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NATO between Washington and The Hague: Identity and Discourse Crisis

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Abstract:

This article examines NATO's identity crisis between the Washington and The Hague summits, attributing to President Trump's leadership an erosion of allied cohesion and credibility, reducing common discourse to an institutional minimum. It considers the main international perspectives—realist, liberal-institutionalist, and constructivist—to interpret the drift from a community of values towards an instrumental and transactional form of cooperation. The analysis contrasts the discourses of both summits and highlights, from The Hague's final communiqué, the introduction of new defence spending targets (5% of GDP), as well as divergent interpretations of commitment. It also notes the growing fragmentation between US and EU security agendas, the Europeanisation of support for Ukraine, and renewed US pressure for burden-sharing.

Keywords:

NATO, identity, deterrence, burden sharing, defence spending.

NOTE:** The ideas contained in the ***Analysis Papers are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) or the Ministry of Defence.

La OTAN entre Washington y La Haya: crisis de identidad y discurso

Resumen:

Este artículo examina la crisis de identidad de la OTAN entre las cumbres de Washington y La Haya, atribuyendo al liderazgo del presidente Trump una erosión de la cohesión y la credibilidad aliada, hasta reducir el discurso común a un mínimo institucional. Se consideran las principales perspectivas internacionales (realista, liberal-institucionalista y constructivista) para interpretar la deriva de una comunidad de valores hacia una cooperación instrumental y transaccional. El análisis contrasta los discursos de ambas cumbres y destaca, del comunicado final de La Haya, la introducción de nuevos objetivos de gasto en defensa (5% del PIB), así como las interpretaciones divergentes sobre el compromiso. Además, señala la creciente fragmentación entre las agendas de seguridad de EE. UU. y la UE, la europeización del apoyo a Ucrania y las renovadas presiones estadounidenses por el reparto de cargas.

Palabras clave:

OTAN, identidad, disuasión, reparto de la carga, gasto en defensa..

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Introduction

Between 2017 and 2021, the survival of the liberal international order in the face of an emerging new order[1] and the redistribution of world power[2] were already part of a debate that continues today. The United States (USA), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and the European Union (EU) form a Euro-Atlantic triangle whose balance Trump has strained during his second presidency[3].

From January 2017 to January 2021, President Trump redefined USA hegemony along illiberal lines[4]. As Fernández Sola points out, «the blockade of the functioning of the World Trade Organization and of a good number of UN agencies» are examples of an isolationist trend[5]. While the US's global military and economic power was preserved, it abandoned the active promotion of democracy and free trade, pillars of international liberalism. Multilateral organisations and agreements were rejected in favour of unilateralism, and NATO was approached from a transactional perspective, focused on immediate USA interests and allies' economic contributions. The Alliance had to adapt (NATO 2030 agenda) [6] to avoid the risk of an American withdrawal.

Between the Washington Summit (July 2024) and The Hague (June 2025), NATO has undergone a period marked by the erosion of its identity and cohesion, with the common discourse reduced to institutional minimums. In March 2025, Josep Borrell warned of the danger of a NATO «hibernation»[7] – that is, alive in theory, but lacking effective deterrence, ultimately casting doubt on its usefulness.

During his second term, Trump reinforced the transactional view of the alliance, subordinated to immediate national interests – for example, those linked to the defence

[1] BUZAN, Barry. «Will the Liberal International Order Survive? An English School Perspective», *The Decline of the Western-Centric World and the Emerging New Global Order*. Eds. Yun-han Chu and Yongnian Zheng. Routledge, Londres y Nueva York, 2020, pp. 166–85.
[2] BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep. «La redistribución del poder mundial», *Cuaderno de Estrategia 224, Geopolítica del poder militar.* Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Madrid, 2024, pp. 15-45.
[3] CASTILLA, Juan C. *El difícil equilibrio en el triángulo transatlántico: la nueva temporada*. Documento de Análisis IEEE 15/2025 2025. https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/el_dificil_equilibrio_en_el_triangulo_transatlantico_2025_dieeea15
Nota: Todos los hipervínculos se encuentran activos con fecha 1 de septiembre de 2025.
[4] POSEN, Barry R. «The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy», *Foreign Affairs* 97(2). 2018, pp. 20-27.
[5] FERNÁNDEZ SOLA, Natividad. «Consecuencias del repliegue de Estados Unidos», *Política Exterior*, *226*. 2025, pp. 64-75, p. 65.
[6] https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf
[7] «Acta de las I Jornadas Geopolíticas del IEEE (26-28 marzo 2025)». https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2603677/Cuaderno_Jornadas_Geopoliticas_del_IEEE_2025.pdf/009a10c6-f301-a78a-44ff-150953308a56?version=1.0&t=1748856597968&download=true

industry and burden-sharing – at the expense of the common values that have historically underpinned its legitimacy.

From a constructivist perspective, this period implies an identity crisis provoked by the disruption of US leadership, which weakens NATO's capacity to act as a true security community, or even as an effective alliance. A non-exhaustive review of key theoretical perspectives – realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism – makes it possible to contrast power and interest based explanations with those centred on the construction of shared meaning, highlighting how discursive change affects threat perception, mutual trust, and strategic cohesion.

The analysis rests on a comparison of the communiqués from both Summits and the discourse in the period between them; in The Hague communiqué a shift towards more ambitious spending targets is identified, but accompanied by a reduced and ambiguous narrative. In addition, the fragmentation of security agendas between the US and the EU, the Europeanisation of support for Ukraine, and mounting pressure to increase defence investment are also noteworthy. The 2024–2025 period thus constitutes an ideal laboratory for examining the extent to which politics and discourse can reconfigure allied identity and shape its future viability.

Perspectives on NATO

NATO can be analysed as an instrument for the distribution of power (realism), a mechanism for solving collective problems (liberal institutionalism), or as a sphere where legitimacy and discourse operate (constructivism and post-structuralism) [8].

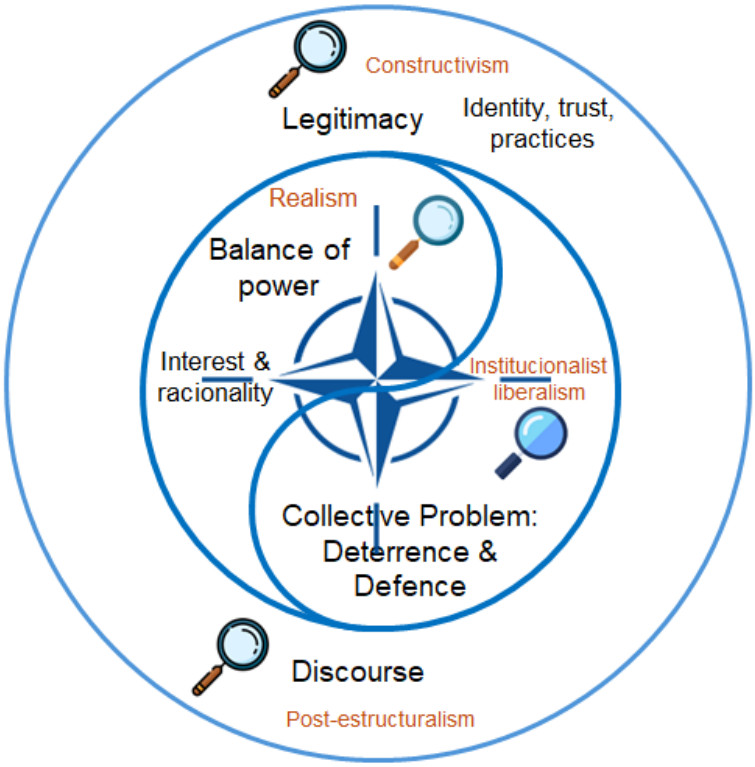
From a realist perspective, it is a military alliance aimed at maximising security in an anarchic international system—lacking a central authority—with three key axes: balancing against external threats through collective defence, managing internal differences, and maintaining American leadership[9].

According to Waltz, NATO's creation was a rational response to the Soviet threat, which acted as an «external federator»[10]Its cohesion depends on alignment with the USA and the perceived level of threat. Currently, NATO officially identifies Russia as a threat and

[8] BARBÉ, Esther. *Relaciones Internacionales,* 4.ª Ed. Tecnos, Madrid, 2020, p. 244.
[9] JOHNSTON, Seth. A. *Part III Perspectives. Realisms*, en J. Sperling & M. Webber (eds.). The Oxford handbook of NATO Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025, pp. 113-128.
[10] WALTZ, Kenneth. N. *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1979. p. 166.

China as a challenge, warning of their strategic collaboration, and accusing China of facilitating Russia's war in Ukraine[11].

Figure 1 Perspectives on NATO



Own elaboration.

European allies experience the «alliance dilemma»[12]: they fear abandonment by the USA in the face of Russia but are unwilling to be dragged into a possible conflict with China—the current Thucydides' Trap[13]—resulting from a globalised NATO. The Alliance's internal dynamics depend on power hierarchies and national priorities; while consensus is the norm, Orwell's principle that some are more equal than others' applies in practice.

According to Mearsheimer[14], the USA uses NATO to ensure its hegemony in Europe, and each state acts in its own interest, applying rationality[15]. The eastward expansion of the Alliance responds more to US strategic interests than to the altruism of consolidating

[11] HASS, Ryan, KIM, Patricia. M. & KIMBALL, Emilie. «Should China have a role in ending the war in Ukraine?». 26/3/2025. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rivals-and-responders-the-us-china-and-global-crisis-management/
[12] SNYDER, Glenn. H. «The security dilemma in alliance politics», *World Politics*, 36(4). 1984, pp. 461-495.
[13] ALLISON, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Mariners Books, Boston y Nueva York, 2017.
[14] MEARSHEIMER, John. J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton & Company, Nueva York 2001.
[15] MEARSHEIMER, John. J. & ROSATO, Sebastian. *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*. New Haven y Londres, Yale University Press, 2023.

democracy. In 2016, Kissinger proposed redefining the «Atlantic society»[16], instead of referring to the Atlantic community, thus prioritising bargains of interest over shared values (bond) [17].

Liberal institutionalism coincides with realism in identifying NATO's origins in state interest and rationality[18]; but additionally explains the Alliance's continued existence beyond the initial threat. NATO generates interdependence[19] and cooperation among today's allied democracies; it reduces uncertainty, structures information, and creates shared expectations[20], institutionalising norms and trust—all of which explain its survival after the implosion of the Soviet Union.

Article 2 of the Washington Treaty fosters free institutions and economic collaboration to promote stability and well-being[21]. The debate on fair burden-sharing—active since the organisation's creation—combines economic arguments (security as a public good[22]) and political ones about the fairness of burdens and benefits, as well as the effectiveness of collective deterrent and defence action[23].

[16] KISSINGER, Henry. *Orden mundial. Reflexiones sobre el carácter de los países y el curso de la historia.* Barcelona, Debate, 3.ª ed., 2016, p. 102.
[17] RUBIO PLO, Antonio R. «Barcia Trelles, la OTAN y la comunidad atlántica», *Real Instituto Elcano*. 2020. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/barcia-trelles-la-otan-y-la-comunidad-atlantica/
[18] KEOHANE, Robert. O. & WALLANDER, Celeste. A. «Security in a Post-Cold War World», en PAUL, Thazha. V., HALL, Richard J. A. & WIRTZ, James A. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 39-53, p. 40.
[19] KEOHANE, Robert O., & NYE, Joseph S. «Power and Interdependence Revisited», *International Organization* 41(4), 1987, pp. 725-53.
[20] KEOHANE, Robert. O. *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton y Oxford, Princeton University Press, 1984. p. 97.
[21] En https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm?selectedLocale=es
[22] MANCUR, Olson & ZECKHAUSER, Richard. «An Economic Theory of Alliances», *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 48:3. 1966, pp. 266–79.
[23] TODD, Sandler & HARTLEY, Keith. «Economics of Alliances: The Lessons for Collective Action. Economics of Alliances», *Journal of Economic Literature* XXXIX. 2001. pp. 869–896.

Realists and liberals agree that states seek to rationally maximise their own national interest[24]. The USA expresses its discontent[25] with free-riding[26]. Each ally emphasises the burden-sharing metric most favourable to itself (whether in terms of investment, capabilities, or contributions to operations). As for the benefits, some allies gain more than others; while the USA defends America First, others demand greater attention to eastern defence or southern security. Trump's demand for 5% of GDP as defence investment has reignited the debate; It is questioned whether the figure reflects the real requirements of a solidarity-based defence, or simply constitutes «arbitrary mathematics»[27]. The success of these demands varies according to the ally and their strategic importance[28], determining, for example, when the USA assumes the cost of protection, as in the case of Iceland, which lacks its own army but is a founding member of the Alliance.

From the constructivist viewpoint, NATO is seen as a «security community» [29], fully matured[30] and based on identity, trust, and shared practices[31]. Deutsch defined the concept as states which forgo the use of force among themselves and rely on the peaceful management of disputes; norms, shared narratives —or discursive frameworks—and institutionalisation define legitimate behaviour among allies[32]. The current allied identity rests on liberal-democratic values[33] (a key idea during its eastward expansion), self-restraint and multilateral dialogue; trust is maintained through the practice of upholding norms and commitments.

[24] ZYLA, Benjamin. «NATO Burden Sharing: A New Research Agenda», *Journal of Information and Organizational Sciences* (JIOS), 7(2). 2016, pp. 5–22.
[25] MALLORY, K., GERMANOVICH, G., WELBURN, J. W., & SMITH, T. D. *Burdensharing and Its Discontents.* Rand Corporation, Santa Monica CA, 2024.
[26] ZYLA, Benjamin. «Burden-Sharing», en SPERLING James, and WEBBER Mark (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of NATO*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025, pp. 499-516.
[27] CASTILLA, Juan C. «Reparto de la carga ¿solidaridad real o matemáticas arbitrarias en la OTAN y la UE?», *Real Instituto Elcano.* 2025. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/reparto-de-la-carga-solidaridad-real-o-matematicas-arbitrarias-en-la-otan-y-la-ue/
[28] BLANKENSHIP, Brian. «The price of protection: Explaining success and failure of US alliance burden-sharing pressure», *Security Studies*, 30-5. 2021, pp. 691-724.
[29] DEUTSCH, Karl. W., *et al*. *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1957.
[30] ADLER, Emanuel & BARNETT, Michel N. (eds.). *Security Communities*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
[31] GHECIU, Alexandra. «Part III Perspectives. Security Community: Identity, Practices and Trust*», The Oxford Handbook of NATO*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025, p. 146, pp. 146–159.
[32] BARBÉ, Esther. *Op. cit.* 2020. p. 110.
[33] BUNDE, Tobias. «Chapter 5: Social constructivism», *Research Handbook on NATO*. Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023, pp. 69-83.

Constructivism and post-structuralism emphasise the role of discourse: the official narrative that reinforces cohesion and deterrence, and guides legitimate practices. Language does not merely describe, but also constructs reality[34], and can be used to dominate other countries. Discourses and rituals define what it means to be an ally[35] and help to manage crises; a discursive rupture generates internal division.

> «In every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to avert its powers and dangers [...] Everyone knows that they are not free to say just anything, that one cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances, and that not everyone has the right to speak of everything.» (Foucault, 1970, 14)[36].

The Oxford Handbook of NATO[37] (2025) underlines that the allied community was built through practices of cooperative security with eastern partners, the extension of norms and a narrative of unity in shared values; yet the rise of illiberal forces challenges this approach.

Security community and military alliance are not equivalent: the former can exist without the latter. The EU, despite its treaties, is not a military alliance. The EU's 2016 Global Strategy raised the need to consolidate itself as a «security community»[38]; despite its lack of capabilities and will to assume a global role. NATO seeks to prevent external wars; if the USA were to withdraw and the Russian threat persisted, the EU and other allies would have to adapt, possibly through a transformed NATO.

Political agenda and comparison of communiqués (2024–2025)

In February 2024, at a rally, Trump suggested that Russia could do whatever it wants[39] with NATO countries that failed to meet the 2% of GDP defence spending target. This

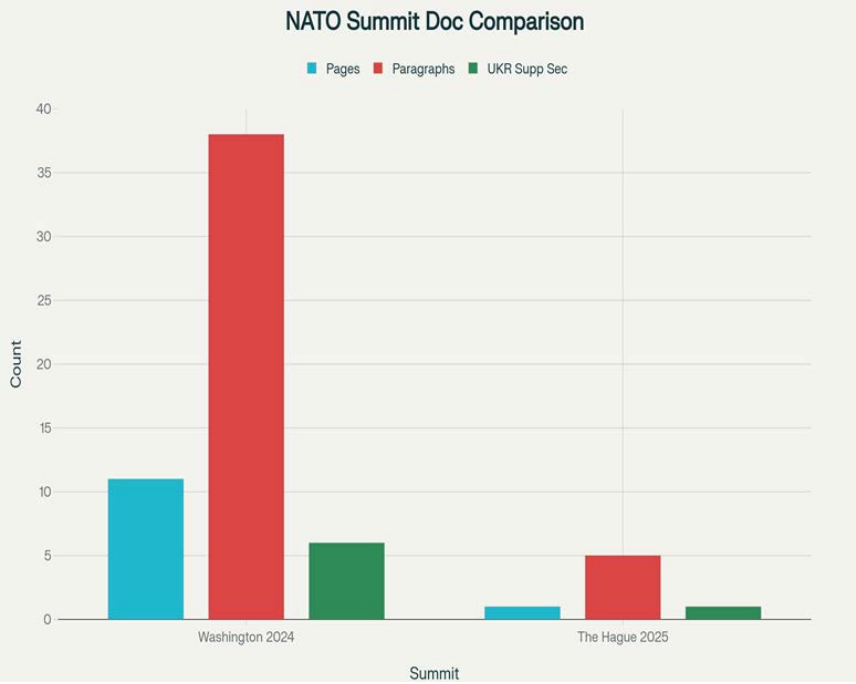
[34] BARBÉ, Esther. *Op. cit.* 2020. p. 133.
[35] SCHLAG, Gabi. «Part III Perspectives 13. Visual Discourses of Identity-Making», *The Oxford Handbook of NATO.* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2025, pp. 208-225.
[36] FOCAULT, Michel. *El orden del discurso*. Tusquets, Barcelona, citado por BAQUÉS QUESADA (2023a). 1970, p. 164.
[37] FOCAULT, Michel. *El orden del discurso*. Tusquets, Barcelona, citado por BAQUÉS QUESADA (2023a). 1970, p. 164.
[38] *Una visión común, una actuación conjunta. Una Europa más fuerte: estrategia global para la política exterior y de seguridad de la Unión Europea,* p. 17. https://op.europa.eu/es/publication-detail/-/publication/3eaae2cf-9ac5-11e6-868c-01aa75ed71a1
[39] Donald Trump, mitin de campaña, Conway (Carolina del Sur), 10 de febrero de 2024. Declaraciones recogidas en prensa internacional. FAGUY, Anna (11/02/2024) «Pleasing Putin': Trump Draws Outrage—And Attention Away From Biden—After Controversial Russia Comments» https://www.forbes.com/sites/anafaguy/2024/02/11/pleasing-putin-trump-draws-outrage-and-attention-away-from-biden-after-controversial-russia-comments/?sh=7022c36469e7

contradicted the foundations of the Alliance and undermined both cohesion and deterrence. The Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, not overly surprised given his experience during Trump's first presidency, responded that any suggestion that «the allies will not defend each other undermines all of our security» and increased risks for US and European troops[40]. In this way, the allied narrative underlined that careless public statements increase risks, and thus the importance of rhetorical self-restraint within the Alliance.

Under the Biden administration, legislation was passed to prevent any president from withdrawing the USA from NATO without two-thirds Senate approval. Additionally, the president is required to notify Congress 180 days prior to any plan to exit, reinforcing the United States' ongoing presence in the Alliance and preventing unilateral decisions, especially in light of a possible Trump return[41].

The official communiqué of the Washington Summit in July 2024 spans 11 pages and contains up to 38 general points and six sections devoted to supporting Ukraine. It declared Ukraine's path to membership as «irreversible». Key points included strengthening allied deterrence and defence, new measures against Russia and China, industrial and nuclear modernisation, cooperation with the EU and the Indo-Pacific, responses to hybrid, cyber, and technological threats, and a commitment to collective defence, alongside other regional and global challenges.

[40] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68266447
[41] https://thehill.com/homenews/4360407-congress-approves-bill-barring-president-withdrawing-nato/



In contrast, the communiqué from The Hague (2025) is just over a page and limited to five paragraphs. It reaffirms the validity of Article 5 on collective defence, makes only minimal mention of the Russian threat—without naming China—and focuses on establishing the 5% GDP commitment for defence investment by 2035 (3.5% on military spending and 1.5% on investments indirectly linked to defence, such as critical infrastructure, networks, industrial innovation, and resilience). It adds brief recognition of industrial efforts and protocolarily thanks Turkey for organising the next summit. Reviewing the chronology of events between the summits helps explain this contrast.

In July 2024, Trump—still a candidate—insisted: «If they don't pay, I'm not going to defend them», suggesting that certain allies could be abandoned to face Russia alone, but without the United States formally leaving NATO[42]. Article 5 of the Washington Treaty does not require a specific, automatic response and needs unanimous agreement from the North Atlantic Council:

[42] SPATAFORA, Giuseppe. «Trump card: What could US abandonment of Europe look like?». 2025. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-02/Brief_2025-06_Trump%20card.pdf

> «The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, *each of them*, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence […], will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by *taking forthwith*, *individually* and in concert with the other Parties, such *action as it deems necessary*, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area» *(*emphasis added in italics*).*

This provision acts as a «constitutive norm», not a «regulatory» one[43]; that is, it is essential for NATO's identity, but it does not prescribe precisely how allies should behave in any given situation when it might be invoked. This does not preclude the existence of allied defence plans; these plans may or may not be executed, as each country deems necessary among the measures that could be taken.

If the US were to decide not to use force, arguing that an ally had not fulfilled its burden-sharing commitments, the Alliance would hardly be able to maintain its cohesion or guarantee a collective military response; this could be lethal to its survival as we know it.

Fecha	Evento
26/06/24	Appointment of the new NATO Secretary General (SG) Mark Rutte (effective from 1/10/24)
9-11/07/24	NATO Summit in Washington (chaired by SG Stoltenberg)
20/01/25	Inauguration Ceremony of President Donald Trump in Washington
27/01/25	Visit of SG Rutte to Madrid
14/02/25	Munich Security Conference. Speech by Vice President James D. Vance
28/02/25	Televised meeting of President Trump and VP Vance with President Zelensky in the Oval Office
06/03/25	European Council in Brussels
19/03/25	Presentation of the European Defence White Paper in Brussels
02/04/25	US announcement of tariffs, «liberation day»
30/04/25	Signing of the agreement between the USA and Ukraine on mineral resources
05/06/25	Meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Brussels, preparatory to The Hague Summit
24/06/25	First day of The Hague Summit (chaired by SG Rutte)
25/06/25	Second day of The Hague Summit with leaders present
27/07/25	Announcement of USA-EU trade and tariff agreement

Table 1 Chronology of events with discursive impact

[43] BARBÉ, Esther. *Op. cit*. 2020, p. 113.

Between December 2024 and January 2025, Trump renewed public pressure on Denmark to acquire Greenland—as he had already done in 2019; between February and March 2025, he also stated the desirability of incorporating Canada as yet another state of his country. Trump's statements represented verbal aggression against the territorial integrity of his allies, clearly eroding allied identity and cohesion.

On February 12, Trump announced—after a phone conversation with the Russian president—the imminent opening of peace negotiations on Ukraine, excluding the EU; yet it was not until August 15 that a direct meeting between the two took place in Alaska.

On February 14, Vice President James D. Vance declared at the Munich Security Conference that the main threat to Europe was neither Russia nor China, but rather its own democratic erosion and loss of freedom of expression. This contradicted the Madrid Strategic Concept (2022) and the allied narrative regarding threats. Vance's speech was perceived in European capitals as a serious challenge to collective defence and NATO's democratic identity and as particular support for extremist and Eurosceptic currents. It undermined European confidence in the US and destabilized the allied narrative, provoking a widespread response from European leaders and the press, except for a more conciliatory reaction from Poland. Le Monde described it as a «declaration of ideological war»[44], equating it to President Putin's speech in Munich in 2007.

The previous episode demonstrated a fracture in the «Global West» as described by the liberal Ikenberry[45], in which the allied community of Western democracies was breaking apart. Constructivists and liberal institutionalists confirmed the identity crisis of the Atlantic institution; the need to redefine Euro-Atlantic society, as previously anticipated by Kissinger, was overdue.

The Union, especially since the Strategic Compass of 2022, had been insisting on developing its own defence market and reducing external purchases, which was articulated in the 2024 European Defence Industry Strategy. After Vice President Vance's statements, the debate in the EU on strategic autonomy and defence intensified.

After the tense televised meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on February 28, 2025, US military support to Ukraine was temporarily

[44] https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/02/15/in-munich-jd-vance-declares-ideological-war-on-europe_6738189_4.html
[45] IKENBERRY, G. John. «Three Worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order», *International Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 1. Enero 2024, pp. 121-138. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad284

suspended. Settling the long-standing debate about eastern expansion raised by Brzezinski in the 1990s[46], Trump closed the door to Ukrainian NATO membership. He also demanded economic compensation for the support provided until then, making clear an extractive and transactional vision of military aid.

At the European Council on March 6, 2025, leaders urged the mobilization of more resources for European security. The Commission presented the European Defence White Paper, proposing up to 800 billion euros in additional defence spending over four years. Under pressure from NATO and the EU, on April 22, 2025, the Spanish government approved the "Industrial and Technological Plan for Security and Defence," with the goal of reaching 2% of GDP in 2025 and modernizing its defence industry. However, the effective execution of these resources, among other factors, depends on whether companies and their supply chains can absorb the investment, as emphasized by Calvo, Fonfría, and Martí [47].

On 1 April, in the European Parliament[48], Reagan's commitment to free trade in 1987 was recalled, warning that tariffs only provide temporary protection, hinder innovation and depend on the state, provoking reprisals, trade wars, and loss of jobs, which ultimately harms companies and consumers[49]. The EU sought agreements where everyone would benefit (absolute gains) and there would be shared benefits, as opposed to a US approach that posed a zero-sum game.

The following day, Trump announced universal tariffs, which led the President of the European Commission to call for a proportional response and to reaffirm the EU's commitment to fair and open trade[50]. It is worth recalling the Most Favoured Nation principle of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which promotes equality and predictability in global trade; the current US tariff policy, despite remaining a WTO member since 1995, diverges from these principles and from the literal wording of Article 2 of the Washington Treaty. The debate about the possible continuation of the USA in the

[46] BRZEZINSKI, Zbigniew K. *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. Basic Books, Nueva York, 1997, p. 54.
[47] CALVO GONZÁLEZ-REGUERAL, Carlos, FONFRÍA MESA, Antonio, y MARTÍ SEMPERE, Carlos. «El aumento del gasto en defensa español. Financiación y necesidades», *Fundación Alternativas Informe n.º 11/2025*. Madrid, 2025, p. 113.
[48] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2025-04-01_EN.html
[49] «Radio Address to the Nation on Free and Fair Trade». https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/radio-address-nation-free-and-fair-trade
[50] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_964

WTO remains open[51], in a context where the organisation is practically inactive in its essential functions. Using Borrell's term – given the possible future scenario for NATO – one could say that the WTO is in hibernation.

In May 2025, the American administration anticipated its objective for the coming decade: « 5% is our number. We're asking our allies to invest in their defence»[52].

On the EU's agenda, the new security and defence agreement with the United Kingdom, signed on 19 May 2025 and linked to the White Paper of the same March, stood out, possibly one more step in building a European pillar – though not of the EU [53] – within NATO.

In May, Trump stated that the EU had been created to take advantage of the US in trade[54]. Although the Marshall Plan did not directly create the Union, Baqués[55] points out that it helped forge a commercial competitor, but it was also a geopolitical success for the United States. The EU, often seen as a transmitter of US foreign policy – for example, in Ukraine before Trump II – has supported the objective of avoiding a non-American hegemon in Europe.

A day before the May meeting of allied defence ministers, the US ambassador to NATO demanded that each country assume specific commitments, budgets, and concrete results to meet the 5%[56]. Thus, the USA used discourse to control the Summit's agenda, which focused on investment and burden-sharing, simplifying the public debate to a single figure.

On 19 June, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez intervened in the allied debate, justifying to Rutte, in a letter, a cap of 2.1% of GDP in defence for Spain: he argued it was enough to comply with NATO and warned that raising it would risk social welfare, asking for flexibility. Rutte replied briefly and diplomatically on Sunday, 22 June; there remained doubt as to whether Sánchez would sign the Summit's Final Communiqué, which could undermine its robustness.

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[51] HORN, Henrik y MAVROIDIDS, Petros C. «Why the US and the WTO should part ways». 25/6/25. https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/why-us-and-wto-should-part-ways
[52] https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/13/trump-wants-to-hear-how-allies-plan-to-boost-defence-spending-nato-envoy-says
[53] BISCOP, Sven. «NATO : The Damage Is Done – So Think Big», *Egmont Institute Policy Brief*, *379*(May). 2025, pp. 1-6. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/nato-the-damage-is-done-so-think-big/
[54] https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2025/05/24/trump-launches-a-new-trade-offensive-against-europe_6741612_19.html
[55] BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep. *Op. cit*. 2023b, pp. 36-37.
[56] https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/06/06/nato-allies-agree-to-raise-defense-spending-to-up-to-5-of-gdp_6742066_4.html

Thus, in the year leading up to The Hague, concern about the Alliance's future amid strategic uncertainty and lack of automatic defence guarantees grew in Brussels and other allied capitals; this concern remained until the summit of 24 and 25 June 2025[57].

The Keys to the Summit in The Hague

The brevity of the Summit communiqué was due to the substantial change in the new US administration's approach to the Alliance and the Europeanisation of the defence agenda in supporting Ukraine. Compared to previous summits, it omitted any mention of limited Asian participation. The US disruption forced the Secretary General to agree on a minimum text to avoid failure, prevent US withdrawal and preserve minimal cohesion. The aim was to protect what was essential: the credibility of deterrence[58] under Article 5 and allied solidarity, with new spending commitments up to 2035 that formalise burden-sharing. The goal was to keep NATO alive, even if it meant sacrificing the allied narrative to the bare minimum.

On 24 June 2025, Rutte, together with the Presidents of the Council, Antonio Costa, and of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, supported Zelensky in a pre-leaders' day event focused on cooperation in the defence industry within the European rearmament plan.

Unlike the previous summit, Ukrainian presence and the focus on the war were less, limited to the European sphere[59]. At the end of April 2025, the agreement between the US and Ukraine on the «US-Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund» – commonly known as the agreement on critical minerals – had been signed, while military support for Kyiv had come to be viewed as primarily a matter for the EU's own agenda. Meanwhile, it was hoped that US positions would not negatively affect the allied mission of support for Ukraine (NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine, or NSATU) launched at the previous Washington Summit[60]. In light of the declarations by Trump and Rutte in July, support for NSATU appears to continue as long as the Europeans pay[61].

[57] https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/06/25/trump-rattles-nato-allies-as-he-descends-on-summit_6742689_4.html
[58] DUNN, David, & WEBBER, Mark. «Looking ahead: imbalance, dependency and NATO's uncertain future», *Defence Studies*. 2025, pp. 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2025.2474057
[59] https://www.freiheit.org/germany/takeaways-nato-hague-summit
[60] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm
[61] https://www.france24.com/es/programas/el-debate/20250716-ee-uu-fabricar%C3%A1-armas-para-ucrania-servir%C3%A1-el-pacto-de-trump-con-la-otan

In The Hague, only the New Zealand prime minister attended, whereas in Washington in 2024, Japan, South Korea and the deputy prime minister of Australia also participated, playing an active presence in defence, cybersecurity and support projects for Ukraine[62]. The lower Asian presence is attributed to the internal situation in South Korea, tensions due to US pressure on Japan and Korea to increase defence spending, diplomatic issues in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East, and a reduction of the allied agenda to a more European framework[63]. This lower presence may also indicate a pause in the supposed path towards a global NATO and its presence in the Indo-Pacific. These considerations may impact allied cohesion and identity; it remains to be seen what impetus the US decides to give to NATO's global character.

After the Summit, Trump, Sánchez[64] and other leaders made various statements about investment commitments. Several challenges regarding the scope of the commitment remain, given three fractures in the official communiqué. Firstly, the definitions of what constitutes defence spending (3.5% of GDP) or security (the additional 1.5%) were vague at the time of the Summit. One might debate the binding nature of these commitments for all allies.

In the English version of the communiqué, in the second paragraph, "We, the Allies" was replaced by "Allies" – without specifying the determiner – when setting the new defence spending targets. This allows, as the Spanish government currently argues, the interpretation that not all allies[65] have to reach the 5% of GDP threshold, but only those who decide to or need to do so in order to provide the required capabilities. However, the French version is more demanding as it uses «*les Alliés*» and not «*des Alliés»,* which suggests that the commitment is general[66]. Since both versions are equally valid, any interpretation is possible. This can create new internal and inter-allied tensions, as already occurred in the previous decade from the 2014 Wales Summit and its flexible language about the objective: «aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade»[67].

[62] https://www.reuters.com/world/why-indo-pacific-countries-are-joining-nato-summit-2024-07-10/
[63] https://efe.com/mundo/2025-06-23/cumbre-otan/
[64] https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/presidente/intervenciones/Documents/2025/250625-Intervenci%C3%B3n-PG-RdP-Cumbre-OTAN-La-Haya.pdf
[65] «Compromiso con la seguridad», *Revista Española de Defensa*. Julio/agosto de 2025. https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/gabinete/red/2025/07/p-53-55-red-429-otan.pdf
[66] PEROT, Elie. «Fuzzy, Loose, Soft: NATO's New Defence Spending Targets». 2025. https://csds.vub.be/publication/fuzzy-loose-soft-natos-new-defence-spending-targets/
[67] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm?selectedLocale=en

Future allied decisions and subsequent written reviews of what was agreed will be influenced by the allied institutional practice of «intertextuality» (a post-structuralist concept)[68]: within internal committees, the officially approved documents always remain the basis for any subsequent ones.

The third fracture is subtler and open to debate; nothing is politically neutral. Linking – in the same paragraph – the mention of the Russian threat and the new defence spending commitment can be interpreted as a veiled reference to Trump's message: if you do not meet the 5% commitment, you may find yourself alone in facing Russia. It is an indirect way of legitimising the possibility that the USA does not act as expected in the event of an Article 5 situation, if the affected ally does not meet the new commitment.

To all the above should be added the issue of the trade agreement between the USA and the EU; a matter which should be analysed in due course as it affects defence:

> «The European Union plans to substantially increase procurement of military and defence equipment from the United States, with the support and facilitation of the US government. This commitment reflects a shared strategic priority to deepen transatlantic defence industrial cooperation, strengthen NATO interoperability, and ensure that European allies are equipped with the most advanced and reliable defence technologies available.» [69].

After the Trump-Putin meeting in Alaska on 15 August, peace in Ukraine remains «elusive»[70]. From Foreign Affairs, Trump's pernicious diplomacy is criticised, acting like Andersen's naked emperor:

> «Methods and manners matter in international relations. Trump's processes are too chaotic, his speech too riddled with falsehoods, and his policy shifts too abrupt for foreign leaders to trust him. Without trust, there is no persuasion and no genuine cooperation; without trust, alliances lose their validity. If its trustworthiness is a fully spent commodity, all Washington will have left is the limited tool of hard power.» [71].

[68] BARBÉ, Esther. 2020. *Op. cit*. p. 138.
[69] Traducción propia. Comunicado conjunto, párrafo 7 en https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-statement-united-states-european-union-framework-agreement-reciprocal-fair-and-balanced-trade-2025-08-21_en
[70] PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José M. «Paz esquiva en la guerra de Ucrania», *Política Exterior,* n.º 226. 31 de julio 2025, pp. 54-63. https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/paz-esquiva-en-la-guerra-de-ucrania/
[71] KIMMAGE, Michael «The Pernicious Spectacle of Trump's Russia-Ukraine Diplomacy», *Foreign Affairs*. Issue Septiembre/Octubre. 19 de agosto 2025. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/pernicious-spectacle-trumps-russia-ukraine-diplomacy

Conclusions

The transition from the Washington Summit (2024) to The Hague Summit (2025) reveals a profound crisis of identity and credibility within NATO, caused primarily by the disruption of US leadership during Trump's second presidency. The concise final communiqué from The Hague reflects the priority of preserving the USA's permanence within the Alliance and maintaining minimal cohesion among allies, reaffirming collective defence (Article 5) and burden-sharing, while the common narrative is reduced to a minimum.

Solidarity in defence spending, boosted by Trumpism, has become a central axis of allied identity, moving cohesion based on shared values towards a transactional and realist logic grounded in immediate national interests. This change generates tension between an identity-based vision and an instrumental one, making it difficult to sustain a constructivist reading that considers NATO a mature security community. Recent developments point towards a nationally calculated approach and increased pressure around the commitments undertaken, with the risk of eroding the community of values.

NATO's survival in disruptive scenarios depends not only on threats and material resources, but also on symbolic and discursive factors. The controlled management of discourse, the display of unity, and institutional rituals help to postpone breakdowns, even if cohesion proves provisional.

Security agendas between NATO and the EU have fragmented; The Hague Summit exemplifies that support for Ukraine is primarily in the hands of the EU and European allies, while the USA maintains a bilateral approach.

US ambiguity has turned European dependence into a vulnerability, spurring initiatives within the EU for rearmament, industrial investment in defence, and strategic autonomy. Nonetheless, Europe's limited industrial capacity to absorb these resources emerges as a structural challenge.

The 2024–2025 period suggests that NATO may be entering a state of hibernation, oscillating between resistance to disintegration and the need for reinvention, both discursively and in terms of cooperation. The risk of losing the character of a community of values is real, and the Alliance faces the prospect of fundamental reassessment if the crisis of trust persists.

The combination of abrupt shifts in US leadership positions, fragmentation of the allied agenda around Ukraine, pressure over burden-sharing, and weakening sense of identity

places NATO at a possible turning point that may lead it into a new process of adaptation. This inflection point is characterised by the maintenance of symbolic and institutional minima, which has thus far prevented rupture, but the future will depend on restoring trust and community spirit in the face of new challenges.

Should the Russian threat persist and the US ultimately withdraw its defence umbrella, the EU would have to rapidly emancipate itself within a reconfigured NATO, requiring efforts that would probably exceed 5% of GDP in defence spending. We must stay alert!

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