



## **NATO commits to 5% spending plan to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans up**

### **A review of the NATO Summit meeting in The Hague, 24-25 June 2025**

#### **Key events and decisions:**

- The summit was described as "[historic](#)", but for all the wrong reasons. NATO leaders fawned over a bullying, bellicose US President. And in a new low, the NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte (the new Lord Haw-Haw), endorsed President Donald Trump's reckless and illegal bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities and sat motionless as the US President repeatedly described independent media outlets that questioned the outcome as "scum". In rejecting diplomacy and supporting an illegal war—also in contravention of Article 1 of NATO's own [1949 North Atlantic Treaty](#)—the summit delivered a deep blow to the architecture of global affairs and the notion that the alliance is a 'values-based' institution.
- In a five-paragraph [summit declaration](#), NATO member states pledged to increase their military spending to 5% of GDP by 2035—a move long called for by the US President. However, Trump said the target does not apply to the United States (which spends slightly more than 3%) and Spain was effectively granted special dispensation to make its own budgetary decisions.
- The 5% target in the Hague Defence Investment Plan is made up of:
  - 3.5% for traditional military expenditure ("based on the agreed definition of NATO defence expenditure") for which member states will submit annual plans "showing a credible, incremental path to reach this goal"; and
  - an additional 1.5% allocated to military-related spending, to "protect our critical infrastructure, defend our networks, ensure our civil preparedness and resilience, unleash innovation, and strengthen our defence industrial base".
- The new spending targets are a political commitment with no enforcement mechanism. However, "the trajectory and balance of spending" will be reviewed in 2029, "in light of the strategic environment and updated Capability Targets".
- The agreement to double arms spending over the long-term could strengthen NATO's unity but also risks internal divisions and voter discontent. Economically, it may boost the defence sector but could strain public budgets and will likely come at the cost of cuts in vital health and public services across member

states. Militarily, it could modernize forces and enhance deterrence but risks escalating tensions with adversaries like Russia and China. (For a more detailed analysis of the Hague Defence Investment Plan, see [NATO Watch Briefing 124](#)).

- Direct contributions towards Ukraine's defence and its defence industry will be included when calculating military spending by NATO member states. The NATO leaders also reaffirmed "their enduring sovereign commitments to provide support to Ukraine", but this fell short of previous summit commitments to Ukraine's "irreversible path" to NATO.
- The summit declaration also reaffirmed NATO member states' "ironclad commitment" to the alliance's Article 5 collective security guarantee.
- NATO released public versions of its [Updated Defence Production Action Plan](#) (previously approved by NATO Defence Ministers in February 2025); and NATO's first [Commercial Space Strategy](#) and [Rapid Adoption Action Plan](#) (previously approved by NATO Defence Ministers in June 2025).
- The next summit will take place in Türkiye in 2026 followed by a meeting in Albania in 2027. Neither country has previously hosted a NATO summit.

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and the NATO Heads of State and Government, The Hague, 25 June 2025 – photo credit: NATO



## Part I: Summary of the Summit

This NATO summit was the first hosted by the Netherlands. The originally planned two-day meeting was truncated for the benefit of President Trump so that official business amounted to a dinner hosted by the Dutch royal family and ended with one two-and-a-half hour session of the North Atlantic Council. The resulting communiqué consisting of five paragraphs was one of the shortest ever at a NATO summit. [Described](#) by one analyst as "an orchestrated grovel at the feet of Donald Trump", the agenda was narrowed to focus on the military spending increases demanded by Trump. Topics that might have irritated the US President—the Ukraine conflict, the Russian threat or the US bombing of Iran—were consigned to the summit margins.

On the 23 June the NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte held a pre-summit [press conference](#) where he outlined his expectations for the summit. "We meet at a truly historic moment, with significant and growing challenges to our security" Rutte stated. "As the world becomes more dangerous, Allied leaders will take bold decisions to strengthen our collective defence, making NATO a stronger, a fairer and a more lethal Alliance". Approval of a major new military investment plan, raising the benchmark to 5% of GDP, was expected to be the centrepiece of the summit. He also said that the Summit provided the opportunity to engage with Ukraine, NATO partners in the Indo-Pacific, and the leadership of the European Union. On Ukraine Rutte said, "we must continue to make sure Ukraine has what it needs to defend today and deter in the future". "Our support for Ukraine is unwavering and will persist" he affirmed.

### NATO Public Forum

Prior to the start of the summit on 24 June the Secretary General gave an [address](#) at the [NATO Public Forum](#), a public event jointly organized by NATO and the Government of the Netherlands with civil society organisations, which ran parallel to the

summit itself. His main message to the Forum was that “if you want to prevent war, spend more”, and the old refrain, “Peace through strength”.

## Support for Ukraine

During the first day of the summit, the NATO Secretary General was involved in three bilateral meetings and one trilateral meeting. There was a private bilateral meeting between the NATO Secretary General and the President of Ukraine. In his short [public remarks](#), the Secretary General reassured President Volodymyr Zelensky that it was “safe to assume that in the Summit Declaration there will be important language about Ukraine, and the support for Ukraine also financially going forward”.

Mark Rutte also met jointly with President Zelenskyy, President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen and the President of the European Council, António Costa, and again only the [opening remarks](#) were made public. In addition, there was a meeting at the end of the summit between the NATO Secretary General, the President of Ukraine and leaders of the E5 countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland and United Kingdom). No details of the talks were given.

Arguably the most important Ukraine-related get-together, was President Trump’s lunchtime [meeting](#) with President Zelensky, their first face-to-face session since April when they met at St. Peter’s Basilica during Pope Francis’ funeral. Trump said in response to a question from a Ukrainian journalist that he pledged to supply Kyiv with Patriot anti-missile interceptors. Later when he was asked if the US would restart military aid to Ukraine, stopped under his administration, he did not rule it out entirely. “We’ll see what happens,” the president said. In his account, Zelensky [described](#) the meeting as productive, and said his priority was “the purchase of American air defence systems to shield our cities, our people, churches, and infrastructure”.

The reality, however, was that having been a central focus at previous summits, Ukraine and Zelensky’s role was considerably reduced at the Hague summit. He attended the dinner and held bilateral meetings, but the final communiqué, while tying Russia’s “long-term threat” to the need to increase military spending, made no mention of NATO’s previous commitments to Ukraine’s

“irreversible path” to NATO. Instead, it simply reaffirmed NATO’s “enduring sovereign commitments to provide support to Ukraine”. In his [closing press conference](#), the NATO Secretary General made a point of repeating NATO’s longstanding pledge of eventually admitting Ukraine. “Our aim is to keep Ukraine in the fight today so that it can enjoy a lasting peace in the future,” he said. “We stand by Ukraine in its pursuit of peace and will continue to support Ukraine on its irreversible path to NATO membership,” echoing the [2024 summit communiqué](#) in Washington.

## Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

As part of NATO’s deepening relationship with its four Indo-Pacific partner countries (Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea), the Secretary General also held private bilateral meetings with the Prime Minister of [New Zealand](#), Christopher Luxon, and the Foreign Minister of [Japan](#), Takeshi Iwaya on the first day of the summit. And on the second day he met with all four leaders, and again, only his [opening remarks](#) were made public. In terms of practicalities the discussion likely focused on ongoing defence industrial cooperation, innovation, potential joint procurement and support to Ukraine, as indicated in the subsequent five-paragraph [statement](#) between the NATO Secretary General and the four Indo-Pacific partners.

## NATO Summit Defence Industry Forum and new multilateral projects

A plenary session of the NATO Summit Defence Industry Forum was also held on the first day of the summit. Jointly organised by NATO Allied Command Transformation and the Defence Investment Division of the NATO HQ International Staff, the forum brings together industry executives, high profile military commanders and national politicians, as well as leaders from NATO and EU institutions. During his [keynote speech](#) at the forum Rutte called on NATO member states, partners and industry to “unite, innovate and deliver” to ensure the alliance is able to “win this new war of production”. He also highlighted the clear demand signal NATO is sending to the defence industry, through the massive uplift member states have agreed in capability targets. (On the need for greater parliamentary oversight of the NATO defence planning process that

produces these classified capability targets, see [NATO Watch Briefing 126](#)).

President Zelensky also made a speech at the forum urging further security assistance and increased defence industrial cooperation between NATO member states and Ukraine.

At the start of the forum, business leaders from Europe and North America presented the Secretary General with an [ambition statement](#), reflecting their collective commitment to support [NATO's Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge](#) for the "prosperity, security and resilience of the Transatlantic economy and society". NATO also released its first public version of the [Updated Defence Production Action Plan](#), which outlines NATO's commitment to aggregate demand, boost capacity and strengthen engagement with industry. (On NATO's defence industrial strategy also see [here](#)).

NATO also released public versions of its first [Commercial Space Strategy](#) (designed "to create more business opportunities and cut red tape in NATO's procurement processes") and its [Rapid Adoption Action Plan](#) (to "substantially accelerate the adoption and integration of new technological products for defence, across all military domains").

At the forum NATO member states also [signed several new multinational projects](#) and expanded existing ones. Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Türkiye and the UK committed to the joint acquisition, storage, transportation and management of stockpiles of defence critical raw materials. This is expected to help make NATO less vulnerable to supply shocks and reduce reliance on external providers. The project supports the implementation of NATO's [Defence Critical Supply Chain Security Roadmap](#), agreed by NATO Defence Ministers in June 2024.

The Multinational Multi Role Tanker Transport Fleet [programme](#) (a NATO-EU collaboration) also reached a new milestone, with Denmark and Sweden joining this initiative. In addition, the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) [signed a contract](#) with Airbus Defence and Space for the acquisition of two additional A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport aircraft, raising the current fleet to 12 aircraft. The NATO Support and Procurement Organisation (NSPO), NSPA's

governing body, also signed a [partnership agreement with Australia](#) to allow the country participation in the full range of NSPA activities and services.

Estonia, Finland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands and Sweden also broke new ground in supporting the further integration of new technologies in military operations, announcing the establishment of the first [NATO Innovation Ranges](#) "to test, refine, and validate new technological products in operationally realistic environments".

The first day of the summit ended with two closed working dinners: a North Atlantic Council Working Dinner in Defence Ministers' session; and a NATO-Ukraine Council Working Dinner in Foreign Ministers' session.

### **NATO Secretary General endorses an illegal attack on Iran**

The second day of the summit began with a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General, followed by doorstep statements by leaders of the member states. Space was then given on the agenda for some [short remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General and President of the United States. Most of the remarks by the US President, his Secretary of State and Defence Secretary concerned the evidence of bomb damage in the US attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. Mark Rutte then weighed in by saying "the great thing is you took out the nuclear capability of Iran. This was crucial. You did it in a way which is extremely impressive. But the signal it sends to the rest of the world that this President... is willing to use the enormous strength of the American military. That signal to the rest of the world, which is far beyond Iran, is extremely important".

President Trump then compared the US military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Such a comparison breaks down on almost every critical level: the nature of the weapons, the targets, the strategic context, the intended consequences, and the legal and ethical frameworks. Above all else, it minimises the unique horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which remains the only instance of nuclear weapons being used in warfare. Rutte sat on his hands and said nothing.



Trump then went on to denigrate independent media outlets that questioned the extent of the damage, calling the New York Times and CNN “scum”. Again, Rutte sat on his hands and said nothing.

To be clear. Trump authorised the bombing of Iran’s nuclear enrichment installations, a country that had not attacked the United States, was not preparing to and did not even threaten war. The attacks violate various international agreements, including the UN Charter, Article 1 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the 2005 Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM), the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, the IAEA Statutes, the rules of customary international humanitarian law and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

However, on at least three occasions when responding to questions from journalists the NATO Secretary General denied that the US attacks were illegal or even a cause for concern. When [asked](#) by James Bays, a journalist from Al Jazeera, to justify NATO's position of criticising Russia for breaching the rules-based international order by invading Ukraine, but not doing so in respect of US actions, the NATO Secretary General gave a defensive reply: “Well, I don't agree with that assessment at all. Obviously, NATO is concentrated on the Euro-Atlantic, but I do not, at all, not one syllable of your assessment, sorry on what you just said, with all the respect, of course, for your news outlet, which I always respect, but I think you have this completely wrong”.

In a follow-up question, Bibiana Piene, from the Norwegian News Agency asked the NATO Secretary General if he agreed with the [statement](#) by the Norwegian Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, criticising the US attack on Iran. Rutte responded by saying “My biggest fear would be for Iran to own and

be able to use and deploy a nuclear weapon, and to be a stranglehold on Israel, on the whole region and other parts of the world. And that is why NATO has said Iran should not – and this is a consistent position of NATO – Iran should not have its hands on a nuclear weapon. So, and I would not agree that this is against international law what the US did”.

Finally, when asked during his closing [press conference](#) about the legality of the US attack against Iran he reiterated “what US did last weekend is justified. This is preventing Iran, and this is a position NATO has taken for a long time, that Iran should not get its hands on a nuclear deterrent”. And in response to a follow-up question on whether Iran may have moved the highly enriched uranium prior to the US attack and whether this might pose a threat to NATO, he replied with further gushing praise:

“Only United States is capable to do this. So, B-2s, their fantastic pilots in those fighter jets, the bombs which were used to get deep into these nuclear facilities in Iran. Nobody has that type of stuff. And history made you the leader. History made you the ones who have to take action when it is necessary. And I think what President Trump did here, is take a very targeted, surgical, operation to take out as much as possible Iran's capability to get to a nuclear weapon. And I commend him for that. And obviously it's now up to, all the studies being done and all the details looked into what exactly has been the effect of this. But I'm personally very optimistic that this has dealt a massive blow to Iran”.

While the evidence to support this latter claim is still pending, and is likely to remain contested, one

thing is clear. Rutte’s words dealt another massive blow to [international law](#), which is already on life support.

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and Donald Trump, The Hague 25 June 2025 – photo credit: NATO



## North Atlantic Council session agrees the Hague Defence Investment Plan

After the short remarks by the NATO Secretary General and US President, came the “welcome ceremony and official photo”. This was followed by the only formal business session, a meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government. Apart from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General the session was closed to the media and public. At his closing [press conference](#) Mark Rutte confirmed that NATO leaders had agreed on The Hague Defence Investment Plan, which he said would “fuel a quantum leap in our collective defence”. The 5% target in the Plan is made up of:

- 3.5% for traditional military expenditure (“based on the agreed definition of NATO defence expenditure”) for which member states will submit annual plans “showing a credible, incremental path to reach this goal”; and
- an additional 1.5% allocated to military-related spending, to “protect our critical infrastructure, defend our networks, ensure our civil preparedness and resilience, unleash innovation, and strengthen our defence industrial base”.

The US president [described](#) this decision as a “big win for Europe and... Western civilisation”. Certainly, the remilitarisation to come is substantial. NATO military spending in Europe and Canada could increase from around \$500 million today to \$1.1 trillion in 2035, when the combined defence budget of the other 31 allies will essentially equal the Pentagon’s. This might modernize European armed forces and enhance deterrence but also risks escalating tensions with adversaries like Russia and China. In a post on X, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [said](#): “NATO countries already account for 55% of the world’s total military spending. Yet they’re still being asked to raise defence investment to 5% of GDP to build a ‘more lethal NATO’. What exactly is NATO’s objective behind this?”.

Spain had already officially announced that it cannot meet the 5% target, and others including Belgium and Slovakia have voiced reservations, but the investment pledge includes a review of spending in 2029—after the next US presidential

elections—to monitor progress and reassess the security threats.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez of Spain [said](#) before the summit that Spain would spend 2.1% of its GDP on defence, “no more, no less”. Although Rutte [said](#) in relation to Spain, “NATO has no opt-out, and NATO doesn’t know side deals”, wiggle-room for Spain is provided in the communiqué which says “the allies”—not “all allies”—had agreed to the 5% figure.

After the meeting, Sanchez [said](#) that Spain can execute NATO’s military plans by spending only 2% of GDP on defence. “In today’s summit, NATO wins and Spain wins something very important for our society, which is security and the welfare state,” he said. Trump, however, [criticised](#) Spain. “They want to stay at 2%. I think it’s terrible,” he said. “You know, what we’re going to do? We’re negotiating with Spain on a trade deal. We’re going to make them pay twice as much”.

Other countries closer to the borders of Russia and Ukraine—Poland, the three Baltic states and Nordic countries—had already committed to the 5% goal. NATO’s three major European powers, France, Germany and the UK, were also supportive. But like most European countries they face major economic challenges, and Trump’s [global tariff war](#) could make it even harder for them to reach the 5% target. The UK, for example, is already [squeezing welfare and foreign aid spending](#) to channel extra funds into their military budgets.

It is also argued that extra funds may also be needed should the Trump administration announce a draw-down of forces in Europe, where around 84,000 US troops are based. The Pentagon is expected to announce its intentions in the coming months.

## Part II: Analysis

Lord Ismay, the first Secretary General of NATO, famously described the alliance’s purpose as “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”. This often-cited quote reflected the initial geopolitical context and concerns surrounding the formation of NATO in 1949. With a slight modification in relation to Germany—which is now required to be up rather than down—the same quote could be used to

highlight where NATO stands after The Hague summit. However, all three strands reflect a direction of travel that appears misplaced and likely to lead to increased insecurity and instability in the long term.

### "Keep the Russians out"

In 1949, this referred to the perceived threat of Soviet expansionism during the Cold War and the need to contain Soviet influence in Europe. Today, it refers to the perceived threat from Russia and the potential for spillover from the Russia-Ukraine war.

The perception among political leaders in most NATO countries—particularly those near the Russian border—is that Moscow could pose a direct threat to their countries in the near future. Rutte and [others](#) have repeatedly said Russia could use military force against the alliance within four years. The previous [2024 summit declaration](#) referenced Moscow's "brutal war of aggression" several times.

At this summit, however, the declaration mentions the "long-term threat posed by Russia to Euro-Atlantic security" and reaffirms the need to provide enduring support to Ukraine, but there is no specific condemnation of Russia. This was purely to satisfy President Trump, and his two European supporters, Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary and Prime Minister Robert Fico of Slovakia. These three leaders want to reopen economic and diplomatic relations with Moscow and essentially judge that good relations with Russia are vital for European security, that the war in Ukraine contributes to NATO vulnerability, and that NATO should spend to defend itself, and not to fight Russia in Ukraine. They also regard NATO expansion as a contributing factor in the Russian invasion of Ukraine (a heretical view within NATO, but one that is [shared](#) by some former senior US government and military officials, and other experts, spanning several decades).

They have a point. Root causes of the war (and wider European insecurity) remain contested. Western states consider the eastward expansion of NATO an internal affair which does not threaten Russia, whilst the Russians consider it the very origin of the conflict. Western states/mainstream opinion consider that the crisis was caused by Russian expansionism and a desire to recreate the

Soviet Union, whilst the Russians consider that they have been responding to the aggressive enlargement of the western bloc.

The past eleven years have seen a complete absence of diplomatic effort in the space where those interests collided. Aside from [Trump's blunderbuss diplomacy](#), there has also been no diplomatic track aimed at ending a long, grinding war which has constantly risked escalation to a direct NATO-Russia conflict. Nonetheless, the threat Europe faces is unlikely to be a full-scale attack by Russia on a NATO member. Despite the rhetoric, Russia hardly has the capability for such a scenario. Even with decreasing US support, Ukraine has largely managed to [hold its ground](#) over the past year.

According to a [comparison of the military capabilities of NATO and Russia as of 2025](#), NATO already maintains a considerable advantage over Russia. The combined forces of NATO had approximately 3.44 million active military personnel, compared with 1.32 million active military personnel in the Russian military. The collective military capabilities of the 32 countries that make up NATO outnumber Russia in terms of aircraft, at 22,377 to 4,957, and in naval power, with 1,143 military ships, to 419. In terms of ground combat vehicles, NATO had an estimated 11,495 main battle tanks, to Russia's 5,750. The combined nuclear arsenal of the United States, United Kingdom, and France amounted to 5,559 nuclear warheads, compared with Russia's 5,580.

If, as [NATO's Secretary General claims](#), Russia will be ready to attack NATO by the end of the decade, that scenario would appear to be via a heightened form of its existing hybrid activities (sabotage, espionage, cyberattacks, electoral manipulation, disinformation campaigns etc). These are largely a consequence of the proxy war with the West over Ukraine and could be expected to decline following resolution of the war in Ukraine and a new policy of engagement with Moscow.

Ultimately, the aim of 'keeping Russia out' is misplaced and a recipe for perpetual conflict. There can be no common security in Europe while Russia is out in the cold. President Trump is right to focus on ending the war in Ukraine and improving relations with Russia. Europe needs to do this too. Negotiations must address the process through which fighting will come to an end, as well

as the difficult but necessary task of building a new security architecture that includes mechanisms not just to deter Russia, but also to engage it in ways that do not lead to security dilemmas in other parts of Europe. Whether there is scope for reconciliation while President Putin is in power in Russia remains an open question, but one that needs to be explored.

It might seem idealistic to consider a future where Russia is integrated into a European security order, but the 'common security' promoted by the peace and democracy movements in the 1970s and 1980s was similarly dismissed as utopian until it took root in a Russian elite and heralded the end of the Cold War.

### "Keep the Americans in"

In 1949, this emphasized the importance of maintaining a strong US military presence in Europe to deter potential aggression and provide a security guarantee. This remains an important aim of European NATO member states and as noted above the NATO Secretary General designed this summit around Trump. He sought to flatter him by agreeing massive increases in military spending, to show that Europeans would now take more responsibility for their own security. Nothing else mattered.

Rutte also hoped that by keeping the summit focused on coinage, he would avoid any potential clashes between Trump and the other leaders. Nobody could have guessed however, the extent of [the self-abasement and hypocrisy](#) that occurred. The US president, while on route to the summit, published a screenshot of a private message from Rutte saying: "Donald, you have driven us to a really, really important moment for America and Europe and the world. You will achieve something NO American president in decades could get done." "Europe is going to pay in a BIG way, as they should, and it will be your win," Rutte wrote. NATO officials confirmed that the message, which Mr. Trump posted on social media, was authentic.

In the [joint appearance](#) with Trump on the second day of the summit, Rutte reacted to Trump describing the war between Israel and Iran as "like two kids in a schoolyard" who had had a big fight". "And then daddy has to sometimes use strong language to get them to stop", he added. The

NATO Secretary General defended his tone towards Trump and denied it was demeaning, but [acknowledged](#) later it was "a bit of a question of taste". Rutte said that Trump was "a good friend" and added: "Would you ever think that this would be the result of this summit if he would not have been re-elected president?".

Flanked by a grinning Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, Trump seemed amused by the whole thing: "I think he likes me, if he doesn't... I'll come back and hit him hard. He did it very affectionately: 'Daddy you're my daddy,'" he laughed.

Rutte may have been seeking to replicate the undiluted devotion Trump receives from worshippers at a MAGA rally in the hope that it would keep him onside. And on a superficial level the flattery worked, since Trump was pleased with the outcome. "This was a tremendous summit, and I enjoyed it very much," he [said](#). He added that he understood the central role the United States plays in the defence of Europe. "They want to protect their country, and they need the United States and without the United States, it's not going to be the same," he said. The White House statement on the summit ([President Trump's Leadership, Vision Drives NATO Breakthrough](#)) was also predictably upbeat and consisted of a long list of supportive quotes from domestic and international sources.

Importantly, the summit communique included a restatement of the commitment to collective defence in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. But ahead of the summit, Trump had again [raised doubts](#) over whether the United States would defend its allies, suggesting there were "numerous definitions" of the mutual security guarantee. It was a reminder of [comments he made](#) in 2024, when he suggested if a country did not pay its way "I would not protect you, in fact I would encourage [Moscow] to do whatever they want".

How sincere is Trump's commitment to Article 5 and how long will it last? At his final [press conference](#), Mark Rutte expressed frustration over continued questions on this topic. He urged journalists and politicians "to stop worrying", adding: "The United States is totally committed to Article 5. How many times do we want them to say this?".



But when the dominant power in your alliance is itself the origin of so much instability, the question will continue to be asked. It is also wrong and self-defeating to assume that European leaders have no alternative to capitulation in the face of US demands.

The aim of “keeping the Americans in” at all costs is a misplaced and dangerous strategy that is kicking the can down the road to the day when European leaders will have to take responsibility for their own security. Europe was always dangerously overexposed to decisions made in Washington. Since at least 2000 the United States has, in sentiment, run against transatlanticism and with the focus on China, that will continue whoever is in the White House.

The transatlantic security community, or ‘the West’ more broadly, increasingly appears to be bound by few shared interests and even fewer shared values. The current chaotic moment is an opportunity to chart a new rules-based path either without the United States or within a recalibrated security relationship. That Trump has even spoken of the use of military force, extending to the sequestration of territory, against some US allies means that, at the most basic level, the US can no longer be trusted as a security, intelligence or trading partner.

NATO as the main basis of European defence and security, is also an approach which now looks increasingly precarious. Trump’s second term, combined with the growing influence of nationalist parties in Europe, could lead to a different kind of transatlanticism: a new [transatlantic alliance of revisionists](#) (states that seek to alter or dismantle the existing international order, including its rules, norms, and institutions).

Europe needs to reduce its reliance on US security guarantees and reorient itself in a rapidly changing world. Separation between the US and Europe is unlikely to be quick, easy or anxiety-free, but a start could be made in standing up to Trump, buying fewer not more American-made weapons and closing or restricting the use of the more than 30 military bases the United States has across Europe.

## **"Raise the Germans up"**

In 1949 the aim was “to keep the Germans down”, as a reflection of the historical context of World War II and the desire to prevent the resurgence of German militarism and aggression. These concerns continued up until and during the reunification discussions in the 1990s. Today, however, there is a strong push for European rearmament generally, and German rearmament in particular, to counter the perceived threat from Russia and the potential departure of US forces from Europe.

Germany plans to increase core defence spending to 3.5% by 2029, which would increase its total military expenditure from €95 billion in 2025 (already the highest in Europe except for Russia at [€138](#) billion) to €162 billion in 2029. This rearmament coincides with a [historic shift](#) in Germany’s political landscape, with the far-right Alternative for Germany becoming the second largest party in the Bundestag, winning 20.8 percent of the vote in the February 2025 federal elections. Rearmament and far-right ascendance in Germany each carry significant risks, and their interaction amplifies uncertainties and poses substantial threats to both domestic stability and international relations.

For example, a more militarized Germany risks provoking Russia into further arms buildup in its western regions, worsening the arms race in Central and Eastern Europe and with other powers. Far-right influence on German defence policy could lead to reckless stances (such as aggressive posturing toward Russia) or the misuse of military resources for populist promises (like prioritizing homeland defence). Additionally, far-right infiltration of the military ([exposed](#) recently with neo-Nazi networks in the Bundeswehr) may threaten the military’s loyalty and turn defence into a tool of ideological extremism.

Moreover, there is a danger that Germany will be seen as both ‘abandoning its peace legacy’ (due to rearmament) and ‘backsliding on democracy’ (due to far-right gains). This could damage its soft power as a stable EU leader and a champion of international rules, straining trust with allies and partners worldwide. Indeed, the combination of increased military power and far-right politics could lead to perceptions of Germany as a potential threat.

It is crucial for Germany to navigate these challenges carefully to maintain its role as a stabilizing force in Europe and the world.

## Conclusions

The Hague summit achieved what it set out to do: a narrow win for Trump to get Europeans to substantially increase military spending. Elsewhere, however, the war grinds on in Ukraine and in multiple other armed conflicts around the world. It is also unclear how long the carefully choreographed agreement in The Hague, will last. Trump's impulsive handling of Iran, in which military action was repudiated in favour of diplomacy one day, before war was launched the next, followed by the proclamation of peace the day after, suggests that the White House may not remain enamoured of its European allies for long.

In an era of radical uncertainty, one thing is certain: Trump will continue to march to his own drum. This means that the European NATO nations and Canada have to create a viable system of collective defence against hostile threats that is not dependent on the impulses of the incumbent in the White House.

The almost universal response from European political leaders and think tanks to the diminished US security guarantees and Russian threat has been to delve even deeper into the military toolbox. This culminated in the Hague Defence Investment Plan and other plans for rebuilding a European defence-industrial base, more effective industrial and procurement coordination, the rapid acquisition of various capabilities for which Europe is currently dependent on Washington and new forms of extended nuclear deterrence. In short, it is argued that European governments need to increase and enhance their militaries to be able to sustain a high-intensity conventional armed conflict against Russia.

However, current European fears of a Russian invasion largely reflect worst-case thinking rather than an objective assessment of the regional military balance and the intentions of Russia's leadership. The threat stems far less from Moscow and more from nationalist-populists who already hold veto power over Europe's security and defence policies through their increasingly prominent roles in government.

Europe's existing conventional military strength and societal resilience provides it with a strong defence and deterrent capability, including to those countries most at risk in Eastern Europe. Europe's latent power dwarfs Russia's. The EU has nine times Russia's GDP and three times its population, and already significantly outspends Russia on defence.

Europe is relatively strong today because it has kept arms at bay and democratic politics and international law are its first lines of defence. Rather than rush to rearm, Europe needs to adopt a policy of military restraint. Spain should be commended for having the bravery to stand up to Trump and be honest and realistic about what is achievable. Sanchez also put a sound argument forward for NATO to measure outputs and outcomes, rather than a crude financial input metric. NATO Watch has consistently [argued](#) for new and broader metrics to measure burden sharing in NATO.

A European policy of military restraint might be centred on a combination of conventional non-offensive defence, peacekeeping forces, strengthened societal resilience and reduced reliance on nuclear deterrence. It also means strengthening regional and global arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation norms and rules and avoiding addressing vulnerabilities by simply adding more spending, more equipment and more technology into the military pot. In other words, doing enough to deter attack, without contributing to interstate tensions, crisis instability or arms racing.

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