

JULY 2023

RESHAPING COLLECTIVE DEFENCE PLANS AND ADDRESSING OPEN QUESTIONS: HOW NATO IS APPROACHING THE VILNIUS SUMMIT



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Introduction

On July 11th and 12th, 2023, NATO heads of state and government are convening in Vilnius, Lithuania, for the Alliance's annual summit, which is very likely to prove a watershed moment in NATO's recent history for several reasons. To begin with, in light of the ongoing war of attrition in Ukraine, leaders are set to approve the first comprehensive defence plans since the Cold War era, with ambitious rearrangements in terms of military mobility along NATO's Eastern Flank. Secondly, as far as defence expenditure is concerned, Allied countries will deal with the proposal to turn the 2% ceiling into an investment floor. Thirdly, they will discuss the progress of Ukraine and Sweden's membership bids, with debates around the opportunity for Kyiv to benefit from a fast-track procedure alongside compromises to encourage Turkey and Hungary to lift their veto on Stockholm's accession. Lastly, NATO leaders will try to reach a consensus on Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's successor after the latter's mandate has been extended three times.

This info flash aims at illustrating the areas where NATO allies are meant to deliver at the upcoming summit based on pledges made at previous meetings, as well as the most contentious issues on which consensus seems less likely. It will start by assessing whether commitments made at the 2022 Madrid Summit have been met (section I), followed by an overview of the Alliance's reshaped defence plans in terms of capacity building and military interoperability along the Eastern Flank (section II). The analysis will then move on to the divisive issues of defence expenditure (section III) and the progress of Ukraine's and Sweden's path towards membership (section IV). It will conclude by hinting at the need for NATO to address security challenges beyond the Euro-Atlantic region, hence unpacking its new geographical areas of focus and the defence frameworks established with local partners (section V).

I. Post-Madrid Progress: Where Does NATO Stand?

NATO has made mixed progress on three major pledges made at the 2022 Madrid Summit on June 29th and 30th: deploying robust combat-ready forces along the Eastern Flank; enhancing collective defence exercises for high-intensity and multi-domain operations; and commitment to NATO's new Force Model (Monaghan et al., 2023).

As for the first commitment, notwithstanding pledges by the U.S., Canada, the U.K., France, and Germany to scale up existing Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battlegroups to brigade-size units (NATO, 2022a), no large-scale deployment has yet taken place. An example was German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius's claim to send a permanent brigade to Lithuania in late June (Associated Press, 2023), following Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda's call for their deployment. However, considering German combat forces' readiness and Lithuanian infrastructure's precariousness, this will unlikely occur anytime soon (Monaghan et al., 2023).

The picture concerning joint exercises is much more positive. Air Defender became the biggest air exercise in NATO's history: hosted by Germany on June 12th-23rd, 2023, it witnessed the participation of 25 states through 10,000 staff and 250 aircraft (NATO, 2023a). As for maritime exercises, the last iteration of the Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) hosted 50 ships, around 45 aircraft and over 6,000 personnel from 20 nations (NATO, 2023b).

Lastly, NATO's EFP Battlegroup asserted itself as a combat-ready force during the Iron Wolf exercise on May 8th-20th. 3,500 troops from 13 nations, led by the Lithuanian Iron Wolf Brigade, participated alongside additional forces from the U.S., Great Britain, Canada, Poland and Portugal (MNCNE, 2023).

The new Force Model, designed to replace the NATO Response Force to ensure a larger pool of high-readiness forces and step up short-notice response capabilities (NATO, 2022b) is far from meeting its targets. The ambitious scale of the plans, namely to increase high-readiness units from 40,000 to 300,000 in response to Russia's warmongering, caught the Allies unprepared about whether they would entail additional costs (Bayer & von der Burchard, 2022). Such a target remains highly unlikely to be achieved by the end of 2023 (Monaghan et al., 2023).

A more long-standing commitment concerns nuclear deterrence capability-building, where Allies displaying the highest credentials are still not on the same page. France continues to pull its forces out of NATO, while Great Britain, whose capabilities have been cut drastically since the end of the Cold War, provides limited options with only one delivery system left. Additionally, discussions to revamp NATO's air delivery have constantly been postponed: hence, the service merely relies on Allies maintaining aircraft capable of transporting US-supplied freefall bombs (Dorman, 2023).

II. Revisiting Collective Defence Plans for Smoother Capacity-Building and Military Mobility

A pressing issue on the summit's agenda is arguably NATO's military presence along the Eastern Flank to strengthen its defence and deterrence posture (Paul et al., 2023). Calls for swifter troops and military equipment displacement, notably coming from Eastern NATO member states (Pugnet, 2023), have never been more prominent since the end of the Cold War, even though military mobility mainly relies on Allied forces' coordination (Paul et al., 2023).

Under the new Force Model, 300,000 troops would be spread around NATO's territory with three high-readiness alerts deployable in 3, 10 and 30 days. As anticipated by SHAPE Deputy Chief of Staff Operations Maj. Gen. Matthew Van Wagenen, who labelled this change as the most dramatic one since the fall of the Berlin Wall (The Economist, 2023b), 40,000 forces will fall under the command of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) Chris Cavoli, supported by 100 aircraft and 27 ships in the Baltic and the Mediterranean Sea (Pugnet, 2023b). Moreover, NATO members should approve three regional plans covering respectively the High North and Atlantic (under the Joint Force Command's leadership in Norfolk, U.S.), the Baltics and the Alps (led by Brunssum, Netherlands), the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (under the Naples command in Italy) (Pugnet, 2023b).

A senior NATO official identified five main priorities for reform: combat-capable ground forces, integrated air and missile defence systems to protect moving units, long-range firepower, digital networks to allow secure data flow between the battlefield and headquarters, and logistics to displace large armies across Europe (The Economist, 2023b). These areas largely reflect both the developments on the Ukrainian battlefield and the evolution of NATO's Eastern Flank since the fall of the Warsaw Pact, going from the 1,380 km of the inner-German border to joining the Arctic and Turkey. Such an expansion requires more agile forces: in this sense, the new alert system aims at sharpening NATO's intelligence machinery for a prompt response to threats (The Economist, 2023b).

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III. Defence Expenditure: Turning the 2% Financial Ceiling Into a Floor?

NATO envisages the revision of 2% of national GDP as the target for defence expenditure by 2024. Since its pronouncement at the 2014 Wales Summit, seven NATO members have met it: Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the U.K. and the U.S. (Pugnet, 2023a). By contrast, Germany and France will probably reach the threshold in 2024 and 2025 respectively. At the Vilnius Summit, under the Eastern allies' impulse (Poland and Estonia aim to reach 4% and 3%), such financial ceiling may turn into a floor (The Economist, 2023b).

This has become more urgent since the war in Ukraine still has no end in sight: in this regard, despite praising the \$350-billion increase in defence expenditure between 2014 and 2022, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg has encouraged Allies to turn pledges into "real cash, contracts and equipment" (Pugnet, 2023a). More worryingly, no NATO member has yet met the target to devote 20% of the 2% of GDP to military equipment. Additionally, in response to the Baltic States' request for rotational air defence in May, a coalition of 17 countries led by Germany committed to procuring assistance under the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) alongside France's call for a conference on the matter (Pugnet, 2023b).

Nevertheless, considering the aforementioned statistics, turning the 2% ceiling into a floor might exacerbate the existing divide between aspirations and reality (The Economist, 2023b). This is why other defence investment instruments will come into play to shape negotiations during the summit, starting from the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA), which became operational on June 19th (NATO, 2023c) and will grant €100,000 to each of the 30 start-ups as part of the €1-billion Innovation Fund. From an industrial capacity standpoint, NATO leaders will sign a Defence Production Action Plan (Monaghan et al., 2023) to build ammunition and missile manufacturing capacity in coordination with the EU's Act in Support of Ammunition Production (European Commission, 2023).

IV. Ukraine and Sweden's Road Towards Membership

Throughout the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO has provided Kyiv with military support while making progress on new initiatives to counter Moscow. Nonetheless, the Alliance needs to move beyond this containment policy, which would only help achieve some form of end state, with no idea about what it might be (Dorman, 2023). A solution will likely come out of the debate on the security guarantees, which Ukraine should benefit from as applicants? towards NATO membership (Stankevičius & Androšiūnaitė, 2023). Great Britain's "mutual security assurances" declaration with Finland and Sweden (UK Government, 2022) or the joint guarantee of long-term military assistance conceived of by Washington, Paris and Berlin (Ward Gould & McLeary, 2023) seem plausible options, although with no certainty that consensus will be reached (Monaghan et al., 2023)

By contrast, NATO will commit itself to support Kyiv's transition from Soviet-legacy equipment to modern NATO-standard platforms and capabilities, while establishing a NATO-Ukraine Council (Paul et al., 2023) to enhance bilateral relations more than the current NATO-Ukraine commission has done so far (Cesluk-Grajewski, 2023).

Some NATO members like Poland and the Baltic Republics maintain that Ukraine should be granted membership since NATO will benefit from Kyiv's military prowess on the battlefield to deter future Russian aggression. Others, such as the U.S., Germany and southern European states, would prefer to remain within the boundaries of the 2008 Bucharest Declaration (Monaghan et al., 2023), which stated that Kyiv would join the Alliance at an unspecified later stage (NATO, 2008). A "Bucharest plus" solution could be a possible compromise, either in the form of a "membership path" as advocated for by French President Macron (Monaghan et al., 2023), or the fast-track accession process, supported by British foreign secretary James Cleverly, lifting the Membership Action Plan (MAP) requirement (Gallardo, 2023).

Sweden is two ratifications away from membership; however, with Hungary postponing the parliamentary vote to the autumn session (Spike, 2023) and Turkey doubling down on demands to extradite Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) representatives, Stockholm is unlikely to join NATO soon. Both sides have taken steps to satisfy each other's concerns: Sweden passed anti-terrorism legislation and lifted the arms embargo (Monaghan et al., 2023), while Turkey signed a joint memorandum to not veto Finland and Sweden's applications prior to the 2022 Madrid Summit (Bayer & Gallardo, 2022). This, however, did not prevent recently re-elected President Erdoğan from blowing out Stockholm's hopes to join NATO anytime soon (Fraser & Badendieck, 2023).

V. Beyond the Euro-Atlantic: Confronting Strategic Challenges in the Arctic and the Indo-Pacific

With the acknowledgement in the 2022 Strategic Concept of China's rise as a major challenge to Euro-Atlantic interests, security, and values through hybrid and cyber operations, attempts to control critical industrial sectors and infrastructure, and its strategic partnership with Russia (NATO, 2022c, p. 5), NATO has been promoting stronger partnerships with Indo-Pacific actors like Japan, South Korea and Australia (Dorman, 2023). Their invitation to the Vilnius Summit for the second consecutive year is indicative of the transboundary nature of contemporary security threats and the Alliance's commitment to address them. Among the multilateral forums to bolster cooperation on pressing challenges like economic coercion, maritime, space and cyber security, hybrid and disinformation operations, the Asia-Pacific Four (AP4) will be replaced by the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) (Paul et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding the need to partner up with like-minded countries to uphold a rules-based international order, NATO leaders in Vilnius will most likely engage in debates around contentious matters, such as the opening of a liaison office in Japan and the choice between prioritising European defence vis-à-vis Russia and shifting to the contribution to the Indo-Pacific security landscape (Paul et al., 2023).

Another geographical area acting as a platform for strategic competition is the Arctic, especially considering the Russian Arctic Command's ability to hinder NATO members' reinforcement and free navigation (Paul et al., 2023) and China's "Polar Silk Road" project to reach Europe (Deutsche Welle, 2023). The stronger the Sino-Russian synergy becomes through joint energy, infrastructure and earth projects, the more compelling the need for NATO to change its understanding of the region will be. In this respect, Sweden's accession can strengthen the Alliance's posture and deterrence in the Arctic while fostering security in the Baltic Sea (Paul et al., 2023).

Conclusion: an Ambitious Agenda Tarnished by Contentious Issues and Uncertainty About a Post-Stoltenberg Secretariat.

With an agenda dominated by highly ambitious objectives and contentious open questions, the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius can potentially mark a watershed in the Alliance's recent history. The range of security challenges and geographical regions within which NATO wants to enhance its defence posture is unprecedented. However, the dividing line between success and failure is thin, and if Allies do not deliver on the reshaped collective defence plans or remain faithful to the Open Door Policy by delaying Ukraine and Sweden's accession, NATO will risk coming out of the summit as a giant with clay's feet, an organisation with global ambitions but unable to provide security guarantees on the European continent.

The implementation of NATO's agenda is further complicated by the uncertainty surrounding NATO's new Secretary General. With his mandate already being extended three times, Stoltenberg disclosed his intention to step down earlier this year (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2023). To date, however, NATO members have not succeeded in agreeing upon a successor, with British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace recently pulling out of the race (The Economist, 2023a), thus increasing the likelihood for Stoltenberg to reluctantly extend his tenure for another year (Paul et al., 2023).

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