

BRIEF

NATO-UKRAINE

HAGUE SUMMIT SERIES NO. 6

| TONY LAWRENCE |

Russia's war in Ukraine shows few signs of ending. Across Europe, there is a widely held view that the outcome of the war will be critically important to determining the continent's future security: Ukraine must prevail. This view, however, does not appear to be shared by the second Trump administration which, after a brief attempt to negotiate a (unjust) solution, seems unable to deliver on the president's campaign promise to bring peace, in particular if this involves being tough on Russia. Differences between the US and most European Allies regarding both the conditions for ending the war and Ukraine's longer-term integration into Euro-Atlantic security structures present one of the greatest dangers to the transatlantic relationship in the years ahead. More immediately, uncertainty about how to handle these differences presents the greatest risk that NATO's forthcoming summit in The Hague will not be seen as a success.

WHAT NATO DOES

NATO has been very cautious about providing practical support to Ukraine. From the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, NATO made clear that it would not intervene militarily, though it would provide support to increase Ukraine's defence capacity.¹ In practice, this military assistance—both weapons and training—has been provided by Allies and others on a bilateral basis or through various EU instruments. Coordination of supply—the business of ensuring that the right equipment, training, and logistics packages come together at the right time and place—has also happened outside NATO in the US-convened Ukraine Defence

Contact Group (UDCG, often known as the Ramstein group). This group enhanced its support in 2024 by creating capability coalitions to better coordinate supplies in eight critical areas (air forces, armour, artillery, demining, drones, integrated air and missile defence, information technology, and maritime security).² With the arrival of the new US administration, chairmanship of the group passed to the UK (February 2025 meeting) and jointly to the UK and Germany (April and June).

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Despite its broad caution, NATO, as an institution, has stepped up its support to Ukraine in the past year. It agreed, at the 2024 Washington Summit, to establish the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU) to take on from the UDCG some of the tasks of coordinating military assistance, a move widely interpreted as an attempt to safeguard western military support in the event of a second Trump presidency. NSATU, a 300-strong multinational command based at Wiesbaden in Germany, is now responsible for coordinating more than 60% of the assistance provided by the European Allies and Canada.³ An NSATU trust fund, launched in April 2025 under UK management, is intended to enhance the command's ability to respond to urgent demands for support.⁴

In addition, through a decision of the NATO-Ukraine Council in February 2024, NATO has also co-established the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis

Training and Education Centre in Bydgoszcz, Poland. The Centre's purpose is to identify and apply lessons from Russia's war against Ukraine and ensure that these are integrated into doctrine and practice at all command levels.⁵ NATO has also continued to provide Ukraine with non-lethal and other forms of assistance through the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) established at the 2016 Warsaw Summit. By early 2025, Allies and partners had contributed a total of more than EUR 955 million to the Ukraine CAP Trust Fund.⁶

WHAT NATO SAYS

NATO's political support to Ukraine has been equally—arguably more—important than these practical measures. NATO leaders' statements about the war and the place of Ukraine in Europe's future security arrangements have been essential signals to Ukraine, and to Russia, and have helped build and maintain cohesion among the Allies themselves. The inclusion of Ukrainian military personnel and officials at all levels in NATO business has sent similar messages. It has also facilitated interoperability and smoothed Ukraine's path towards NATO membership.

Trump's ambivalence towards the outcome of the war and reluctance to continue support to Ukraine has become increasingly clear

In its strategic communication, NATO has made abundantly clear where responsibility for the war lies and how it must be ended. For example, in Washington, a year ago, NATO leaders stated that:

Russia bears sole responsibility for its war of aggression against Ukraine, a blatant violation of international law, including the UN Charter. There can be no impunity for Russian forces' and officials' abuses and violations of human rights, war crimes, and other violations of international law [...] Russia must immediately stop this war and completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its forces from Ukraine.⁷

A second key element of NATO's strategic communication has been its public commitment to Ukraine's future membership prospects. While not offering Ukraine the formal invitation

to join the Alliance that it and some of its supporters have sought, NATO leaders have made progressively clearer their view that Ukraine will, at some point, become an Ally. As a more practical matter, they also agreed (at the Vilnius Summit) that Ukraine need not go through the Membership Action Plan process designed to help aspiring Allies prepare for accession. In Washington NATO, leaders thus declared that "Ukraine's future is in NATO," and pledged to "continue to support it on its irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership."⁸

However, these strong messages concerning both Russia and Ukraine will likely appear only in the most condensed form in the text that emerges from The Hague Summit, as Allies seek to avoid a confrontation with America's volatile president. The Trump administration's ambivalence towards the outcome of the war and reluctance to continue support to Ukraine has become increasingly clear, especially since the stalling of US attempts to secure some kind of peace settlement. In the run-up to the summit, US Defense Secretary announced that the US would reduce military assistance to Ukraine and skipped a meeting of the UDCG, the first US official to do so in three years.⁹ At the Banff meeting of the G7, meanwhile, President Trump complained about President Putin's exclusion, indicated that the US would not place further sanctions on Russia, and left early, avoiding a face-to-face meeting with President Zelenskyy.¹⁰ In pursuit of a peace deal, Trump has also upended US policy by ruling out NATO membership (or US security guarantees) for Ukraine and casting doubt that the country's territorial integrity could (or should) be restored.¹¹

Early indications that The Hague Summit language would be tuned to accommodate the views of the new US administration came in spring, when it was reported that NATO staff were seeking to head off any criticism by watering down language related to climate, and women and security.¹² More recently, it has been reported that the summit text will comprise only a single five-paragraph page, focused on defence spending, with just the briefest of references to the threat posed by Russia and to NATO's

support to Ukraine.¹³ As such, it will resemble the 2019 London Declaration, issued from the low-key leaders' meeting that followed a year after Trump's chaotic appearance at the 2018 Brussels Summit, rather than the multiple-paragraph texts of more recent summits.¹⁴

The summit text will thus not restate Ukraine's irreversible path to NATO membership, or mention China, whose material support has been crucial to sustaining Russia's prosecution of its war in Ukraine.¹⁵ Nor will there be any reference to the pledge of long-term assistance to Ukraine, agreed last year in Washington. While the final form of this pledge was substantially downgraded from then Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's original proposal, it at least offered the promise of twice-yearly performance reports by and on the Allies.¹⁶ This is a curious omission as the Allies have, in the first year of the pledge's operation, exceeded by EUR 10 billion the baseline figure of EUR 40 billion they agreed in Washington, with 60% of the total donations coming from European Allies and Canada.¹⁷

Undeniably, summit texts can quickly become bloated if every Ally is allowed to insert its own special interests—in NATO parlance, like hanging decorations on a Christmas tree. Also, Secretary General Mark Rutte has argued that whether or not the idea of Ukraine's "irreversible path" is included in the communique is irrelevant, as language agreed before is there until NATO decides that it is not.¹⁸ But, given the Trump administration's well-known hostility towards its European Allies, it will be hard for NATO to persuade anyone that its drafting of The Hague Summit text is anything other than an attempt to avoid upsetting the US. Indeed, this scepticism has been reflected in press headlines reporting the run-up to the summit with regular references to NATO "appeasing" Trump.

WHO NATO INVITES

For similar reasons, a second difficult question has been the form in which Ukraine should be represented at The Hague meeting. President Zelenskyy has joined each of the past three NATO summits, attending virtually in Madrid in 2022 and in person in both Vilnius in 2023 and Washington in 2024. Secretary General Rutte has confirmed that he has, as the convenor of the

summit, invited President Zelenskyy to The Hague, but NATO appears to have struggled to agree on how to handle his presence.

There will not be a NATO-Ukraine Council (NUC) meeting at leaders' level. There will, however, be a working dinner of the NATO-Ukraine Council in the Foreign Ministers' session on 24 June. The NUC was launched at NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit, replacing the NATO-Ukraine Commission as part of a package aimed at bringing Ukraine closer to NATO. It met at the level of heads of state and government in both Vilnius and Washington.

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President Zelenskyy will also not be able to attend any official sessions of the summit but has been invited instead to join the informal dinner of NATO leaders, also on 24 June.¹⁹ The opportunities for Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy to meet—presumably Zelenskyy's main motive for attending the summit—will thus be somewhat limited; indeed, there has been speculation that NATO officials have choreographed the event to avoid this possibility. It is not entirely clear that Zelenskyy will attend at all.

CONCLUSION

It is unusual for a publication of this nature to focus on what is likely to be missing, rather than what is likely to be there. But the re-election of Donald Trump has brought uncertainty and unpredictability back to European security affairs. NATO has elected to deal with this by seeking to remove all potential sources of confrontation from its summit in The Hague, and to focus on the one issue (defence spending) thought to motivate the administration. Inevitably, however, it has not been able to keep its behind-the-scenes deliberations out of the public eye.

Whether NATO's approach will succeed in the short term (that the US delegation will return to Washington feeling they have achieved a win) or in the longer term (that this will be enough to persuade the US to remain committed to

European security) is to be seen. But Ukraine could not be blamed if it were to feel badly let down by the Alliance on this occasion, and NATO's adversaries might be expected to relish

the cracks evident in the transatlantic relationship during the summit preparations.

ENDNOTES

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