

NATO after The Hague: A Single-issue, Sustainable and More European Alliance

by Alessandro Marrone

The latest NATO summit in The Hague, the first with Donald Trump again in the White House, can be considered a relative success for the Alliance, especially for Europe, if measured against the fundamental objective of maintaining peace in the Euro-Atlantic area. The allies indeed agreed on an extremely narrow agenda of priorities on which consensus could be achieved, and a new expenditure target to achieve three inter-related goals: deter and contain the Russian threat; keep the US committed to the collective defence of Europe; and be largely compatible with the budget constraints of member states over the next ten years – including Italy and other countries in Western Europe.

The expenditure target is twofold. First, it includes a commitment to invest 3.5 per cent of GDP in defence in a narrow sense, namely the national armed forces and their equipment. Second, another 1.5 per cent of GDP to be “accounted”¹ in a new, broad

and vaguely defined basket related to defence and security. Actually this second basket mostly refers to funds already invested by the vast majority of European countries in critical infrastructures and civil resilience. The distinction between these two categories is very important for allies. For example, for Italy this means that the current integrated defence budget, as defined in the latest available Multi-Year Defence Programming Document of 2024, will have to grow in ten years up to 3.5 per cent of GDP rather than to 5 per cent.

In an international security environment marked by more than three years of Russian invasion of Ukraine,² the 5 per cent target will contribute to maintaining two overarching, interrelated goals that NATO achieved since its establishment in 1949: “peace in the West” and “peace of the West”.

¹ NATO, *The Hague Summit Declaration*, 25 June 2025, point 3, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

² Alessandro Marrone (ed.), *Russia-Ukraine War's Strategic Implications*, Rome, IAI, February 2024, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18118>.

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If peace in the West is worth a charm offensive towards Trump...

Historically, the NATO goal of “peace in the West” consisted in bounding together countries that otherwise had and could have made war on each other: not only those who fought on opposite sides in the two World Wars, but also Greece and Turkey (whose relations are still tense), or the member states that emerged from the bloody civil wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Peace in the West works if the United States maintains a modest but real military presence, both nuclear and conventional, in Europe, which prevents the vicious circle of sovereigntist re-nationalisation of the defence policies of single allies, of fragmentation into bilateral, trilateral or regional agreements, of mutual mistrust at the strategic level, and even of reopening the debate on a national military nuclear force for certain European countries. Europe already tragically experienced all this – except the use of nuclear weapons – for centuries until World War II. If it helps at least for now to prevent this from happening again, an excessively flattering message by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte to US president Trump – which was strongly criticised by many observers³ – all in all may be an acceptable price to pay as part of a diplomatic charm offensive to let the summit succeed.⁴

³ See for example Susan B. Glasser, “A Week for the Ages in the Annals of Trump Suck-Uppery”, in *The New Yorker*, 26 June 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-trumps-washington/a-week-for-the-ages-in-the-annals-of-trump-suckupery>.

⁴ Joseph Ataman and Clare Sebastian, “Inside

...detering a Russian attack to the NATO eastern flank is worth 3.5 per cent of GDP

The second traditional NATO overarching goal is “peace of the West”, that is, collective deterrence and defence against Russia. This was obviously dominant for NATO’s military posture during the Cold War. Then, from 1991 to 2014, it was somehow performed by default by the very same existence of the Alliance, as a form of “insurance policy” against a possible return of Russia’s aggressiveness towards its Western neighbourhood. In this period, NATO activities focused on crisis management operations and partnerships, from the Western Balkans to North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. The Alliance came back to the basics of collective deterrence and defence after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and even more so since 2022, becoming again the core business and absolute priority for NATO.

After more than three years of aggression war against a neighbouring European state, the Russian regime looks still solid, despite over half a million dead or wounded soldiers. The Kremlin will spend about 6.3 per cent GDP on defence in 2025⁵ and plans to reach 1.5 million soldiers in service,

the NATO Charm Offensive that Shocked as Much as It Delivered”, in *CNN*, 26 June 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/25/europe/rutte-daddy-trump-nato-ukraine-intl-latam>.

⁵ Gleb Bryanski and Vladimir Soldatkin, “Putin Says Russia Plans to Cut Military Spending from Next Year”, in *Reuters*, 27 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-plans-cut-military-spending-next-year-2025-06-27>.

while it continues to bombard Ukraine⁶ instead of seriously negotiating with the Ukrainian leadership.⁷ This is a direct, serious and lasting threat to Europe.

Against this backdrop, Trump signed the NATO summit communiqué that recognises “the long-term threat posed by Russia to Euro-Atlantic security”.⁸ The same document reaffirms the “ironclad” commitment to collective deterrence and defence established by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, without any interpretation or uncertainty.

Such a commitment is based on an appropriate level of military spending by all allies, the Trump administration’s top priority. During the Cold War, the European countries that were then members of NATO spent about 3 per cent of GDP on defence, a percentage that halved on average across Europe in the 1990s and 2000s since the threat of the Warsaw Pact had disappeared. The goal of 2 per cent of GDP spent on defence that had been set in 2014 following the Russian invasion of Crimea has already been achieved on average by Europe to date. The new 3.5 per cent target by 2035 serves both

NATO traditional goals of “peace of the West” and “peace in the West”: that is, respectively, to deter a Russian attack against allies, and in the worst-case scenario to repel it; and to maintain a certain US military presence in Europe.

Such an expenditure level agreed by European allies is enormously lower than the damage that a large-scale war like the one in Ukraine would cause to them – a scenario that cannot be ruled out a priori if deterrence were to fail. And this planned spending is much lower than what Europe would have to invest to defend itself completely on its own if the United States were to withdraw from NATO. Sure, part of the approximately 100,000 American troops currently stationed in Europe, as well as a portion of the US military assets and strategic enablers, can and must be replaced by European capabilities thanks to the increased level of spending, thus maintaining collective defence. But it would be much more difficult and expensive to replace them altogether – let alone developing a nuclear force capable of deterring the nuclear threat frequently voiced by Moscow.

Ukraine out of NATO but helped by NATO countries

To defend the “peace of the West” from the Russian threat, the summit in The Hague has clarified which Alliance’s borders are under collective defence, clearly excluding Ukraine. The prospect of NATO membership, requested by Kyiv after the start of the Russian invasion in 2022, was de facto abandoned already at the 2023 Vilnius summit, when the Biden administration refused to set

⁶ Constant Méheut, “Russian Barrage of Drones and Missiles Hits beyond Usual Ukraine Targets”, in *The New York Times*, 29 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/29/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war.html>.

⁷ “Putin Will not Join Russian Delegation at Ukraine Peace Talks in Turkey”, in *France 24*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20250514-putin-absent-from-russia-s-delegation-for-ukraine-peace-talks-in-turkey>.

⁸ NATO, *The Hague Summit Declaration*, cit., point 2.

the timing for enlargement, which was postponed sine die. The democratic administration and NATO as a whole, however, maintained a narrative, increasingly detached from reality, about a future path for Kyiv towards membership, which was defined by the subsequent Washington summit in 2024 as “irreversible”.⁹

The Trump administration immediately clarified in February 2025 that Ukraine will not join NATO,¹⁰ and in The Hague summit’s communiqué there is no mention of any possibility for Ukraine to be part of the Alliance. It is no coincidence that Volodymyr Zelenskyy was a guest at the official dinner as the representative of a partner country, but did not participate in the working session reserved to the heads of state and governments of the allies.

Nonetheless, the 2025 communiqué also states that the cost of military aid donated by NATO countries to Ukraine will count towards the 3.5 per cent target which is an incentive for allies to continue to concretely support Kyiv. This is a pragmatic choice, based on the assumption that inviting Ukraine to NATO is not a feasible option to help it defend itself from Russia, and other ways must be pursued.

⁹ NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, point 16, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.

¹⁰ Natasha Bertrand, Clare Sebastian and Haley Britzky, “Hegseth Rules out NATO Membership for Ukraine and Says Europe Must Be Responsible for Country’s Security”, in *CNN*, 12 February 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/12/politics/hegseth-ukraine-rules-out-nato-membership/index.html>.

A regional and single-issue NATO, sustainable and (more) European

The NATO shaped at The Hague summit, which is likely to continue along the same lines at least under the Trump administration, presents four major features: regional, single-issue, sustainable and (more) European. Regional, as it narrows the NATO focus down onto the allies’ territory, especially its eastern flank, from Scandinavia to the Black Sea through Central and Eastern Europe. The 2025 communiqué says nothing instead about the NATO southern flank, North Africa or the Middle East, or even the Indo-Pacific. But while the latter is somehow still on the Alliance’s radar, with the Australian defence minister being present in The Hague, the states of what Italy calls “enlarged Mediterranean”¹¹ that are not members of the Alliance are completely outside the NATO agenda agreed at the summit.

Under the Trump administration, NATO is and is likely to remain substantially single-issue. Indeed, the one-page summit communiqué with only five points, compared to an average of dozens of pages and hundreds of points in previous summits, erased several key-words that accompanied NATO in recent years, such as: partnership; cooperation with the EU; climate change; hybrid threats; organised crime; illicit trafficking; China. A key takeaway from The Hague is that NATO no longer seriously deals with all of this.

¹¹ See in this regard, among others, Leo Goretti and Filippo Simonelli, “Italy’s Foreign Policy in the ‘Super-election Year’ 2024”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 25|01 (February 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19501>.

Of course, the communiqué recalls the three core tasks of the 2022 Strategic Concept, where cooperative security and crisis prevention and management were secondary and instrumental to the primary objective of collective deterrence and defence¹² – and remain as such. NATO will continue to carry out important operations for European security, such as the one that maintains peace between the Serbian and Albanian ethnic groups in Kosovo, Sea Guardian patrolling the Mediterranean and the NATO training mission in Iraq. As for cooperative security, win-win cooperation with the EU still matters for NATO, but under the current US administration it is unlikely to be on top of Trump's agenda.

Concerning cooperative security, partnerships with non-NATO countries will continue to exist, but with very strong differences between them. Partnering with Ukraine is the top priority for Europe; relations with the Western Balkans also play an important role for regional stability; the Indo-Pacific partners are relevant interlocutors in political, military and economic terms – especially Australia, South Korea and Japan.¹³ At the other extreme, partnerships with countries in North Africa and the Middle East, including the Mediterranean Dialogue

and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, will remain in the status of stalemate and abandonment in which they have been since 2022.

The choice of a regional and monothematic NATO essentially serves to limit the confrontation with Washington to the issues on which an agreement can be found, leaving out what is both divisive and non-essential for the Alliance and its strategic functions of preserving "peace of the West" and "peace in the West". After all, what sense would there be in discussing a NATO strategy for the Middle East when at the same time Trump changes his mind every month, Ankara considers Tel Aviv a threat, and EU countries struggle whether or not to review the association agreement with Israel?

A regional and single-issue Alliance, in which European countries move towards 3.5 per cent of GDP in defence and gradually replace some of the US forces – but not all – in Europe is much more sustainable in the short, medium and long term: not only in the four years of the Trump administration, but also in a future that will see the US limit its military support to Europe to the bare minimum, giving priority to the challenge posed by China, the Indo-Pacific and legitimate domestic isolationist demands.

A more sustainable NATO is in fact a more European NATO than it has ever been, in terms of investment, human resources, assets and commands, burden and risks. Already post-2022, only one out of the eight multinational battalions deployed on the eastern

¹² Alessandro Marrone, "NATO's New Strategic Concept: Novelties and Priorities", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|30 (July 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15667>.

¹³ On cooperation between Japan and NATO allies concerning military capabilities see, among others, Alessandro Marrone (ed.), "The New Partnership among Italy, Japan and the UK on the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 25|03 (March 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19737>.



flank is US-led, in Poland. And in the new NATO force posture, the bulk of the 200,000 troops that the allies are committed to deploy within thirty days to the eastern flank in the event of an escalation by Russia are not American.

A more European NATO is the leitmotiv from Finland to Germany, and it is essentially what Italy has wisely been supporting for years, including the Giorgia Meloni government, by developing the concept of a stronger, more solid and cohesive "European pillar" of NATO. On the basis laid down in The Hague, a further step forward is needed to aim for a "Europe-led NATO"¹⁴ as a more sustainable solution for the deterrence and defence of Europe vis-à-vis the Russian threat. In practice, European Allies should: staff NATO commands with European personnel at all levels; acquire at least some of the strategic enablers necessary to sustain collective deterrence and defence; establish stable politico-military coordination among them within NATO structures; have a greater say in terms of strategy, doctrine and plans. In other words, on the basis of higher national expenditure and larger military capabilities deployed within the NATO framework, Europe should make the allied deterrence and defence work in a credible and effective manner with less US presence and leadership than in NATO entire history.

In conclusion, The Hague can indeed be regarded as a relative success which could not be taken for granted

in previous months. The so-called "Pax Americana" is in crisis at a global level, but a renewed "Euro-Atlantic Pax" can and must gradually emerge in the Euro-Atlantic region. It is a difficult path given Trump's unpredictability, but at least the summit's political agreement on NATO's priorities and allies' spending is a right step in that direction.

4 July 2025

¹⁴ Alessandro Marrone, "A Europe-led NATO to Guarantee European Security: The Time Has Come", in *Aspenia Online*, 16 June 2024, <https://aspensiaonline.it/?p=54692>.

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