sees itself as Moscow's mouthpiece. While Turkey benefits from its geostrategic position on the Bosphorus, which hinders sanctions, Hungary's strategic weight in NATO is significantly lower. Although the Washington Treaty does not provide for the suspension of NATO membership, there are means of

dealing with members so clearly opposed to NATO's values. In addition to political pressure by strongly emphasizing this canon of values in the summit communiqué, the US has a special role to play here. It has the option of blocking arms deliveries, for example, if not to change the position of Turkey and Hungary, then at least to exact a high cost.

2. AN ACCESSION PERSPECTIVE FOR UKRAINE

The central issue at the summit is likely to be Ukraine's potential NATO membership. For two years, the country has been resisting Russia's attacks with Western help, thereby also defending the security interests of the Atlantic Alliance. It therefore makes sense to offer Ukraine the prospect of joining NATO as soon as possible, especially as the European Union has already signalled this, even if Ukraine still has a long way to go in terms of democracy and the rule of law. At the last summit in Vilnius, NATO members could not find a common position. Instead, Ukraine was merely exempted from the "Membership Action Plan" – a preliminary stage to membership – so that the accession procedure could be shortened if necessary, similar to Sweden and Finland. It was also stated succinctly that



Source: NATO

Ukraine could be invited to join if the conditions for accession were met.¹ On the one hand, this was in line with the lack of consensus in the Alliance and the expected blockade by individual states, such as Hungary and Turkey, against Sweden's accession to NATO. On the other hand, it emphasized that NATO could not admit a country in an open war, as otherwise the Alliance would immediately become a conflict party.

Even today, NATO is still far from unity on the Ukraine issue. While the Eastern European members, with the exception of Hungary, are in favor of swiftly inviting Kiev to join, the US and Germany in particular remain skeptical. In addition to the problem of ongoing hostilities, the military implications, and therefore costs, are the main concern for Washington, as the US believes it would bear most of the burden. Ukrainian membership would require NATO to guarantee security for the eastern border of Ukraine – the second largest territorial state in Europe after Russia. Given the fact that NATO would currently struggle to defend its own borders against attack, defending Ukraine would be an extremely ambitious goal requiring further military reinforcement measures. This problem of Ukraine's defense was also one of the reasons Germany explicitly spoke out against Ukraine's accession at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, along with the desire to not upset Russia and the lack of Ukrainian readiness for membership at the time.

However, three factors increasingly speak against this continued reluctance to admit Ukraine to NATO. First, readiness for accession – in this case, the ability to represent the values and goals of the Alliance – should be largely given after the losses the country has suffered in its struggle for freedom. This clearly indicates their desire for democracy and self-determination. Second, Ukraine now has strong and, above all, battle-hardened armed forces that can make a significant contribution to its own national defense. And third, Russia is losing more and more soldiers and modern military equipment which cannot be produced in sufficient quantities due to sanctions. Moscow will be able to keep up the fighting in eastern Ukraine for a long time thanks to its huge quantities of obsolete weapons and imports from Iran, North Korea, and Turkey. However, such a static war forces Russia to accept an alarmingly high number of casualties. In December

2023, US intelligence estimated that Russia had lost almost 90 percent of its initial 360,000-strong invasion force in Ukraine, with around 315,000 casualties (dead and wounded). This has set the military modernization of Russia's armed forces back by 18 years.² This could indicate that the European NATO forces – including Ukraine – will in future be able to defend themselves against such a weakened Russia alone or with only limited US assistance.

In any case, a further postponement of the Ukraine issue and a hollow compromise like the one reached in Vilnius in 2023 is unlikely to be possible given the threat posed by Russia and the symbolic significance of the anniversary summit.

It is worth noting, though, that it is not only formal NATO membership that is important for Ukraine, but also the question of credible security assurances (the term "security guarantees" is misleading),³ unless NATO extends an invitation to join. Such assurances are also the prerequisite for Ukraine's economic reconstruction and thus of crucial importance for its decreasing dependence on Western aid. International companies will only invest in Ukraine if they consider their investments to be secure in the long term. This basically gives rise to two options for the Washington summit, which can be chosen in different forms.

On the one hand, NATO could promise Ukraine membership as soon as a ceasefire with Russia is reached. Membership would initially extend to the areas controlled by Ukraine, so presumably not to parts of eastern Ukraine and Crimea. A historical example of such partial NATO membership was Germany during the Cold War, when only the Federal Republic belonged to NATO. It is true that this option would grant Russia a kind of say in NATO, as it could delay the accession process by pursuing the fighting. However, Russia's resources for continuing the war are not unlimited, and such a NATO decision would send a clear signal to Moscow that its ambitions to subjugate Ukraine have failed. Russia could delay Ukraine's accession to NATO, but it could no longer prevent it.

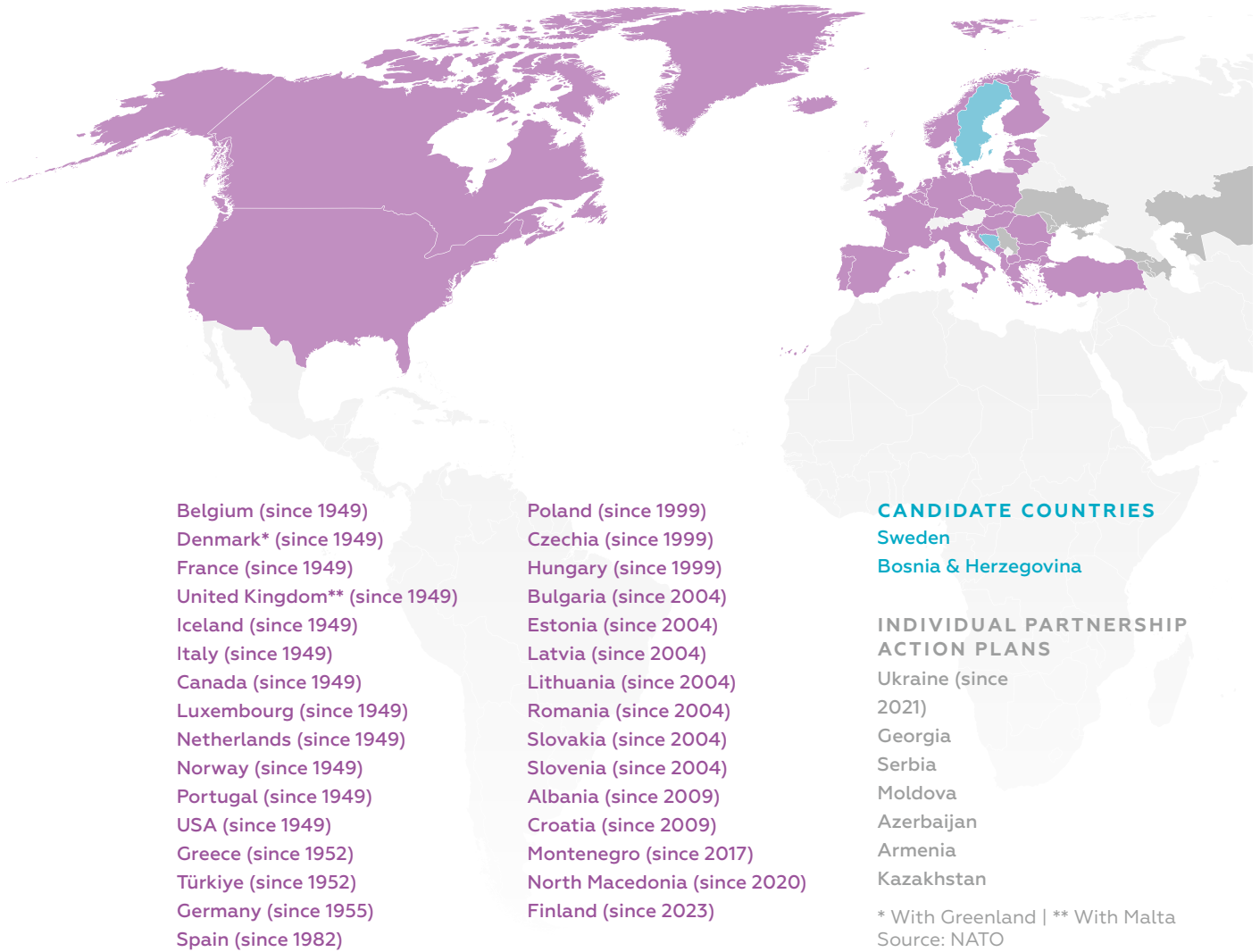
Second, if Washington does not agree to join, NATO could agree on security commitments that Ukraine considers credible and that act as a deterrent to

1 NATO "... will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met." Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 19 July 2023, para. 11, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm (accessed on 29 January 2024)

2 U.S. Intelligence Assesses Ukraine War Has Cost Russia 315,000 Casualties, U.S. News, December 12, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-12-12/u-s-intelligence-assesses-ukraine-war-has-cost-russia-315-000-casualties-source> (retrieved on 29/01/2024)

3 Even NATO membership, which is generally regarded as the highest form of security, is not a real "guarantee," as Article 5 of the Washington Treaty does not oblige any NATO state to provide military defense for a member under attack. There is only an obligation to take such measures as are "deemed necessary." This can include armed force, but does not have to.

2 – The 31 Member Countries of NATO (as of Feb. 6, 2024)



Russia. These would have to go well beyond the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, in which Ukraine was promised territorial integrity in exchange for the Soviet nuclear weapons stationed on its soil.⁴ This agreement was broken by Russia in 2014 and 2022 without any consequences, although it was also signed by the US and the UK.

declaration to emphasize its commitment to Ukraine’s security. While the final document from Vilnius stated only that Ukraine’s security was “of great importance to Allies and the Alliance,”⁵ Washington could agree on the wording “vital to the security of the Alliance.” This would bring Ukraine closer to becoming a NATO member.

Such credible security commitments to Ukraine could be made by NATO as a whole or by individual NATO members. NATO as an institution could agree on strong wording in the Washington Summit

In addition, important NATO members could make bilateral security commitments to Ukraine. For example, the United Kingdom had already given written commitments to Finland and Sweden before they

4 Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Budapest, Dec. 5, 1994, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf> (accessed Jan. 29, 2024)
5 Cf. Vilnius Summit Communiqué, op. cit. para. 12.

joined NATO, the wording of which came close to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.⁶ The treaty obligations the US has entered into bilaterally with its allies in the Asia-Pacific region, understood as strong security commitments, can also serve as a model.⁷

It is clear that while bilateral commitments can bridge the gap until Ukraine becomes a full NATO member, they cannot replace a joint NATO commitment. There are also historical examples of this. From 1951, the US, France and Great Britain developed joint plans for the defense of West Berlin and for secure access to the city. Nevertheless, in 1961, these three major NATO members and nuclear states insisted that NATO as a whole should guarantee free access to Berlin. As a result, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander developed corresponding plans from 1961 under the heading BERCON (Berlin Contingency) because it was certain that joint action would have a greater deterrent effect against the Soviet Union.

3. THE MILITARY ADAPTATION OF THE ALLIANCE

NATO had already made fundamental changes to its military planning following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia was once again recognized as a potential military threat and armed forces were stationed on NATO's eastern borders as a deterrent. They served primarily as a "tripwire" that would trigger extensive redeployment of forces from West to East in the event of Russian aggression. In 2020, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander developed a comprehensive defense concept for the entire Euro-Atlantic area (Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area - DDA) for the first time in decades. The overarching SACEUR defense plan (SACEUR's Area of Responsibility-Wide Strategic Plan - SASP), which focuses on Russia and terrorism as the main threats, is derived from this overall concept. Three specific defense plans (NATO Regional Plans) for the North-West, Central and South-East regions and seven Subordinate Strategic Plans (SSP) for the individual categories of armed forces were derived from this.

In line with these defense plans – known as the "Family of Plans" in NATO jargon – NATO's force structure has also been changed: away from the idea of a mere tripwire for deterrence purposes and towards a comprehensive military defense capability on the Alliance's eastern borders.⁸ In the New Force Model, up to 800,000 troops are to be available in future, of which around 300,000 are to be kept at high and maximum readiness, ready for deployment within 30 days.

These plans are currently being revised and updated for confirmation in Washington. From 2025, they should be backed by the corresponding armed forces and thus be executable. All of this will also be a summit topic because the military adaptation will require considerable financial resources, raising political question marks. For years, many NATO members – including Germany – have ignored their promise to spend two percent of their GDP on defense, with all kinds of excuses and spurious justifications. When, with the attack on Ukraine in February 2022, NATO could no longer ignore the threat from Russia, the Alliance was able to painfully agree to a new pledge. According to this new Defence Investment Pledge (DIP), two percent is no longer understood as an upper limit, but as a minimum amount. But even this vague and unambitious target continues to be ignored by individual NATO countries. Currently, 19 NATO members remain below two percent and it is considered scandalous that major economies such as Canada, Italy and Spain are still at levels between 1.2 and 1.4 percent.

Germany, on the other hand, was able for the first time to join the group of countries that will fulfil the two percent target in the future, with a special fund of EUR 100 billion provided as part of the "Zeitenwende" – the changing of the times as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has deemed the period since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Largely unnoticed by the public, the German Bundestag has taken precautions to ensure higher defense spending even after the special fund has been used up. The law codifying the special fund for the Bundeswehr stipulates that, if the money is used up, the federal budget will continue to provide a defense budget sufficient to achieve NATO's

6 UK pledges to back Sweden and Finland against Russian threats, in: The Guardian, May 11, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/may/11/uk-pledges-to-back-sweden-and-finland-against-russian-threats-nato> (accessed Jan. 29, 2024)

7 Article 4 of the treaty with the Philippines states: "Each Party recognises that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on either of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes." Cf. Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines; August 30, 1951. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp (accessed Jan. 29, 2024)

8 Federal Defence Minister Boris Pistorius' pledge in 2023 to permanently station a combat-ready Bundeswehr brigade in Lithuania by 2027 is in line with this logic.

capability goals.⁹ This would probably require more than two percent of GDP.

Those member states that still do not make a sufficient defense contribution, however, must be repeatedly reminded at the highest political level of the need to financially underpin NATO's defense capability. Only through such "blaming and shaming" – whether in internal debates or as part of NATO's annual publication of members' defense expenditures¹⁰ – can sufficient political pressure be built up.

4. THE REFORM OF NATO PARTNERSHIPS

One area that has been neglected amid the current focus on the Russian threat and Alliance defense needs is NATO's partnership policy. After the end of the Cold War, it was a successful instrument for binding interested countries outside the Alliance or for promoting political democratization processes in regions beyond the Alliance's borders. It will become all the more important in the future, as the next and presumably far greater challenge already lies beyond the acute conflict in Ukraine. This is the global confrontation with an increasingly aggressive China, which seeks to change the international order in its favor.

For partnerships to work well in the future, a fundamental reform is required. Over the past three decades, a proliferation of partnership groups and formats has developed that even experts can hardly penetrate. Since the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994, NATO has created more and more new partnership bodies for countries in different regions. There is a Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) for countries in the Mediterranean region, an Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) for countries in the Gulf region, three Special Relationships with Russia (until 2022), Georgia and Ukraine, a Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), the Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process (PARP), the Intensified Dialogue (ID) and the Membership Action Plan (MAP). If this were not enough, the Individual Tailored Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP), the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) or the Partnership Around the Globe were further differentiated. The list goes on. The Washington Summit would be a good opportunity

to clear this impenetrable jungle and take a fundamentally new approach. Germany already developed initial ideas for a reorganization of the partnerships at the beginning of 2023, based on three considerations:

First, NATO partnerships must be fundamentally interest-oriented and viewed in terms of usefulness. NATO should define which countries can or should become partners instead of presenting a menu from which interested countries can choose according to their own preferences. The Alliance has benefited from many partnerships, for example by achieving military interoperability with partners or gaining influence in the regions. Conversely, NATO's military training assistance, for example, has enabled many partners to ensure their own security. If this two-way street of mutual benefit does not exist, a partnership makes little sense. Consequently, there can be no grandfathering of one of the abovementioned formats.

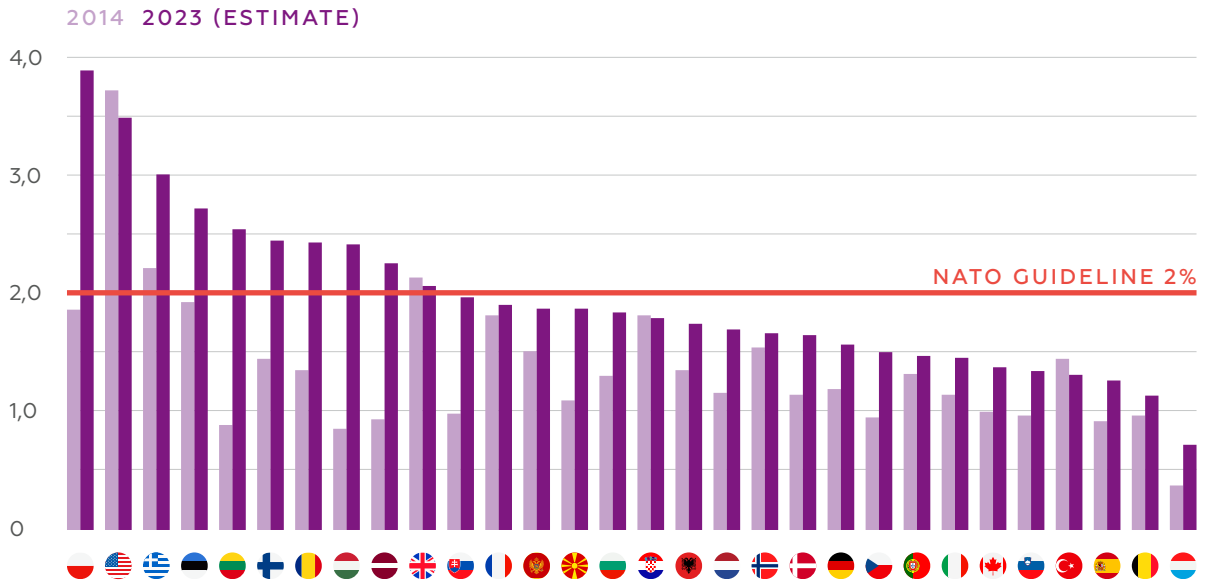
Second, partnerships cannot be free of hierarchies. Partners have different levels of relevance due to their geostrategic location, their political system or the contributions they bring to the relationship with NATO. Some partners have a privileged position, while others have a less intensive partnership. Such hierarchies can also change when political circumstances change. This is neither discriminatory nor reprehensible, but results from the legitimate interests of the Alliance.

Third, it is above all the political system and the values orientation of a country that determines whether it can be counted among NATO's privileged partners. The Atlantic Alliance is a values-based institution and must therefore attach particular importance to democratic states. If the future global strategic competition is also about countries such as Russia and China resolutely rejecting Western values, with China aiming to impose its own canon of values internationally, then a values-based organization must position itself against this. The fact that some NATO members are gradually moving further and further away from the transatlantic values framework is a regrettable development under their respective autocratic governments, but does not fundamentally speak against the Alliance's values orientation.

9 "After the special fund has been spent, the federal budget will continue to provide the financial resources to ensure the Bundeswehr's capability profile and the German contribution to the NATO capability goals then in force." Cf. Bundeswehr Financing and Special Assets Act - BwFinSVerM, July 1, 2022, <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bwfinsvermg/BwFinSVerM.pdf> (accessed on January 29, 2024)

10 Cf. Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023), NATO Press Release, July 7, 2023, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf (accessed Jan. 29, 2024)

3 – Share of Defense Spending in GDP (%): 2014 vs. 2023*



*Based on prices and exchange rates from 2015 | Source: NATO

The closest circle of NATO partners therefore consists of those countries that promote NATO’s interests and goals *and are* in line with the democratic principles of NATO. These privileged NATO partners must be granted influence over the Alliance’s internal processes. This does not mean the right to have a say or vote in the Alliance’s concrete decisions, but requires that the security interests of these partners are always included in NATO’s deliberations.

If the heads of state and government in Washington commissioned a reform of the partnerships along these basic lines, this would strengthen NATO as a whole and arm it against future autocratic threats from outside but also from within.

5. NATO’S ROLE ON THE SOUTHERN FLANK

One of the classic summit topics is NATO’s role on its southern flank - i.e. with regard to threats south of the Mediterranean that particularly affect the security interests of individual NATO states. For years, there has been an East-South divide in the Alliance, in which the Northern and Eastern Europeans point to the threat from Russia as the Alliance’s primary field of action. Southern neighbors such as Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, and France, on the other hand,

fear that too many resources are being devoted to the eastern flank, while their threat perceptions in the South are not sufficiently appreciated. In order to alleviate this tension, NATO has long spoken of a “360-degree approach” with which it wants to address the concerns of all members.

As plausible as it sounds, this could do little to resolve the East-South conflict in the Alliance, as NATO faces a fundamental problem that is difficult to solve. The danger from Russia is primarily a military threat, for example in the form of an attack on a NATO member that can be fought primarily by military means - i.e. deterrence and defense capability. This is NATO’s core competence. Threats from the South, however, are primarily socio-economic problems such as terrorism, migration or violence in the context of ethnic conflicts. A direct military threat, such as a military attack by an Islamist terrorist group on NATO territory, is hardly to be expected. NATO’s southern neighbors are therefore exposed to dangers that can only be fought to a very limited extent by military means or are not part of NATO’s portfolio, such as the recent Hamas attack on Israel.

Although NATO describes terrorism as the second greatest threat after Russia in its documents, following the 360-degree logic, it is ill-suited to fighting terrorism itself. At best, the Alliance’s armed forces

have a supporting role, for example by assessing the situation on the ground (situation awareness) or through maritime surveillance measures. In addition, NATO can also send a political signal, for example by appointing a Special Representative for Counter-Terrorism that Turkey has been calling for. However, this would be just as symbolic as NATO's most recent measure to develop a Sequenced Response Plan for the South in addition to the three Regional Plans, which would be primarily aimed at carrying out military exercises with NATO's new Rapid Reaction Force.

In Washington, NATO will again try to take the security interests of its southern members into account with declarations of intent and of solidarity, without the capability to solve the fundamental problem of the East-South divide.

6. THE STRENGTHENING OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Just as for conventional weapons, NATO also initiated significant changes in the area of nuclear weapons after 2014. In view of the obvious dangers posed by a revanchist Russia, nuclear deterrence in the Alliance had to be strengthened again after years of being largely irrelevant. To achieve this, it was first necessary to reestablish a nuclear mindset, i.e. the realization in all NATO member states that deterrence cannot simply be proclaimed but must be underpinned by functional and convincing nuclear capabilities.

In addition, NATO had to significantly reduce nuclear response times, as it had created a rapid reaction force, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), in response to the annexation of Crimea, meant to be operational in five to eight days in the event of a crisis. If, in comparison, many weeks were still needed to make NATO's nuclear potential operational in parallel, this conceptual imbalance would weaken deterrence overall, even if nuclear weapons were only an extremely remote option. NATO also increased the number of nuclear exercises and organized them into crisis scenarios that were as real as possible. Furthermore, as part of the SNOWCAT¹¹ program, the number of NATO countries that would participate in a NATO nuclear operation with their conventional capabilities, even though they do not have American nuclear weapons on their soil, has increased. If American

nuclear weapons were ever deployed within the NATO framework, these countries would, for example, fly escort missions or combat enemy air defenses.

However, all these activities related more or less to the military side of deterrence, i.e. the weapons, the procedures or the exercises. The political dimension – the strategic consensus within the Alliance on *how* to deter *whom* with *what* – was largely ignored. The last nuclear strategy document in which NATO agreed on a common deterrence logic was the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) adopted at the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago. Among other things, the paper succinctly stated that nuclear deterrence capabilities were sufficient under the given circumstances of the time,¹² putting an end to the debate about the usefulness of American nuclear weapons in Europe.

However, the international security situation was fundamentally different at the time. Russia was still considered a NATO partner, China was perceived as fundamentally benevolent, and the illusion of the Arab Spring still prevailed in the Middle East. With Russia's annexation of Crimea, what was defined as sufficient in 2012 was no longer valid in 2014 and must be considered completely outdated today.

In the meantime, NATO has begun an intensive nuclear debate. In Germany, a Social Democrat-led federal government has made a clear commitment to the presence of American nuclear weapons on German soil (something that the SPD and Greens have traditionally criticized) and has decided to purchase the F-35 nuclear carrier aircraft. Poland is campaigning in favor of stationing American nuclear weapons on its territory. Some NATO countries are debating how they should position themselves in relation to the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which came into force in 2021. Others fear a weakening of nuclear deterrence should Donald Trump retake the White House in 2024.

In view of this mixed situation, NATO urgently needs a new political consensus paper, a follow-up document to the outdated DDPR, to unite the different ideas on deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons in the Alliance under one strategic umbrella. As the Washington summit will have to come up with weighty deliverables due to its importance, the heads of state

11 Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics

12 "NATO has determined that, in the current circumstances, the existing mix of capabilities and the plans for their development are sound." Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, paragraph 31, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_87597.htm (accessed Jan. 29, 2024)

and government could commission a new DDPR and thus trigger the urgently needed debate on nuclear strategy.

7. STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

At the time of the summit, political Washington will be dominated by the US presidential election campaign, the outcome of which could have global political consequences. Consequently, the internal NATO discussion will also be dominated by the possibility of a Donald Trump presidency. In view of Trump's previous and recent threats to abandon the institution and the current rhetoric of the Trumpists, this scenario triggers existential fears within the Alliance. Therefore, NATO also urgently needs to ensure that transatlantic relations are "Trump-proof." This includes above all significantly increasing European defense spending in order to eliminate one of the most frequent (and justified) complaints of the first Trump administration – that Europeans do not pull their financial weight. Here, Germany, which was often the target of criticism, has set an example with the "Zeitenwende" and has shown that defense budgets are not dictated by constraints, but are always a consequence of political priorities and decisions.

Even beyond a Trump presidency, transatlantic points of contention must be defused in order to maintain the current unity in NATO, for example vis-à-vis Russia and, in the future, China. Possible conflicts include the classic debate on burden-sharing within the Alliance, the East-South divide, the question of what role NATO should play in the face of the growing threat from China in the Asia-Pacific region, or how to deal with Russia after the end of the war in Ukraine. These are questions on which individual NATO members sometimes differ considerably. Consequently, NATO should reach agreement on at least two issues.

First, Europe must significantly increase its military capabilities through larger defense budgets in order to play a much greater role in deterring and defending against Russia in the future. Regardless of the outcome of the war, Russia will emerge from the Ukraine conflict severely weakened because it has lost its modern military capabilities and a large

part of its military and will find it difficult to restore these. It is likely to have largely lost its strategic invasion capability and can probably be held in check by European armed forces in the future.¹³ However, NATO must agree this by consensus and it cannot be achieved through the European Defence Union within the European Union, which is repeatedly invoked in vain. The militarily "autonomous" EU, to which only France had actually seriously aspired, was always an illusion. It has completely lost its basis since the war in Ukraine. The Eastern Europeans in particular will always – even if transatlantic relations deteriorate – seek a connection to the US instead of entrusting themselves to a purely European construct. The Europeans will also for a very long time continue to be dependent on military capacities that can currently only be provided by the US. The future therefore does not lie in a militarily autonomous EU, but in a close integration of the respective capabilities of the EU and NATO.

Second, Europe must pay more attention to the threats in the Asia-Pacific region. Since no NATO country apart from France and the UK has the military capability to make a significant impact in this region, Europeans should focus their engagement on two areas:

Europe must contribute to the further expansion of NATO partnerships with the Asia-Pacific Four (AP-4): Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. It is completely incomprehensible that France – apparently because it was offended by the AUCUS pact – prevented such an important political signal as the establishment of a NATO liaison office in Japan at the Vilnius summit. The AP-4 are not only important players in the region, but also part of the political West, exposed to the dangers of autocratic regimes worldwide.

Moreover, European NATO members can take on more military tasks in their neighborhood so that the American armed forces can focus more on Asia-Pacific. This includes military operations in the Mediterranean as well as anti-piracy missions in the Red Sea. The US is even continuing to provide forces for the NATO mission in Kosovo, a mission that is definitely a matter for the Europeans and can only be carried out with their armed forces.

¹³ Of course, Russia could try to restore its former military capabilities after the end of the war. However, depending on the circumstances, this would probably take up to a decade. However, popular claims that Russia would want to attack NATO after reconstituting its forces are operating in a political and strategic vacuum. Russia has pursued a specific goal with its attack on Ukraine and has carefully avoided any escalation of the conflict on NATO territory and has also accepted the constant flow of supplies to Ukraine via Poland. Even attacks by Ukraine on Russian territory have not been able to change this caution. Moscow is obviously aware of its own inferiority compared to NATO.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The NATO summit in Washington will attract particular attention, not only because of its historic anniversary, but also because of the global crisis situation and the US presidential election campaign. If the heads of state and government want to do justice to the seriousness of the situation and take decisive action, they will have to make far-reaching decisions in the areas mentioned.

The future of Ukraine and the strengthening of NATO's conventional and nuclear deterrence require particular attention. Further postponement of the Ukraine issue is hardly possible at this NATO summit, which is now the fifth (including the virtual summit on February 25, 2022) since the start of the war. In addition to furthering military and economic support for Ukraine, the main issue is to connect the country to NATO's security space. Germany must therefore help to present Ukraine with a concrete prospect of accession – also to compensate for the loss of trust from Eastern Europe that German governments have suffered as a result of their overly Russia-oriented policies. Should it not be possible to agree on this step due to the blockade of individual countries, credible security commitments would at least be required both from individual NATO states and from the Alliance as a whole. These could be reflected in the summit declaration. Here, too, Germany has a special responsibility as Ukraine's second-largest supporter.

In order to make such security promises, a further improvement in conventional defense is required. However, such measures to strengthen NATO are associated with considerable costs. Some countries, such as Germany, have already changed their budgetary priorities in favor of defense spending, while others still believe they can continue to ignore joint NATO promises. These members must understand at the summit that their reticence not only weakens the security of NATO as a whole, but also the future stability of transatlantic relations. With the special fund for the Bundeswehr, Berlin has shown that it is possible to change budgetary priorities in favor of defense spending despite a general shortage of funds. This means that – despite all the problems with implementing the “Zeitenwende” – Berlin can very well present itself as a model for other NATO members.

In addition to strengthening conventional armed forces, it is also important to develop a common understanding of nuclear deterrence issues. As the

country where American nuclear weapons are stationed, Germany should press for NATO to tackle a new nuclear strategy paper at the summit. Another area in which Germany should bring its weight to bear is the fundamental reform of NATO partnerships in order to future-proof the Alliance in this area, too.

At the same time, the heads of state and government must resist the urge to overload the summit with other topics, because experience shows that every NATO member tries to anchor its own particular interests in the final summit declaration. Only a prioritization of the topics will lead to a concise and strong summit declaration, which can be taken as a clear guide for action by NATO's political and military bodies. If this succeeds, the Washington Summit can indeed be historic.



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