



07/2026

14/07/2026

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NATO and the Balancing Act in Ankara

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Abstract:

The Ankara Summit marks a transition from an Alliance primarily defined by political commitments to one focused on the effective delivery of capabilities. The most significant change does not lie in achieving a specific defence-spending target, but in transforming financial resources into operational military power.

Europe must build a defence-industrial base that becomes a substantial pillar of the Alliance. Russia's war against Ukraine has reinforced the priority of the Eastern Flank, accelerated technological innovation, and consolidated a new European strategic culture. The challenge is no longer simply to spend more, but to ensure that investment translates into production capacity, readiness, resilience, and military effectiveness.

At the same time, NATO has had to manage the political implications of Trumpism, Turkey's growing geopolitical prominence, and the consequences of the conflict with Iran. European allies can contribute diplomatic engagement and political legitimacy, while the extent of their future military contribution remains uncertain. Yet these developments also reveal a broader transformation in the transatlantic relationship.

Overall, the Alliance emerges strengthened from Ankara. It has preserved the transatlantic bond while encouraging Europe to invest more heavily in its defence-industrial base and to assume greater responsibility for conventional defence.

Keywords:

NATO, Great Power Competition, Deterrence, Defense Industry, Trumpism

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La OTAN de los equilibrios en Ankara

Resumen:

La OTAN de la gran competición estratégica sostiene que la Cumbre de Ankara marca el paso de una Alianza basada en compromisos políticos a otra centrada en la ejecución efectiva de capacidades. El principal cambio no reside en alcanzar un determinado porcentaje de gasto en defensa, sino en transformar ese esfuerzo financiero en poder militar operativo.

Europa debe construir una base industrial que aporte un elemento sustancial a la Alianza. La guerra de Ucrania ha reforzado la prioridad del Flanco Este, acelerado la innovación tecnológica y consolidando una nueva cultura estratégica europea.

Por otra parte, la OTAN ha gestionado políticamente el trumpismo, el protagonismo geopolítico turco, y lo relativo a la guerra con Irán. Los europeos pueden aportar diplomacia y legitimidad política y está por ver si apoyos militares. Con todo, la Alianza sale fortalecida al preservar el vínculo transatlántico a la vez que Europa aporta más inversión en industria de defensa, y se hace más responsable de la defensa convencional.

Palabras clave:

OTAN, gran competición estratégica, disuasión, industria de la defensa, trumpismo.

Cómo citar este documento:

MANFREDI SÁNCHEZ, Juan Luis. *La OTAN de los equilibrios en Ankara*. Documento Informativo IEEE 07/2026.

The doctrine of credible deterrence—combining political will with effective and visible capabilities—has moved at the Ankara Summit from commitments to implementation. All 32 Allies have now surpassed the 2% of GDP benchmark for defence investment, marking a significant step forward in NATO's collective defence posture.

In terms of funding, the objective of allocating 3.5% of GDP to core defence capabilities by 2035 (plus an additional 1.5% for related expenditures) remains achievable, at present, only for Poland and the Baltic states. It is therefore insufficient to assess NATO's transformation solely through this metric. The real change lies in determining how this collective financial effort is translated into operational military capability. The challenge is not simply to spend more, but to create across Europe an industrial ecosystem capable of delivering strategic autonomy through production capacity, infrastructure, supply chains, innovation, skilled labour, and readiness. Otherwise, uncoordinated increases in spending will inevitably lead to bottlenecks, delivery delays, continued dependence on the United States, and, ultimately, political frustration.

Europe's defence industry is becoming a fundamental component of a renewed strategy. EU defence-industrial initiatives, open to other Allied partners, could effectively become NATO's thirty-third member. Industrial capacity is the distinctive contribution that Europeans must bring to the debate. Factories on European soil, engineering expertise, specialised training, logistics networks, and resilient supply chains are as important as budgets themselves. Reindustrialisation is strategic because it provides the necessary precondition that gives defence spending its real value. The shared effort, measured through different interpretations of the 3.5+1.5% GDP target, does not adequately capture the burden-shifting dynamics of a genuinely European NATO. The pace of investment determines the speed of transformation and enables a meaningful strategic dialogue with the new United States, beyond the Trump administration. Credible leadership among equals can only be achieved through sustained financial commitment.

Since Russia's aggression in 2022, deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank has restored a sense of purpose and mission to the Alliance. The war has forced NATO to update its thinking on drones and artificial intelligence while accelerating the adoption of prototypes and other innovations. In Ankara, Allies institutionalised their commitment to supporting Ukraine over the coming years. The €70 billion pledged for 2026 will not only sustain Ukraine's territorial defence but also constitute one of the Alliance's most valuable

investments in research and development, providing insight into the future technological character of warfare.

Several important issues received less attention in the final communiqué despite their relevance to NATO's future. Maritime security in the North Atlantic, beginning with Greenland, deserved more detailed consideration. Similarly, deterrence and collective defence rely on a shared strategic culture, enhanced protection of critical infrastructure, deeper cyber-defence cooperation, the promotion of democratic resilience, and a stronger fight against disinformation. Greater reflection is also needed on the cognitive domain and the rise of cognitive warfare as a security challenge. The combination of disinformation, manipulation, generative artificial intelligence, and political polarisation is creating new forms of hybrid aggression. In practice, Russia's strategy tests democratic resilience daily through activities that remain below the threshold of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. There may be no territorial invasion, but these threats nevertheless undermine the political cohesion upon which democracies depend.

The Political Management of Trumpism

The Summit can be credited with four major achievements. NATO successfully managed President Trump, Erdoğan's Turkey, the consequences of the Iran conflict, and the role of the European Allies.

First, however counterintuitive it may seem, credit must be given to Secretary General Mark Rutte for his ability to manage President Trump's temperament, if not his rhetoric. This should not be underestimated. Trump did not walk away from the Summit; Allied leaders approved a declaration and reached substantive agreements. One may disagree with Rutte's style or strategic silences, but the Alliance did not unravel at a time of growing diplomatic unilateralism.

The second key development is the presentation of Turkey as a geopolitical hub. The more European NATO becomes, the more significant Turkey's role appears due to its access to the Black Sea and the Caucasus, its influence over migration flows in the Eastern Mediterranean, its position within regional energy networks, and its political narrative of multipolarity. Turkey is a swing state by definition, maintaining strong lines of communication with Washington, Brussels, Moscow, the Gulf capitals, and Central Asia,

while sharing a border with Iran. It is an autonomous regional power rather than a peripheral actor. This strategic relevance is reinforced by the neo-monarchical style projected by both Trump and Erdoğan. The two leaders converge symbolically in their preference for displays of hyper-leadership, elaborate ceremonies, and public demonstrations of authority.

Third, particular attention should be paid to the explicit references to Iran, the Strait of Hormuz, freedom of navigation, and nuclear proliferation contained in paragraph five of the Declaration. The conflict has already generated irreversible consequences across three dimensions: NATO's geographical scope of action, the geoeconomic agenda, and relations with partners in the Gulf.

Following the Iran crisis, NATO's future institutional development remains uncertain. President Trump appears to favour transforming the Alliance from an organisation conceived as a mechanism of collective security into a more explicitly offensive instrument. Such a shift would be difficult, though not impossible, particularly if the Strategic Concept adopted at the Madrid Summit in 2022 were to be revised. In practice, however, a post-Iran NATO is already beginning to take shape.

The fourth achievement rests on European unity. Allies have increased long-term defence investment, managed disagreements over the response to Iran, and advanced transatlantic dialogue. European partners continue to contribute diplomacy, crisis management, logistics, and political legitimacy, even if decisive military action remains predominantly American. At the same time, it is worth asking whether the focus on Iran risks overshadowing the Southern Flank, which remains a cornerstone of Spain's national interest.

What Comes Next

Finally, attention should be paid to the electoral landscape of 2026–2027. Sweden will hold general elections in the autumn, while Israel will elect a new parliament. The U.S. midterm elections will determine Trump's real political strength during the second half of his presidency. Russia's legislative elections may serve as a referendum on its performance in Ukraine. Within the European Union, negotiations over the Multiannual Financial Framework reveal the re-emergence of national preferences over more

federalising ambitions. In the spring, France and Spain will form new governments, Finland will elect a new parliament, and Germany will choose a new president. In 2028, the cycle concludes with presidential elections in both Turkey and the United States.

While outcomes cannot be predicted, voters will increasingly make decisions shaped by security, energy, employment, and territorial integrity. This is a significant shift. NATO's future no longer depends solely on Trump's electorate; it is increasingly in European hands. Europeans can now decide what kind of Alliance they want in an era of great-power competition. In the medium term, political leaders will emerge with renewed legitimacy and policy agendas adapted to NATO's ongoing transformation.

Conclusion

Taken together, these developments allow us to conclude that the Ankara Summit was a success. The transatlantic community remains intact. The United States, despite its current unpredictability, continues to play the decisive role, while Europeans are beginning to embrace a more responsible, investment-oriented, and autonomous strategic culture. Only sustained effort can reduce military and security dependence. The international environment, shaped by deglobalisation and geoeconomic competition, is unlikely to change in the near future. Europe's political project must therefore adapt to an increasingly hostile world.

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