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Why the NATO summit in Ankara matters: values, defence and the transatlantic bond

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Abstract:

The NATO Summit held in Ankara on 7–8 July 2026 confirms an already announced epochal shift. This analysis sets out the position of the Board of the Spanish Atlantic Association, which throughout the summit published assessments and articles offering keys to its expectations and to the outcomes achieved. Ankara reflects neither a crisis in transatlantic relations nor a rift among allies, but rather the crystallisation of changes suited to our times and to today's challenges. The response, the consensus reached and the final declaration therefore mean neither rupture nor resignation —nor, of course, confrontation between Europeans and Americans on either side of the Atlantic— but an orderly transition towards a more balanced and, for that reason, more European Alliance. Our analysis moves across three levels: the meaning of the summit and its strategic context; the twofold drive that characterises it —the industrial and technological acceleration of defence and the strengthening of the European pillar through a new burden sharing—; and the deliberately terse final communiqué, together with the roadmap it sets for the years ahead.

Keywords:

NATO; Ankara Summit; transatlantic bond; European pillar; defence industry.

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NATO summits are rarely remembered for their communiqués. Ankara, held on 7–8 July 2026, will be no exception. While the spotlight followed the statements of the United States President, Donald Trump, in the meeting rooms a sober declaration was being finalised that, read calmly, says more about the Alliance's future than any headline. It is worth separating the ambient noise from the exact tone of the signal this summit sends.

An epochal shift, not a passing crisis

The United States is, and will remain, the indispensable ally: no partner contributes as many capabilities or projects as much force. Washington has for years been shifting its gaze towards Indo-Pacific geopolitics, and competition with China; this is a trend that predates President Trump and is structural in nature. The announcement of a thorough review of its deployment in Europe and the pre-emptive reduction of its long-range strike capabilities confirm that we are witnessing a deep readjustment driven by its own needs, not a punishment of anyone. And even speaking of crises, the Alliance has survived greater ones —Suez, France's withdrawal from the integrated military command structure, the euromissile crisis, Iraq—, yet it is true that this summit coincides with the largest war on European soil since 1945, with a sustained hybrid offensive by Russia against the allies, with China's strategic competition and with a rekindled conflict in the Middle East that aggravates the geopolitical and geoeconomic context.

Yielding to the force of short-term tensions has never been the rule of the house. NATO is seventy-seven years old and has experience and perspective enough to understand that it would be a historic mistake for all its members to decide on impulse: without allies or rules, the United States would be left only with force to sustain a hegemony that the recent war with Iran has proved insufficient; and Europe, after decades of neglecting its military power, would not even be invited to the tables where its future is negotiated. The conclusion is plain: both shores are condemned to understand each other, because neither has a better alternative. And what unites them —democracy, the rule of law and the freedoms enshrined in the 1949 Washington Treaty— is too valuable to be weakened in any form whatsoever, whether internal or external. With all the imperfections and self-criticism we may apply to ourselves, the Atlantic Alliance remains the world's largest defensive alliance of democracies.

What sets Ankara apart: industry and the European pillar

Two factors set Ankara apart from previous summits. The first is the emergence of the defence industry as a central focus. The war in Ukraine showed that deterrence is measured not only in soldiers but in the capacity to produce munitions and drones, systems and spare parts quickly. The summit hosted, in parallel and for the first time, a major defence-industry forum and new mechanisms for coordinating production. The Secretary General, Mark Rutte, insisted that industry must rise to the formidable investment and modernisation effort of allied defence. The warning is apt: spending more is not enough if the money does not translate into real capabilities. Europe devotes defence budgets that triple those of Russia and, even so, the fragmentation of production and the market as well, in many instances, devaluates them. Yet this is only part of the problem, and not even the most significant. The main problems in Europe stem from the shortage of skilled labour and from low investment in R&D.

The second factor is the rebalancing of responsibilities. The so-called Alliance 3.0 aims for Europeans to assume, progressively, the conventional defence of the continent and its political leadership, while the United States retains the strategic capabilities —nuclear deterrence, intelligence and transport— that, as of today, is what the USA is providing to the NATO-allied nations. The shift is fair and necessary, but it requires resolving an old shortcoming: the European pillar remains an abstraction, without the single telephone number Kissinger once demanded. Neither an improvised European army nor the duplication of structures NATO already offers will solve the problem; the Europe that will enact is a Europe that acquires its own capabilities and greater integration.

The communiqué and the roadmap

The Ankara declaration was, like The Hague's declaration, deliberately brief. In an organization that decides by consensus, the concision is a form of unity: only the essential is stated, so that no one dissents. Five ideas underpin it. It reaffirms Article 5 and the transatlantic bond, with a 360-degree approach attentive to the east, and particularly to the north with the thawing of the Arctic, and also, to the security threats on the southern flank —a matter of particular interest to Spain. In Compliance with The Hague spending commitments, it was noted —that the European allies and Canada raised their investments in 2025 and 2026 accordingly, signing new contracts at the summit itself,

and furthermore, eliminating the removal of barriers, as well as calling for the expansion of joint programmes, which are highly needed at this point. It is stated aloud that a stronger Europe makes a stronger NATO, with a deterrence that combines the nuclear, the conventional, missile defence, space and cyberspace. Support for Ukraine —now financed mostly by the Europeans— is renewed, and it is asked to be equitable, predictable and sustainable; fixating its gaze on the threats at large with Iran's political doctrines and the demands of never having the possibility to acquire nuclear weapons, as well as respecting the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.

The roadmap is, ultimately, a managed transition towards a fixed destination: continuity of commitments, with an interim review in 2029 and a horizon into 2035; consolidation of the European pillar; industrial acceleration and firmness in the face of common threats —accompanied by a genuine reckoning with the consultation protocols among NATO allies.

The merit of Ankara lies not so much in what it proclaims —in our AAE debates, one of our board colleagues called it a «statement of the obvious»— as in what it averts: fracture.

Credit is due to Secretary General Rutte, who has worked hard, in his own peculiar way, to preserve unity and to limit the damage, the outbursts, contradictions, upsets and other frights typical of summits at such a high level.

It must also be acknowledged that we are democracies: we live through our history and report it live, in real-time, before the cameras; always under the gaze of our adversaries. The course of history is the right one. Tomorrow's NATO should not be a military appendage of the United States, but an Alliance of thirty-two countries supported by pillars, able to stand firm in any circumstance, and choosing to walk together for the security of its citizens. Because, as the old adage says, together we will go farther.

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