

NATO 3.0: Keeping the Americans In, the Russians Out, and the EU Up

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As the United States shifts its strategic focus from Europe to the Indo-Pacific and the Western Hemisphere, not only do transatlantic relations suffer from a change of rationale, but also NATO. When NATO was created, its main purpose was famously summarised by its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, in the catchy phrase, [‘to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down’](#). This encapsulated the Cold War logic: deterring the Soviet Union from attacking, anchoring US strategic interests in Europe and avoiding a return to power politics on the continent.

Nowadays, however, this formula no longer works. Russia has returned as the main military threat to European security, with its large-scale aggressive war on Ukraine and continued hybrid attacks on European countries. The multilateral rules-based order is under threat internationally from a return to great power politics that affect the security of Europe. Although the US is still an essential part of NATO, it is no longer willing to take on the majority of Europe's conventional defence. Meanwhile, the European Union, once marginal to hard security issues, is becoming a central player in Europe's future defence.

As such, the new *raison d'être* for the Alliance should therefore be: **to keep the Americans in, the Russians out and the EU up**. This is also the essence of NATO 3.0: [‘A stronger Europe in a stronger NATO’](#).

And the NATO Ankara Summit marks the beginning of this internal transformation. As set out in the Summit's declaration, a modernised Alliance based on a stronger European pillar will be less dependent on the United States, while Washington will retain a substantial foothold in NATO.

From NATO 1.0 to NATO 3.0

From a historical point of view, the internal transformation of the North Atlantic Alliance can be divided into three broad phases.

NATO 1.0 was the 'Cold War Alliance'. Its core task was collective defence. It was built around large armies, territorial defence and a strictly defensive posture against one clearly identified rival: the Soviet Union. Its main purpose was to deter Soviet aggression, protect Western Europe and North American allies (Canada and the US), and ensure the continued military presence of the United States on the continent after the Second World War.

NATO 2.0 emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall and can be considered the 'Unipolar moment of the US' alliance. Rather than dissolving when the Soviet threat collapsed, the Alliance expanded its functions. Its new identity was based on three Cs: [collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security](#). The Alliance remained committed to defending its members but also moved into out-of-area operations, conducting missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, it entered into security partnerships with countries outside NATO and beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. This was the NATO of enlargement, expeditionary operations and global partnerships.

NATO 3.0, still in development, marks a return to basics, but not to the past. Collective defence is once again the core focus. Russia is once again the principal military threat. Yet the burden-sharing model is changing. In NATO 1.0, the United States was Europe's dominant military provider. In NATO 3.0, however, Europeans will have to carry much more of the conventional defence burden themselves. While Washington adopts a more hands-off approach, a stronger European pillar will emerge inside NATO. While the US will remain essential, particularly through its nuclear umbrella and cutting-edge strategic capabilities, it will no longer be the first-line provider of European conventional defence.

2026 Ankara: the first summit of NATO's new internal transformation

The Ankara Summit represents the beginning of NATO's internal reform towards NATO 3.0. While last year's NATO Summit in The Hague saw the allies commit to investing [5% of their GDP](#) in defence by 2035, this year's summit focused on delivering on these commitments, with a particular emphasis on strengthening armed forces, increasing defence production, and developing the essential capabilities required to defend the Alliance. This marks the start of a genuine realignment of the Alliance, as Europeans are not only increasing their spending, but also focusing on procuring the strategic enablers that NATO actually needs to maintain a credible defence and deterrent posture with a scaled-back American presence.

Hence, the most significant outcomes emerged from the NATO Defence Industry Forum and the new capability commitments that were announced during the summit. Allies agreed to invest at least [\\$50 billion](#) in defence capabilities through joint procurement. These projects

target the strategic enablers on which Europe currently disproportionately relies on the United States. [One of the most significant initiatives](#) is the plan to replace NATO's ageing AWACS fleet with GlobalEye: a new early-warning and surveillance platform produced by the Swedish company Saab. Other important joint procurement projects announced by Allies include those relating to aerial refuelling; strategic transport; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities (ISR); a common military satellite constellation to improve communications; intelligence-sharing and missile tracking; and a multinational NATO project on ground-based precision strike capabilities, including new launchers and missiles. In parallel, Allies revealed plans to invest more than [\\$40 billion](#) in counter-drone capabilities over the next five years, with the aim of increasing the number of trained drone operators fivefold by the end of 2027. Taken together, these initiatives indicate that European NATO countries are starting to invest in capabilities that enable high-intensity warfare and readiness.

Keeping the Americans in

The first pillar of NATO 3.0 is keeping the Americans in. This remains crucial because the United States is still the most powerful military force within NATO. The US provides capabilities that no European ally can yet replace, including long-range missiles, aircraft carriers, strategic bombers, fighter aircraft, submarines, deep-sea search and rescue operations, long-range surveillance and intelligence systems, space-based assets, air and missile defence, command and control, and strategic lift and aerial refuelling capabilities.

Europe still suffers from overdependence on the United States for these high-end strategic enablers. Replacing them will take time. Realistically, it might take five to ten years before Europeans can fully cover many of the strategic functions currently provided by Washington. Some gaps may take even longer to fill and could cost around [\\$1 trillion](#) to replace some key elements of US conventional military capabilities.

The United States has already signalled its intention to [reduce its conventional military presence in Europe](#). It has announced troop withdrawals, reduced the forces assigned to NATO defence plans, and launched a six-month review of its military presence on the continent. The Trump administration has also informed NATO military commanders that it is scaling back its contributions to the NATO Force Model, which could result in fewer strategic bombers, fighter jets and submarines being available in the event of an attack.

This is why the transition towards NATO 3.0 must be carefully managed. European allies need to be prepared to take over any missions, capabilities, force contributions or leadership responsibilities that Washington may reduce or relinquish. However, the guiding principle should be simple: *no critical US capability should disappear before a credible European replacement is in place.*

Any US reductions will need to be carefully coordinated by Europeans and Americans, especially on the Eastern Flank, to avoid a disorderly transition in which America withdraws faster than Europe can step up.

Keeping the US firmly anchored in NATO is essential for preserving the alliance's credibility and safeguarding European security. At the same time, a stronger European pillar at the heart of NATO 3.0 could also serve American interests. A more capable European contingent would bolster NATO as a whole and enhance the Alliance's appeal to current and future US administrations, given that stronger allies could be more valuable in terms of the United States' global posturing.

Keeping the Russians out (with Ukraine's Help)

The second pillar of NATO 3.0 is to keep the Russians out. Russia is investing [almost half of its national budget](#) in its military campaign in Ukraine and shows no signs of abandoning its aggressive political and policy stance against Europe, even in the event of a potential end to the conflict in Ukraine. A reduced US role in the alliance could accelerate the Europeanisation of NATO, but it could also tempt Russia to test NATO's resolve. Moscow may exploit vulnerabilities through cyberattacks, sabotage, disinformation campaigns, putting pressure on critical infrastructure, and hybrid incidents on the Eastern Flank.

The message in the Ankara Summit declaration was unequivocal: whilst NATO may be rebalancing internally, the allies' commitment to Article 5 remains ironclad: '[an attack on one is an attack on all](#)'. Although this is considered the summit's primary success, given the fractured transatlantic partnership and strained relations between the Trump administration and European allies, this commitment must be reinforced through action.

Russia will look to exploit any hesitation, fragmentation or gaps within NATO and among the transatlantic partners. Apart from ensuring that any reduction in the US military presence in the Eastern Flank, the NATO Force Model or military regional plans is managed with the greatest care, the Allies (including the Americans) must clearly draw a red line: any attempt to test the Alliance will incur an extremely high cost for the aggressor and will be met with a unified response.

Furthermore, Ukraine has become a vital part of this equation. Kyiv has undergone tremendous transformation in the past four years. Alongside being a beneficiary of Western security assistance, it can also contribute to European security. By resisting Russia, Ukraine has reduced the main conventional threat to NATO and forced Moscow to pay a much higher price for aggression than expected. Therefore, NATO must think beyond merely training Ukraine. It must also learn from Ukraine how to keep the Russians out.

Ukraine could bring something that NATO currently lacks: the most extensive modern combat experience in Europe. Its armed forces have been fighting a large-scale, high-intensity war

against Russia for over four years. They have gained valuable experience in areas such as air defence, drone warfare, counter-drone systems, electronic warfare, cyber resilience, battlefield medicine, logistics under fire and the protection of critical infrastructure.

Ukraine knows how Russia fights today. It understands Russian tactics, adaptation patterns, logistics, vulnerabilities, and escalation methods. This knowledge would be invaluable to NATO, particularly to its allies on the Eastern Flank.

Ukraine also offers [valuable lessons in innovation](#). Its forces, companies, engineers, volunteers and civil society have created a dynamic ecosystem that can swiftly transform battlefield needs into technological solutions. In contrast, NATO's procurement systems are often slow and bureaucratic. Ukraine has demonstrated that, in war, adaptation must occur within weeks or days, not years.

Finally, Ukraine provides further lessons in resilience. Russia has targeted the country's energy infrastructure, ports, railways, hospitals, public administration, information systems and civilian morale. Ukraine has had to maintain state functioning under constant attack. This is highly relevant to NATO's security environment, which includes hybrid attacks, cyber operations, sabotage, disinformation and pressure on critical infrastructure. The Kremlin is already partially testing NATO's responses to these actions.

Keeping the EU up: the European pillar of NATO

The third pillar of NATO 3.0 is keeping the EU up. This means supporting the emergence of a stronger European pillar within NATO. This also means a more involved European Union in the conventional protection of the continent, working alongside the alliance.

The EU can play a vital role. Twenty-three of its 27 member states are also NATO members. A clear division of labour may be evolving: NATO would oversee command and control structures, standards, and military preparedness, while the EU would be responsible for industry, capabilities, investment, and regulation.

The EU's [ReArm Europe/Readiness](#) programme aims to mobilise up to €800 billion by 2030. SAFE provides €150 billion of this for joint procurement for capability coalitions, and the activation of the national escape clause in the Stability and Growth Pact could create a further €650 billion, allowing Member States to increase defence spending by an additional 1.5% of GDP over the next four years. Additionally, [the next long-term EU budget](#) includes €131 billion for military capabilities and €17 billion for military mobility projects, including roads, bridges, ports and airports, to facilitate the movement of forces across Europe.

This is how the EU is already stepping up inside NATO, not as a competitor to the Alliance, but as the engine driving Europe's defence, industrial, financial and regulatory mobilisation.

It is a complementary formula in which NATO sets the military requirements and the EU helps generate the industrial, legislative and investment base to meet them.

Over the past two years, the 31 non-US NATO members have [pledged \\$250 billion](#) for new programmes and defence investments. [European NATO members and Canada](#) spent an average of 2.31 per cent of GDP on core defence in 2025, and this figure is estimated to rise to 2.53 per cent this year. Thus, while European defence spending is rising, spending more is not enough. The real test is whether Europeans can spend more efficiently on the capabilities they still lack in a coordinated manner. While the announcements from Ankara are positive, Europeans still face the challenges of fragmented national defence industries and insufficiently interoperable, strategically incomplete national armed forces.

A way forward: Made in Europe or Made in NATO?

NATO 3.0 is the response to this new reality of a more dangerous Russia, a more demanding United States and a Europe that can no longer afford to outsource its defence.

The Ankara Summit shows that this transformation has begun. European Allies are investing in defence production, including drones, counter-drone systems and strategic enablers such as: ISR, air refuelling, space capabilities, and precision strike capabilities. Furthermore, Europeans are assuming greater responsibility for Ukraine, forward land forces and NATO's regional defence plans. Thus, the European pillar is becoming operational.

But one major political challenge still lies ahead, and it might pose the same critical importance as the question of burden shifting, namely [the potential future tension](#) between 'Made in Europe' and 'Made in NATO' proponents. Europeans want to reduce external dependencies, maintain public investment within the European economy, and develop their own defence industrial champions by implementing concrete EU plans for 'European preference' and 'Made in Europe' defence capabilities. Conversely, Secretary General Mark Rutte announced the 'Made in NATO' concept in Ankara, which prioritises transatlantic defence industrial cooperation, focusing on how to include the US and American companies in Europe's defence spending boom.

While this tension could turn into a zero-sum fight in the near future, it should not. The 'Made in EU' concept can easily be integrated into the 'Made in NATO' concept. In the medium to long term, the EU must build its European defence market and strengthen its own industrial base and autonomy in critical areas. In the short to medium term, transatlantic defence industrial cooperation can contribute to developing and scaling up those capabilities that interoperability, technology, speed of production and collective security require.

To sum up, this is the balance the 'under-work' NATO 3.0 must strike: **the Americans in, but not carrying Europe; the Russians out, but deterred by a credible alliance supported by Ukraine; and the EU up, not as NATO's rival, but as the foundation of a stronger European pillar within it.**

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