

NATO Summit Madrid: Reinforcing Deterrence at This Crucial Time Is in the U.S. National Interest

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

A clear-eyed, capable NATO will lessen the chance of a broader conflagration pitting the U.S. and NATO against Russia in a direct military confrontation.

Russia's second invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, underscores the importance of military capabilities in an era of great-power competition.

The U.S. must ensure that the Madrid Summit propels its allies toward a whole-sale recommitment to collective defense and all that entails.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) summit in Madrid on June 29 and 30 comes at a consequential moment for the Alliance. Russia's unprovoked second invasion of Ukraine, the ensuing war that has resulted in the deaths of at least 4,000 Ukrainian civilians,¹ and the displacement of over 14 million people is very likely a fulcrum in history. The transatlantic community will not return to the pre-invasion relations with Russia and must plan accordingly. As the shock of Russia's invasion on February 24 has evolved into the realization that the war is likely to grind on, the transatlantic community must steel itself for the long haul.

For NATO, the Madrid Summit is an opportunity to expand upon the initiatives announced at the Brussels Summit in April, fulfilling the immediate need for further deterrence measures in Eastern Europe with

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a clear-eyed resolve, while putting in place plans to ensure that NATO has the capabilities to continue tackling challenges over the long term. While the summit provides a historic opportunity, the danger is that the summit will merely repackage half measures—which Russia would see as a sign of weakness, inviting further aggression. The U.S. must ensure that the Madrid Summit fulfills its potential. For the United States, a stable, secure Europe is firmly in U.S. national interest, and a stable and secure Europe begins and ends with a vigorous NATO capable of deterring Russian aggression against its member states.

The past few months have underscored the reality that, while many European nations have stepped up, there is no substitute for U.S. leadership within NATO. As such, the U.S. should ensure that NATO implements measures that bolster deterrence immediately while laying the groundwork for retaining strength in the long term through robust defense investment. The U.S. should propel its allies toward a wholesale recommitment to collective defense and all that entails: robust, lasting commitments to defense spending, moving beyond tripwire forces in Eastern European member states toward a force posture of deterrence with broad participation across the Alliance; swift consideration of Finland and Sweden in NATO; and support for member states that are aiding Ukrainian forces.

In the U.S. National Interest: A Robust NATO

For economic, political, and security reasons, the U.S. maintains a central interest in the peace and security of the European continent. While Russia's second invasion of Ukraine has proven profoundly destabilizing, the core mission of NATO, to deter aggression against member states, remains intact, and Russia has thus far shied away from any direct military action against a NATO member state. To avoid further miscalculations and lessen the chance that Vladimir Putin strikes a NATO member, the Alliance must bolster its deterrence posture, starting with fleshing out the promises of the Brussel Summit to put in place new forces to deter Russian aggression and, if necessary, defeat an invasion of a NATO country.

In response to Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, NATO created an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) of four multinational battalions in each of the Baltic states and Poland. While the force size in each battalion, typically 1,000 to 1,500 troops, is small, the idea was to deploy a multinational force as a signal of resolve as well as a so-called tripwire to ensure that, should Russia invade, the battalion would not only slow down any advance but also provide critical political insurance that member states contributing

troops would literally have skin (or, more accurately, lives) in the game to galvanize their sustained involvement in the conflict.

This spring in Brussels, the Alliance announced the creation of four additional battalions, one each stationed in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. While the Alliance's decision to create additional battalions is helpful, it is clear that a small tripwire force does not provide the deterrence effect that a larger force, complete with enablers, such as air defenses, could. Recently, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz backed the calls of Lithuanian officials (where Germany leads the EFP battalion) to create a brigade-size presence (usually 3,000 to 5,000 troops).²

Defense Spending

As an intergovernmental security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its member states. For years, many U.S. NATO allies failed to live up to their Article 3 commitments in the North Atlantic Treaty to “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”³ In 2006, in an effort to encourage defense investment, NATO set a target for member states to spend 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. At the 2014 Wales Summit, member states recommitted to spending 2 percent of GDP on defense and committed to spending 20 percent of their defense budgets on “major equipment” purchases by 2024.

NATO defense spending has steadily risen, particularly since Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014. A combination of heightened threat perception, and a keen U.S. focus on Allied defense spending commitments, particularly under the Trump Administration, fueled the trend. In 2021, eight allies hit the benchmark of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense (in 2014 only three met the benchmark), and 21 allies hit the benchmark to spend 20 percent of their defense budgets on “major new capabilities” (as opposed to seven in 2014).⁴ The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led additional allies to commit to 2 percent, including Denmark, Germany, Slovakia, and Spain, while leading to further increases by Poland and Romania, which had already hit the benchmarks but plan to raise defense spending to 3 percent and 2.5 percent of GDP respectively.

While these are positive trends with real implications for the Alliance's ability to carry out its core mission of collective defense, member states can and should do more to increase their defense capabilities. Furthermore, it is important not to be complacent about the positive trajectory—ongoing economic strains lingering from the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with high inflation mean that defense budgets are sure to come under pressure

in many nations. The commitment to prioritizing defense spending must be a national commitment made again and again; ultimately it is the only way that NATO can sustain the necessary capabilities to defend its member states.

A NATO alliance that is clear in its commitments to defend every inch of its territory and has the determination, capabilities, and political will to do so, will lessen the chance of a broader conflagration that pits the U.S. and its NATO allies in a direct military confrontation with Russia. Half-measures create space for ambiguity, opening space for interpretation by Moscow, a dangerous prospect considering Putin's clear miscalculations in Ukraine, both in terms of Ukraine's will and ability to fight, and in terms of the Western response.

At the upcoming summit in Madrid, the U.S. must ensure that NATO closes off such space for misinterpretation by Russia. To do this, the U.S. should:

- **Focus NATO's new strategic concept on its raison d'être of collective defense.** In Madrid, the Alliance will adopt a new strategic concept (the current one has not been updated since 2010). The world has changed dramatically over the past 12 years, and the new concept should take these changes into account. The U.S. should ensure, however, that its principal focus on collective defense rises clearly above all other tasks.
- **Reaffirm the importance of Article 3.** Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty is the most important when it comes to the overall health of the Alliance. Article 3 states that member states, at a minimum, will "maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." Only a handful of NATO members can legitimately say that they are living up to their Article 3 commitment. This is a case where "naming and shaming" should play a role. The U.S. should focus on those nations that do not have a plan to increase defense spending.
- **Encourage NATO members to make increased defense spending the law of the land.** Some allies have passed legislation requiring that their governments spend a certain amount of GDP on international aid, while failing to do the same for 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.

- **Call a special meeting to renew focus on defense spending.** NATO should call for a special session in Madrid to discuss the need for immediate commitment of allies to meeting NATO defense spending benchmarks. This session should include as many finance ministers as possible. In many parliamentary democracies, it is the finance minister who controls public spending. Educating the finance ministers on the importance of military investment could help to secure more defense spending over the long term.
- **Encourage allies to make a public case for defense spending.** An average of 71 percent of the publics of NATO members believes that their country should defend another NATO ally if attacked.⁵ To honor this commitment, a nation must have the appropriate capabilities and manpower. NATO leaders, including leaders in the U.S., should not take public support for membership for granted. Instead, the strategic review should encourage governments to strongly and consistently make the case for NATO, and for the importance of robust defense spending, to their publics.
- **Support the swift consideration of Finland and Sweden to NATO.**⁶ The inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO will bolster transatlantic security by adding two countries with the capability and willingness to contribute. General Christopher Cavoli, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Europe and Africa, recently testified that “[e]ach of those militaries brings quite a bit of capability and capacity to the alliance from day one.”⁷ Finnish and Swedish membership will also better secure critical regions, such as the Arctic, Baltic, and Nordic regions, through updated operational planning and negating any perceived strategic ambiguity, while adding two countries with a proven record of standing up against China. While President Joe Biden and the Senate should support Finnish and Swedish accession, there is a clear need for active U.S. leadership to unblock the impasse over Turkish objections to Swedish accession. The U.S. should ensure that Finland’s and Sweden’s historic decisions to apply for membership do not wither on the vine.
- **Consider a persistent and continuing presence in Eastern European member states.** Since Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. has bolstered its troop levels in Europe, almost exclusively through the use of rotational forces. But, while new rotational forces

in Europe certainly improve deterrence, they are an unequal substitute for a sustained forward stationed force. Living, operating, and training where the fighting will occur is an advantage that both U.S. allies and adversaries enjoy. A sustained presence of U.S. forces allows better person-to-person contacts with allies, as well as improved doctrinal, technical, and cultural interoperability. Recently, General Cavoli echoed this view stating that “permanently assigned forces are more operationally effective, as they remain fully oriented to the operational environment and can become interoperable with our allies and partners.”⁸ Persistent and continuing deployments could include a U.S. Army heavy division in Poland (not just the headquarters, but a division with three full brigade combat teams) with supporting air defense and long-range fires, or stationing a U.S. Air Force wing in Europe.

- **Encourage NATO allies to lead the way in transitioning NATO’s eastern battalions from tripwire forces to forces of deterrence.** In Madrid, NATO should announce a decision to expand the eight battalions to brigades with enablers, consisting of robust contributions from allies across Europe and Canada.⁹
- **Continue to build out missile defense capabilities.** At the 2021 Brussels Summit, NATO reaffirmed a commitment to “deliver a NATO Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) capability.”¹⁰ The threat to the Alliance from enemy ballistic missiles remains and as such NATO should continue to seek ways to build out its BMD capabilities, including encouraging allies to invest in components to help the Alliance to deliver on the capability, including investing in BMD-capable ships.
- **Increase the U.S. Naval presence near Russia.** U.S. military planners should not underestimate the importance of a robust Naval component for deterrence. The U.S. should ensure a continued robust Naval presence in key regions, such as the North Atlantic, the eastern Mediterranean, and the northern Pacific, as a means of additional deterrence against Russia. Given Russia’s most recent invasion of Ukraine, near-term consideration should be given to increased Naval presence in the Baltic Sea to signal commitment to Baltic NATO members to protect U.S. national security interests.
- **Back Alliance efforts to aid Ukraine.** NATO allies continue to aid Ukrainian forces through donations of aid, munitions, weapons, and

intelligence. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia are repairing Ukrainian equipment. Estonia and Latvia donated the equivalent of approximately one-third of their military budgets to Ukraine, Poland donated around 13 percent, and Slovakia nearly 12 percent.¹¹ The U.S. and the U.K. have taken the lead in coordinating distribution of aid to the Ukrainian military,¹² and NATO should ensure (by helping to coordinate) that the depleted stocks donated by member states are backfilled in a timely manner.

Conclusion

Russia's second invasion of Ukraine has exposed the naivete of those on both sides of the Atlantic who believed that Putin's Russia would be a benign neighbor as long as the West provides the proper assurances and appeasement offerings. Furthermore, this second invasion has once again underscored the importance of military capabilities in an era of great-power competition, as well as the continued necessity for a strong NATO to safeguard the security of the member states. The U.S. should ensure that NATO's upcoming Madrid Summit fulfills its potential by acting on the promises made in the spring at the Brussels Summit to strengthen deterrence in Eastern Europe—which, in turn, makes spillover conflict from the Russian war against Ukraine less likely, an outcome squarely in U.S. national interest.

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Endnotes

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9. Alliance-wide participation in the EFP battalions is already strong. Currently 24 of 30 member states contribute to one of the eight battalions. Three of the nations that do not take part—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—are host nations whose military capabilities the deployments are meant to bolster, leaving only Greece, North Macedonia, and Turkey as NATO members that are not contributing troops to any of the eight battalions. The eight battalions are led by Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Hungary, France, Germany, U.K., and the U.S.
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