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**LOOKING BACK ON THE
VILNIUS SUMMIT OUTCOMES:
WHAT IS NEXT FOR NATO AND
THE EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY
LANDSCAPE?**

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Abstract

'On 11-12 July, NATO leaders held their annual summit in Vilnius amidst an unprecedented security landscape and high expectations on the steps towards enlargement and the new courses of action to preserve collective defence in the Euro-Atlantic area and states' resilience and capacity-building. While the Alliance delivered on its core missions (collective security and crisis management), it was not as ambitious and straightforward when it came to more sensitive matters like Ukraine and Sweden's membership paths, or partnerships in other global regions (e.g., the Asia Pacific).

This info flash builds on the one making a preview on the Vilnius Summit (Bosica, 2023) to reflect upon its outcomes in the following areas: Ukraine and Sweden's membership paths (section I), collective defence plans (section II), defence investment pledges and capacity building (sections III) and initiatives to enhance NATO's resilience vis-à-vis emerging threats (section IV). Although times are still not ripe to make a conclusive assessment about the Summit's success or failure, it will surely be remembered for being a bridge between the Madrid Summit in 2022 and the upcoming Washington Summit in 2024 (Atlantic Council Experts, 2023).

I. Ukraine and Sweden's Membership Paths: Political Will Not Matched by Clear Accession Timelines

The summit opened with a promising note, with Turkish president Erdoğan endorsing Sweden's accession bid vis-à-vis Stockholm's increased counter-terrorism efforts against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Bushard, 2023). During a side-meeting with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, the two countries agreed to extend their cooperation under the Trilateral Permanent Joint Mechanism set up at the 2022 Madrid Summit (NATO, 2022). This was the result of a trilateral memorandum between Türkiye, Finland and Sweden, where the Baltic states agreed to, inter alia, counter national security threats against Ankara, investigate and interdict PKK's financing and recruitment actions, and support Türkiye's involvement in EU CSDP initiatives like PESCO's Military Mobility project (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2022).

Furthermore, the parties established a new bilateral Security Compact which will meet annually at ministerial and working groups level, where Sweden will have to present its roadmap to continue countering terrorism while not supporting the PKK-affiliated People's Defense Units (YPD) and the terrorist organisation referred to as FETÖ by Ankara (NATO, 2023c). Secondly, Türkiye and Sweden agreed to promote trade and investment opportunities through the Joint Economic and Trade Committee (NATO, 2023c). Despite these remarkable steps, uncertainty persists about the Accession Protocol's ratification: the Turkish Grand National Assembly will not reconvene earlier than October and has not scheduled the vote yet (Le Monde, 2023).

The failure to make significant progress on Ukraine's membership ambitions gave the summit a bittersweet end: interestingly, despite being the main topic of debate, the final communiqué only dedicates a handful of paragraphs to the ongoing conflict (Dempsey, 2023). On the one hand, the text reiterates Kyiv's future in NATO and lifted the requirement of the Membership Action Plan in virtue of NATO-Ukraine increasing interoperability and political synergies (NATO, 2023d). On the other hand, NATO leaders could not draw an accession timeline, which increases the pressure on Allies to make progress towards next year's Washington Summit (Atlantic Council experts, 2023).

Overall, the conclusions on Ukraine suffer from wording ambiguity, which reflects the lack of consensus on 'when' and 'how' Kyiv will join NATO (Atlantic Council Experts, 2023). In this regard, Allies claim they 'will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine' once they 'agree and conditions are met' (NATO, 2023d). Contrary to expectations of an unequivocal stance beyond the Bucharest formula (Brzezinski & Vershbow, 2023), which vaguely opened towards NATO membership (NATO, 2008), NATO leaders only pushed themselves as far as to define Russia 'the most significant and direct threat' to the Alliance, which should strengthen cooperation with the EU within the context of the conflict (NATO, 2023d).

Such statement reminds that support for Ukraine is 'not philanthropy, but the smart way to defend our vital interests' (Atlantic Council, 2023). Yet, it was not substantiated by the repeatedly promised security guarantees (Atlantic Council experts, 2023) or defence cooperation instruments like the NATO-Ukraine Deterrence and Defence Partnership (DDP) and the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (Atlantic Council, 2023). The former would contribute to build up Kyiv's long-term capacity to defend itself and deter future Moscow aggression vis-à-vis NATO's commitment to equip Ukrainian forces, which would be coordinated if the 54-nation Contact Group was made permanent (Atlantic Council, 2023).

The only concrete actions were the establishment of the NATO-Ukraine Council and the renewal of non-lethal assistance through the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) (NATO, 2023d). The former ensures equal standing between Ukraine and Allies to bring forward political dialogue, cooperation, Kyiv's membership aspirations and crisis consultation. The CAP, instead, has been turned into a multi-year programme to rebuild Ukraine's security and defence sector towards full interoperability with NATO (NATO, 2023d). Considering the expectations for a membership roadmap and a comprehensive transition towards NATO military standards (Politico, 2023), these achievements represent a minimum common denominator (Atlantic Council Experts, 2023). In this regard, the communiqué will be remembered for lacking political courage and strategic outlook vis-à-vis Ukraine's future in the Alliance (Dempsey, 2023).

II. Adjusting NATO's regional defence posture to an evolving security landscape

NATO leaders turned the 2% annual defence expenditure ceiling into a floor to compensate existing loopholes and deal with an increasingly contested security order (NATO, 2023d). Remarkably, European Allies and Canada have raised their defence budget by \$450 billion since 2014 (NATO, n.d.a). Such funds will contribute to implement initiatives to enhance NATO's deterrence and defence posture and ensure rapid reinforcement of any threatened ally (NATO, 2023d). Above all the new regional defence plans, a multi-domain Allied Reaction Force alongside the New Force Model, robust combat-ready forces on the Eastern Flank and increased interoperability of NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence (NATO, 2023d) are particularly noteworthy.

The regional defence plans provide for 300,000 high-readiness troops alongside air and naval combat power to counter the major threats to the Euro-Atlantic Area, especially Russia and terrorism (NATO, 2023e). They will be complemented by a Defence Production Action Plan to foster NATO's industrial capacity, build resilience into the necessary munition stockpiles and establish a widespread network of defence companies according to a spirit of solidarity (Murray, 2023). To fulfil this mission, the plan can rely on the new-born Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) and the NATO Innovation Fund, which can foster innovation and generate capital flows within the defence ecosystem (Murray, 2023).

The adoption of such thorough plans completes the shift from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial started with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Atlantic Council Experts, 2023). In parallel, it comes full circle with NATO's strategy vis-à-vis the USSR in the closing stages of the Cold War (Atlantic Council Experts, 2023). Overall, with no end to the Russo-Ukrainian war in sight, the revised defence plans perpetuate the Alliance's pledge at the Madrid Summit to 'defend every inch' of NATO territory (NATO, 2022).

Thanks to Finland's accession in April and Sweden expected to join in the near future, NATO is establishing a solid defence line against Moscow's aggression (Atlantic Council Experts, 2023). The New Force Model, established last year in Madrid, will provide states with guidelines on their wartime responsibilities and incentives to meet the 2% defence spending floor while encouraging to strengthen NATO's presence in eight front-line states with permanent brigade-level participation (Atlantic Council experts, 2023). The latter will have to be supported by essential intelligence and surveillance capabilities, air and missile defence mechanisms and long-range fires to respond to Russia's aggression or land-grabbing attempts (Brzezinski & Vershbow, 2023).

I. Bolstering deterrence and defence with an interoperability orientation

The Defence Production Action Plan aims at grounding long-term engagement on transparency, equitable treatment and inclusiveness. On such basis, the summit communiqué confers a convener, standard-setter and aggregator role upon NATO to promote sustainable defence industrial capacity (NATO, 2023d). To ensure forces' seamless interoperability, this requires an urgent effort to step up materiel standardisation, procurement and transparency with the private sector, where a common understanding of NATO's defence industry becomes unassailable among small and medium-sized enterprises (NATO, 2023d).

To enforce these objectives, NATO leaders committed to step up investment in interoperable capabilities across all domains, especially in combat capable, heavy and high-end forces, to ensure that Allied forces maintain appropriate readiness (NATO, 2023d). To maintain its comparative advantage in dealing with crisis response operations, NATO has pledged to increase its battle-decisive munitions stockpiles and ensure greater capability integration across the spectrum of armed conflict (NATO, 2023d). Along these lines, Allied leaders reinstated the Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD)'s mission to deter or neutralise the increasingly diversified air and missile threats from all strategic directions (NATO, n.d.b). More relevantly, NATO members agreed to renew their commitment to enhance IAMD's surveillance, interception and command-and-control capabilities (NATO, 2023d).

The communiqué also recognises the uniqueness of nuclear deterrence, for which NATO members committed to strengthen strategic communications, hold more effective exercises and reduce strategic risks (NATO, 2023d). Missile defence complements nuclear weapons in deterrence and defence through NATO's Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) framework, which was established at the 2010 Lisbon Summit and gained Initial Operational Capability status in 2016 (NATO, n.d.c). To continue fulfilling its relevance to protect the Euro-Atlantic area from the threatening proliferation of ballistic missiles, Allied states agreed to complete essential command-and-control components to progress towards BMD's full operational capability (NATO, 2023d).

IV. Resilience: the precondition for credible deterrence and defence

If it turns into a resilient actor, NATO will become credible in its deterrence and defence mission (NATO, 2023d). The legal basis for resilience-oriented actions is art. III of the Washington Treaty, which stipulates that states parties shall develop individual and collective capacity to resist any sort of armed attack (NATO, 1949). With the passing of time, the definition of 'armed attack' has gone beyond its purely conventional understanding: this is reflected by the areas of interest, the objectives and the initiatives undertaken by NATO Allies over the last decade and agreed upon at the Vilnius Summit, ranging from emerging disruptive technologies to hybrid threats, from geostrategic competition to cyber- and space-related challenges (NATO, 2023d).

With the 2023 Alliance Resilience Objectives, heads of state and government went beyond the 2021 Strengthened Resilience Commitment relying on NATO security's indivisibility and states' pledge to defend each other (NATO, 2021). The new objectives are meant to reinforce NATO's preparedness against strategic disruptions, allow states to ensure governmental stability and service provision, enable civil support to military operations and safeguard critical infrastructure, supply chains and health systems (NATO, 2023d). Furthermore, Allies endorsed a Digital Transformation Implementation Strategy which, by 2030, will enable NATO to conduct multi-domain operations, ensure cross-sectoral interoperability, raise situational awareness and promote data-driven decision-making (NATO, 2023a).

A fair share of the final communiqué was dedicated to emerging and disruptive technologies. NATO members are trying to retain an interoperability and military edge over strategic competitors or potential adversaries to deter malicious initiatives, protect the innovation ecosystem and safeguard democratic values and human rights (NATO, 2023d). The launch of new challenges by NATO's Innovation Accelerator for national start-ups (NATO, 2023b), coupled with NATO Innovation Fund's upcoming investments in the deep-tech sector, go in that direction, and will be soon complemented by strategies on Quantum Technologies, Biotechnology and Human Enhancement (NATO, 2023d).

Along these lines, the Alliance will remain steadfast in deterring, defending against and countering hybrid and cyber threats: as for the former, it contemplates the deployment of Counter Hybrid Support Teams for a coordinated response, while leaving attribution as a national prerogative (NATO, 2023d). As for the cyber domain, NATO leaders reaffirmed their responsibility to adhere to the Cyber Defence Pledge, which was adopted at the 2016 Annual Summit in Warsaw (NATO, 2016). They also launched the Virtual Cyber Incident Support Capability to support stricken allies in mitigating and recovering from a malicious activity (Martin, 2023).

Conclusion

The Vilnius Summit will be remembered as a productive, but not entirely resolved meeting: on the one hand, it has produced a lengthy communiqué with a trove of initiatives in the realms of collective deterrence and defence, as well as resilience vis-à-vis emerging and disruptive technologies, hybrid and cyber threats. On the other hand, though, it fell short of setting a clear time frame for Ukraine's path towards NATO membership, which had been on everyone's lips during the long run-up to the Summit. This increases the pressure on states to deliver at next year's Washington Summit, which will herald the Alliance's 75th anniversary (Moyer & Winberg, 2023). In this regard, Secretary General Stoltenberg's one-year term extension (Erlanger, 2023) can ensure continuity in the implementation of NATO's ambitious agenda, especially in such turbulent times of kinetic warfare in Europe (Moyer & Winberg, 2023).

Stoltenberg's confirmation is also likely to preserve NATO's global projection, especially in the Indo-Pacific, which have only been hinted at in the Summit's conclusions. For instance, due to lack of consensus on the Alliance's role in the region, the proposal to open a NATO office in Japan was not mentioned (Atlantic Council experts, 2023). On the other hand, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan's participation cannot be ignored, nor can be NATO's assertive stance on China's potential provision of lethal aid to Russia (Moyer & Winberg, 2023).

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