

2018 NATO summit

A critical time for European defence

SUMMARY




On 11 and 12 July 2018 the NATO Heads of State and Government will meet in Brussels for the 28th NATO summit. The summit comes at a time of tension in transatlantic relations, but also of continuing threats and challenges posed to the alliance. Against this background, leaders will focus on strengthening defence and deterrence, modernising the alliance and enhancing relations with the EU. Burden-sharing among allies is set to be one of the most controversial items on the agenda. In 2018 only eight out of twenty nine NATO members are estimated to be reaching the 2 % of gross domestic product (GDP) defence spending target.

The Brussels summit aims to push forward the agenda, decisions and actions agreed upon at previous summits, notably in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016). Yet there are fears that the insistence of US President Donald Trump that the focus be placed on burden sharing and demands that the NATO allies spend more on defence, might lead to the side-lining of other items on the agenda. The situation is aggravated by the current climate in transatlantic relations, which has deteriorated since the most recent G7 summit in Canada.

The summit in Brussels will also seek to secure progress on EU-NATO cooperation, aiming to produce a second joint statement, following that agreed upon in Warsaw in 2016. After two years of increased EU action to build up strategic autonomy in defence through initiatives such as PESCO and the European Defence Fund, cooperation with NATO is critical when it comes to taking European defence forward.



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Introduction

The 2018 NATO summit will take place in Brussels on 11 and 12 July 2018. The Heads of State and Government of the 29 members of the alliance are [likely](#) to reach a consensus on practical proposals on enhancing deterrence and responding to the ongoing political, security and economic challenges emanating from the east and south. Discussions on the future of the alliance, for instance on burden sharing and potential enlargement, will almost certainly prove more contentious.

Figure 1 – Defence expenditure estimates for 2017 (% GDP)



*Defence expenditure does not include pensions

Data source: [NATO](#).

Founded in 1949, NATO 'remains committed to fulfilling its three core tasks: collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security'. These are reflected in the [six themes](#) around which the Brussels summit has been organised, namely (1) strengthening deterrence and defence; (2) projecting stability and fighting terrorism; (3) enhancing the NATO- EU partnership; (4) modernising the alliance; (5) achieving fairer burden-sharing; and (6) shared values and transatlantic unity.

Following a meeting of NATO's defence ministers in June, there is a fair expectation that some key [deliverables](#) will emerge from the summit. These include launching a new NATO readiness initiative, referred to as the 'Four Thirties' (capacity for 30 mechanised battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels to be ready within 30 days or less to counter possible aggression by 2020), and increasing the NATO command structure by 1 200 personnel and [two new commands](#) (for the Atlantic in Norfolk, Virginia, and for military mobility in Ulm, Germany). Significant progress is also expected on [NATO-EU relations](#), in the form of a new joint declaration between NATO's secretary general and the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission. [Military mobility](#), a flagship area of EU-NATO cooperation, is meanwhile likely to figure prominently.

Progress in these areas will inevitably depend on achieving a climate of unity among allies from the two sides of the Atlantic. Diverging positions between the EU and the US on issues such as the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and potentially Russia, as well as issues beyond security, such as trade and tariffs, have raised concerns in this regard. Moreover, the expected tension over the item of burden-sharing among NATO members, particularly following the issuing of letters from President Trump to several NATO member leaders, urging them to spend more on defence, has done little to improve the climate. In 2018, just eight out of twenty-nine NATO members are estimated to be reaching the 2 % of GDP defence spending target [agreed](#) upon in 2014 as a pledge with a view to 2024.

Background

Since the first NATO summit in Paris in 1957, 27 [summits](#) have taken place at key junctures in the history of the alliance. Decisions taken at summits are issued in the form of declarations and communiqués and then translated into action by the relevant actors, namely the North Atlantic Council's subordinate committees and NATO's command structure, which cover the whole range of functions and activities of the alliance. NATO summits are normally attended only by member countries, but occasionally convene in different formats, including, for example, meetings of defence or foreign ministers, Heads of State or Government of countries belonging to the Euro-

Atlantic Partnership Council, the NATO-Russia Council, the NATO-Ukraine Commission or the NATO-Georgia Commission. They can also include leaders from countries contributing troops to a NATO-led operation or high-level representatives from international organisations such as the UN.

Deteriorating security, globally and on Europe's periphery, led to two landmark summits being held in 2014 and 2016. The 2014 NATO [Wales summit](#) was marked by the Ukraine crisis, growing instability in the southern neighbourhood and rising transnational threats, for instance from ISIL/Da'esh. Allied leaders had been expected to focus on NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, but Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine shifted their focus. NATO leaders returned to the fundamental debate over NATO's strategic approach to Russia, its deterrence and defence posture, and its core purpose: [collective defence](#) as enshrined in [Article 5](#) of the Washington Treaty.

Many of the same issues were on the [Warsaw](#) agenda in 2016 but additional challenges to Euro-Atlantic security included rising terrorism and unprecedented migrant and refugee flows. A major outcome of the summit was the agreement to intensify NATO's deterrence posture by [increasing](#) the alliance's military presence in the east. First steps included deploying multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. In the Middle East, allies pledged to make further capacity-building efforts in Iraq, to support the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL by deploying surveillance aircraft to gather intelligence, and to maintain Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan beyond 2016. A decision was also made to expand NATO's presence in the Mediterranean Sea, especially in cooperation with [EUNAVFOR MED](#) (Operation Sophia). An important outcome of the summit was the EU-NATO [joint declaration](#) which outlined areas for enhanced cooperation, including countering hybrid threats, stepping up operational cooperation at sea and on migration, coordinating cyber-security and defence, developing the interoperable defence capabilities of EU Member States and alliance members, strengthening the defence industry, increasing coordination on exercises and building up the defence and security capacity of partners in the east and south. The range of decisions made at the Warsaw summit reflected the division of [interests](#) and priorities within the alliance. At the 2016 summit leaders adopted the 'Enhanced Forward Presence' (EFP) in Poland and the Baltic States and the 'Tailored Forward Presence' (TFP) in the Black Sea region.

Issues to watch and stakeholder views

Within the context of the summit's official agenda, experts analysing and forecasting the outcomes of the leaders' encounter have been focusing on the following specific themes:

Transatlantic relations and burden sharing

This will be President Trump's first official NATO summit. The summits are traditionally an opportunity for allies to show a common front against security challenges, but the aforementioned tension in [transatlantic ties](#) risks jeopardising this. Experts are [concerned](#) that distrust generated in the area of trade will seep into discussions and weaken consensus on the way ahead for NATO. They argue that the summit should move past the issue of burden sharing. Yet, as [others](#) point out, this age-old debate is expected to 'reach a moment of reckoning this year' leading to what is referred to as 'strategic adjustment on a grand scale' whereby the European allies will move towards investing more in defence capabilities. Further concern has been raised by the American president's decision to meet Russian president Vladimir Putin in Helsinki shortly after the summit, on 16 July.

For [some](#), much will depend on how President Trump decides to approach the summit, both publicly and privately, and on whether he will confirm the US unconditional commitment to NATO's collective defence clause, regardless of the issue of defence budgets and [burden sharing](#). In spite of his rhetoric, the Trump administration has so far supported the defence of Europe's eastern flank through the [European Deterrence Initiative](#) which adds more than US\$15 billion to NATO's hard power. The US is also expected to outline its role for the new Atlantic command.

EU-NATO relations

With growing threats in Europe's periphery, the summit will inevitably focus on boosting security in Europe, including through countering Russian aggression and tackling challenges related to the ongoing crises in the Middle East and North Africa. EU Member States are [expected](#) to reiterate the benefits for NATO of closer EU cooperation in the field of defence, such as [PESCO](#), the [European Defence Industrial Development Programme](#) (EDIDP) and the [European Defence Fund](#), and to downplay any concerns held by non-EU NATO members. In this respect, the expected EU-NATO joint statement will further solidify complementarity between the EU initiatives and NATO.

Regional focal points

Russia's [growing presence](#) in the Black Sea has led several think tanks to [argue](#) that the summit will be used to focus on NATO's operations in the region, as well as on the role of the partnerships with [Georgia](#) and [Ukraine](#). NATO's [Mediterranean partnerships](#) should also come into the spotlight, as they are important in building defence capacity, as should the potential NATO training mission in Iraq. A 'hub' for the south was recently established at Joint Force Command in Naples. NATO leaders are also [likely](#) to open accession negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Russia represents the most pressing and, according to the [Heritage Foundation](#), 'existential' threat to NATO members; the effort to build up deterrence measures is explicitly in response to Russia. For the American conservative think tank, a united and robust response to Russia should be the major outcome of the summit. In the same vein, [Chatham House](#) experts argue that tensions among allies should not get in the way of dealing with Russia, and offer several recommendations in this vein, including a focus on the Arctic and the Black Sea; making progress in the areas of military mobility and situational awareness; and [updating](#) the 2011 NATO maritime strategy. Concrete actions aside, however, according to experts from the [German Marshall Fund](#), 'it is not the military deliverables from the Brussels summit that will be key for deterring Russia; what is paramount is unity among the allies, and especially transatlantic unity'.

MAIN REFERENCES

[Anxious anticipation ahead of NATO Brussels summit](#), German Marshall Fund, July 2018.

[Counting dollars or measuring value. Assessing NATO and partner burden sharing](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2018.

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