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THE UPCOMING NATO SUMMIT AND THE FUTURE OF THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE

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It is perhaps a sign of the volatility of our era that just last year NATO looked invincible but now many fret about – not without a reason – whether it will survive its next summit, which is scheduled to take place in the Hague on June 24-25.

In 2024, the Atlantic Alliance marked its seventy fifth birthday showing no apparent signs of aging. At 75, NATO could boast the enlargement to two formerly neutral countries – Finland and Sweden –, capping a process that has expanded the Alliance from its original 12 founding members in 1949 to the current 32. More importantly, in 2024 NATO could celebrate its renewed unity and relevance, the 2022 Russia's invasion of Ukraine having offered the opportunity – rather, required – to reaffirm NATO's role as the bulwark of Western defense and as the continuing champion of a European security order built on principle rather than force.

With strong leadership from the Biden administration – one of the more resolutely, but perhaps anachronistically, Atlanticist presidencies the US has ever had –, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept refocused the organization on the core task of deterrence and collective defense (the previous one dating back to 2010 was still describing a relatively cooperative security environment). Perhaps more decisively, on the occasion of the Atlantic Alliance's seventy fifth anniversary, Washington showed no hesitation in reaffirming in the clearest possible terms the interdependence of American and European security, placing transatlantic solidarity at the center of a renewed effort to defend liberalism in a world threatened by authoritarianism.

While long-standing doubts lingered about Ukraine's NATO membership, between 2022-2024 Western partners concurred that Kyiv was

fighting a war on behalf of what used to be called the ‘free world’, not just one for its own survival. Whatever the exact postwar settlement, Ukraine had to be firmly anchored to the new, more NATO-centric, order that would need to be put in place to contain the new Russian sphere of influence. In an imperfect replay of the bipolar era, there would be little room for any remaining grey zone. ‘In-between countries’ would rather avoid being caught in the crossfire between the two blocs. For all its disruptions, the return of large-scale interstate war to the European continent had at least brought much needed strategic clarity, together with a renewed sense of purpose for a Western community that had self-doubted NATO’s ‘raison d’être’ for way too long.

NATO’s current predicament

Just six months into 2025, many of these certainties look way less justified. And NATO’s impressive achievements of the last few years no longer appear irreversible. In fact, transatlantic unity has never looked less assured and the future of NATO has never appeared more uncertain. The Trump administration’s doubling down on its transactional and unprincipled America First agenda has dramatically moved the transatlantic debate well past the long-standing US request for more balanced burden-sharing.

Rather, what the US administration seems to be pursuing – in what remains a chaotic course marked by sudden reversals – is a strategic shift altogether, whereby Europe is seen as a burden in and of itself. At the very least, Europe is viewed as an obstacle between America

and its true priorities, which are its own renewal, the expansion of its influence in the Western hemisphere (including of a territorial nature, when necessary), and the competition with China for international hegemony.

In this vision, re-engaging Russia bears greater strategic (and economic) value than defending Ukraine's sovereignty. And confronting Beijing takes priority over cooperating with Europe (as if the two could not be mutually reinforcing goals). While the proud EU-critic US Vice President J.D. Vance reassures that 'we are still on the same team', the damage has already been done – possibly irretrievably so. Initial proclamations about America's withdrawal from Europe may have softened in recent weeks, but the new US administration has made it abundantly clear that its role as the preeminent

guarantor of European security is over.

Indeed, Europeans have become painfully aware that the era of largely benevolent US leadership is behind us and that there is no such thing as a natural partnership with America anymore. Rather than a unity of destiny rooted in history and common values, there is a deep anti-European prejudice among vast sections of the current US establishment that has to be countered at every turn. There is also a tendency – this one for sure predating the current administration – to dismiss Europe as a strategic sideshow as the world enters the Pacific Century (a notion propounded many years ago by Hillary Clinton). What the future holds for NATO in the midst of all this change is anyone's guess.

While the fog may remain thick for quite some time, this much seems to be clear already. As a 'security community', NATO is, in every practical sense, already dead. If growing doubts about America's true commitment to Article 5 (NATO's defense clause) were not enough, Washington's espousal of power politics rules out any form of organic and long-lasting solidarity. Simply put, the new America no longer frames the world around a transatlantic community of democratic nations within which conflict has become unthinkable, and where common values matter as much as common interests. Rather, the Euro-Atlantic space has now become a zero-sum arena as much as the rest of the world.

Yet, even against the backdrop of this predicament, as an organization NATO seems set to survive for the foreseeable future, being the only game in

town at present when it comes to both Western and European defense. Decades of transatlantic security cooperation and the irreplaceability of America's assets in the short term – from its strategic enablers to its advanced weapons systems, from the nuclear umbrella to technological innovation – are prompting Europeans to be very careful about precipitating an unnecessary transatlantic divorce that at this stage would hurt Europe the most.

As a matter of fact, NATO may also continue operating as a – significantly transformed – military alliance. For all its frustrations, even Washington may in fact conclude – at least provisionally so – that the continuation of a rebalanced NATO is better than its wholesale dismantlement. For their part, Europeans rightly see in NATO a venue in which they can still benefit from US support whenever possible,

and a platform enabling EU countries to seek even closer cooperation with the United Kingdom, Canada, and Türkiye at a time when they are collectively expected to do much more for European security than they have ever done. In one phrase, NATO is dead, long live NATO!

The NATO Summit

After an impressive string of successful summits, the success of the upcoming one in the Hague will be measured more by what will be avoided rather than what will be agreed. Avoiding any major diplomatic crisis will be surely seen as an achievement in and of itself. Transatlantic diplomats are reportedly working tirelessly towards preparing the most succinct final document possible for endorsement by NATO leaders. This is to prevent any last-minute dissonance on the wide range of issues where

transatlantic sensitivities are clearly far from being aligned.

The Summit will undoubtedly also take some important practical decisions, among which is the widely discussed new target in defense spending, bringing the share of GDP devoted to security (military and non-military) to 5 percent. If so agreed, Europeans should look at the new resources as an opportunity to make Europe stronger rather than an expedient move to quench President Trump's thirst for 'better deals' for America. Yet, this and other concrete deliverables, for instance when it comes to the operationalization of NATO's regional plans to protect its Northern and Eastern flanks, will hardly alter the overall picture.

The latter is a highly dynamic one – to use an euphemistic expression – in which willing

and capable European countries will be required to make bold and decisive stepstowards taking the continent's destiny into their own hands, lest Europe loses its chair at the table and ends up on the menu of the geopolitical competition. That is why, with all its limitations, the 'coalition of the willing' to support Ukraine is a most important European pilot project that deserves all possible support.

While its specific agenda remains to be fully articulated, its purpose is nonetheless clear enough: to leverage a new platform that is Europe-led but certainly not anti-US, which is more than the EU but something different from NATO, towards the goal of endowing Europe with greater strategic and military agency. The whole initiative is based on the lucid recognition that even in a post-American Europe – or perhaps even more so in such scenario – the future of European security

and European peace will be arguably decided on the battlegrounds of Ukraine.

While the NATO Summit will hopefully be a success (with President Trump attending the gathering, however, diplomatic incidents cannot be completely ruled out), what will happen around and after the Summit will be this time as important as the Summit outcomes themselves. What Europe needs is nothing less than a 'movement' towards ultimately Europeanizing common defense. This process is not incompatible with NATO – and can actually be better achieved in a NATO setting in the present circumstances. But other pieces of the puzzle will have to come together to sustain the new security equation – starting with the creation of a much more integrated European defense market.

In this respect, for the first time in the Atlantic Alliance's

history the Summit will be a success insofar as NATO's 'transformation' – to use a traditional formula – will actually go beyond NATO itself, allowing for the development of a range of non-NATO initiatives through which Europe will redefine its place in transatlantic cooperation and European security a time of tectonic change.



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