



# IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

## Ankara 2026: NATO's Strategic Reset in an Era of Transactional Alliances

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The NATO Summit held in Ankara on 7–8 July 2026 may ultimately prove to be one of the alliance's most significant meetings since the end of the Cold War. While media attention focused on President Donald Trump's confrontational rhetoric, renewed hostilities between the United States and Iran, and disagreements among allies, these developments obscured a more profound transformation. The summit demonstrated that NATO is neither collapsing nor returning to its Cold War form. Instead, it is evolving into a more pragmatic alliance shaped by strategic necessity, economic interdependence, and transactional diplomacy.

For much of the past decade, commentators have repeatedly predicted NATO's decline. These forecasts rested on three assumptions: declining American commitment to European security, inadequate European defence spending, and growing political divergence among member states. The Ankara Summit challenged all three assumptions, although not in ways that NATO's founders would necessarily have anticipated.

The summit convened amid one of the most volatile international security environments in recent years. The Pakistan-mediated ceasefire between the United States and Iran was threatened by an imminent collapse almost simultaneously with the opening of the conference, followed by American

strikes on more than eighty Iranian military targets after attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Simultaneously, Russia intensified its missile and drone campaign against Ukraine, prompting President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's presence in Ankara to secure additional European air defence commitments.

These concurrent crises reinforced an enduring truth of international politics: geography may shape security, but instability is increasingly global. NATO's agenda could no longer be confined to the Euro-Atlantic theatre. Events in the Middle East were directly influencing alliance cohesion, maritime security, energy markets, and strategic decision-making.

President Trump once again emerged as NATO's most disruptive participant. His criticism of European allies for failing to support American military operations against Iran, renewed demands regarding Greenland, and punitive trade measures against Spain reflected a consistent worldview in which alliances are judged primarily through the lens of immediate national benefit rather than enduring political solidarity.

Conventional wisdom interprets such behaviour as evidence of NATO's weakening cohesion. A more careful analysis suggests otherwise.

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<sup>2</sup> Lithuania (5.33%), Estonia (5.1%), Latvia (4.92%), Poland (4.68%) and Greece (3.65%).

<sup>3</sup> "Five NATO members seen to spend over 3.5% of GDP on core defence this year, alliance estimates show," Reuters, July 7, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/five-nato-members-seen-spend-over-35-gdp-core-defence-this-year-alliance-2026-07-07/>

Rather than resisting American pressure, European governments have gradually adapted to it. The principal American demand has never been ideological conformity but equitable burden-sharing. The Ankara Summit confirmed that this adjustment is now well underway. Several allies have already crossed the 3.5 percent defence expenditure threshold – whereas majority is still to meet the required target – while the alliance remains committed to reaching the ambitious target of 5 percent of GDP by 2035. More importantly, European governments collectively announced an additional \$139 billion in defence investment.

This development carries significance beyond simple accounting. Defence expenditure is ultimately a political indicator. It reflects national willingness to assume responsibility for collective security. For decades, Washington complained that Europe enjoyed the benefits of American protection while underinvesting in its own military capabilities. Ankara suggested that this imbalance is finally beginning to narrow.

Equally significant was the summit's emphasis on defence-industrial integration. European procurement decisions increasingly favour American platforms and joint production arrangements, creating economic interests that reinforce strategic commitments. Defence cooperation is no longer confined to military planning; it is increasingly embedded within industrial supply chains, technological collaboration, and long-term investment. Such interdependence makes alliance disengagement politically and economically more costly for all participants, including the United States.

Perhaps the summit's most important strategic outcome was the gradual emergence of a new operational model. NATO is evolving from an alliance dependent upon American operational leadership toward one in which Europe assumes primary responsibility for conventional deterrence on its own continent while the United States provides strategic enablers, advanced technologies, intelligence, and nuclear guarantees. This redistribution of responsibilities represents adaptation rather than retrenchment. It enhances NATO's resilience by reducing its

vulnerability to fluctuations in American domestic politics.

The Ankara Summit also illustrated another defining characteristic of twenty-first century diplomacy: the growing influence of personal relationships between political leaders. President Trump's decision to attend the summit owed much to his longstanding rapport with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Institutional diplomacy alone may not have secured American participation under the prevailing political circumstances.

Erdogan demonstrated considerable diplomatic dexterity. By avoiding Turkish military involvement in the American-Iranian confrontation while simultaneously presenting Turkey as an indispensable NATO ally, he positioned Ankara as a constructive partner without alienating Washington. The diplomatic dividends were substantial. The announcement regarding the removal of CAATSA sanctions linked to Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence system, coupled with renewed American support for Turkey's participation in the F-35 programme, represented one of the most significant improvements in bilateral defence relations in years.

Critics may view these decisions as evidence that personal diplomacy has displaced institutional processes. There is some truth in this assessment. Yet it also reflects a broader transformation in international politics. Strategic partnerships are increasingly shaped by transactional calculations rather than ideological affinity. States cooperate not because they share identical political values but because they perceive converging strategic interests.

This shift should not necessarily be interpreted as a sign of institutional decay. International alliances have always combined principles with pragmatism. What has changed is the relative balance between them. NATO today appears less as a community bound primarily by common democratic identity and more as a security coalition sustained by mutual strategic dependence, integrated defence industries, and shared perceptions of external threats.

The Ankara Summit therefore deserves to be viewed as more than another contentious meeting dominated by presidential personalities. It marked an important stage in NATO's institutional evolution. The alliance is adapting to a geopolitical environment characterised by renewed great-power competition, regional conflicts, economic insecurity, and political uncertainty within its own membership.

Whether this transformation should be described as "NATO 3.0" remains open to debate. Nevertheless, its defining characteristics are already becoming apparent: higher European defence spending, greater European operational autonomy, deeper transatlantic industrial integration,

and a more transactional but arguably more sustainable relationship with the United States.

Paradoxically, NATO's future may depend less on restoring the political consensus of the past than on successfully managing the strategic disagreements of the present. The Ankara Summit demonstrated that while transatlantic unity has become more difficult to sustain, shared security interests remain sufficiently compelling to keep the alliance together. History may therefore judge Ankara not as the summit that exposed NATO's divisions, but as the summit that compelled the alliance to adapt to a fundamentally different strategic age.

