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NATO, from The Hague to Ankara: Burden Shifting and the forced birth of the European Pillar

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The NATO summit in Ankara (7–8 July 2026) has taken place in a qualitatively different context from that of The Hague (2025): disagreements over Greenland and Iran have transformed an identity crisis into a crisis of operational trust.

The article examines the evolution of the Alliance between the two summits at two complementary levels. At the political-institutional level, the allied “permacrisis” – shaped by Greenland, Iran and bilateral frictions with Washington – has accelerated a de facto autonomous European coordination, whose core is the E5 format.

The debate has shifted from burden sharing to burden shifting. At this level, a further dilemma has emerged over European technological autonomy, illustrated by France's commitment to a sovereign solution, the Arcadia artificial-intelligence-based command-and-control system (C2-AI), as opposed to the US Maven system.

The next cycle of allied defence planning (NDPP), negotiations for which begin in the second half of 2026, will be more decisive for the future of Euro-Atlantic security than the summit itself.

Keywords:

European pillar of NATO, Burden shifting, Allied permacrisis, European Strategic Autonomy

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«For years, the European question was how to spend less on defence without it being too noticeable. Ankara's question will be the opposite: how to spend more without deceiving ourselves.»¹

Introduction

European confidence in US protection has been eroded and the Alliance is seeking to preserve its strengths in a transformed environment.

Between the NATO summits in Washington (July 2024) and The Hague (June 2025), the US narrative changed dramatically and tensions emerged that affected the Alliance's identity and cohesion².

The official communiqué of The Hague summit was reduced to the lowest common denominator, close to one, the minimum possible. It reaffirmed the credibility of collective defence, which would only be viable if allies honoured a new investment pledge with targets for 2035: 3.5% of GDP for defence capabilities and a further 1.5% indirectly related to defence and security³. Progress would be measured annually in accordance with national plans. The communiqué also underlined the importance, for deterrence, of a defence industry capable of supplying what is needed, at scale and with urgency.

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East are becoming normalised without being resolved, and Europeans continue to struggle to overcome their taboos about power and military capabilities. The European Union (EU) is currently drafting a new Security Strategy⁴. The Union still aspires to become a strategic actor and a provider of security, both external and internal.

Beyond political formulations, capability development is an urgent priority in both the EU and NATO. It is one of the reasons why reflection continues on the Alliance's still-undefined European pillar.

At the Ankara summit⁵, 7 and 8 July 2026, progress on previous commitments has been reviewed; the next major test of allied adaptation will be the negotiation of the Political

¹ MONAGO J. A. [Ankara pasando revista a los arsenales](#). Geopaper. LinkedIn entry by the author dated 28 June 2026, p. 5.

Note: All hyperlinks in this article were active as of 9 July 2026.

² CASTILLA, J. C. [La OTAN entre Washington y La Haya: crisis de identidad y discurso](#). Documento de Análisis IEEE, 57/2025.

³ Meanwhile, within the Union there is no comparable quantitative commitment; beyond the Commission's calls for increased national investment.

⁴ A necessary update of the EU's 2016 Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass.

⁵ NATO. [NATO summits](#). 2026.

Guidance for the next cycle of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) (2027-2030), which must be agreed in the second half of 2026, while cuts to the American capabilities available for European defence plans are also being considered.

Brevity in official summit communiqués

The shorter official communiqués are, the easier they are to agree ahead of each summit. Brevity may be an indicator of the difficulty of reaching consensus.

Summit	Number of paragraphs	Number of words
Vilnius (2023)	90	11.248
Washington (2024)	44	5.341
The Hague (2025)	5	427
Ankara (2026)	6	485

Table 1. Quantitative comparison of the length of official communiqués.

Own elaboration, using English versions.

In both The Hague⁶ and Ankara⁷, the ironclad commitment to Article 5, the transatlantic bond and the protection of one billion citizens is reaffirmed. Ankara demonstrates the materialisation of The Hague commitments, with figures on investment already delivered, new procurement packages, and a boost to manufacturing capacity and advanced technologies.

In Ankara, Ukraine regains prominence, and, in connection with support for it, so does the European Union. Iran and security in the Strait of Hormuz enter the agenda, despite the Alliance's practically negligible role to date

Between The Hague and Ankara: political and confidence "permacrisis"

⁶ [The Hague Summit Declaration | NATO Official text](#)

⁷ [The Ankara Summit Declaration | NATO Official text](#)

If the EU is trying to emerge strengthened from its crises, NATO too faces the challenges of a world in "permacrisis"⁸, with recent peaks of instability related to Ukraine, Greenland and Iran.

Since the Hague summit (June 2025), the US has published new versions of its security (December 2025) and defence (January 2026) strategies. The Americans are considering the possibility of two simultaneous armed conflict scenarios, in the Indo-Pacific and in Europe, and a review of the global deployment of their forces remains pending⁹.

Washington formally informed its allies of cuts to the military capabilities assigned to the NATO Force Model: a reduction by half in the number of strategic bombers, a third of fighter aircraft, no submarines deployed in Europe¹⁰, fewer drone and air-to-air refuelling capabilities, and so on¹¹.

The allied Defence ministers' meeting of October 2025 opened the post-The Hague cycle, focusing on implementing commitments and beginning preparations for Ankara. Alongside the defence ministers, Kaja Kallas and Ukraine's Defence minister were also present¹².

Between late 2025 and early 2026, Trump progressively stepped up his campaign to annex Greenland—moving from diplomatic pressure and tariff threats against Denmark and the EU to even hinting at the use of force.

Marco Rubio was absent from the allied Foreign ministers' meeting in December 2025. This, combined with the hostile language towards the EU in the American security strategy published earlier that same month, explains the unease felt by not a few EU allies¹³.

Trump pushed the pressure to the limit, and NATO's very continuity was called into question. Russia, without doubt, watched the spectacle with satisfaction. The symbolism of Germany—and other Europeans—sending an officer on a reconnaissance mission to Greenland, for possible joint military exercises with Denmark, was enormously significant.

⁸ ZARKADA, A. y MELANTHIOU, Y. 'From a VUCA Environment to a Permaccrisis World'. In: *Future Management for Sustainable Prosperity*. Future of Business and Finance. Cham, Springer, 2026.

⁹ SONNE, P. y TIMSIT, A. 'Pentagon says U.S. will cut thousands of troops from Europe', *The Washington Post*. 20 May 2026.

¹⁰ US Congress (2026) *NATO: Issues for the July 2026 Ankara Summit*.

¹¹ NIEHUS, G. 'Una cumbre para limitar los daños', *Política Exterior*. 26 June 2026.

¹² GOBIERNO DE POLONIA. 'Meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels'. *gov.pl*. 2025.

¹³ FLECK, J. y BATCHIK, J. 'Trump may move on from Greenland. Europe won't', *Atlantic Council Dispatches*. 22 January 2026.

Had the Alliance derailed, the systemic consequences would have been unpredictable¹⁴. Among other possible consequences, the risk of horizontal nuclear proliferation would have grown in Europe¹⁵.

This crisis was defused following consultations with the Secretary General and the Allies. It was agreed to reframe the issue by referring to a future agreement on Arctic security under the Allied umbrella. In this way, the organisation – whose existence had been put at risk – served as an institutional exit route to avoid a rupture of the Atlantic bloc. At the Brussels meeting of February 2026, European Defence ministers arrived relieved to have resolved—for the time being—the existential crisis over Greenland. The Arctic Sentry mission was officially launched.

In those early months of 2026, allies were absorbing the core messages arising from the new US strategies, namely a NATO 3.0 involving a handover of responsibility for conventional deterrence and defence (Burden Shifting) to European hands (not to be confused with the EU).

Once again, American institutional participation fell short of what would theoretically have been expected; instead of Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, Under Secretary Elbridge Colby represented the US.

Since then, the ministerial meetings of 2026 have shown a clear progression: from the strategic diagnosis (NATO 3.0, European responsibility) in February, to the political-industrial commitment in Helsingborg (Sweden, in May), moving towards the concrete implementation phase of the commitments made a year earlier.

The four threads running through the entire sequence are defence spending and its conversion into capabilities, transatlantic rebalancing, Ukraine, and the new Middle East/Iran variable.

In February, the American intervention in Iran was coordinated beforehand only with Israel, not with the Allies. As soon as the conflict began to drag on and the US ran into difficulties—perhaps not foreseen as likely in its prior planning—tensions with allied countries resurfaced. Washington criticised the sovereign decisions of certain countries regarding the non-use of shared bases in Europe—a matter governed by bilateral

¹⁴ ENGSTRÖM, A. et al. [The Greenland crisis: Implications for transatlantic and global security](#). FOI Memo 9229. Estocolmo, FOI (Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut / Swedish Defence Research Agency), 2026.

¹⁵ Author's observation during the debates of the course "Strategic Competition and Russia", held at the George Marshall Center (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany) in February 2026.

agreements—and criticised the Alliance itself. They were reproached for their lack of support for the US, which was said to be hindering its projection towards the theatre of operations.

In connection with Chancellor Merz's visit to Washington on 3 March, President Trump criticised British Prime Minister Keir Starmer: "He's no Winston Churchill"¹⁶, for initially refusing the use of bases in the United Kingdom, though he later allowed it. Trump also went after Spain for not authorising the use of Morón or Rota for the intervention in Iran: "It's a terrible ally. [...] We're going to cut off all trade with Spain, we don't want to have anything to do with Spain"¹⁷. On 8 April, during a visit by the Alliance's Secretary General to President Trump, the latter stated that NATO had failed when they could have helped, and that he would not forget it¹⁸.

In late April, verbal exchanges between President Trump and Chancellor Merz resurfaced. Trump described Merz as ineffective in relation to the war in Ukraine, following the German chancellor's criticism of the humiliation Iran was inflicting on the US; Trump threatened to reduce the American military deployment in Germany¹⁹.

Against that backdrop, the 22 May meeting was reached, a Foreign ministers' gathering in Helsingborg—the first at that level held on Swedish territory since the country's accession—at which an attempt was made to steer the agenda towards focusing on: credible national plans towards 3.5% of GDP on defence capabilities (plus the supplementary 1.5%); the need to intensify defence-industrial production on both sides of the Atlantic; and maintaining "substantial, predictable and sustainable" support for Ukraine²⁰. They also discussed the situation in the Strait of Hormuz.

During the following month, Europe—and beyond—continued to suffer the economic effects of the energy crisis, owing to the persistent double blockade (by Iran and the US) on the aforementioned strait. President Trump signed a possible agreement in Versailles on 18 June during the G7 meeting; the strait would be reopened while the parties gave themselves two months to conclude the definitive agreement. On 7 July, attacks on ships

¹⁶ MCKIERNAN, J. ["Trump says Starmer is 'no Winston Churchill' over Iran strikes"](#), *BBC News*, 3 March 2026.

¹⁷ VIDAL LIY, M. Trump: ["We're going to cut off all trade with Spain"](#), *El País* (edición en inglés), 3 March 2026.

¹⁸ Ver SUBRAMANIAN, C. ["Trump assails NATO, says US will 'remember' response on Iran"](#), *Bloomberg*, 26 March and *Reuters* 2026. ["NATO chief says some European allies were tested and failed in Iran war"](#), 8 April 2026.

¹⁹ Ver MARTIN, N. y MAZUMDARU, S. ["US to withdraw thousands of troops from Germany"](#), *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 1 de mayo y SVIRNOVSKIY, G. ["Trump continues broadsides against Germany's Merz over Iran"](#), *Politico*, 30 April 2026.

²⁰ NATO. ["NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in Sweden address how to make the Alliance stronger"](#), *NATO News*, 22 May 2026.

in the strait resumed, along with attacks on Iran and on US bases in Bahrain and Kuwait; stabilisation remains far off.

Without the Alliance's participation either in the conflict or in its diplomatic resolution, the Defence ministers' meeting was held in Brussels (18th June). Secretary General Rutte framed it under the slogan "a stronger Europe in a stronger NATO"²¹ and described it as the last major gathering before Ankara.

This time it was US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth who announced the review of the US force posture and bases in Europe—the "NATO 3.0 review"—over the following six months; he made American financial contributions to the Alliance conditional on allies meeting their spending targets. He reiterated accusations against several countries for having denied overflights and the use of bases during the operations against Iran. He left before hearing all the interventions that followed his own²².

On 18 June, the Nuclear Planning Group also met, agreeing to modernise allied nuclear capabilities and strengthen strategic planning; and the session of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group was held—with President Zelensky in attendance—discussing new financial support commitments and the acceleration of deliveries of Patriot PAC-3 missile interceptors and other resources through the Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) mechanism. Since April, supplies of equipment to Europe had been delayed owing to what had been consumed against Iran; the US also needed to replenish its own stocks²³.

A week after the allied ministerial meeting, the leaders of the E5 format (Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Poland—without Spain) met at the Federal Chancellery in Berlin (24 June) to coordinate positions ahead of the Ankara summit; Mark Rutte took part by videoconference from Washington, where he was also preparing for the summit while visiting President Trump.

²¹ RUTTE, M. ['Doorstep statement ahead of the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence'](#) [transcripción oficial], NATO. Bruselas, 18 June 2026.

²² RUTTE, M. ['Press conference following the meetings of NATO Ministers of Defence'](#) [transcripción oficial], NATO. Bruselas, 18 June 2026.

²³ SLATTERY, G. y PAMUK, H. ['Exclusive: US to delay weapons deliveries to some European countries due to Iran war, sources say'](#), Reuters. 16 April 2026.

The E5 is an informal format linked to the forced birth of the European defence pillar²⁴. The media anticipated a tense summit in Ankara²⁵.

In the Oval Office, Rutte sought to defuse potential tensions by focusing on data and projections that might persuade the US President of the economic benefits for the United States arising from increased allied investment – already on the right track – thanks to the Trump factor²⁶. Perhaps the pressure within the “transatlantic crucible”²⁷ may yet turn into an opportunity for European defence and, likewise, for EU initiatives.

Furthermore, institutional representation of the Indo-Pacific partners (IP4) has not returned to the level seen at the Washington summit (2024), which was attended by all four presidents or prime ministers. At The Hague, only the Prime Minister of New Zealand was present, while at Ankara only the President of South Korea attended, accompanied—as were Japan, Australia and New Zealand—by Defence or Foreign Affairs ministers. An ad hoc meeting of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) also took place, undoubtedly relevant in the context of the open crisis with Iran.

<i>Meeting type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Place</i>
Defence Ministers	15/10/2025	Brussels (Belgium)
Foreign Affairs Ministers	3/12/2025	Brussels
Defence Ministers	12/02/2026	Brussels
Foreign Affairs Ministers (informal)	21-22/05/2026	Helsingborg (Sweden)
Defence Ministers	18/06/2026	Brussels
Allied Summit	7-8/07/2026	Ankara (Türkiye)

Table 2. Ministerial meetings prior to Ankara Summit

²⁴ Castilla, J.C (2026) [La defensa entre dos pilares: la OTAN, la UE y la batalla por la voz europea](#). Documento de Análisis IEEE, 14/2026. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos.

²⁵ DÍAZ, S. [‘España se queda fuera de la reunión de las grandes potencias europeas para preparar la cumbre de la OTAN de julio’](#), *Antena 3 Noticias*. 24 June 2026.

²⁶ NATO. [‘Secretary General meets President Trump in Washington – Europe is stepping up’](#), *NATO News*. 25 June 2026.

²⁷ GIOE, D. [‘The Transatlantic Crucible: Why the Crisis Between Washington and Europe May Be a Blessing in Disguise’](#), *Foreign Affairs*. 4 June 2026.

On 8 July, the US president again publicly criticised Spain; meanwhile, the Spanish president referred to the cordial tone of the closed-door exchanges, saying they had even talked about football ²⁸.

The technological and industrial race: from investment to capabilities

NATO's last three summits have progressively expanded the role the Alliance aspires to play in relation to the defence industry. In 2023, the Defence Production Action Plan (DPAP) was launched, driving demand aggregation with a priority on munitions; in 2024, the Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge was approved; in 2025, the Alliance approved the Rapid Adoption Action Plan (RAAP) for technological solutions, its role as architect of the Euro-Atlantic industrial and innovation ecosystem was reinforced²⁹.

At the Ankara summit, the third NATO Summit Defence Industry Forum (NSDIF) took place, examples of demand aggregation in the form of contracts were seen, and the innovation drive was given continuity with the approval of the NATO Innovation Scale-up Package.

It is clear that declaring investment commitments is not enough; they must urgently be converted into operational capabilities—combat-ready formations, munitions, air defence, logistics, and so on, together with associated infrastructure—while relying decreasingly on American assets, which will be limited but critical (satellite and nuclear). At the same time, technological innovations, such as those related to artificial intelligence, must be incorporated, and the capacity of the defence and space industry must be increased on both sides of the Atlantic, with appropriate cooperation³⁰.

The tension between allied interoperability and European strategic autonomy is not merely financial or political; it also has an increasingly relevant technological dimension. France's decision to reject the Maven Smart System—an AI-enabled command and control system developed by the American company Palantir and adopted as the reference solution within NATO—is illustrative; it opted instead to promote Arcadia, its

²⁸ Véase *Noticias DW* (8 julio) [Trump vuelve a amenazar a España y ésta responde "tranquila"](#) y *La Razón* (8 July) [Sánchez evita el choque con Trump: "No ha habido tirantez, hemos hablado de fútbol"](#)

²⁹ CASTILLA, J. C. [Ante el espejo: OTAN, UE y la industria de defensa europea. Complementariedad competitiva](#). Documento de Análisis IEEE 49/2026.

³⁰ [Strategy for Industry-NATO Cooperation](#) endorsed by Allied leaders at the NATO Summit in Ankara.

own C2-AI system, aligned with allied standards but built on sovereign French, and perhaps European, technology (developed by Mistral AI, Safran, Thales and Airbus)³¹.

The choice is not merely technical but strategic: should the Alliance's European pillar be built on digital architectures of American origin, or on technological infrastructures of European sovereignty? The answer each Ally gives to this question will shape not only future interoperability, but the real capacity for European operational autonomy.

"Washington's timetable for its cuts is unclear; it appears it will be carried out in phases"³². It is important to put into context the notice period—six months—that the US gave to the other allies. What does this mean for NATO's planning processes?

During the second half of 2026, the content of the Political Guidance for the next NDPP cycle (2027-2030) will be negotiated in Brussels. The other Allies will have to fill the gaps in conventional capabilities that the Americans will no longer contribute to the inventories for the defence of Europe, bearing in mind the possible simultaneity with another crisis scenario in the Indo-Pacific. This will influence both capability planning and operational planning (defence plans).

According to the NDPP's foreseen timeline, it would be in 2029 that new packages of capability targets would be due to be assigned to countries; moreover, at The Hague it was agreed that the adequacy of financial defence investment commitments would be reviewed in that same year, 2029.

If the US were to bring forward the withdrawal of the capabilities made available to the Alliance, as contributions to NATO's New Force Model and to the continent's defence plans, could allies really be expected to wait until 2029 to be assigned new capability targets?

Conclusions

The Ankara summit (7–8 July 2026) revisited the commitments undertaken in The Hague the previous year, but in an even more adverse context, shaped by developments concerning Greenland and Iran. If The Hague was the summit of the lowest common denominator—a pared-down text to preserve unity—Ankara again sought to minimise

³¹ ROMMEN, R. '[NATO drills: France to test AI battlefield tech as alternative to US system](#)', *Euronews*. 7 June 2026.

³² RUIZ, R. «Una Alianza más Europea», *Revista Española de Defensa*, n.º 440. Julio/agosto de 2026, p. 42.

damage, while acknowledging progress on investment commitments in an environment marked by continuous crises within the Alliance.

The transactional logic of the second Trump presidency applied to NATO has continued since the previous leaders' summit, and discord over values among allies persists; for Washington, the Alliance is above all an instrument to be exploited for benefit. The American discourse triggered an identity crisis between the Washington (2024) and The Hague (2025) summits. The pattern has continued, and today the Alliance may be facing something qualitatively different: a crisis of operational trust; perhaps an opportunity to build a Europe of common defence from within the Alliance itself.

The American intervention in Iran—coordinated only with Israel, without prior consultation with Allies who ended up economically affected—together with the criticism over the refusal to allow the use of shared bases in Europe, has damaged the consultation and transparency mechanisms that form the Alliance's institutional cement, beyond Article 5 itself.

The Iranian crisis introduces a variable absent from the analysis of the 2024-2025 period: NATO was left on the sidelines of a conflict led by the US, with serious economic, energy and military repercussions for Europe, confirming divergences between American and European security agendas.

The European reaction to the Greenland crisis (including the allied Arctic Sentry mission), and the informal practice of the E5 format (24 June) for coordinating ahead of Ankara, reveals that the major European allies are internalising the lesson: prior consultation within NATO can no longer be taken for granted, and autonomous European coordination has moved from being a political aspiration to an operational necessity.

Spain's exclusion from the E5 format on the eve of the allied summit—possibly a consequence of its public disagreements over The Hague's financial targets and other tensions with the American Administration—illustrates a position within the informal allied hierarchy far from what it should be. It is a situation that could ultimately affect Spain as well in the field of EU defence.

The European pillar is ceasing to be a mere non-defined concept and becoming an architecture forced by circumstances, with the E5 as the core of strategic coordination. However, unresolved structural tensions persist: the institutional distinction between NATO's European pillar and the EU's defence dimension—which includes non-EU allies

such as the United Kingdom or Norway—the risk of duplication in the industrial and innovation policies of the international organisations, technological sovereignty, and disparities in national capabilities

If, between 2024 and 2025, the allied debate centred on burden sharing—how much European Allies should spend—between 2025 and 2026, that debate has undergone a qualitative change towards burden shifting. The US is not only pressing Europe to spend more, but is handing over responsibility for conventional deterrence and defence to European hands, having already brought forward its cuts to the NATO Force Model. In the short term, European Allies will have to fill the capability gaps left by the Americans' reduced contributions.

President Trump's tone in Ankara has not been a significant novelty; it is part of the Allies' new normal.

The Political Guidance to be approved for the next NDPP cycle (2027-2030) will be a first opportunity to assess what the possible reduction in American capabilities made available to the Alliance will mean for Europeans. Will each ally's capability targets need to be reviewed before 2029? The Political Guidance will be negotiated in the second half of 2026; it will be more decisive for the future of collective security in Europe than the summit itself.

The Ankara summit has not resolved the structural tensions running through the Alliance; as at The Hague, damage has been minimised and increases in defence investment have been highlighted.

However, the great strategic question remains unresolved: whether NATO's adaptation will be able to manage the transition towards a new Euro-Atlantic security architecture—with greater European responsibility and less dependence on the US—while preserving the cohesion needed to deter potential adversaries. This is a space to watch closely!

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