



Ankara 2026: when the military strength is not guarantee of political cohesion

The Ankara NATO Summit, held on 7–8 July 2026, was far more than another routine meeting. It confirmed that the Alliance is experiencing one of the most delicate periods in its recent history: militarily more necessary than ever, yet politically under increasing strain as a result of the transformation of U.S. leadership and the deterioration of the global strategic environment.

An analysis of the Summit Declaration reaffirms the Alliance's "ironclad" commitment to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty—the principle that an attack against one Ally shall be considered an attack against all. Beneath this traditional message of unity, however, lies a more complex reality. NATO remains indispensable, but the transatlantic relationship no longer rests on the same level of political trust that sustained the Alliance throughout much of the Cold War and the post-Cold War era.

The first major message emerging from Ankara was financial and industrial. Allies welcomed the achievement of the long-standing commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence—originally agreed at the 2014 Wales Summit—although this still falls short of the new 5% target adopted at The Hague. The Declaration also calls for a substantial increase in European and Canadian defence investment. In 2025 alone, European Allies and Canada increased spending on core defence requirements by more than \$139 billion. This is complemented by over \$50 billion in new procurement commitments, alongside measures to expand collective defence production, accelerate innovation, and strengthen NATO's technological and industrial base. Agreements were also announced on airborne early warning aircraft, missile systems, drones, strategic airlift capabilities, aerial refuelling assets, and secure Alliance communications.

This effort should not be interpreted merely as a political concession to Washington. Above all, it is an operational necessity. Russia's war against Ukraine exposed Europe's shortage of military stockpiles, critical capabilities, logistical depth, and industrial resilience required to sustain a prolonged high-intensity conflict. In this context, the traditional debate over burden-sharing has evolved into something considerably harsher. Washington is now demanding that Europe assume a significantly greater share of responsibility for its own defence. What was once expressed as recurring criticism of insufficient European defence spending has become explicit, transactional, and at times politically uncomfortable pressure. NATO, long portrayed as a partnership of equals, is

gradually evolving into a more asymmetric relationship in which the United States acts not only as the leading Ally but also as the actor setting the political price of its security guarantee. The Alliance remains multilateral in form, yet its internal balance increasingly reflects the logic of a *primus inter pares*.

Despite these tensions, Ankara sought to project unity and resolve. The Declaration reiterates the commitment to a robust 360-degree approach to Euro-Atlantic defence and to deterrence based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional, missile defence, space, and cyber capabilities. NATO thus presents itself as a modernised Alliance capable of integrating emerging technologies while preserving its military advantage in an environment characterised by strategic competition, hybrid threats, regional instability, and the return of high-intensity warfare to Europe.

Within this framework, Ukraine occupies a central position. The Declaration states that Ukraine contributes to transatlantic security and reaffirms Allied support for its freedom, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Allies committed €70 billion in military assistance, equipment, and training for 2026 while pledging to maintain comparable levels of support in 2027. Reuters has confirmed both the inclusion of this commitment in the Ankara Declaration and the announcement by some Allies, such as the Czech Republic, that they will not participate in the package under the same conditions.

Support for Ukraine reflects clear political determination but also raises a profound strategic dilemma. *De jure*, Ukraine is not a NATO member and therefore does not benefit from Article 5 guarantees. *De facto*, however, the Alliance provides such extensive military assistance, intelligence, training, financial support, weaponry, and political backing that Ukraine enjoys a form of reinforced protection. This is not full collective defence, but rather a kind of "limited Article 5" that, while stopping short of automatic security guarantees, provides Ukraine with a depth of Western support that has become decisive to the course of the war.

This ambiguity may serve NATO's interests by enabling support for Ukraine without formal membership. Yet Moscow may equally interpret it as a gradual escalation within the security dilemma. Russia could conclude that, although Ukraine remains outside the Alliance, NATO increasingly behaves as though Ukraine's strategic survival were directly linked to Allied security. Such perceptions heighten the risk of stronger Russian responses across the grey zone, including sabotage, cyberattacks, disinformation

campaigns, pressure on critical infrastructure, covert operations, and calibrated provocations against vulnerable Allies. Nor can the possibility be dismissed that influential Russian strategic circles will continue advocating an increasingly aggressive nuclear rhetoric.

Particularly significant in this regard is the role of Sergei Karaganov. In June 2023, he openly argued that Russia should consider employing nuclear weapons against European NATO members to break Western resolve in supporting Ukraine. His proposal included striking targets in several countries to "bring them back to their senses." Although President Putin publicly rejected such proposals at the time, the very existence of this debate within circles close to the Kremlin illustrates the extent to which the war in Ukraine has eroded the traditional boundaries of nuclear deterrence.

The Ankara Declaration also includes an important reference to Iran. Allies reaffirm that Iran must never acquire nuclear weapons and urge Tehran to fully respect freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Although cautiously worded, this statement is significant. By linking nuclear proliferation with maritime security in one of the world's most critical energy corridors, NATO leaves open a political pathway for future pressure—or potentially even collective action—should a major crisis arise. Legally, however, any military intervention not justified by immediate self-defence would require authorisation from the United Nations Security Council, an outcome rendered highly unlikely by the predictable Russian or Chinese veto. The enduring tension between strategic necessity, international legality, and institutional paralysis once again lies at the heart of Euro-Atlantic security.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Ankara, however, lies not only in the Declaration itself but also in the political atmosphere surrounding the Summit. President Donald Trump's treatment of several Allies once again reflected a style that many Europeans perceive as closer to intimidation than diplomacy among partners. During the meeting, Trump harshly criticised several Allied governments, revived the Greenland issue, and singled out Spain as a problematic Ally in the context of burden-sharing. While Washington is entitled to demand greater defence contributions, doing so through public humiliation, territorial insinuations, or economic threats undermines the political trust upon which the Alliance depends. Allies may demand responsibility from one another, but they should not treat one another as strategic subordinates.

This is the central paradox of Ankara. On the one hand, NATO emerges materially stronger through higher defence spending, greater industrial capacity, enhanced military capabilities, sustained support for Ukraine, and a firm commitment to collective defence. On the other hand, it emerges politically weaker because the transatlantic relationship is increasingly perceived not as a strategic community of equals but as one shaped by the preferences of its dominant member. NATO remains the cornerstone of Western security, yet its internal cohesion depends more than ever on Europe's ability to assume greater strategic responsibility without weakening the transatlantic bond.

Once again, NATO has demonstrated its extraordinary capacity for adaptation. It survived the end of the Cold War, transformed itself through crisis-management operations, returned to collective defence after Russia's annexation of Crimea, and rearmed following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ankara confirms this Darwinian logic: survival belongs not to the strongest, but to those most capable of adapting to changing circumstances. Yet adaptation alone cannot guarantee trust. NATO may modernise its capabilities, increase defence spending, and strengthen deterrence, but if the political bond uniting its members continues to erode, the Alliance's strategic architecture will inevitably become more fragile—and its deterrent credibility will suffer.

Ankara does not resolve NATO's internal crisis; it merely places it in strategic suspension. The Alliance remains indispensable, but it is no longer comfortable. It remains powerful yet increasingly marked by internal fractures. It continues to provide the principal guarantee of Euro-Atlantic security, but its internal balance has shifted from a partnership of *pares inter pares* to a structure dominated by an increasingly demanding and less predictable *primus inter pares*. NATO remains alive, adaptive, and operationally stronger. Nevertheless, the transatlantic relationship continues to bear mounting political pressure. Like every great alliance, NATO can survive external threats. What no alliance can withstand indefinitely, however, is the erosion of trust among its own members. For deterrence is built on military capabilities, but strategic credibility rests on political trust. As Dwight D. Eisenhower observed, "*only our unity can deter aggression.*"

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