

NATO VILNIUS SUMMIT 2023

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s Vilnius Summit took place in the backdrop of 500 days of raging military conflict on the European continent. Something that was initially considered to be short-lived, has continued for nearly 18 months with still no end in sight.

Since the start of the conflict in February 2022, the Vilnius Summit is the Alliance's fourth Summit meeting. Several internal as well as external issues were discussed that had previously been a bone of contention within the Alliance. The unity of the Alliance was repeatedly questioned by several experts and observers. The Vilnius Summit has addressed these concerns to some extent.

The Summit was attended by the Heads of State and Heads of Government of 31 countries including NATO member states and partners like Ukraine, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Moreover, representatives of the inter-governmental organizations also attended. The venue of the Summit, the capital of Lithuania, signifies the importance of NATO's eastern flank security.¹

Undoubtedly, NATO is currently facing the most unpredictable and dangerous security environment since the cold war. The purpose of the meeting was to address the security challenges, bolster its

¹ Lithuanian National Radio and Television, "NATO leaders assemble in Vilnius for two-day summit", published on July 11, 2023.
<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2031876/live-updates-nato-leaders-assemble-in-vilnius-for-two-day-summit>

defense and deterrence, and bring Ukraine closer to the Alliance. While announcing the date of the Summit, Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, had commented:²

“The decisions we will take in Vilnius will bring Ukraine closer to NATO...bolstering NATO's deterrence and defence will also be high on the agenda of our summit.”

Agenda of Summit:

Following were the key topics on the agenda:³

a) Deterrence and Defense:

Against the backdrop of the Russian action against Ukraine, NATO aimed to bolster its deterrence and defense to secure 1 billion of its population. Moreover, for the first time since the cold war, a new regional defense plan and a new force model with increased troops were to be discussed at the Summit.

b) Support for Ukraine:

One of the key issues to be discussed at the Summit was to bring Ukraine closer to the Alliance. All allies agreed that NATO is the right place for Ukraine and it will become part of it at a suitable time. In addition to that, the military, financial, and political support of Ukraine to defend its sovereignty as granted by the United Nations Charter was high in the optics.

c) Defense Investment:

Since the Crimean annexation by Russia till 2022, NATO has invested US\$ 350 billion extra in defense under Defense Investment Pledge 2014.⁴ In Vilnius Summit, 2% spending of GDP was to be regarded as a “minimum” requirement. Additionally, to reinforce defense capabilities, deliberations were planned regarding investments in novel technologies, alongside addressing the domains of cyber and space security.

d) Partnership:

The Summit aimed to strengthen the Alliance's cooperation with partners in Europe and the 'Indo-Pacific' along with intergovernmental organizations, especially European Union (EU). In

² NATO, “Joint press conference”, published on July 10, 2023.
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_216977.htm

³ NATO, “2023 NATO SUMMIT”, published on June 28, 2023.
<https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/216570.htm>

⁴ Ibid.

addition to that, the outstanding issue of Sweden's bid to join NATO was hoped to reach a decisive end as President Erdogan signaled a positive response.

e) Broader Security Challenge:

The Transatlantic Alliance realized that it is contemporarily facing a multitude of threats. In addition to conventional military threats, non-conventional threats such as terrorism, climate change, and new technologies pose a great challenge to the security and stability of the region. Allies aimed to adopt a 360-degree approach to ensure security by adopting a climate change and security plan, cooperation with the EU to protect critical infrastructure, and an innovation accelerator and invention fund for the development of emerging technologies.

Key Decisions:

Keeping in view the strategic constraints Alliance is facing, NATO partners agreed on a wide range of agreements to enhance deterrence and foster unity among key allies. Following are the key decisions taken at the Vilnius summit:⁵

a) Ukraine Membership:

The Alliance refrained from offering Ukraine a formal invitation to join NATO or a timeline for its membership. However, the package for Ukraine agreed at the Summit brought Ukraine closer to some degree. The package includes 3 elements, (i) Long-term assistance for Ukraine to develop its security and defense infrastructure; (ii) Setting up NATO-Ukraine Council, which would be an avenue for crisis consultation and decision-making; and (iii) agreement on the removal of the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine, reducing membership process from two steps to one.

b) Strengthening Deterrence and Defense:

Allies agreed on spending 2% of GDP on enhancing defense capabilities including an explicit call to strengthen the supply chain and domestic defense industries. In addition to further strengthening forward defense, a new Allied Reaction Force was established to improve the Alliance's ability to reinforce an ally. For the first time since the Cold War, a new generation of regional defense plans was adopted for the North, Centre, and South of NATO. Moreover,

⁵ NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué", published on July 11, 2023. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

allies agreed to put 300,000 troops at higher readiness to ensure the eastern flank's security assisted by substantial air and naval power.

c) Sweden's Membership:

Sweden's NATO membership was previously halted by Türkiye and Hungary. On the July 10, 2023, Türkiye's President Erdogan in a meeting with NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Ulf Kristersson, Prime Minister of Sweden, agreed to ratification of Sweden's bid from the Türkiye parliament.⁶ The Foreign Minister of Hungary also signaled support for Sweden's bid.⁷ The progress at Vilnius Summit would help finalize Sweden's likely accession to the alliance by the end of 2023.

d) Deepened Cooperation with 'Indo-Pacific' Partners:

Allies agreed to deepen cooperation with partners from 'Indo-Pacific' on hybrid threats, cyber security, maritime security, climate change, and new technologies. Vilnius summit was the second consecutive summit attended by Indo-Pacific partners. Alliance also regarded China as the prominent systemic challenge to NATO, implying security as a global rather than a regional challenge.

Various experts pinned their opinions regarding major developments at the Summit. Concerning Ukraine's support and membership, the Summit fell short in two areas: (i) providing a security guarantee; and (ii) a clear timeline for membership.⁸ The United States and Germany were of the view that Ukraine's membership of NATO at this stage will invoke NATO's Article 5, putting the Alliance in direct war with Russia.

Alessandro Marrone, Head of Defense Programme at the Institute of International Affairs (Italy), opined that Ukraine's membership will depend upon the outcome of the counter-offensive and

⁶ NATO, "Press statement following the meeting between Türkiye, Sweden, and the NATO Secretary General", published on July 10, 2023.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_217147.htm

⁷ Euronews, "Sweden's NATO bid: Hungary joins Turkey in lifting veto", published on July 11, 2023.

<https://www.euronews.com/2023/07/11/hungary-signals-it-is-ready-to-join-turkey-in-approving-swedens-bid-for-nato-membership>

⁸ Jason C. Moyer & Henri Winberg, Wilson Centre, "NATO Vilnius Summit 2023: A Summit For Implementation", published on July 11, 2023.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/nato-vilnius-summit-2023-summit-implementation>

Ukraine's ability to withstand war attritions beyond 2023.⁹ One thing is for sure, Ukraine's odds for full membership are bleak as long the current conflict rages on.

Concerning the development of Sweden's accession at Vilnius, the development seems positive for now as President Erdogan agreed to ratify its bid. NATO agreed to increase counter-terrorism efforts to address Turkiye's concerns along with Sweden's renewed support for Turkiye's bid to join the EU. However, some experts view Turkiye's response as a 'Maximilian' approach to gain leverage, considering off-the-record F-16 jet deal with the U.S.¹⁰

Christopher Skaluba, Director of the Scowcroft Center's Transatlantic Security Initiative, commented, "There is a non-zero chance that some intervening circumstance (like another public Quran burning [in Sweden]) could serve as a pretext for derailing the process again."¹¹

In preparation for the Vilnius Summit, the NATO Secretary General had stressed 2% GDP spending on defense as a "minimum requirement not a goal to aim for". As of 2023, the target of 2% will be met by only 11 out of 31 members.¹² It might have fallen short of making 2% a floor, as it is ultimately up to individual member states to commit funding at national level.

Wojciech Lorenz, Head of the International Security programme, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), commented, "The development of robust forces ready to fight a high-intensity war with Russia will be a challenge for numerous allies. Some still do not believe that Russia could realistically attack NATO, even if it rebuilds its forces weakened by the invasion of Ukraine."

Conclusion:

Considering the communique of the NATO Summit and the events surrounding Ukraine, it is implied that NATO nations are adopting a new Cold War model. NATO defense posturing at the eastern flank is aimed at bolstering NATO's deterrence, fueling the protracted conflict in the region. The prolonged Ukrainian conflict works in Russia's favor, as NATO cannot grant Ukraine full membership

⁹ Alessandro Marrone, Council of Councils, "NATO Divided: Global Perspectives on the Vilnius Summit", published on July 14, 2023.

<https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/nato-divided-global-perspectives-vilnius-summit>

¹⁰ Atlantic Council, "Experts react: Erdogan just agreed to support Sweden's NATO bid. What does that mean for Turkey, Sweden, and the Alliance?" published on July 10, 2023.

https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-erdogan-agrees-sweden-nato-accession/?mkt_tok=NjU5LVdaWC0wNzUAAAGM4VcGET8i4iYj4bIP_aDB-jwW_8YdUm94-HfmdyIY_pvzP4RZC3dvnKpPBdPYhtFn6EHwBeQoiCEsnuvt0jVUsDf5nKz1rbUVKy4sM6XiZMU-Mg

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sabine Siebold, "Explainer: What's on the table for NATO at Vilnius summit?", published on July 10, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/whats-table-nato-vilnius-summit-2023-07-07/>

status during wartime or even during the existence of a frozen conflict. This exacerbates Ukraine's predicament by denying it the much-needed balance of power in non-conventional spheres.

It also works in favour of the European defence industrialists as well since the Ukraine conflict has led to the rejuvenation of the calls to modernize forces and capabilities, strengthen supply chains and revive the defence industry which was very much visible in the Vilnius Summit. This naturally puts a big question mark on Europe's will and commitment to tackle challenges posed by Climate Change, a subject that was dominating the Western policy debates till early last year.

Furthermore, China is identified as the most prominent strategic challenge to NATO. The next NATO Summit in Washington, to commemorate the Alliance's 75th anniversary, will serve to formalize NATO's China Policy. This development carries significant implications as it could lead to greater connectivity between the 'Indo-Pacific' and European theaters of conflict, ultimately strengthening blocs in the global arena.

The presence of the Four Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4) second time in a row at NATO summits and the extension of "Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP)" to each AP4 states is an indication of the Alliance's focus and priorities for the coming years - China.

Although the Vilnius Summit has been termed as the *"summit for implementation for the NATO of tomorrow"*, it clearly looks like NATO is completely reorienting and restructuring itself to tackle more complex and dynamic challenges it faces in the contemporary world, most particularly those perceived by Europe being posed by China.

The Vilnius Summit clearly showed (as highlighted in NATO Strategic Concept), that the Alliance is looking to move beyond its territorial jurisdiction (of the Euroatlantic region) and expand its operational radius way beyond its borders, namely the Asia-Pacific. By identifying new "rivals" and threats, NATO is re-writing its *raison de etre* and justifying its outreach by outlining new areas of cooperation with far-flung partners. The new eastward thrust in the Western Alliance's approach and outreach is not likely to be viewed favourably by many of the key actors in this arena.