

Toms Rostoks

NATO summit in The Hague: the Baltic perspective

Summary

- The NATO summit in The Hague was expected to be uneventful, and it was. The allies secured US President Donald J. Trump's commitment to Article 5, and the United States, in turn, extracted a commitment from European members to ramp up defence spending. This is a significant step forward in strengthening Baltic security. A stronger alliance will be better prepared to deter Russia.
- The concern that President Trump would attend the summit and cause havoc by undermining NATO unity and the US commitment to the Alliance did not materialise. Trump's rhetoric on NATO was surprisingly positive.
- The commitment to spend 5 per cent of GDP on defence is a milestone in NATO's efforts to rebuild member states' militaries. Defence spending is set to grow to 3.5 per cent of GDP by 2035, and additional 1.5 per cent will contribute to various defence- and security-related efforts.
- The summit represented a kind of »victory lap« for Trump, as his efforts to cajole allies to spend much more on defence finally succeeded. The European allies went out of their way to make the summit a win for the US president.
- But while defence spending overall will increase over the coming years, there will be considerable variation across NATO in terms of how much allies will actually commit to on defence. Allies who do not meet NATO's Wales summit spending target of 2 per cent of GDP are unlikely to meet the much higher 3.5 per cent spending target.
- The summit was notable for the lack of progress on NATO's Russia strategy and Ukraine-related commitments. These issues were put on hold because of US efforts to pursue diplomacy with Russia. These efforts are yet to yield any substantive results, however.
- The Baltic states have much work to do behind the scenes to ensure that the decisions taken in The Hague are implemented, while also taking an active part in preparing the agenda of the next NATO summit in Ankara.

→ The success or failure of NATO's deterrence and defence posture towards Russia will be determined by the military capabilities and policies of the European part of the Alliance. While the United States may contribute positively to these efforts, especially in the short term, it will be up to NATO's European pillar to deter Russia.

Pre-summit expectations

NATO's Hague summit resulted in a historic commitment by the allies to increase defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP. Expectations leading up to the summit, however, were cautious. The aim was to give Trump a win in the form of a defence spending commitment, keep the summit as brief as possible, reduce any potential for disagreement to a minimum, and allow Trump to get his way on everything.¹ It became clear well in advance that the NATO summit in The Hague would be devoted to increasing defence spending, a goal in line with the Baltic states' priorities. Had the allies not been ready to commit to higher defence spending, it was likely that Trump would not even show up.

Despite the concessions made to President Trump, there was a risk that the summit would descend into mutual recriminations between Trump and European leaders. President Trump had repeatedly criticised European allies for not spending enough on defence and even called into question the US commitment to Article 5. Transatlantic disagreements resurfaced upon Trump's return to the White House in January 2025, with Trump imposing tariffs against the EU and Vice-president JD Vance criticising European states – Germany in particular – for allegedly restricting freedom of speech. NATO's Hague summit could have ended in bitter disagreements and sudden US disengagement from Europe. This would have been the worst-case scenario for the Baltic states, whose security depends on NATO's capabilities and cohesion. The hope, however, was that the summit would reaffirm the enduring character of the Transatlantic partnership, thus strengthening NATO deterrence against Russia and giving Europe the breathing space necessary for defence investments to materialise.

While the main concern before the summit was Trump's position on NATO, there were also concerns regarding the European allies' willingness to commit to much higher defence spending. Eventually, a compromise was achieved between the US demand that allies spend 5 per cent of GDP on defence (US defence spending in 2024 being 3.38 per cent²) and the Europeans' apparent inability to com-

mit to such high defence spending. The compromise was that allies would spend 3.5 per cent of GDP on core defence requirements and an additional 1.5 per cent on non-military aspects of security, such as resilience, cyber security, infrastructure, innovation and the defence industry. It is important to note that the Baltic states' defence spending already exceeds the commitments made in The Hague.

The timeline for increasing defence spending became a divisive issue, as some allies sought to extend the deadline for reaching the 5 per cent target as far into the future as possible. Eventually, the allies agreed to set 2035 as the target date, with a progress review scheduled for 2029. This is a setback for the Baltic states, as they advocated ramping up defence spending by 2032. Spain, on the other hand, was uncomfortable even with postponing until 2035. Their threat perception and fiscal constraints make it unlikely that they will meet the ambitious defence spending targets. This is an early indication of the difficulties the allies are to likely face.

There was little indication prior to the summit that significant progress would be made on developing a common strategy on Russia and supporting Ukraine. President Trump pursued diplomacy with Russia in the spring of 2025 with two aims: ending the war in Ukraine and normalising relations with Russia. The US has tried to take an even-handed approach to Russia and Ukraine and has offered concessions to the former to facilitate negotiations. Meaningful progress has been elusive in talks with Russia, but the US approach had not evolved by the time of NATO's Hague summit. Thus, adopting a more assertive posture towards Russia was not possible. Russia, however, was referred to in the summit declaration as a »long-term threat«.³

The immediate context of NATO's Hague summit was provided by the military confrontation between Israel and Iran and the US decision to use its unique military capabilities to target the latter's nuclear facilities in Natanz, Isfahan and Fordow. Although the extent to which the US attack succeeded in setting back Iran's nuclear programme is yet to be determined, President Trump claimed that the mission shortly before the Hague summit was a success and that the targeted nuclear sites had been »obliterated«.⁴ NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte tried to use the US bombing of nuclear sites in Iran as an opportunity to appeal to Trump, claiming that the US use of military force against Iran had been a success and that the NATO summit in The Hague would likewise be a success for the US

1 Ed Arnold (2025): All About Trump: the 2025 NATO Hague Summit, 26 June. London, RUSI; available at: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/all-about-trump-2025-nato-hague-summit>

2 NATO (2024): Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2024). Brussels, NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2024, p. 4; available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf

3 NATO (2025): The Hague Summit Declaration. Hague, 25 June; available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm

4 The White House (2025): Iran's Nuclear Facilities Have Been Obliterated – and Suggestions Otherwise Are Fake News. Washington, 25 June; available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/06/irans-nuclear-facilities-have-been-obliterated-and-suggestions-otherwise-are-fake-news/>

President.⁵ Thus, the stage was set for the Hague summit by lowering expectations, careful diplomacy in the preceding months, and the US use of military force against Iran (later forcing the cessation of hostilities between Israel and Iran).

Post-summit assessment

NATO's Hague summit went as planned, and in that sense it was a success. The summit prompted some difficult questions regarding Europe's security and defence dependency on the United States, however, as well as how that relationship will play out in the coming years. Also, the allies decided to postpone important decisions regarding Russia and Ukraine for later. The summit, however, was about safeguarding Europe's security interests. Faced with the prospect of US abandonment, the European allies did everything they could to secure a US commitment to Europe's security.

From the perspective of the Baltic states, the summit succeeded in two important ways. First, the United States managed to extract a commitment from its European allies to spend much more on defence. This is a subject that President Trump has raised constantly since 2017. This hike in defence spending should eventually make NATO's European pillar more powerful militarily.⁶ The Hague summit declaration makes it clear that the allies »will allocate at least 3.5 per cent of GDP annually based on the agreed definition of NATO defence expenditure by 2035 to resource core defence requirements«. ⁷ Thus, the Hague summit produced a »substantial and important deliverable – a new defence investment pledge«. ⁸ Regarding the 1.5 per cent of GDP pledge, however, there is as yet no agreed-upon way to determine whether money will be spent on defence-related objectives or not. Furthermore, broadening the definition of what counts as defence spending risks opening the flood gates to »creative accounting«. ⁹

Second, for the Baltic states, there is as yet no substitute for the US commitment to European security. In this respect, European allies secured a commitment from the US to Article 5 and President Trump had some positive things to say about his European allies. The first paragraph of the summit declaration clearly states that allies reconfirm their »ironclad commitment to collective defence as en-

shrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty – that an attack on one is an attack on all«. ¹⁰ The summit conveys the message that Trump has often disparaged the United States' European allies because of their lack of commitment to fair burden-sharing within NATO. With a renewed commitment to spend more on defence, the Transatlantic relationship has been repaired and European allies can count on US security assistance. A renewed US commitment to European security bolsters NATO deterrence vis-à-vis Russia and buys Europe time to rearm. In short, the Hague summit was mainly about rebalancing NATO burden-sharing. ¹¹

While NATO's Hague summit eased Europe's fears of abandonment, there are nevertheless still reasons for European NATO member states (including the Baltic states) to be concerned. First, the European allies are unlikely to live up to their commitment to spend up to 5 per cent of GDP on defence. While the summit declaration calls for the allies to submit annual plans that demonstrate incremental progress in attaining the 5 per cent objective, some (even most) are unlikely to live up to the defence investment pledge. Higher defence spending is needed to meet the capability targets identified in NATO's defence plans, but it is uncertain whether the allies will keep their part of the bargain. This would anger President Trump, who is particularly sensitive to what he sees as free riding. Also, for Europe's own sake, failure to deliver on the defence spending pledge would be detrimental for NATO's efforts to deter Russia in the Baltic region.

Second, President Trump's visit to The Hague for the NATO summit was carefully planned and prepared. It went as planned, but burden-sharing disagreements are only partially to blame for transatlantic tensions. These have been compounded by economic disagreements and Trump's efforts to address so-called trade imbalances by using tariffs. Furthermore, Trump's views on NATO may change once again. Shortly before the NATO summit in The Hague President Trump was musing about different interpretations of Article 5, ¹² and he has questioned the US commitment to the security of the NATO allies before. There is little reason to expect that his praise for NATO will last. In the end, even the European commitment to spend more on defence may not be enough to secure US engagement in Europe.

⁵ Will Weissert (2025): »Dear Donald.« Trump Posts Fawning Private Text from NATO Chief on Social Media. Associated Press, 24 June; available at: <https://apnews.com/article/trump-rutte-text-message-nato-signal-6263810ac3ca77a5bf7366499f51c772>

⁶ This is a subject that President Trump emphasised numerous times during the press conference in The Hague. Defense Now (2025): President Trump Takes Over the World Forum in The Hague, Netherlands. Hague, 25 June; available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYsPMJVj4gw>

⁷ NATO (2025): The Hague Summit Declaration, paragraph 3. 25 June; available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm

⁸ Tony Lawrence (2025): The Hague Summit: Mission Accomplished. Tallinn: ICDS; available at: <https://icds.ee/en/the-hague-summit-mission-accomplished/>

⁹ John R. Deni/Ryan Arick (2025): What Counts as »Defense« in NATO's Potential 5 Percent Spending Goal? Washington, Atlantic Council, 20 June; available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-counts-as-defense-in-natos-potential-5-percent-spending-goal/>

¹⁰ NATO (2025): The Hague Summit Declaration, paragraph 1. The Hague, 25 June; available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm

¹¹ Joshua C. Huminski (2025): Hague Summit Series: Trump and the Rebalancing of NATO. Tallinn: ICDS; available at: <https://icds.ee/en/hague-summit-series-trump-and-the-rebalancing-of-nato/>

¹² Chris Lunday/Jake Traylor/Laura Kayali (2025): Trump Casts Doubt on Article 5 Commitment en Route to NATO Summit. Brussels, Politico, 24 June; available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-nato-summit-sidesteps-article-5-mark-rutte-eu-defence-budget-russia-vladimir-putin-iran-israel-strikes-qatar/>

Third, it is too early to tell what Russia's takeaways from the NATO Hague summit will be. Although it is hard to gauge Russia's thinking about the credibility of NATO deterrence, conflicting interpretations of the Hague summit are possible. The NATO allies' pledge to increase defence spending is bad news for Moscow. Certain aspects of the summit, however, display NATO's weaknesses. Europe's reliance on the US for security and defence is a sign of a lack of confidence among the European allies that they can stand up to Russia on their own. Also, the pledge to spend 5 per cent on defence and security is unlikely to be fulfilled any time soon by some allies, prompting disagreements within the Alliance. Furthermore, it remains to be seen what the outcome of the US Global Posture Review will be.¹³ However, US military presence in Europe is likely to be reduced. The extent of the US withdrawal from Europe is too early to determine, however, not to mention whether the US military presence in frontline states such as Poland and the Baltics will be affected. If the US eventually withdraws large parts of its military presence in Europe, then the positive effects of NATO's Hague summit may be outweighed by visible signs of the United States' lack of interest in Europe.

Fourth, President Trump met with the Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky during the NATO summit. The US President characterised their conversation in positive terms. President Zelensky asked for additional missile interceptors for Patriot batteries. However, military aid to Ukraine was briefly suspended after the NATO summit. While low weapons and ammunition stockpiles were cited as the main reason why some weaponry was not delivered to Ukraine,¹⁴ this raises questions about the reliability of the US defence assistance and its future availability. This decision placed Ukraine at a disadvantage at a crucial time when Russia's aerial attacks on Ukraine intensified.¹⁵ Also, it is unlikely that another US military assistance package to Ukraine will be adopted during President Trump's second term. The package that was adopted during Joe Biden's presidency is nearing its end, and Ukraine needs more military assistance to defend itself against Russia.

Finally, the organisation of the Hague summit is inadequate for managing the transatlantic relationship in the long run. Allies went to great lengths to avoid discussing difficult issues, for example. This is hardly sustainable. NATO's Hague summit made remarkable progress on defence spending, but it did not accomplish much else. There are other divisive issues, such as NATO's Russia strategy and military personnel shortfalls that have to be addressed

by the allies, one way or another. These issues are particularly important for the Baltic states because they affect NATO's ability to deter Russia.

What implications for Baltic-Nordic security?

The Trump administration's often disparaging approach to its European allies has caused considerable concern in the Baltic region. However, the current US approach may yet impact Baltic security positively. But this is possible only if the countries of northern Europe invest substantially in defence and security. Importantly, this is already happening. Poland and the Baltic states have increased defence spending significantly and are already above 3.5 per cent of GDP. The Nordic states and Germany are also in the process of ambitious defence spending increases, and most allies in northern Europe have either never abandoned conscription or have reintroduced it since 2014. NATO's capabilities in northern Europe have also grown considerably with the accession of Sweden and Finland. Countries in northern Europe are among the key supporters of Ukraine and share a common threat perception.

In practical terms, this means closer defence cooperation among the Nordic-Baltic countries,¹⁶ Poland and Germany. The Baltic states have developed close defence cooperation over recent decades, complemented by an allied military presence in the Baltic region since 2017 in the form of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). Two-thirds of the NATO allies are already militarily present in the Baltic region. Two of the contributing states – the United Kingdom and France – are nuclear powers, while the United States (another nuclear power) has deployed troops separately from the eFP format. Germany, in turn, is the biggest economy in Europe, and under its new government it professes to be finally ready to play a more significant role in deterring Russia and defending its frontline allies. Also, Poland understands that Russia's aggression against the Baltic states would have far-reaching implications for its own national security. Thus, it is also ready to play a bigger role in the Baltic region by steadily increasing its own military capabilities and providing infrastructure for allied military mobility.

The key challenge is to build a cooperative framework among the northern NATO allies that would offer enough in terms of military capabilities and political commitment to deter Russia, but there are other challenges that go beyond simply having the frontline strength to defend against it.¹⁷ Political cohesiveness and the ability to act

¹³ Torrey Raussig (2025): Four Fundamental Questions the NATO Summit Did not Answer. Washington, Atlantic Council, 27 June; available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/four-fundamental-questions-the-nato-summit-did-not-answer/>

¹⁴ Paul McLeary/Jack Detsch/Joe Gould (2025): Pentagon Halting Some Promised Munitions for Ukraine. Brussels, Politico, 1 July; available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/01/pentagon-munitions-ukraine-halt-00436048>

¹⁵ Veronika Melkozerova (2025): Russia Hits Ukraine with Biggest Attack of the War; F-16 Pilot Is Killed. Brussels, Politico, 29 June; available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-ukraine-biggest-attack-war-f16-pilot-kill/>

¹⁶ Eitvydas Bajarūnas (2025): Europe's Vital Nordic-Baltic Shield. Washington, CEPA, 31 March; available at: <https://cepa.org/article/europes-vital-nordic-baltic-shield/>

¹⁷ Veronika Slakaityte/Izabela Surwillo (2025): The Baltic Sea Region Reminds Us Deterrence Is More than Frontline Strength. Copenhagen, DIIS, 14 May; available at: <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/the-baltic-sea-region-reminds-us-deterrence-is-more-than-frontline-strength>

collectively comprise a good starting point, however. While the term »coalition of the willing« has objectionable connotations because it was used in the highly divisive US decision to invade Iraq in 2003, it offers a solution to NATO's security problem in the Baltic region. The allies need to muster the resources needed to make military aggression prohibitively expensive for Russia. In the short term, the United States would still play an indispensable role in this constellation, but eventually it would be up to European powers such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Poland, in cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic states, to deter Russia. If a coalition of the willing has the means and political will to respond effectively to Russia, deterrence will likely hold.

The strengthening of NATO's European pillar is also necessary because of global US responsibilities and its sharp focus on China. In a scenario in which Russia initiates military aggression against NATO in Europe, the United States would still have to keep much of its military power intact. Otherwise, China may use this as a window of opportunity to bring Taiwan under its control. Thus, the United States is unlikely to do the heavy lifting in the European theatre. Its leadership and cutting-edge military technologies would be key to defending against Russia's aggression, but the biggest contribution would have to come from Europe.

All in all, the NATO summit in The Hague was a win for the Baltic states, but Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia will need to invest heavily in working with the other NATO allies to ensure that decisions made in The Hague are implemented adequately. This would involve not just leading by example in defence spending but also working closely with allies to achieve tangible progress in getting the relevant forces and capabilities ready to support NATO's regional defence plans. Apart from the implementation of earlier decisions, the two other key objectives for the Baltic states in the context of the next NATO summit in Ankara in 2026 will be to ensure adequate and uninterrupted military assistance to Ukraine and develop a common strategy on Russia. This will require much work in dealing with allies whose security interests are often at odds.

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