

What to expect from the next NATO Summit in the Hague, in light of the new American foreign policy?

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Key words: NATO Summit, burden sharing, capabilities gap, US forces in Europe, NATO support to Ukraine

Abstract:

The article explores what potential announcements and decisions might be issued and taken at the NATO Summit in the Hague, that might impact two important topics: deterrence and defence and support to Ukraine. Although the decisions that will be adopted at the level of heads of state and government are usually well discussed and agreed in principle in advance, the Summit in the Hague might be an atypical one, with lots of uncertainties derived from the latest declarations trumpeted in various fora by the new American administration, which indicate a slow but steady disengagement of the US from the security of the European continent. The article highlights the European allies' acknowledgement to invest more for their own defence and perhaps prepare for a potential gradual disengagement of the US from the European security both in terms of its presence on the ground and the employment of its strategic capabilities. It also indicates the capability gaps the European allies should quickly address and how this inflection point could transform in an opportunity to revive the idea of European strategic autonomy. The article will also emphasize that support from Ukraine will continue to be a central issue on NATO's agenda but with less American involvement.

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I. Introduction

The NATO Summit in the Hague will happen in a volatile geopolitical context, with lots of uncertainties and characterized by a recalibration of the US policies regarding the main international affairs' topics, the European security and the allied interests.

The potential US's disengagement and decoupling from the security of the European continent², hinted many times by the current American administration, and bluntly unveiled by the vice-president J.D. Vance's remarks³ at the 2025 edition of the Munich Security Conference, is still pondered and analyzed in Washington.

European allies must acknowledge they should focus more in prioritizing their defence efforts which should encompass the allocation of more financial resources for the defence sector and the acquisition of strategic capabilities. A new commitment to increase the defence spending, which is highly expected to be adopted at the Summit, might convince the US to partially preserve its posture in Europe but would also allow the Europeans to consolidate, within NATO, their strategic autonomy and reduce their overreliance on the American capabilities.

The next NATO Summit, that will take place in the Netherlands, from 24 to 25 of June, in the Hague, will be crucial in determining whether the Alliance can overcome the internal divisions and efficiently adapt to a transformed geopolitical environment. Unity and cohesion were always at NATO's center of gravity. At Summits, the things usually tend to be structured, carefully choreographed and most of decisions agreed upon beforehand, laying the ground for a smooth decision-making process the allied heads of state and governments would need to address during this event. However, with the new American administration, predictability might not be the strongest characteristic of this Summit discussions and wisely crafted negotiations might be easily derailed by off-topics.

² Michael Hirsh, *The New Meaning of 'Munich'*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/19/europe-trump-vance-munich-security-conference-russia-ukraine/>, accessed on February 20th 2025

³ Christina Lu, *The Speech That Stunned Europe*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/18/vance-speech-munich-full-text-read-transcript-europe/>, accessed on February 20th 2025

II. From burden-sharing to burden-shifting

II.1 Setting a new benchmark for defence spending

One of the key points that NATO will be called upon to address will be to quickly and positively respond to an increased pressure to *upping the defence budget* in order to better and efficiently tackle the new realities of the international security environment, especially the great power competition and the current and emerging threats that affect the Euro-Atlantic security.

The Defence Investment Pledge (DIP) adopted in 2014 at the Wales Summit, which set a benchmark of 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for defence spending within 10 years and the decision taken at the Vilnius Summit in 2023, to set a minimum level for defence spending of 2 percent of GDP (*considered as a baseline rather than a threshold to reach*), seem already obsolete.

NATO has been *externally* under pressure to swiftly overhaul its collective defence approach and allocate more resources due to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine but also *internally*, with the US President-elect Donald Trump re-calling on its members to spend much more on defence.

There is a growing consensus among the allies that the current 2 percent goal has to be increased. The current allocation level is insufficient to meet the requirements of the newly adopted *regional defence plans* and the soon to be updated and approved *military capability targets*. The Alliance needs to be fit for purpose and efficiently respond to the two main threats, Russia and terrorism, as they are identified into the latest NATO Strategic Concept⁴.

One potential new defence spending target might be set to 3 percent of GDP, although President Trump recently urged a 5 percent goal⁵. Poland comes the closest, spending 4.12 percent

⁴ Press conference by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte following the meetings of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs 3-4 April 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_234095.htm, accessed on April 5th 2025

NATO Secretary General calls on Allies to increase defence spending: to prevent war, NATO must spend more, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_231346.htm, accessed on April 5th 2025

⁵ Joshua Posaner, Laura Kayali, Julius Brinkmann, Oliver Noyan, *Europe splits on Trump's call to dramatically boost defense spending*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-tells-allies-spend-5-percent-gdp-defense-nato/>, accessed on January 10th 2025

of its GDP on defense in 2024, and aims to increase that to 4.7 percent this year⁶. The US spent 3.4 percent of its GDP on defense last year⁷.

Poland, one of the champions and staunch supporter of DIP commitment, recently submitted a written proposal to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and all NATO member states asking them to increase defence spending to at least 3 percent of GDP⁸. This seems more of a realistic target having in mind that only two thirds of allied states (24 out of 32 NATO countries) are currently meeting the 2014 DIP commitment.

As a frontline state, Romania, which shares the longest land border with Ukraine, acknowledged that defence investments, and major programs acquisitions should be accelerated in order to respond to the deteriorated and more complex security environment, which directly affect it. Romania plans to raise defence spending to as much as 2.5 percent of GDP this year from a little over 2.2 percent in 2024.

II.2 Adjusting the US posture in Europe?

Another bone of contention, that might be addressed in an incipient manner at the NATO Summit in the Hague could touch upon the *reshuffling of the US forces in Europe*.

Since his inauguration in January 2025, the US President Trump has signaled that he wants to pivot American security priorities away from Europe and focus on China and the Indo-Pacific region. It goes without saying that the impact will be visible not only on the number of American troops stationed in Europe but also reflected on the available capabilities that the European allies might rely upon in case of a crisis. Furthermore, although not yet discussed, even the forward deployment of the American nuclear weapons in Europe and the extended nuclear security umbrella US is providing, could be put into question.

⁶ NATO Secretary General: *The transatlantic partnership remains the bedrock of our Alliance*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_233569.htm, accessed on March 8th 2025

⁷ Francesca Micheletti, *Poland backs Trump push for NATO to boost defense spending to 5 percent of GDP*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-backs-trump-calls-to-ramp-up-nato-defense-spending/>, accessed on January 14th 2025

⁸ Dominika Cosic, *Poland's Duda: NATO members must increase defence spending to 3%*, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/03/06/polands-duda-nato-members-must-increase-defence-spending-to-3>, accessed on March 8th 2025

The presence of the US troops in Europe constantly grew since Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, reaching its peak after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is assessed that over the course of the war, the total number of US troops fluctuated between 75,000 and 105,000 military personnel, primarily from the Air Force, Army, and Navy⁹. Many of them were involved in large scale exercises or exercises with the host nation, as well as regular rotations designed to increase the overall interoperability and to practice reinforcement. Others were assigned to facilitate the transfer of US-donated weapons and ammunition and support the training of Ukrainian soldiers.

The current American administration might use as a bargaining chip the threat of sharply adjusting the US' security presence in Europe, and determine the European allies, where these US troops are located, to increase their operating costs for the US/NATO bases. This move was already anticipated and many European countries have already significantly invested into modern bases that host the US personnel, over fears of a possible US withdrawal from the continent, a noticeable example being Poland (and the so-called Fort Trump), as well as Romania with the Mihail Kogalniceanu (MK) Base¹⁰.

The Romanian military air base at MK, located on the Black Sea coast, at less than 200 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, it is said to become the largest NATO military base in Europe, surpassing even the US military base in Ramstein, Germany, in size (MK will cover 3,000 hectares as compared to Ramstein covering 2,000 hectares). Moreover, it is designed to host almost 10,000 soldiers and civilians by 2030. It is also estimated that the costs associated with the expansion of the MK will come to €2.5 billion¹¹, and Romania is supporting the largest part of the costs. The air base's location has proved highly strategic in recent years, both for Romania and its NATO allies, especially the US, as it was used to project force over long distances, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa region and Afghanistan. Given its proximity to the Black Sea area, a region of strategic importance to the Alliance, the air base has hosted an increased number of NATO-led

⁹ Molly Carlough, Benjamin Harris, Abi McGowan, *Where Are U.S. Forces Deployed in Europe?*, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/article/where-are-us-forces-deployed-europe>, accessed on March 2nd 2025

¹⁰ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, *In Romania, NATO is building one of its largest airbases in Europe*, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/08/15/in-romania-nato-is-building-one-of-its-largest-airbases-in-europe_6716228_4.html#, accessed on March 4th 2025

¹¹ Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, *Romania launches expansion of air base near Ukraine*, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/06/13/romania-launches-expansion-of-air-base-near-ukraine/>, accessed on March 4th 2025

enhanced Air Policing missions, including this year's edition, which welcomed the first-ever deployment of Finnish F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets.

The US Defense Secretary, Pete Hegseth, indicated that although the administration officials have no short-term plans to cut US troop levels in Europe, they are committed to reviewing the American military posture worldwide to cut costs and ensure that their forces are prepositioned in the right regions.

Rumors are already circulating that the US might draw down their presence in Germany (where one third of the US troops in Europe are located) and redistribute some of them to Hungary¹² that align more closely with the current US administration's foreign policy priorities. President Trump's move, that is vowing to drastically cut and cap the presence of the US troops in Europe, particularly in Germany, is not unprecedented.

During his first term in office (2017–2021), President Trump made several changes to reduce the American military footprint in Europe, withdrawing nearly 12,000 troops from Germany, arguing that Berlin was not fulfilling its NATO obligations and was lagging behind in defence spending. That decision was later reversed by the Biden administration, restoring the US presence in Germany.

Army General Christopher Cavoli, the commander of US troops in Europe and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), has recently tried to push back this approach and advocated the need to preserve the current number of US troops in Europe in order to ensure an adequate response to a potential Russian aggression on the continent¹³.

II.3 Narrowing the capability gaps between the US and the European allies

¹² Joe Taylor, *Why Trump wants to move U.S. troops to Hungary – and why it's a Big Deal*, <https://www.defensemagazine.com/article/why-trump-wants-to-move-us-troops-to-hungary-and-why-its-a-big-deal>, accessed on March 10th 2025

¹³ Svetlana Shkolnikova, *House lawmakers say US troop levels in Europe must not be reduced, rebuking Trump administration plans*, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2025-04-08/europe-troops-nato-russia-lawmakers-17410745.html>, accessed on April 10th 2025; Nikki Wentling, *Top general recommends US maintain current troop levels in Europe*, <https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-military/2025/04/08/top-general-recommends-us-maintain-current-troop-levels-in-europe/>, accessed on April 10th 2025

Capability gaps between the US, on one hand and its European allies and Canada, on the other hand, have become more visible and acute, especially during the last hot debates which indicated US's willingness to potentially gradually disengage in ensuring the European security.

Carefully filtering the US response that limited and paused for a short period of time the Ukrainian access to the American intel and target acquisition, as well as the delivery of weapons systems, the UK, France and Germany were compelled to *reconsider the European over-reliance on the US for a range of supporting capabilities and assets that allow combat forces to operate effectively*. Without critical enablers mainly provided by the US, such as battlefield command and control (C2), satellite-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), unmanned ISR, deep strike platforms, air-to-air refueling and strategic airlift, the European allies will have difficulties in responding to a Russian armed attack¹⁴. It is assessed that Europe can build up most of the critical defence enablers needed to deter or defeat Russia without the US support within *three to five years*, granted the political will to invest more in defence is there¹⁵.

This dependency looks increasingly risky as US President Trump signals willingness (at least verbally) to desert America's long-time allies and align more with Russia.

In a recent interview given at the end of February, the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said he aimed to strengthen Europe and achieve (military) independence from the US as quickly as possible¹⁶.

Merz, alongside other European leaders, is more loudly voicing that the old continent requires to become more responsible for its own security, basically gaining the strategic autonomy (within NATO) so dear to President Macron. This approach, dubbed as *burden shifting* seems to be adopted more and more by the European allies which finally acknowledge that Europe should match its economic power with an equivalent military power and establish a functional European

¹⁴ Alexandr Burilov, Guntram B. Wolff, *Defending Europe without the US: first estimates of what is needed*, Bruegel, <https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/defending-europe-without-us-first-estimates-what-needed>, accessed on February 27th 2025

¹⁵ Rudy Ruitenberg, *Mind the gaps: Europe's to-do list for defense without the US*, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/02/25/mind-the-gaps-europes-to-do-list-for-defense-without-the-us/>, accessed on February 28th 2025

¹⁶ Patrick Wintour, *Merz strikes urgent tone in calling for more European independence from US*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/24/friedrich-merz-germany-europe-independence-from-us>, accessed on February 27th 2025

defence capability, but not necessarily disjointed from NATO. The burden shifting approach was best highlighted by Admiral Guiseppe Cavo Dragone, the chair of the NATO Military Committee, who said that “the European allies need to step up their defence efforts in order to handle the continent conventional defence and its critical infrastructure, while the US will remain in charge of air, space and nuclear deterrence”¹⁷.

At the NATO Summit in the Hague, NATO heads of state and government are expected to approve a new set of capability targets designed to boost the Alliance’s posture. Admiral Pierre Vandier, the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT) indicated that any discussion about US disengagement from the Alliance is “highly speculative” and “the Americans have not said they are disengaging...there will be a probable capacity rebalancing”, but noting that the US has accepted the 2025 capability targets¹⁸. The SACT’s opinion is backed by Admiral Cavo Dragone’s view, who foresees that “rebalancing of defence means some nations will be less dependent on or even independent from the US”.

President Trump’s transactional approach towards the European allies, whom he considers military free riders, counting on the American security umbrella and failing to pay their fair share of the costs, might affect the transatlantic defence cooperation but allow the Europeans in the end to become more self-reliant.

A longtime symbol of US capability dependence, the acquisition of F-35 by several NATO member states or European partners (e.g. Switzerland) is now put into question, as the rift between the US and the European states and Canada is growing. Thus, Canada is “reviewing the fighter jet purchase and seek to find even partial alternatives to the already agreed acquisition of 88 F-35s”¹⁹.

The remarks, made by the Canadian defence minister Bill Blair came out just hours after being reappointed in the Prime Minister Mark Carney’s new cabinet. Furthermore, Portugal which didn’t sign yet any contract is also considering several alternative options, particularly in the context of European production, such as Dassault Rafale, Eurofighter Typhoon or Saab Gripen. In

¹⁷ Rudy Ruitenberg, *NATO to ask allies for 30% capability boost, top commander says*, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/03/14/nato-to-ask-allies-for-30-capability-boost-top-commander-says/>, accessed on March 16th 2025

¹⁸ Ibidem

¹⁹ Anja Karadeglija, *Carney orders review of F-35 fighter jet purchase from U.S.’s Lockheed Martin*, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/carney-orders-review-of-f-35-fighter-jet-purchase-from-u-s-s-lockheed-martin>, accessed on March 16th 2025

Germany there are also growing fears the US government could decide to block access to software updates and spare parts needed to make the F-35 fully operational. All of these are only supplemental reasons that would determine the European allies to expand the continental defence industrial base and joint cooperation and allow them to become into a reasonable time-frame self-sufficient.

Moreover, questions over future US capabilities reliance might be soon sorted out as the first litmus test of European allies' willingness to limit procurement from the US will be in Denmark, which was in a constant friction with the US President following his remarks over the future of Greenland. The Danish authorities will be soon deciding on whether to choose a European option - Franco-Italian SAMP/T NG or an American one - US Patriot for its future air defence systems acquisitions²⁰.

Against this background, the European allies might be tempted to invest more in the continental defence industrial base and use this opportunity as a game changer that would allow them to reduce their reliance on the American capabilities, thus establishing a vibrant European defence industry.

II.3 Would NATO allies still benefit from the American security umbrella?

The uncertainty over the US commitment to the Alliance and its European member states ignited also the European nuclear deterrence debate.

NATO's deterrence and defence posture relies on a mix of conventional, nuclear and missile defence forces and capabilities, complemented by selected cyber and space capabilities. In this context, the *strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance*, particularly those of the US as well as the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, are the ultimate guarantee of the security of the allies.

²⁰ Laura Kayali, Joe Gould, Robbie Gramer, Lucia Mackenzie, '*Punching allies in the face*': Trump sparks US weapons conundrum for Europe, <https://www.politico.eu/article/punching-allies-in-the-face-how-trump-is-making-europe-question-us-arms-deals/>, accessed on March 20th 2025

In practice, in order to guarantee the security of its allies, the US has deployed a limited number of B-61 nuclear weapons to several locations in Europe (Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Türkiye, United Kingdom) which remain under US custody and control. Recently, at the end of January 2025, the US military has begun deploying upgraded B61-12 nuclear bombs at its bases in Europe, further enhancing its strategic deterrence capabilities. Moreover, some reports indicate that a US storage facility for tactical nuclear weapons has been revived at the Lakenheath military base in the UK²¹.

Despite these evident US commitments, Friedrich Merz, Germany's Chancellor, made an astonishing declaration at the end of February about the future of European nuclear deterrence. He hinted to starting discussions with both France and UK over a potential unprecedented move that would allow to both to extend their nuclear security umbrella over Germany as well. However, significant strategic, doctrinal, and logistical obstacles make such a shift difficult. The French and British nuclear forces are not seen on a short term as a viable solution in the event of a hasty withdrawal of the US nuclear forces. Merz's declarations should be seen more as a preliminary thinking and debates about potential nuclear security alternatives, if need be.

Notwithstanding both the UK and France have a limited arsenal of nuclear warheads compared with the US, their mere presence would have a deterrence role in itself. What might impede the two nuclear European countries to extend their nuclear deterrence by stationing their weapons in other countries is actually their own nuclear doctrines which do not envisage such an approach. Perhaps, this is the proper moment to start raising public awareness about the importance of nuclear deterrence for Europe's defence and build political will and societal support for a robust and coherent nuclear strategy that would allow Europe to be protected from Russia's threat (which has recently lowered its threshold for using nuclear weapons²²), in a potential worst-case scenario that will place US as a bystander.

²¹ Riley Ceder, *US might be gearing up for UK-based nuclear program, report says*, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2025/02/28/us-might-be-gearing-up-for-uk-based-nuclear-program-report-says/>, accessed on March 2nd 2025

²² Daryl G. Kimball, *Russia Revises Nuclear Use Doctrine*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-12/news/russia-revises-nuclear-use-doctrine>, accessed on March 4th 2025

Support for Ukraine

At the 2024 Washington Summit, allies agreed to establish NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) to coordinate the provision of military equipment and training for Ukraine by allies and partners and announced a pledge of long-term security assistance for Ukraine, providing a minimum baseline funding of 40 billion euro within the next year, and sustainable levels of security assistance in the future²³. At the Summit in the Hague, allies are expected to take stock of the progress achieved so far is supporting Ukraine while at the same time to re-evaluate if the level of assistance matches Ukraine's needs and requirements.

In the past the US has been at the center of efforts to support Ukraine militarily, but in the recent months those responsibilities have shifted to allies in line with President Trump's priorities. While it is difficult to predict if the US will maintain a certain level of military support to Ukraine, including providing weapon systems, judging through the lenses of the latest decisions taken by the current American administration, to withdraw its temporary presence from Jasionka²⁴ (in Poland), where an important logistical enablement node is located, one could foresee that US will wither down its previous commitments to Ukraine.

Furthermore, starting this year the US is no longer leading the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, commonly called the Ramstein Group, a format of 57 countries militarily supporting Ukraine – which includes the 32 NATO members plus 25 others, which was organized by former Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to arrange support for Ukraine. That effort is now being led by the UK and Germany. It is difficult to say whether the US has permanently relieved itself of the role, but nevertheless it is undoubtedly a reflection of a new strategic approach.

Against this backdrop the expectations are that the European allies, Canada and other like-minded partners (such as Japan, which even expressed willingness to participate into NSATU²⁵ and Australia) step up their assistance and support, to gradually take over more responsibilities and also maintain the minimum baseline funding of 40 million euros.

²³ *Washington Summit Declaration issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C. 10 July 2024*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm?selectedLocale=en, accessed on April 10th 2025

²⁴ Wojciech Kość, *US pulls presence from key Ukraine arms aid hub in Poland*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-pull-presence-key-ukraine-arms-aid-hub-poland-jasionka/>, accessed on April 9th 2025

²⁵ Joint press statement by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and the Prime Minister of Japan, Shigeru Ishiba, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_234396.htm, accessed April 10th 2025

Conclusions

The upcoming NATO Summit in the Hague will be the first event, following the arrival of a new American administration in Washington, where the Alliance heads of state and governments will discuss and take decisions on a variety of topics connected to NATO deterrence and defence posture and future support to Ukraine.

NATO allies are already alerted to signals pointing to diminished US engagement in defending the Alliance and this will be an important element that will loom large on the discussions during the Summit.

The US Secretary of State Marco Rubio attempted to suppress some of the concerns percolating among NATO countries when he attended a NATO foreign minister's meeting, during 3-4 April, in preparation of the next Summit, dismissing it all as "hyperbole", although there are already clear signs that the continuity of NATO's agenda might be put into question and Europe might face multiple challenges.

Against this backdrop, the European allies should not be complacent but agree both to spend more and to take more responsibility for their own security. In real terms, it means that they should start preparing the ground for adopting a defence spending target of 3 percent of GDP by 2030, to be decided at the next NATO Summit. Moreover, they should continue to strengthen the European defence industrial base with enhanced joint European procurement programs that would reduce reliability on certain American strategic enablers, weapons systems or capabilities.

The security of Europe should continue to remain a transatlantic responsibility, because Europe alongside US stands much stronger, both politically and militarily. Currently, the US Defence Department is undergoing a global force posture review, which results might be announced at the Summit in Hague. Although no decisions have been made yet, the European allies should brace for a potential announcement with impact on the number of US forces in Europe, particularly those deployed in Germany or on the Eastern flank. Shifting the burdens of collective security towards Europe and away from the US could be a gratuitous risk, especially if rushed, as it might incentivize Russian revenge and conflict.

The last sore point that will surface during the Summit is the continuous support to Ukraine and the future implementation of the long-term security assistance pledge. While the US might be tempted to bail it out, the European allies and other like-minded partners should avoid a “wait and see” attitude and instead be prepared to take over US’s responsibilities.

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