ISSUE BRIEF

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NATO SUMMIT 2025 – STRATEGIC REALIGNMENTS AT THE HAGUE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) convened its 2025 summit in The Hague, Netherlands, from June 24 to 25. This summit was unprecedented in its scale, symbolism, and strategic decisions, particularly given the backdrop of continuing Russian military action against Ukraine, evolving transatlantic dynamics in the second term of President Donald Trump in the U.S., and growing calls for European defence autonomy.[1] With participation from 45 heads of state and thousands of delegates, the summit was a defining moment for NATO's trajectory in the second half of the 2020s.[2]

Hosted at the World Forum in The Hague, the summit brought together representatives from all 32 NATO member states. Special attention was accorded to the participation of U.S. President Donald Trump, who's past scepticism toward NATO spurred a charm offensive by the Dutch hosts, including official dinners at the royal palace.[3] Also present were the alliance's four Asia-Pacific partners, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea (though the latter did not send a head of state). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy attended a side dinner, reflecting Ukraine's continuing but still

1 NATO, "NATO Summit in The Hague Concludes with Joint Decisions and a Focus on the Future," Government.nl, June 26, 2025, https://www.government.nl/topics/nato-summit-2025
2 Ibid.
3 "Nato's Trump Flattery Buys Time but Dodges Tough Questions," Reuters, June 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/natos-trump-flattery-buys-time-dodges-tough-questions-2025-06-25/

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incomplete engagement with NATO.[4] This summit also marked the first under NATO's new Secretary General, Mark Rutte, former Prime Minister of the Netherlands.[5]

Key Themes and Agenda

1. **Defence spending and 5% Commitment:** The most consequential decision of the summit was the adoption of a new collective defence spending goal: 5% of GDP by 2035. This marks a significant escalation from the previous 2% benchmark, which had long been a point of contention within the alliance.[6] The breakdown includes: 3.5% for traditional military expenditures; and 1.5% allocated for resilience-related spending, encompassing cyber security, critical infrastructure, and support to partners such as Ukraine.[7] Each NATO member is required to submit a national implementation roadmap by mid-2026, with progress reviews set for 2029. While nearly all members backed this move, Spain notably negotiated an exemption, citing its distinct defence metrics.[8]

2. **Alliance Unity and U.S. Commitment:** One of the summit's implicit but vital goals was securing ongoing U.S. engagement with NATO under President Trump. Despite his prior criticisms of alliance 'free-riding', President Trump endorsed the new spending framework and reiterated support for Article 5, NATO's mutual defence clause.[9] The Hague's hosting and Secretary General Rutte's personal diplomacy were widely seen as instrumental in keeping the U.S. onside, albeit temporarily and with conditions.[10]

3. **Support for Ukraine:** While reaffirming support for Ukraine against Russia's continued aggression, the summit stopped short of offering a concrete timeline for NATO membership. Instead, support remained in the form of military aid, including commitments for more air

4 "Zelenskiy opts for more formal, calibrated wardrobe ahead of Trump meeting," *Reuters*, June 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/zelenskiy-opts-more-formal-calibrated-wardrobe-ahead-trump-meeting-2025-06-25/

5 Ibid.

6 Lili Bayer, "What is NATO's New 5% Defence Spending Target?" Reuters, June 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/what-is-natos-new-5-defence-spending-target-2025-06-23/

7 Ibid.

8 Spain Agrees with NATO to Skip 5% Defence Spending Target," *Reuters*, June 22, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spain-agrees-with-nato-skip-5-defence-spending-target-2025-06-22/

9 NATO, "NATO concludes historic Summit in The Hague," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, June 25, 2025. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_236516.htm

10 Reuters, "Nato's Trump Flattery Buys Time," June 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/natos-trump-flattery-buys-time-dodges-tough-questions-2025-06-25/

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defence systems and expanded training.[11] However, there was evident discomfort among some Eastern European states over what they perceived as NATO's "strategic ambiguity" regarding Ukraine's eventual integration into the alliance.[12]

4. **Global Engagement and Security Concerns:** Broader global security discussions included NATO's increasing collaboration with its Asia-Pacific partners and evolving concerns around China's global posture.[13] Meanwhile, President Erdogan of Turkiye used the platform to call for a ceasefire in Gaza, underscoring Middle Eastern and broader Muslim world concerns into focus.[14] The summit also dwelt on Iran's nuclear 'risks' and alleged proxy activity but did not put forward any new initiatives on these accounts.[15]

Key Resolutions and Policy Shifts

1. **The Hague Declaration:** The summit concluded with *"The Hague Declaration"*, which codified key decisions: commitment to the 5% defence spending by 2035; recognition of hybrid threats, cyber warfare, and foreign interference as central to NATO's operational landscape; reaffirmation of Article 5 as "ironclad"; expanded coordination on defence procurement and supply chain security; and support for Ukraine as a "core component" of European security, albeit with no membership pathway.[16]

2. **Strategic Roadmaps and Reviews:** Each NATO country is now tasked with submitting roadmaps outlining how they will reach the 5% spending target. Annual reporting begins in 2026, with a formal review in 2029. Importantly, NATO allowed for flexibility in defining "resilience spending," potentially opening the door to creative accounting by fiscally constrained members such as Spain, Belgium, Luxemburg, Slovakia, and Portugal.[17]

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11 AP News, "NATO Leaders Agree to Hike Military Spending," June 25, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/nato-defense-spending-trump-spain-db0912cbfdaedc4c6b57809c9e11d6bd

12 The Times, "NATO's Potemkin Summit Sends Lethal Signals," June 25, 2025. https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/natos-potemkin-summit-sends-lethal-signals-mjq3xfqrc

13 Brookings Institution, "What to Expect at the NATO Summit in The Hague," June 18, 2025. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-to-expect-at-the-nato-summit-in-the-hague/

14 "Turkey's Erdogan calls for permanent Iran-Israel ceasefire, Gaza truce," *Reuters*, June 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/turkeys-erdogan-calls-permanent-iran-israel-ceasefire-gaza-truce-2025-06-25/

15 Ibid.

16 NATO, "The Hague Summit Declaration," June 25, 2025. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm

17 "Spain Agrees with NATO to Skip 5% Defence Spending Target," *Reuters*, June 22, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spain-agrees-with-nato-skip-5-defence-spending-target-2025-06-22/

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Evaluating the Summit's Impact

The 2025 NATO Summit yielded significant strategic momentum, yet not without complex political undercurrents and unresolved tensions. Among its most prominent strengths was the alliance's unified endorsement of a new 5% defence spending benchmark by 2035. This consensus marked a turning point in NATO's approach to burden-sharing, signalling a collective seriousness about deterring Russia and preparing for hybrid threats.[18] The summit also illustrated effective diplomacy, particularly by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, whose personal outreach to U.S. President Donald Trump helped secure a continued American commitment to the alliance and defused potential transatlantic tensions.[19]

Another noteworthy achievement was the broadened definition of security embedded within the 5% spending framework. By allocating 1.5% of the target toward "resilience spending", which includes infrastructure, cybersecurity, energy security, and assistance to partner states like Ukraine, NATO demonstrated a flexible and adaptive understanding of contemporary security dynamics.[20]

However, this flexibility also introduces potential vulnerabilities. The most pressing concern lies in implementation. While the target is ambitious, its success depends on the political will and fiscal capacity of individual member states. Several countries as mentioned earlier, including Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Slovakia, have expressed reservations about the feasibility of the 5% commitment. Spain, in particular, rejected the target outright, calling it "counterproductive" and secured an exemption allowing it to follow its own defence investment metrics.[21] Belgium and Luxembourg, historically low spenders on defence, cited domestic constraints and EU fiscal rules, while Slovakia and Portugal emphasized post-COVID economic pressures. Even Germany, despite

18 "Hague NATO summit aims to focus on Trump's spending goal but Iran looms large," *Reuters*, June 23, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/hague-nato-summit-aims-focus-trumps-spending-goal-iran-looms-large-2025-06-23/

19 Reuters, "Nato's Trump Flattery Buys Time," June 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/natos-trump-flattery-buys-time-dodges-tough-questions-2025-06-25/

20 Lili Bayer, "What is NATO's New 5% Defence Spending Target?" Reuters, June 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/what-is-natos-new-5-defence-spending-target-2025-06-23/

21 "Spain rejects NATO's 5% defence spending hike as 'counterproductive'," *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2025/6/19/spain-rejects-natos-5-defence-spending-hike-as-counterproductive

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supporting the initiative, has yet to present a concrete pathway to meet the full threshold, given its current spending levels of 2.5%.[22]

The vagueness around the "resilience" component risks enabling 'creative accounting', where states meet the numerical requirements without significantly enhancing core defence capabilities. This could undermine the strategic intent of the initiative and foster disparities in operational readiness across the alliance.[23]

Furthermore, while the summit reaffirmed NATO's commitment to Ukraine, the absence of a clear accession pathway illustrated ongoing ambivalence. Despite symbolic support and military aid, the alliance fell short of offering Ukraine integration in concrete terms, which could erode trust and signal a lack of resolve to adversaries, e.g., Russia.[24]

Lastly, the summit reaffirmed NATO's enduring dependence on U.S. leadership, which remains vulnerable to fluctuations in domestic American politics. Although President Trump endorsed the summit's outcomes, the future of transatlantic unity remains uncertain. A leadership change or shift in U.S. policy could once again place the alliance in a reactive posture, highlighting the fragility of NATO's cohesion in the face of internal political volatility.

Strategic Implications in Regional and Global Contexts

The decisions taken at the 2025 NATO Summit carry far-reaching implications beyond the alliance's internal dynamics. Most immediately, the new 5% defence spending goal is expected to catalyse a surge in military procurement, defence research, and industrial activity across Europe. This expansion, while economically significant, will require robust coordination to preclude duplication and ensure interoperability among NATO members.

In terms of strategic signalling, the elevated spending target sends a strong message to Russia. It underscores NATO's willingness to counter aggression now and respond to any future threats along its eastern flank. However, this assertiveness may also provoke asymmetric responses from Moscow, especially as NATO's infrastructure and digital systems become more deeply integrated.

22 "The Latest: NATO Leaders Agree on Spending Hike, Vow to Defend Each Other," *CityNews Halifax*, June 25, 2025, https://halifax.citynews.ca/2025/06/25/the-latest-nato-leaders-agree-on-spending-hike-vow-to-defend-each-other/

23 Nan Tian, Lorenzo Scarazzato & Jade Guiberteau Ricard, "NATO's new spending target: challenges and risks associated with a political signal," *SIPRI Commentary*, June 27, 2025. https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2025/natos-new-spending-target-challenges-and-risks-associated-political-signal

24 Mason & Dysa, "Trump considers more Patriots for Ukraine, says Putin 'has to end' the war", Reuters, published June 25, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-hails-substantive-meeting-with-trump-2025-06-25/

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Beyond Europe, the summit reaffirmed NATO's growing awareness of global security interdependence. Although not a central agenda item, the presence and engagement of Asian partners, including Japan and Australia, reflect NATO's evolving posture toward China's rising influence. While formal military commitments remain limited, political and technological cooperation with the Asia-Pacific region is steadily increasing, seeking to position NATO as an entity with a widening geographical scope beyond its current Treaty mandate.

In the context of the Middle East, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's call for a ceasefire in Gaza sought to underline the international community's responsibility and the need for NATO's efforts to bring an end to this horrific ongoing genocidal war against Palestinians. This indicates an imperative for addressing regional instability that has a bearing on the alliance's southern periphery, including refugee flows, terrorism, and energy security.

Overall, the summit's implications extend well beyond European borders. NATO's evolving strategic orientation underscores the need to address interconnected threats across domains and regions, positioning the alliance as not only a Euro-Atlantic defence pact but also an actor in seeking to shape the broader global security order.

Forward Strategy

Looking forward, NATO faces a critical window between 2025 and 2029 during which the durability of its renewed strategic consensus will be tested. The success of the 5% defence spending commitment hinges on the timely submission of national roadmaps by mid-2026 and demonstrable progress ahead of the formal alliance-wide review in 2029.[25] This period will be pivotal for assessing not only the credibility of the new burden-sharing framework but also the broader question of NATO's political cohesion, operational readiness, and adaptability to a complex security environment.

The trajectory of NATO–Ukraine relations will also remain under close scrutiny. While the 2025 summit reaffirmed political and military support for Kyiv, the absence of a membership timeline leaves Ukraine in a strategic grey zone. How NATO balances deterrence, enlargement, and engagement with non-member partners and others will significantly shape European security architecture in the years ahead.

25 "NATO agrees to higher defence spending goal, Spain says it is opting out," *Reuters*, June 23, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-countries-approve-hague-summit-statement-with-5-defence-spending-goal-2025-06-22/

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The next two NATO summits scheduled for Turkiye in 2026 and Albania in 2027, will serve as important benchmarks. They will offer opportunities to gauge the extent of member compliance, refine institutional priorities, and reinforce alliance solidarity in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

Whether the 2025 Summit is remembered as a genuine strategic turning point or a rhetorical high point will ultimately depend on implementation, accountability, and sustained political will across the alliance.

Conclusion

The 2025 NATO Summit was an ambitious attempt to recalibrate the alliance for the coming decade. While it produced some ground-breaking commitments, especially on defence spending, questions remain about execution, alliance unity, and the evolving threat landscape. Whether the summit marks a genuine turning point or a politically expedient show of unity will depend on how members operationalize their pledges in the years ahead.

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