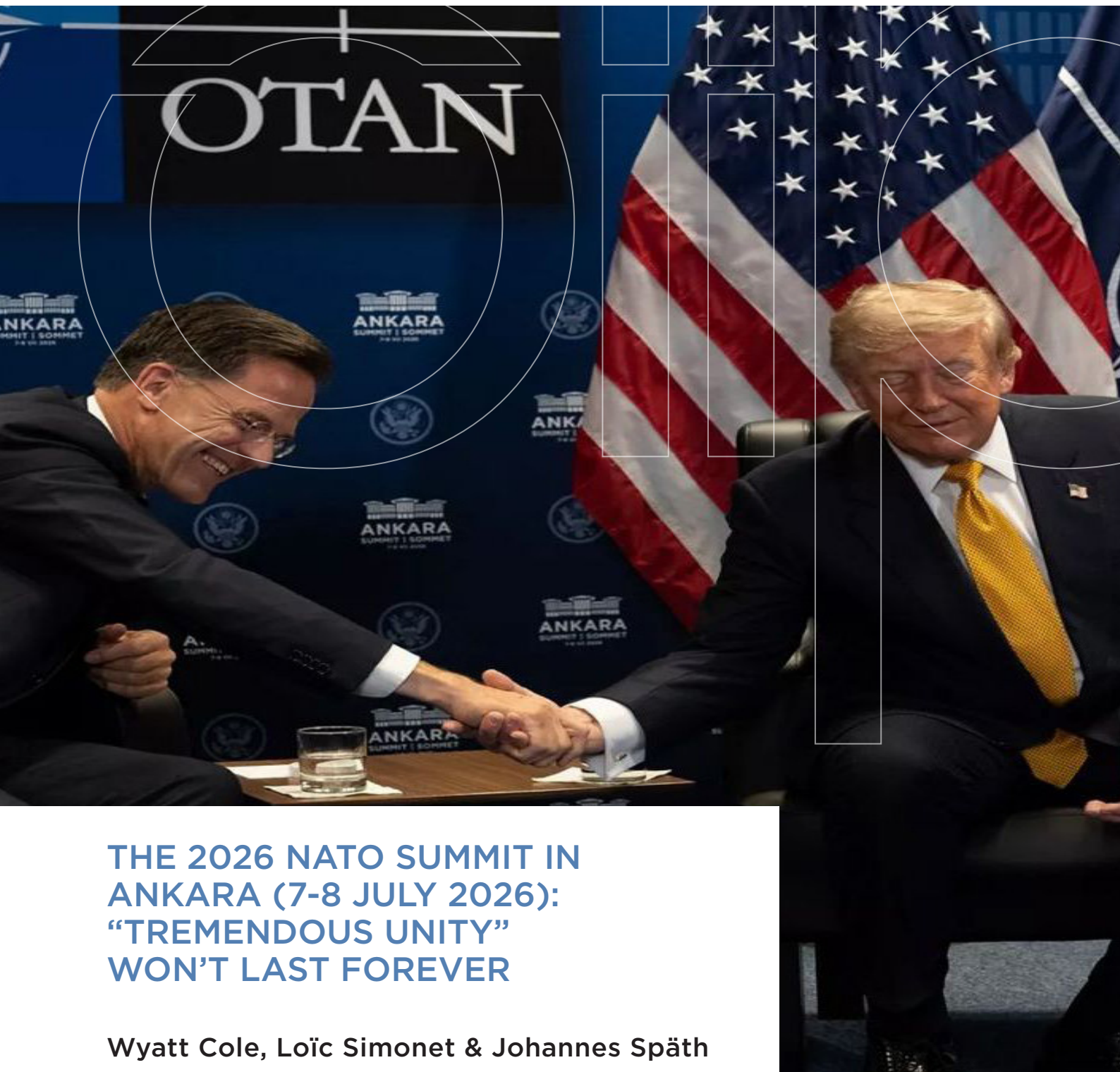




THE 2026 NATO SUMMIT IN ANKARA (7-8 JULY 2026): “TREMENDOUS UNITY” WON’T LAST FOREVER

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ABSTRACT

The 2026 NATO Summit in Ankara delivered its intended message: the Alliance is investing more, producing more, and standing behind Article 5 and Ukraine. Yet this display of “tremendous unity” rests on the untested premise of “NATO 3.0”: a Pentagon-driven vision in which Europe assumes primary responsibility for its own conventional defense while the United States retains overall leadership. This paper argues that Ankara’s apparent success obscures rather than resolves the central tension of this transition. Behind several headline achievements lie six unaddressed structural problems: an undefined U.S. withdrawal timeline, growing exploitable divisions between “good” and “bad” allies, a European rearmament that risks deepening dependency on the U.S. rather than reducing it, an emerging friction between NATO 3.0 as a rebranded continuation of transatlantic dependency and the drive for genuine European strategic autonomy, an inconsistently applied “no more out-of-area operations” doctrine exposed by the Iran crisis, and Türkiye’s simultaneous indispensability and unpredictability. The paper contends that NATO’s structural logics have so far proven more durable than the volatility of any single administration. But this resilience should not be mistaken for resolution: as Europe assumes growing operational and financial responsibility for its own defense, its subordinate position in NATO’s command structure becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Whether NATO 3.0 represents a durable reordering of the Alliance or merely a temporary accommodation of diverging transatlantic interests remains an open question — one Ankara deferred rather than answered.

Der NATO-Gipfel 2026 in Ankara konnte die gewünschte Botschaft vermitteln: Das Bündnis investiert mehr, produziert mehr und bekräftigt Artikel 5 sowie die Unterstützung der Ukraine. Doch diese Demonstration „enormer Einigkeit“ beruht auf der noch nicht erprobten Prämisse von „NATO 3.0“: einer vom Pentagon vorangetriebenen Vision, in der Europa die Hauptverantwortung für seine eigene konventionelle Verteidigung übernimmt, während die Vereinigten Staaten die Gesamtführung behalten. In diesem Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass der scheinbare Erfolg in Ankara die zentrale Spannung dieses Wandels eher verschleiert als löst. Hinter mehreren Schlagzeilen machenden Erfolgen verbergen sich sechs ungelöste strukturelle Probleme: ein unbestimmter Zeitplan für den Rückzug der USA, wachsende, ausnutzbare Spaltungen zwischen „guten“ und „schlechten“ Verbündeten, eine europäische Aufrüstung, die die Abhängigkeit von den USA eher zu vertiefen als zu verringern droht, eine sich abzeichnende Spannung zwischen der NATO 3.0 als neuaufgesetzte Fortsetzung der transatlantischen Abhängigkeit und dem Streben nach echter europäischer strategischer Autonomie, eine inkonsequent angewandte Doktrin der Vermeidung von “out of area” Einsätzen, die durch die Iran-Krise entlarvt wurde, sowie die gleichzeitige Unentbehrlichkeit und Unberechenbarkeit der Türkei. Die strukturelle Logik der NATO hat sich bislang als beständiger erwiesen, als die Volatilität einer einzelnen Regierung. Diese

Widerstandsfähigkeit sollte jedoch nicht mit einer echten Lösung verwechselt werden: Da Europa zunehmend operative und finanzielle Verantwortung für seine eigene Verteidigung übernimmt, wird eine weiterhin untergeordnete Position in der Kommandostruktur der NATO schwerer aufrechtzuerhalten sein. Ob „NATO 3.0“ eine dauerhafte Neuordnung des Bündnisses darstellt oder lediglich einen vorübergehenden Kompromiss zwischen divergierenden transatlantischen Interessen – diese Frage bleibt offen, und Ankara hat sie eher aufgeschoben als beantwortet.

INTRODUCTION

Heads of state and government from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) 32 members met for the 36th summit of the Alliance on 7–8 July 2026 at the Beştepe Presidential Complex in Ankara, Türkiye, at a critical moment for European and Euro-Atlantic security. “Probably one of the more important leaders’ summit[s] in the history of NATO” (Marco Rubio, Department of State 2026b); “an awkward, high-stakes stress test” (Comfort Ero, President & CEO, International Crisis Group ¹)... There was no shortage of superlatives in the run-up to this crucial meeting for the 77-year-old military alliance.

The transatlantic relationship faces one of the most consequential transitions in its modern history. European leaders have started to realize that Private Ryan won’t be crossing the Atlantic a third time, and they are now scrambling to respond to what looks like the end of reliable U.S. protection of the continent. The Alliance’s cohesion is being tested by strategic competition, economic strain, and shifting global priorities. U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction with NATO, questioned the commitment of some European partners to collective defense, and demanded greater financial contributions from NATO’s members. In turn, Europeans have hardened their tone, with highly Atlanticist Poland questioning U.S. “loyalty” (Reuters 2026b) and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz referring to “a chasm, a deep rift” between Europe and the United States (German Federal Government 2026). European leaders’ resistance to U.S. requests for assistance against Iran put the organization under even greater strain.

The Atlantic Alliance is based on trust, but Europeans’ trust in the United States has reached a “historic low,” according to a major public opinion poll, totaling 19,481 respondents, commissioned by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and conducted in May 2026 in 15 European countries – including Austria: only 11% of respondents now consider the U.S. an ally, down from 16% half a year ago and 22% in November 2024. Meanwhile, 25% see it as either a rival or an adversary (Kobzová & Zerka 2026). In the Bertelsmann Foundation’s eupinions study on European independence released in May 2026, 73% of respondents across the EU believe the Union should “go its own way” rather than closely align with the U.S. (Kommer & Bohrn 2026). This assessment has been shared by the military leadership: “We can no longer place the same level of trust in the Americans,” French Chief of the Defence Staff General Fabien Mandon observed during his testimony before the Parliament on 9 April 2026 (Assemblée nationale 2026, 3; we translate).

On the eve of the 2026 summit, the Atlantic Alliance appeared divided and uncertain about its strategic direction. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte’s method – using a mix of flattery and gentle pushback on President Trump – has worked pretty well so far, but has been reaching its limit. And yet, NATO leaders left Türkiye seemingly satisfied. Rather than introducing major new strategic concepts, leaders concentrated on a ‘reality check’, on delivering the commitments made one year earlier at the Hague summit regarding higher defense spending, expanded industrial production, stronger military capabilities, and continued support for Ukraine. The Ankara gathering ended with “love in the room” and “tremendous unity” among Allies, according

1 LinkedIn post “The Month Ahead”, 24 June 2026, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/natos-awkward-high-stakes-summit-crisis-group-yk7vc/?trackingId=8%2Bf9yP%2FctOyF2MhvJi8hjg%3D%3D>.

to Trump himself (CNN 2026), and even produced a few surprises along the way.

How did the Alliance members, and the organization as a whole, manage to seemingly navigate these rifts so successfully? Ankara was the first summit held under the shadow of ‘NATO 3.0’: the Pentagon pitch, first floated in February 2026 (U.S. Department of War 2026b), envisions Europe assuming primary responsibility for its own defence, continued American leadership, and a transatlantic relationship built on partnership rather than dependency. Whether the apparent European buy-in to ‘NATO 3.0’ signals the birth of a reformed, more resilient alliance or merely covers up an irreversible transatlantic drift remains an open question. To investigate these competing dynamics, the oiiip has compiled seven key takeaways from Ankara alongside six uncomfortable truths — successfully swept under the rug behind the display of “tremendous love” — that may yet come back to haunt the Alliance.

1. NATO DELIVERS: SEVEN MAIN TAKEAWAYS FROM THE ANKARA SUMMIT

At the conclusion of the summit on 8 July 2026, Secretary-General Mark Rutte said the message from Ankara was clear: NATO delivers. The summit’s six-point declaration explicitly recognized that European Allies and Canada are carrying a larger share of the Alliance’s conventional defense burden, reaffirmed Article 5 commitments, and pledged at least \$70 billion in support for Ukraine this year, among other points. The following seven takeaways examine what stands behind these headline pledges.

1.1 Europe’s defence: From burden sharing to burden shifting

The Ankara summit was meant to endorse the new military and structural balance between Europe and the United States and to solidify, in the short and medium term, the burden-sharing between the two pillars. Long championed by Paris, the strengthening of the Alliance’s “European pillar” has been supported by many Allies, including Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden. On 24 June 2026, the European Group of Five (E5 – France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom) agreed on “a stronger European role within NATO with Europe taking greater responsibility for our shared transatlantic security” (E5 Leaders’ Statement 2026).

However, beyond a more equitable sharing, Europe has been forced to accept a transfer of responsibility for ensuring its own protection. “Europe must assume *primary responsibility* for its own conventional defense” (U.S. Department of War 2026b; we emphasize): according to the U.S. 2026 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, this core strategic reality is key to a more balanced, effective, and resilient Alliance. “European Allies and Canada, working with the United States, are assuming greater responsibility for the Alliance’s defence” (Ankara declaration, para. 3). Compared to the statement from the previous year, in which the defense of the continent was the responsibility of all the Allies (usage of “we” and “the Allies”, without distinction – Hague Declaration 2025), in 2026 the U.S. seems to be taking a back seat to its Allies.

1.2 Defence spending: From political rhetoric to operationality

One year after the adoption of a new baseline of 5% (3.5 + 1.5) of gross domestic product (GDP) defence and defence-related spending by 2035 at the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague (Draeger & Simonet 2025), the Ankara summit offered the opportunity to assess the progress made by the European Allies at a transformative moment for the Atlantic Alliance. In 2025, NATO Allies in Europe and Canada invested a total of \$574 billion in defence, a 20% increase in real terms compared to 2024. All Allies reported defence expenditure figures that met or went beyond the 2% target first set in 2014, with many making steep increases in spending, and three Allies already meeting the new 3.5% objective in 2025 (NATO annual report 2025, 24 & Secretary-General’s foreword, 4). The Ankara summit’s declaration assesses this momentum: “In 2025, European Allies and Canada increased their investments in core defence requirements by more than \$139bn” (Para. 2).

1.3 Defence capabilities: From pledges to implementation

“Cash is crucial, but you cannot stop a missile or a tank with a dollar or a euro,” NATO SG Rutte emphasized at the Defence ministerial meeting in Brussels on 18 June 2026 (Rutte 2026a). Showing that Allies are able to turn cash into combat-ready capabilities at a greater scale and speed was a top priority in Ankara. The 5% pledge settled *how much*; Ankara was meant to settle *how*.

There is still a long way to go. Russia continues to outpace Europe in terms of arms production, particularly missiles, as European Commissioner for Defence Andrius Kubilius acknowledged on 20 April 2026, before the European Parliament: “Last year annual production of cruise missiles: Russia – 1100; EU – 300; annual production of ballistic missiles: Russia – 900; EU – 0; annual production of artillery ammunition: Russia – 4 mln; European Union – 2 mln; annual production of infantry vehicles: Russia – 3.500; European Union – 500; etc.” (Kubilius 2026). The recent cancellation of the landmark joint New Generation Fighter (NGF) component of the SCAF/FCAS (Future Combat Air System) project by France and Germany illustrates how national incentives can slow cooperation, even when joint production makes strategic sense. The lack of alignment between the strategic visions of Europeans and Americans makes it difficult to continue the essential discussion on strengthening capabilities and increasing defence production within NATO.

Therefore, it was essential to show that NATO’s money was being used effectively to generate increased defence production, cooperation and joint procurement, all in the service of generating a stronger industrial deterrence for the Alliance. To further reassure the White House of Europeans’ commitment to stepping up their efforts to defend the continent, Rutte spared no effort to bring commitments and real-world evidence of a stronger transatlantic defense industrial production to the table. A series of “big reveal” announcements regarding next generation capability were made at the NATO Summit Defence Industry Forum (NSDIF26) on 7 July. Among the largest announcements was NATO’s decision to

establish a multinational Airbus A400M strategic airlift capability. Regarding air to air refueling, the Alliance also confirmed the expansion of its multinational Airbus A330 Multi-Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) fleet, with the delivery of its tenth aircraft and plans to increase to twelve. NATO is expanding its Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) fleet with the purchase of five Northrup Grumman MQ 4C Triton high-altitude long endurance unmanned aircraft; these will help the Alliance detect threats early, protect its sea lines of communication and support operations in demanding regions such as the High North. With regard to airborne early warning capability, the Allies confirmed procurement of up to ten Saab ‘GlobalEye’ aircraft to succeed its aging Boeing E3-A airborne warning and control systems (AWACS), providing the Alliance with a powerful capability for surveillance and reconnaissance. Next on the list: a secure warfighting cloud and powerful artificial intelligence (AI) models, as made explicit in the Ankara summit declaration (Para. 3).

M. Rutte also unveiled NATO’s new front door to industry, NATO Engine (a network of factories), a program for critical materials and supply chains, and \$217 billion in additional financing commitments from banking institutions (Rutte 2026d). Furthermore, Allies launched NATO’s Drone Edge, a major new initiative that will see \$40 billion invested in unmanned aerial systems, autonomous technologies, counter-drone capabilities, training, and rapid procurement mechanisms; the initiative reflects lessons learned from the war in Ukraine, where drones have become central to intelligence gathering, long-range strikes, and battle-field operations (NATO 2026b). The project

will also establish a faster acquisition marketplace to help Allies introduce new technologies into service more quickly.

Finally, leaders approved one of NATO’s largest logistics projects in decades. The Alliance will invest €27 billion (approximately \$31.8 billion) to modernize fuel storage facilities, distribution networks, pipelines, and energy infrastructure across NATO territory, particularly along the eastern flank. The investment is designed to ensure Allied forces can sustain large-scale military operations during future crises while improving resilience against attacks on critical infrastructure. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte described the project as a historic investment in NATO’s warfighting readiness (NATO 2026c).

1.4 An ‘ironclad’ Article 5

“We, the Heads of State and Government of the North Atlantic Alliance, have gathered in Ankara to reaffirm our ironclad commitment to our collective defence under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and to the transatlantic bond. An attack on one is an attack on all”. The wording of the first paragraph of the Ankara declaration is hardly notable. The last five summit communiqués have all used the same “ironclad” adjective in the first paragraph. However, after repeated verbal assaults by Trump on the Alliance, and doubts about the U.S. commitment to NATO’s mutual defence pact, the Ankara summit had to address the credibility of Article 5. Ultimately, reaffirming the “ironclad Article 5” is an indicator that structural alliance logics continue to outweigh executive-level volatility.

1.5 A big boost for Ukraine

Another key priority for NATO officials at the Ankara summit was to continue institutionalizing long-term allied support for Ukraine, both from individual Allies and from NATO as a whole. Kyiv wanted to build on the positive momentum from the France-hosted G7 summit, where U.S. President Donald Trump expressed a “more realistic view of war in Ukraine,” according to Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney (Reuters 2026a) and joined his counterpart in reaffirming their “unwavering support for Ukraine in defending its freedom, sovereignty, and territorial integrity” and assessing “a new momentum” in Ukraine (G7 leaders’ statement on geopolitical issues 2026). Relations between the Ukrainian and American presidents seemed to have thawed significantly since their infamous spat in 2025 (The White House 2026). Ukraine also wanted to reinforce its position as a strategic security partner for NATO and an emerging security provider for Europe, contributing directly to Euro-Atlantic security through its battlefield experience and low-cost technological innovation.

Ukraine’s strategic advantage translated well into the Ankara declaration. A new element is the recognition of Ukraine as a “contributor” to Europe’s security (Para. 4). In the Turkish capital, NATO members reaffirmed support for Ukraine and pledged further assistance: “For 2026, Allies pledge €70 billion in military equipment, assistance and training for Ukraine and affirm their sovereign commitments to sustaining at least equivalent levels in 2027” (Para.

4).² This provision seems to have triggered the most discussion, particularly among EU countries that have so far not provided substantial financial support to Ukraine and were reluctant to take on additional commitments in the future (Vysotska & Shumilin 2026). Part of the funding will come from existing bilateral pledges and an EU Support Loan for Ukraine facility that provides €60 billion for Ukrainian defence investment and procurement for 2026-2027 (Council of the EU 2026). During a bilateral meeting with Donald Trump on 8 July, the Ukrainian president finally secured, after several repeated requests, a license to manufacture Patriot air defense systems. Trump also announced his readiness to go forward with the co-production of drones. This marks a significant diplomatic win, addressing a capability Ukraine domestically currently lacks. As with any unilateral Trump pronouncement, the pledge warrants caution and domestic production remains at least 16 months away. Still, it offers Kyiv a credible longer-term horizon. Notably, Washington made no parallel commitment to bridge the interim gap in interceptor supply, leaving that burden to Europe.

Although, unlike in previous years, no specific Ukraine-NATO session was held in Ankara, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy emerged as a clear winner at the NATO summit in Türkiye. The drama of February 2025, when Zelensky was reprimanded and humiliated in the Oval Office, has been eclipsed. The ongoing crisis

² During a closed-door meeting of NATO ambassadors in April 2026, SG Rutte raised the idea that countries should allocate 0.25% of their GDP to Ukraine —something Estonia is already doing. Rutte faced opposition from NATO major powers, and ultimately the concept does not feature in the Ankara declaration (Marvanová 2026).

between Ukraine and Poland ³ did not affect the meeting.

1.6 Russia still the main threat

The NATO summit came at a pivotal moment in Russia’s war against Ukraine. The United States and Europe have fundamentally different attitudes towards what has traditionally been the Alliance’s main adversary: the Russian Federation. While Europe – particularly Eastern European and Baltic NATO members – perceives Moscow as a serious and even existential threat, the U.S. no longer sees Russia as a conventional military challenge. While it is coined as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” in the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept (Para. 8), Moscow is only perceived as a “persistent but manageable threat” in the U.S. 2026 National Defense Strategy, with “no position to make a bid for European hegemony” (U.S. NDS 2026, 10). While the Biden administration manoeuvred a cautious and incremental approach – giving Ukraine “whatever it takes” to win –, the Trump administration has made the Allies’ discord over Russia more public (Kavanagh 2026).

However, the rupture between Washington and its European Allies over the ‘Russia threat’ and how this issue affects military planning and even the purpose of NATO itself, was avoided in Ankara. The 8 July declaration retains the wording used in

previous statements and says Russia poses “a long-term threat” to “Euro-Atlantic security and stability” (Para. 2). The message for Moscow is unexpectedly sharp. It reinforces the credibility of the deterrence against Russia while the war in Ukraine shows no sign of subsiding. It reveals the diplomatic course for the coming months. Until now, Donald Trump has rarely acknowledged Russia as the aggressor; instead he sees the conflict as an unnecessary waste of human life caused by two equally delinquent sides, which should end as quickly as possible, irrespective of the durability or the justice of a peace settlement. Although Trump, during his 90-minute phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on 5 July 2026, ahead of the summit in Ankara, again offered to help find a solution to the Ukraine war (TRT World 2026b), he might adopt a more impartial and distant stance in his relationship with Moscow.

1.7 A symbol for Türkiye

The 2026 NATO summit – the second hosted by Türkiye, following Istanbul in 2004 – demonstrated Türkiye’s growing influence within the Alliance and its role as a key actor in regional and global security, an image that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long cultivated.

Türkiye has been a strong NATO Ally for more than 70 years. It has the Alliance’s second-largest army after that of the U.S, controls maritime access to the Black Sea

³ Shortly before the summit, Polish President Karol Nawrocki revoking Poland’s highest military order from President Zelensky, despite objections from Prime Minister Tusk, after the Ukrainian leader named a military unit after the infamous “UPA”, or Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which massacred Poles during World War 2 (Kość 2026).

and makes up much of NATO’s southern flank. With a defense budget reaching 30 billion euros in 2025, Ankara aims to reach NATO’s defense spending target of 3.5% plus 1.5% by the end of 2030. Türkiye is no longer merely at the “crossroads,” as it was during the Cold War; it is a geostrategic player that seeks to advance its own interests through diplomacy, strategy, and military means. Türkiye has still not joined the E.U., but it now has things fellow NATO members in Europe want — a big military, a vibrant defense industry and a leader with a unique ability to charm Donald Trump. Ankara sees itself as a potential bridge in growing NATO divisions (Gider 2026). In a world shaped by multi-centric dynamics and asymmetric threats, the ‘drone empire’ has evolved into an active security producer capable of developing independent strategies within its sphere of influence through its military capabilities, its defense industry and flexible diplomacy, positioning itself as an indispensable regional power (Carrasco 2026; Daily Sabah 2026). Türkiye sought to present itself not merely as the host of the Ankara summit, but as a shaping middle power (Gestaltungsmacht) capable of making an independent contribution to NATO’s strategic adaptation to a multipolar world (Rieck 2026). NATO is planning to establish a multinational rapid-response force in Adana, in the south of the country ⁴ (Soylu 2026a). Istanbul would also host a naval headquarters forming the

Black Sea component of the Coalition of the Willing—which brings together Kiev’s allies—on the shores of the Bosphorus, almost at the mouth of the Black Sea (Soylu 2026b).

Türkiye’s desire for a fresh start in defense cooperation with NATO must first surpass the widespread condemnation it received from the Alliance following the country’s 2019 purchase of Russian S-400 air defense systems. Famously, this fallout resulted in Türkiye’s expulsion from the F-35 fighter jet program. Despite saying “I haven’t totally made up my mind,” President Trump repeatedly hinted that he was considering lifting the ban and would “do something that would make him (Erdoğan) very happy.” ⁵ Just a few days before the summit, Reuters indicated that Washington was planning to strike a deal with Ankara for the sale of “hundreds of millions of dollars” worth of high tech jet engines that would be used to power a new generation of KAAN Turkish fighter jets (Pamuk & Stewart 2026).

2. AFTER THE SUMMIT: SIX ‘UGLY TRUTHS’ SWEEPED UNDER THE RUG IN ANKARA

The seven takeaways above suggest an Alliance that, on paper, delivered: higher spending, new capabilities, a reaffirmed Article 5, and a stronger hand for Ukraine. Yet many of these achievements rest on the

4 The Adana region is also home to the Incirlik Air Base, where U.S., Spanish, Polish, and Qatari troops are stationed. In March 2026, Türkiye’s defense ministry said NATO would deploy a new Patriot missile battery at Incirlik base (The Defense Post 2026).

5 Eighteen Democratic lawmakers have signed a letter urging Congress to block any attempt by the U.S. President to restore Türkiye’s access to the F-35 program (Lawler 2026).

NATO 3.0 premise (European primacy in conventional defense, paired with continued American leadership), whose terms remain unsettled and whose costs and downsides have only begun to surface. The following six ‘ugly truths’ examine the issues and contradictions left unresolved, and at times deliberately unaddressed.

2.1 No ‘road map’ for U.S. redeployment

Trump administration officials and administration policy guidance, including the 2026 National Defense Strategy, have articulated a goal of reducing the U.S. conventional military footprint in Europe. Since October 2025, the Administration has announced plans to withdraw at least 9,000—and possibly up to 13,000—U.S. troops from Europe.⁶ While they have finally come to understand the strategic necessity of developing their own defensive capabilities in order to break free from dependence on the United States, the European Allies have repeatedly asked their American counterparts for clarification on their plans for withdrawal, so that they can make an orderly transition towards a more independent defence structure and thus avoid security gaps. However, the proliferation of confusing announcements from Washington regarding the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe does not make the transfer of responsibility to Europeans for their own collective defense an easy process.

At the Helsingborg meeting of NATO foreign ministers on 22 May 2026, U.S. Secretary

of State Marco Rubio announced that the U.S. military presence in Europe would be “adjusted” (U.S. Department of State 2026a). At the 2026 NATO Defense Ministerial in Brussels, on 18 June, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced “a six-month Department of War review that will examine America’s force posture and basing in Europe” (U.S. Department of War 2026a); “it will be designed to ensure that NATO is moving fast and irreversibly toward Europe leading, stepping up to take primary responsibility for the defense of Europe, stepping up to ensure our forces are postured for America’s global needs, and stepping up to make sure that our access, basing, and overflight are clearly delineated and assured any other country would do the same at the same time.”

In the absence of a clear roadmap — contrary to what Mark Rutte boasted he had secured from Donald Trump — the Allies are wondering whether they can rely on a coherent U.S. strategy, or whether the U.S. President remains stuck in a punitive mindset that shifts with his mood and his views on host country governments. In early May 2026, the White House abruptly announced the withdrawal of 5,000 U.S. troops from Germany, where there are currently 36,000, and the decision to cancel the deployment of a battalion specializing in long-range fire and Tomahawk missiles, authorized by Joe Biden. To all observers, this came across as a ‘punishment’ directed at Friedrich Merz after the German Chancellor publicly criticized the

⁶ In the National Defence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 (FY2026 NDAA (P.L. 119-60)), the U.S. Congress prohibited the use of funds to reduce the number of U.S. military personnel in Europe below 76,000 without being first consulted (Belkin 2026, 11).

US-Israeli military strategy in Iran as ill-conceived. On 15 May, Pete Hegseth suddenly halted the deployment of a brigade of some 4,000 soldiers to Poland, causing confusion in Warsaw - an ally nonetheless considered a ‘model’ by Washington - and within NATO which learned of the news through the press. Maria Malmer Stenergard, the Swedish Foreign Minister who hosted the Helsingborg meeting— the first for fledgling NATO member Sweden -, qualified the current situation as rather “confusing”; “It’s not always easy to make sense of it all,” she added.⁷ The forced departure of General Christopher Donahue, commanding general of U.S. Army Europe and Africa and commander of NATO’s Allied Land Command, on 2 July, also worried Europeans, who saw him as a man aware of the dangers ahead.

The U.S. redeployment has an obvious impact on its contribution to the “NATO force model,” meaning the size of its forces capable of deploying to Europe in the event of a major crisis (Belkin 2026, 9; Gordon 2026; RUSI 2026).⁸ But, more than the number of soldiers, it is the type of equipment that may be withdrawn which concerns Europeans, who lack capabilities in air defense, deep-strike and intelligence capabilities, and troop transport.

In June 2026, the U.S. said it plans to significantly reduce the number of aircraft, warships, and military capabilities it makes available for NATO operations in Europe which it outlined in writing to the Allies (*Asharq Al Awsat* 2026).⁹ With the U.S. burden-sharing demand and capability withdrawal occurring simultaneously rather than sequentially, these uncoordinated moves risk undermining the ‘principle of equality of arms’¹⁰ and NATO’s ability to launch long-range strikes and conduct surveillance operations. They would deprive Europeans of an essential means of deterrence against Russia, especially when it comes to ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) - specifically satellite systems and early warning airborne surveillance systems - as well as air and missile defense, long-range fires, and cyber, artificial intelligence, and electronic warfare capabilities (Fix & Terkhorn 2026). Building an armoured brigade, acquiring additional combat aircraft, or developing an indigenous armed drone fleet cannot be accomplished in the timeframe in which American assets are being reduced. “The reality remains that even as Allies move toward spending 5% of GDP on defense, translating that investment into the military capability needed to assume primary responsibility for conventional

7 Sweden FM Maria Malmer Stenergard Strong Message At NATO, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lq9ssikzslQ>.

8 The Pentagon also informed Allies that the U.S. plans to cut roughly 200 staff stationed in NATO command centers, on a total of 400 (Slattery, Landay & Pamuk 2026).

9 Of the 2 US aircraft carriers previously assigned to NATO, one will be withdrawn; of 2 strategic bombers, only one will remain, the number of F15 and F15E fighter jets will reduce by a third to 99, MQ9 and MQ4 Reaper drones by half to 12, KC135 and KC 46 refuelling aircraft from 79 to 63, maritime patrol aircraft from 26 to 15 and destroyers from 17 to 9. A cruise missile submarine (the only one committed) will also be withdrawn (Shea 2026).

10 The “principle of equality of arms,” a legal concept derived from human rights law, guarantees that all parties in legal proceedings have a reasonable, balanced opportunity to present their case without being placed at a substantial disadvantage relative to their opponent. Here we transpose it to military doctrine.

deterrence will take time. Prematurely reducing America's forward presence in Europe before those capabilities are fully realized risks undermining deterrence and sending the wrong signal to Vladimir Putin," U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and U.S. Representative Mike Rogers, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, warned in a joint statement (U.S. House Armed Services Committee 2026). Even Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk warned that Trump's moves look like "Putin's dream plan" (Cannon 2026).

What Europeans really need is NATO's force planning mechanism to reflect what U.S. capabilities will be available to the Alliance in the future, so that they can coordinate to fill the gaps. Ankara could have been the venue for more clarity and predictability about the U.S. plans and the opportunity of a timeline to guide European expectations, as well as consultation with Allies; something akin to a 'roadmap' for a structured transition. It must have been a disappointment: Ankara did not resolve NATO's underlying tension between American retrenchment and European capability; Europeans are unlikely to get a structured process toward a 'NATO 3.0'.

2.2 'Good' and 'bad' Allies: The poison of division between Europeans

Investments have not been equal. Germany will reach 3.5 percent by 2029 already with debt-financed rearmament spending. Poland is heading towards 5% and the Baltic States are at or already above the 3.5 percent, while France, Italy, Spain and the UK still face a steeper climb toward the Hague target by

2035.

On 18 June 2026, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth praised the progress on military spending made by U.S. allies, while noting that some needed to do more. Hegseth made clear that changes to U.S. force posture and U.S. financial contributions could be "contingent on other countries meeting their defense spending targets. Where other Allies do not spend with urgency, our cues and contributions will go down" (U.S. Secretary of War 2026a). Washington might be considering ways to reward high-performing Allies - notably through preferential access to the U.S. government or priority in military equipment deliveries - and ways to punish underachievers. Drawdowns will probably continue to be driven by a system of reward and punishment for 'good' and 'bad' Allies, a concept determined by politics and not defense spending alone.

2.3 EU strategic autonomy or more dependency on the U.S.?

Since Trump's election in 2024, Europeans have been buying a lot from the United States: AH-64E Apache Helicopters for Poland; F-35A Lightning II fighter jets for Romania; Multi-Mission Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Aircraft P-8A for Denmark; Missile 6 Block I and Missile 2 Block IIIC for Germany; AIM-120D-3 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles for Finland; AIM-9X Block II Tactical Missiles and MK 54 MOD 0 Lightweight Torpedoes for Norway; Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles and AIM-120D3 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles for the Netherlands;

Hellfire missiles for Belgium; Javelin missiles for Estonia (Atlantic Council 2026). The U.S. has actively lobbied against the EU’s ‘prefer European’ defense policies, arguing that American technology - like fifth-generation F-35s, satellites, and heavy logistics gear - is indispensable to modern combat operations (Kayali 2026). The Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) initiative¹¹ has tied Europeans’ hands. According to the Department of Defense, as of March 2026, NATO Allies and partners had committed more than \$4.8 billion in PURL-related assistance, of which about \$4.2 billion had been transferred (U.S. Department of Defense 2026). A June 2026 assessment by the Atlantic Council estimated that Allies had committed \$5.5 billion to purchases through PURL (Taylor & Trunkey 2026).¹²

The Ankara summit confirmed that U.S. firms want their share of the gold rush as Europe rearms. A large share of the tens of billion worth of new procurement commitments announced in the margins of the summit were awarded to the U.S.: new contracts worth more than \$1 billion (€880 million) for 200 Patriot missiles for Poland; \$1.15 billion (€1 billion) for precision-guided artillery shells and \$12.8 billion including Arctic satellite communications alongside the GlobalEye,

Airbus and Triton systems (Murray 2026). Trump did not hide that American equipment would be the “largest beneficiary” of the process; “they want the American equipment because it works better,” he added. This aligns well with Mark Rutte’s plan to keep Donald Trump from turning his back on NATO: promise new defense deals that benefit the U.S. (Jack & Barigazzi 2026). This ‘dependency 3.0’ quite cynically contradicts the NATO 3.0 logic - partnership, not dependency.

In the background, the dynamics are shifting, though. Pressure on European Allies to buy more from the U.S. is likely to open up a rift with the EU. Brussels has pushed hard to favor European defense firms in the programs it is financing. The more Europeans spend, the more they will demand design authority and intellectual property rights (Besch, Coskun, Reynolds & Wertheim 2026). With the war in Iran making purchase of U.S. equipment even more uncertain, Europeans are fed up with the contradictory demands from the U.S. which asks them to invest more but to buy American weapons - which it then cannot deliver. However, it would be naive to assume that the U.S. will loosen its grip on NATO 3.0. “NATO is and will remain a collective defense organization with an American

11 Under PURL, NATO military commanders identify military equipment and munitions needed by Ukraine that the United States can provide in greater volumes than other Allies. European Allies and Canada then purchase the equipment, and NATO coordinates delivery to Ukraine through its Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU).

12 PURL has supplied approximately 70% of all missiles for Ukraine’s Patriot batteries, and 90% of the ammunition used in other air defense systems.

DNA. Strategically, operationally, and industrially, it will be an American organization with better-armed but not more autonomous Europeans,” Nathalie Tocci, professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Europe, assessed (quoted by Jacqu   2026).

2.4 Ultimately, has the EU’s quest for strategic autonomy been weakened in Ankara?

At a moment marked by geopolitical tension, hybrid threats, and growing uncertainty around transatlantic cooperation, the relationship between the EU and NATO is under pressure — and more important than ever. The two ensembles, sharing similar membership, geographical scope and interests, have always had a close and mutually beneficial relationship. After the 2022 war in Ukraine, cooperation deepened significantly (Simonet 2023).

Yet, this partnership is also facing strain as the United States’ frustration and skepticism with the EU could dampen increasing cooperation between the two entities under the Trump administration. Trump has been famously hostile to the Union, preferring to negotiate with individual leaders and seeing the project as fundamentally opposed to U.S. national interests (Galindo 2018). With the U.S. 2025 National Security Strategy and Trump officials endorsing euroskeptic leaders such as former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orb  n and holding friendly meetings with leaders of the AFD in Germany, the rift turned ideological.

On 16 April 2026, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte agreed to bolster EU-NATO ties ahead of the Ankara

summit, focusing on accelerating European defense industrial capacity and investment. The Europeans worked together closely to prepare the summit: the E3 – Prime Minister Keir Starmer of the UK, President Emmanuel Macron of France, and Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany – met on 7 June with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in London; the E5 – plus Italy and Poland – on 24 June with NATO Secretary-General. On the spot, though, several initiatives that Mark Rutte unveiled resemble EU’s policies, suggesting a duplication of EU and NATO’s respective tasks. The new multinational High Visibility Project on defence critical raw materials launched on 7 July 2026, bringing together 12 NATO Allies to work jointly on strengthening the resilience of defence supply chains (NATO 2026a), is an effort in which the European Commission was already engaged. Same for the platform to help the industry identify needs and contracts for European defense companies: here, too, the EU had initially taken the lead. The risk is that EU members with a tradition of Atlanticism will turn to NATO rather than the EU to move these issues forward more quickly and scale them up more easily. This could explain France’s relative discretion at the NSDIF26, an event designed primarily to highlight transatlantic collaboration and procurement from the United States. While Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland were particularly at ease and visible, Paris – which has been fighting for years to promote European autonomy in matters of defense – preferred to keep a low profile.

2.5 No more out-of-area operations: But why so much about Iran?

With the ‘NATO 3.0’ concept, Washington has been promoting a return to the roots, in opposition to NATO 2.0, “no longer focused on defending Europe, (...) drifted toward out-of-area operations and things that had nothing to do with war fighting at all” (U.S. Department of War 2026a & 2026b). That was before Trump brought the Iran issue to the forefront of the summit. In the Ankara declaration, “Allies reiterate that Iran must never have a nuclear weapon and call on Iran to fully respect freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz” (Para. 5). The wording is notably weak: a call on Tehran to respect freedom of navigation commits the Alliance to nothing, and the nuclear formulation merely restates a bare-minimum position NATO has held for years.

Yet the Gulf crisis was present in Ankara well beyond the text. Several Gulf partners attended the summit that had themselves borne the brunt of Iranian attacks. Their presence sits uneasily with the ‘no more out-of-area’ framing: if NATO 3.0 is meant to refocus the Alliance squarely on Euro-Atlantic defence, the prominence of a Gulf-adjacent crisis in Ankara suggests the logic is not being applied consistently or that “out-of-area” has simply been redefined rather than abandoned.

This tension is compounded by NATO 3.0’s broader ambition as a template for global rebalancing. The same logic pushing Europe to take primary responsibility for its own conventional defence is being extended to Indo-Pacific allies, who are being encouraged

to shoulder more of the burden for regional threats such as North Korea (The White House 2025). Whether this rebalancing logic is meant to apply to the Gulf as well, with regional partners assuming responsibility for containing Iran, remains unaddressed. Ankara offered no indication either way, leaving the geographic boundaries of NATO 3.0 undefined in practice.

Türkiye’s position added a further layer. Ankara maintains comparatively good relations with Tehran, and hosting a summit that manages to reference Iran without antagonizing it arguably counts as another quiet win for Erdoğan, reinforcing his self-styled role as a regional mediator.

Neither did the U.S. nor Türkiye request Article 4 consultations after attacks on U.S. forces in the Middle East and after Iranian missiles hit Turkish soil. Under the NATO Treaty, therefore, there is no obligation for NATO Members to participate in military action out of the North Atlantic area begun by one State Party to the Treaty. Still, Iran remains a tension in the transatlantic relationship, one which some European NATO Members are eager to ease; hence the willingness of the G7 countries to help President Donald Trump with next steps in Iran, including a complicated effort to remove mines from the Strait of Hormuz contingent on the US-Iran ceasefire holding (Harding & Rose 2026; Ward, Caulcutt, Webber & Leali 2026). With fighting having resumed, that option appears to be off the table again; a reminder of how contingent even modest Alliance initiatives in the Gulf remain on a volatile ceasefire.

2.6 Türkiye: Indispensable yet out of control

From 2019, the year Ankara purchased the Russian S-400 missile defense systems, to 2024, when the country blocked Sweden’s entry into NATO for the sake of petty nationalist gains, Türkiye has given its Allies a hard time, both in Syria – strong disagreement with U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces –, in Eastern Mediterranean and in the Aegean sea. Frequent clashes with European governments have made it one of NATO’s most difficult Allies to manage. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan sparked international backlash by stating in a television interview that Israel has become “a burden that humanity can no longer bear”. Both Minister Fidan and Defense Minister Yaşar Güler promoted their country’s multi-alignment and ‘forum shopping’ policy, based on Türkiye’s national interests (TRT World 2026a). They highlighted that the era of absolute reliance on a single alliance was over and that NATO needed to be supplemented with diverse security mechanisms in an increasingly unpredictable geopolitical environment. Turkey’s approach is aimed at maximizing national freedom of action both inside and beyond NATO. Ankara’s own version of ‘strategic autonomy’ – a policy inherited from the former foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu (2009–2014) – differs considerably from similar debates within the European Union.

On 16-17 June 2026, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan traveled to Moscow, where he met with Vladimir Putin. The meeting yielded few concrete results, but it fulfilled its symbolic and geopolitical purpose: to show the world, three weeks before the Ankara summit, that Türkiye has managed to return to the center

of the NATO arena, while maintaining channels of communication with the Alliance’s ‘best enemy.’

Erdoğan’s Turkey has never been so far removed from the principles of the EU and NATO, a defensive alliance but also a community of democratic values “based on its member countries’ common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law” (NATO’s purpose 2025). And yet, it has never been so indispensable. Türkiye’s assets are seen as critical for NATO’s future – and Erdoğan’s increasingly autocratic governance is a concern for another day (Hubbard 2026). The Ankara summit might be the start of a more ideologically ‘flexible’ NATO marked by a typically Trumpian relativism, where political and military priorities outweigh individual rights and freedoms.

“NATO’s Turkey paradox” (Mammadov 2026) and the country’s ‘forced’ inclusion into the broader European security architecture is a concern for the EU. Persistent objections from several EU member states to institutional cooperation with Ankara on EU-led security and defense initiatives have led to Türkiye’s exclusion from the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) program (EU Commission 2026; Gasco 2025; Besch, Coskun, Reynolds & Wertheim 2026). The EU makes the inclusion of a third country in SAFE contingent on its alignment with the EU’s foreign and security policy (CFSP). In Türkiye’s case, this alignment was estimated at 4% in 2025, a historically low level dropping from 6% in 2024. This decrease reflects Türkiye’s pursuit of strategic autonomy, its refusal to align with EU sanctions against Russia, and differing approaches to Middle Eastern conflicts

(EU Commission 2025; EU Reflect 2025). The fragile relations between Türkiye and Israel further complicate the situation for the EU, which is already divided over Israel’s actions in the Middle East. Eventually, however, the EU member states might be forced to align for the sake of *realpolitik*.

CONCLUSION: A MILITARILY STRONGER, BUT MORE POLITICALLY FRAGILE NATO

The summit in Türkiye, the first real-world test of what NATO coins ‘NATO 3.0,’ concluded without any major setbacks. A façade of unity has been preserved in Ankara. NATO showed the capacity to absorb Washington’s reorientation without fracturing. The specter of a U.S. withdrawal¹³ has temporarily receded. With his support for an “Ironclad Article 5”, the U.S. President has been willing to set aside his skepticism, at least for now. It seems that the Americans have realized that they have nothing to gain from dismantling NATO. Without its bases in Europe (Ramstein in Germany, Rota in Spain), the U.S. military no longer has the same power of projection. A U.S. withdrawal would also jeopardize the highly profitable standardization system implemented by Washington through the pursuit of interoperability among the military equipment of NATO member countries - the alpha and omega of the alliance’s military organization - which greatly benefits the U.S. defence

industry. As former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul, a professor at Stanford University, pointed out, the United States needs NATO to be competitive in this new era of rivalry among great powers: “pragmatic leaders must lead the way by reforming and strengthening NATO, not by dismantling it” (McFaul 2026).

With the Ankara summit, NATO enters a new era - one in which it is better prepared for cost-effective technological solutions and high-intensity warfare, more reliant on its own military capacity, yet equally exposed to internal political tensions (Atalan 2026). Trump’s controversial comments on Spain and his return to his Greenland refrain, have widened an already growing rift. Even if the Allies managed to avoid a confrontation in Ankara, “NATO will remain only one Truth Social post away from disaster as long as Trump is in the White House” (Taylor 2026, 6). Global loss of confidence in NATO shows just how much Donald Trump’s rhetoric has taken hold among the American public. A Pew Research Center survey published on April 6, 2026, revealed that a majority of Americans (59%) continue to view NATO membership favorably, driven heavily by Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (82% of whom see benefits). However, disapproval of NATO among Republicans hits a record high. For the first time, a clear majority of Republicans (60%) said the U.S. does not benefit from NATO membership,

¹³ Which would have been legally impossible without the consent of the Congress. Section 1250A of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (NDAA; P.L. 118-31) states, “The President shall not suspend, terminate, denounce, or withdraw the United States from [NATO] ... except by and with the advice and consent of the Senate.”

marking a significant partisan divide (Fagan & Gubbala 2026).¹⁴

Taken together, the takeaways and uncomfortable truths outlined above describe the same phenomenon from two angles: NATO 3.0 as the framework Allies were willing to endorse in principle, and NATO 3.0 as a set of unresolved trade-offs over command authority, burden-shifting, and strategic autonomy that Ankara deferred rather than settled.

The question is now NATO’s relevance on the long term. Is NATO 3.0 a durable architectural redesign, or is it a performative arrangement built on unsustainable contradictions? Between Europeans assembling the building blocks of a Europeanized security order and the U.S. reducing their involvement and constantly undermining the Alliance, will NATO remain the only relevant game in town? For now, the answer is clearly yes, but there is a wider picture that increasingly matters for the future of European security (Möller 2026, 8). Assuming that Europe funds, produces for, and operationally leads its own conventional defense, why would it remain subordinate in command structure – SACEUR, nuclear decisions, U.S.-centered standardization? Historical precedent suggests operational responsibility and subordinate status are not a stable long-term

combination. Now that the dust has been settled and the Potemkin-like Ankara returned to its normal life, it is time for NATO members to consider what a future Alliance might look like – with or without the United States.

¹⁴ Such decline of public trust in NATO can be observed in several other allied countries. For instance, Turkish public opinion’s support for NATO remains positive but is declining: 61% believe that the Atlantic Alliance is important for the country, which is four percentage points lower than in 2018 (Türkiye Today 2026a). In the Netherlands, 66% of adults have a favorable view of the Alliance in 2025, down from 75% in 2024. Similarly, this share has declined 9 points in Greece and 7 points in Poland (Fagan, Gubbala & Poushter 2025).

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