

A U.S. Agenda for the December NATO Leaders Meeting in London

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

For 70 years, NATO and the U.S. military presence in Europe have contributed to European and American stability. Continued U.S. leadership in NATO is vital.

The U.S. should use the December 2–3 NATO meeting in London to reaffirm partner commitments on defense spending, deterring Russia, and enlarging the Alliance.

The main focus should be Russia—Moscow continues to pressure the Alliance, expose cracks among member states, and undermine NATO deterrence measures.

On December 2 and 3, the heads of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries will meet in London. Although the upcoming Leaders Meeting is not billed at a Summit, it will still serve as an important gathering for the Alliance. Not only is 2019 the 70th anniversary of the Alliance, but holding the meeting in London on the eve of Brexit reaffirms the U.K.'s importance to overall European security. The U.S. should use this meeting to reaffirm important NATO positions on defense spending, deterring Russia, NATO enlargement, and NATO relations with Ukraine and Georgia.

A Stable Europe Is Important to the U.S.

Some of America's oldest and closest allies are in Europe. The U.S. and Europe share a strong commitment to the rule of law, human rights, free markets,

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and democracy. Many of these ideas, the foundations on which America was built, were brought over by the millions of immigrants from Europe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. During the course of the 20th century, millions of Americans fought, and many died, for a free and secure Europe.

A stable, secure, and economically viable Europe is in America's economic interest. For 70 years, NATO and the U.S. military presence in Europe have contributed to European stability, which has benefited both Europeans and Americans economically and made them safer. The economies of Europe, along with the United States, account for approximately half of the global economy. The U.S. and the European Union are each other's principal trading partners. The U.S. and the EU are each other's top source of foreign direct investment. All of this brings untold benefits to the U.S. economy and, by extension, the American worker. The stability that NATO provides, at relatively low cost to the U.S. taxpayer, is what makes all of this possible.

The U.S. should focus on the following five issues at the meeting:

1. Russia. The main focus should be on Russia. From the Arctic to the Levant, Russia remains an aggressive and capable threat to NATO and the interests of its members. Russia continues to occupy parts of Georgia and Ukraine. Moscow is the primary enabler of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's killing machine in Syria. It is a fact that Russia meddles in U.S. elections and that of its allies across Europe.

While the likelihood of a conventional Russian attack against a NATO member state remains low, it cannot be entirely discounted. In the interim, Russia is likely to use a host of tools in unison to pressure the Alliance, expose cracks among member states, and undermine NATO deterrence measures. At the upcoming meeting in London the U.S. should:

- **Ensure that deterring Russian aggression is an explicit—and the top—agenda item.** Russia represents a real and potentially existential threat to NATO members in Eastern and Central Europe, and a significant threat and challenge to the rest of the Alliance. As NATO continues its transition back to collective defense, now is not the time to be coy about why defense is necessary. Allies should talk openly and frankly about the threat from Russia, and which steps are being taken to deter Russia and bolster defensive capabilities.
- **Call for the development of a new Strategic Concept.** A NATO Strategic Concept is an official document that outlines the geopolitical and security challenges facing the Alliance, and the strategy that should be adapted to deal with these challenges. The last NATO

Strategic Concept was published in 2010, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Arab Spring, the migrant crisis, and Russia's intervention in Syria. It is time for the Alliance to update the Strategic Concept.

2. Defense Spending. President Donald Trump did a notable job of raising the issue of European defense spending and his message has been echoed by senior U.S. officials. Reaching the 2 percent benchmark requires a political, economic, and societal will to invest in defense. While some NATO members have increased defense spending, many nations in the Alliance continue to lag behind. In order to encourage NATO members to further increase defense spending in a realistic and timely way, the U.S. needs to:

- **Continue to press allies on defense spending.** President Trump should continue to address this directly with his European counterparts both leading up to and during the meeting.
- **Involve finance ministers.** NATO should agree to hold a special session for finance ministers (or their equivalent) at the next Ministerial Meeting. In many parliamentary democracies, it is the finance minister who controls public spending. Educating the finance ministers on the importance of military investment might help to secure more defense spending over the long term.
- **Encourage European partners to make increased defense spending the law of the land.** Some European countries have passed legislation requiring that a certain amount be spent on international aid and have failed to do the same with regard to defense spending. The U.S. should encourage NATO members to enshrine defense spending commitments and timelines in legislation. This would help to increase transparency and political accountability.

3. Open-Door Policy. NATO's open-door policy for qualified countries has contributed greatly to transatlantic security since the first round of enlargement in 1952, helping to ensure the Alliance's central place as the prime guarantor of security in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty's Article 10 states that any European state that is "in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area"¹

1. The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 10, April 4, 1949, last updated March 21, 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm (accessed November 22, 2019).

can be invited to join the Alliance. Montenegro most recently joined the Alliance in May 2017. Macedonia will be the next to join. This leaves two official candidate countries to join NATO at a future date: Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia. In the longer term there is the expectation that Ukraine will join. In London NATO should:

- **Keep the door open.** The U.S. should ensure that NATO's open-door policy is explicitly clear in any communiqué, joint statement, or messaging coming out of the Leaders Meeting.
- **Make clear that Russia does not have a veto right.** Russia should never be seen as having a veto over a potential country's membership in NATO, including Ukraine. Just because a country was once occupied by the Soviet Union or under the domination of the Russian Empire does not mean it is blocked from joining the Alliance in perpetuity.

4. Ukraine. Ukraine is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation: the West or Russia. The outcome of this struggle will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the notion of national sovereignty. Since 2014, almost 5 percent of Ukraine's landmass, and more than half of its coastline, have been under illegal Russian occupation in Crimea.

Modern Ukraine represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path and to decide with whom it has relations and how, and by whom it is governed. No outside actor (in this case Russia) should have a veto on membership or closer relations with organizations like the European Union or NATO. In many ways, the future viability of the transatlantic community will be decided in the Donbas, the region in eastern Ukraine where the fighting has been taking place. At the Leaders Meeting, the U.S. and NATO must:

- **Speak with a clear and united voice.** NATO must continue to present a united voice against Russia's aggression against Ukraine, reiterating the need for a complete restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity.
- **Improve the quality of non-lethal support to Ukraine.** While the sale of Javelin missiles is a good step, NATO needs to improve the quality of non-lethal equipment, especially in terms of secure communications and more capable unmanned aerial vehicles.

5. Georgia. Few countries in Europe express as much enthusiasm for NATO as Georgia—even though it is not yet a member of the Alliance. The NATO–Georgian relationship has never been closer, but more work remains to be done. Georgia was first promised eventual membership at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008. Since then, this commitment to membership has been reaffirmed at each subsequent NATO summit. Not all members of the Alliance have been as supportive as they could be. This is especially true of those NATO members that have an uncomfortably close relationship with Russia. The U.S. and NATO should:

- **Ensure that the Alliance is clear about Georgia’s future membership.** NATO’s leaders should make it clear that Georgia’s successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to membership.
- **Refer to the Russian military presence as an occupation.** In the summit declaration, NATO should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an occupation. To date, many European countries have failed to use this terminology. Given events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, it is more important than ever that NATO send a united and clear message.

America Must Lead

Since its creation in 1949, NATO has done more to promote democracy, peace, economic prosperity, and security in Europe than any other multilateral organization, including the European Union. It is essential that the U.S. continue to be an active participant in the alliance’s future. U.S. leadership is crucial.

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