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THE NATO SUMMIT IN ANKARA (Jul 2026)
Agenda, Omissions and Structural Weaknesses of an Alliance under Pressure

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Abstract

The 36th NATO Summit in Ankara (7-8 July 2026) was convened at one of the most charged times in the Alliance's history. It took place shortly after the US-Israeli war on Iran, in the midst of protracted and fruitless negotiations over Ukraine, and against a backdrop of an unprecedented public questioning of the US commitment to NATO by the President of the United States himself. This paper attempts a critical analysis of the summit, examining the official agenda that included spending, the defense industry and support for Ukraine and contrasting it with a series of crucial issues that remained outside the discussion, such as the Chinese challenge, the Greek-Turkish impasse, the limits of engagement in Iran and the credibility of the US commitment. Through the analysis of the Ankara Declaration, which proves to be brief and general, a recurring pattern emerges. The Alliance generates symbolic consensus without institutionally addressing its deeper rifts. The paper examines in particular the possibility of NATO's direct involvement in the wars in Iran and Ukraine, concluding that, despite the low short-term risk of direct involvement, the risk of unintended escalation remains substantial. Regarding alliance cohesion, burden-sharing and collective action, this article proposes specific policy measures such as expenditure verification mechanisms and crisis management protocols with the aim of bridging the gap between rhetorical commitment and actual implementation capacity.

Keywords

NATO Ankara Summit 2026; Alliance cohesion; Burden-sharing; Transatlantic relations; Article 5; Ukraine security guarantees; Iran conflict escalation; Greece-Turkey relations

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 36th NATO Summit, was held in Ankara on 7–8 July 2026, at the Beştepe Presidential Complex. It is the second time that Turkey has hosted a NATO summit, twenty-two years after the Istanbul Summit in 2004 (NATO, 2026a). The timing of the summit is particularly fraught. It took place a few months after the US–Israeli war against Iran (spring 2026). At the same time, prolonged but ineffective negotiations over Ukraine took place, and against the backdrop of a reduction in US commitment to the Alliance by the US president himself (Congressional Research Service, 2026; USNI News, 2026).

The Ankara Summit followed a pattern that academic literature has repeatedly described for NATO in the post-Cold War era. According to this pattern, the Alliance produces declarations of high symbolic value but low commitment. The declarations implicitly acknowledge problems such as American withdrawal, industrial gaps, and frictions between Alliance members. However, these problems are not addressed in an institutional way. (Hallams and Schreer, 2012; Rynning, 2021). The final text of the declaration is concise compared to previous declarations, highlighting the tendency for political minimization of confrontation, but reducing the clarity of strategic direction.

This paper attempts a critical analysis of the 2026Ankara Summit. Key elements are the examination of the summit agenda and the results, as reflected in the relevant Declaration (Appendix; NATO 2026b), which was quite short, compared to previous ones (NATO 2024). In addition, an attempt is made to identify issues that, despite their criticality, were not analyzed or downgraded in the public debate of the summit. Third, an analysis is made of the structural weaknesses of the Alliance that were highlighted (but not resolved) in Ankara, with an emphasis on the gap between rhetorical commitment and actual implementation capacity. Also, the possible implications of NATO involvement in the wars in Iran and Ukraine are investigated, assessing the possibility of escalation. Finally, policy proposals are formulated that could mitigate the identified risks.

2. THE SUMMIT AGENDA: AGENDA AND OFFICIAL OUTCOMES

The three main priorities set for the Ankara summit are continued increased Allies' defense investment, strengthening transatlantic defense industrial production, and continued support for Ukraine in the ongoing war (NATO, 2026a; CRS, 2026). The three directions formed the framework of the final Ankara Declaration, which reaffirmed the commitment to

- collective defense under Article 5,
- new procurement of over $50 billion,
- €70 billion in military assistance to Ukraine by 2026 (NATO, 2026b).

This agenda follows on from the Hague Summit in 2025, where Allies agreed on a new, ambitious spending target of 5% of GDP by 2035, of which 3.5% would be spent on core military spending and 1.5% on broader security spending. The spending would cover infrastructure, cyber resilience and industrial capacity (NATO, 2026a). In Ankara, NATO Secretary General Rutte called for Allies to present "clear, concrete and credible" implementation plans rather than new commitments (govtschemes.org, 2026). This request is an implicit statement that the past year has been marked more by political pronouncements than by tangible results.

In addition to the leaders' meeting, the NATO Summit Defense Industry Forum (NSDIF26) was held, which is "the premier high-level event for transatlantic defense production, investment and innovation" (NATO, 2026a). This forum brought together defense industry executives, aiming to move from funding commitments to actual production capacity in ammunition, weapons and joint procurement. In addition to the 32 Allies and representatives of the European Union, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, and defense or foreign ministers from Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates) were present, reflecting on the implications of the war against Iran in the region (govtschemes.org, 2026).

The final Ankara Declaration, however, is notable for its brevity and generality. It consists of six short paragraphs, which focus almost exclusively on Russia, defense spending, Ukraine, and a single, general reference to Iran. In this regard, Iran must never acquire nuclear weapons and must respect freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz (NATO, 2026b). The absence of any reference to China, the Indo-Pacific, internal frictions between allies, or a specific accountability mechanism for the new spending targets is indicative of the issues that remained outside the official text, despite being a strong area of concern for the academic and analytical community before and during the summit.

3. THE 5% OF GDP DEFENSE SPENDING THRESHOLD. RHETORIC OF COMMITMENT VS. CAPACITY TO DELIVER

The central achievement touted in Ankara was progress towards the 5% of GDP target for defense investment. According to official figures, European allies and Canada increased their core defense investments by around $139 billion in 2025. Some countries such as Poland, the Baltic and the Nordic countries are expected to reach the target before 2035, while Germany is estimated to reach it around 2029 (govtschemes.org, 2026). Despite the estimates, there is a fundamental problem that has been highlighted in recent academic literature. The problem is the confusion between resource commitment (input) and actual strategic capability (output) (Bolouri, Lohse and Qari, 2026; Caverley and Kapstein, 2025).

As a recent analysis in the journal Intereconomics points out, 5% is likely to function as a symbol of political resolve and alliance solidarity. But it is an inadequate substitute for a meaningful strategic prioritization. In an environment now dominated by hybrid threats, the challenge for Europe is not so much to achieve a numerical indicator as to effectively align military and civilian means towards resilience (Intereconomics, 2026). Given the absence of such alignment, high spending can increase inflows without correspondingly enhancing the level of real security. The fragmentation of the European defense industry exacerbates the problem. The additional $1.9 trillion required by the 5% commitment is likely to create price inflation rather than enhance real operational capability. A typical example is the case of Leopard 2 tanks. Their prices increased by about 30% in a few months (Strikeorbit, 2026). In its analysis, the Bruegel Institute (Wolff, 2026) points out that European countries' weapons systems purchases through Foreign Military Sales (FMS) have increased significantly since 2020. This fact has strengthened their dependence on American companies, which contradicts their effort to develop European industrial production capacity (Strikeorbit, 2026). This contradiction was not institutionally resolved at the Ankara summit. On the other hand, measuring progress towards the goal is problematic as there is no single mechanism that binds, verifies and ensures that countries' declarations secure a real increase in defense capacity instead of a creative accounting presentation of previous spending as defense.

Regarding burden sharing in NATO, such confrontations constitute a timeless feature of the functioning of the Alliance, as analyzed in section 10 (Koivula, 2021).

4. DEFENSE INDUSTRY: THE GAP BETWEEN COMMITMENTS AND PRODUCTION CAPABILITY

The second pillar of the Summit agenda is the strengthening of the defense industrial base. New defense investment contracts worth over $50 billion were announced in Ankara, with Secretary General Rutte describing the moment as the start of a transatlantic "defense industrial revolution" (NATO, 2026b). However, there is implicit recognition of the problem the Alliance is called upon to solve. The focus is shifting "from committing money to translating it into real arms production, munitions capability and joint procurement". These are key areas where the European defense industry continues to face serious bottlenecks (govtschemes.org, 2026).

This structural weakness is not new, but it is particularly acute in the context of the American retreat. The concept of "NATO 3.0", as analyzed in a recent study by the Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), describes the transition from the goal of a more balanced distribution of responsibilities between Europe and the US (burden-sharing), which was pursued in the period 2014-2024, to a regime where European allies assume primary responsibility for conventional defense and deterrence (burden-shifting). This shift carries the risk of creating capability gaps in European defense, which will be difficult to fill in the short term given industrial inertia (OSW, 2026). It is characteristic that, while Washington is pressuring European allies to assume a greater share of responsibility, at the same time the American defense industry remains a key supplier of the European reorganization, through the FMS programs. The result is a paradoxical system of incentives. Europe is called upon to "de-independence" strategically from the US, while at the same time its investment choices make it increasingly industrially dependent. The Ankara Summit did not offer any specific institutional mechanism to resolve this contradiction, beyond general commitments to "eliminate obstacles to defense trade between allies" (NATO, 2026b). This fact does not leave much optimism regarding the possibilities of truly improving the defense capability of European allies.

5. SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE: INSTITUTIONALIZING AN UNCERTAIN COMMITMENT

The third formal priority of the summit concerned the long-term institutionalization of support for Ukraine, both bilaterally and collectively. The Ankara Declaration commits Allies to €70 billion in military equipment, assistance and training for 2026, with the intention of maintaining similar levels in 2027. At the same time, the European Union's decision to provide multi-year funding through the Ukraine Support Loan mechanism is welcomed (NATO, 2026b). It is, however, significant that European Allies and Canada are now financing a large part of military assistance to Ukraine, explicitly recognizing the declining US contribution (NATO, 2026b; CRS, 2026).

This commitment is becoming particularly fragile at this time. Peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, although they made progress in January 2026 with the signing of the

Paris Declaration by the "Alliance of the Willing", remained stuck on critical issues such as territory, with Russia demanding the cession of the Donbas region (House of Commons Library, 2026a). Three rounds of talks between the United States, Ukraine and Russia in January-February 2026 in the United Arab Emirates and Switzerland yielded no substantial result, while a planned new round of talks in March was postponed due to the US-Israeli military operation against Iran (House of Commons Library, 2026b).

The fact that the war in Iran has essentially "absorbed" the diplomatic attention and resources that would have been allocated to Ukraine highlights a structural weakness of NATO that was not addressed in Ankara as the absence of a mechanism for managing simultaneous crises became apparent. The UN Security Council, in its report (Security Council Report, 2026), points out that the negotiations had essentially "frozen" as a result of the war in Iran and the escalation around the Strait of Hormuz. Zelensky stated that American attention had been "primarily focused" on Iran. Despite the problem of inability to manage multiple crises, the Ankara Summit gave general assurances of unwavering support that constitute a rhetorical contradiction with the reality of recent months. The security guarantees discussed in the context of the peace plan remain vague and essentially outside the NATO framework. The Paris Declaration refers to the "use of military capabilities" while there is no clear definition of the status of a possible European military presence in Ukraine. Furthermore, it is not specified whether it would have a self-defense mandate in the event of a Russian attack (Atlantic Council, 2026). The statement of the Polish Foreign Minister who wonders, "who wants to fight Russia? I don't see many volunteers" (Simonet, 2026), sums up the gap between political declarations and actual operational commitment.

6. ISSUES ABSENT OR DOWNGRADED FROM THE OFFICIAL AGENDA

Ankara's official agenda, as mentioned above, was essentially limited to the three main issues of spending, industry and the war in Ukraine. However, a number of critical issues, which were at the heart of the debate at the international and academic level, were not analyzed in the final text or in the official communication strategy of the Alliance. This conscious choice to limit the scope of the Declaration does not seem to have been simply a matter of timing, but the result of deeper institutional and strategic choices to project an image of symbolic consensus and unity (NATO, 2026b). The four sections that follow examine in detail the most important of these issues: the challenge of China and the Indo-Pacific (section 6.1), the Greek-Turkish conflict as an internal challenge to cohesion (section 6.2), NATO's stance towards the Iran war (section 6.3), and the questioning of American commitment (section 6.4).

6.1. The China Challenge and the Indo-Pacific

The Ankara Declaration presents a significant gap, as it does not contain any references to China. This gap is made apparent as the 2022 Strategic New Doctrine had for the first time characterized Beijing's "ambitions and coercive policies" as a challenge to the Alliance's interests, security and values (Atlantic Council, 2025). Academic literature has pointed out that NATO remains structurally limited vis-à-vis China. It lacks both the role and the mandate to address economic and technological issues related to Beijing, while the China

issue has now become inextricably linked to the long-standing dispute over burden-sharing (Simón, Lanoszka, & Meijer, 2025).

The 2026 US National Strategic Defense Doctrine confirms this trend of realignment. In the event that the United States engages in conflict with China, the defense of Europe against Russian aggression will become the sole responsibility of NATO, without American reinforcement (CSIS, 2026). The absence of any meaningful discussion in Ankara about how the Alliance would manage a potential simultaneous competition in two theaters of Europe and the Indo-Pacific is a significant strategic planning gap. Analysts warn that a military expansion of NATO towards the Indo-Pacific could weaken its ability to stabilize its eastern, southern, and northern borders (Defense Priorities, 2026).

6.2. The Greek-Turkish conflict as an internal challenge to cohesion

By hosting the summit, Turkey had the opportunity to showcase its strategic role as the holder of the Alliance's second largest army at the junction of the Black Sea, the eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus (govtschemes.org, 2026). We note that the long-standing Greek-Turkish confrontation remained off the official agenda, although it constitutes, according to numerous studies, one of the serious internal challenges to the cohesion of NATO's southeastern wing. As a recent ELIAMEP study points out (Kakavas, 2025), the principle of cohesion and collective defense in NATO is constantly tested by a series of chronic and unresolved differences between Greece and Turkey, which include maritime borders, sovereignty over the Aegean islands, the status of minorities, as well as symbolic confrontations.

The tension is not just a bilateral issue but, reaching structural levels, directly affects the functionality of the Alliance. As noted in the international bibliography (Journal of Politics and Democratization, 2023; Lampas and Filis, 2023), the crisis in the Aegean threatens to undermine the cohesion of both NATO and the European Union, creating opportunities for exploitation by external actors. As an example, Russia may seek increased influence in the eastern Mediterranean by exploiting internal divisions. The Alliance's own historical practice, the so-called "Luns" principle (according to which NATO must maintain strict neutrality between Greece and Turkey), has been criticized as inadequate, as it leaves the issue of Turkish revisionism unanswered and ultimately undermines the unity and effectiveness of the Alliance itself (Papasotiriou and Ntanou, 2023).

The choice of Turkey as the host country in 2026, without any explicit reference to the Greek-Turkish standoff in the official agenda or in the Declaration, clearly highlights the logic of the "lowest common denominator" that governs the organization's operation on issues of internal friction. NATO systematically avoids taking on an active mediation role beyond superficial mechanisms, such as the "Recognized Air Picture" over the Aegean, which do not touch on the deeper causes of the confrontation (Voice of East, 2025). The absence of any substantive reference to the issue at the Ankara summit confirms the finding of earlier studies that NATO's new Strategic Doctrine, although it recognizes the issues of the Eastern Mediterranean, does not offer a comprehensive de-escalation strategy, constituting a missed opportunity to strengthen alliance cohesion (Lampas & Filis, 2023).

6.3. The War on Iran and the Test of Article 5 on Collective Defense

The most striking omission from the Ankara Summit concerns the limited, almost phobic, response to the US-Israeli war against Iran. The military confrontation erupted in late February 2026 with US and Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear and military facilities, and continued with Iranian retaliation against US bases in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (GovFacts, 2026). During the conflict, NATO air defense systems intercepted Iranian missiles in Turkish airspace, while an Iranian drone struck a British base in Cyprus, incidents that brought to the fore public debate about the possible activation of Article 5 (RAND, 2026; CNBC, 2026).

However, NATO as an organization consciously avoided direct involvement, limiting its role to "enabling support" such as logistics and missile defense, effectively refusing any collective military action by applying Article 5 (NATO Watch, 2026). Legal analysts have pointed out that the threshold for triggering Article 5 remains high and clearly political, not automatic. US Secretary of Defense Hegseth publicly rejected the possibility of its activation after the interception of the Iranian missile over Turkey (FDD, 2026). The fact that an Alliance member country (Turkey) directly received Iranian missiles on its territory, without any formal collective process being triggered, highlights a deeper weakness. As there is no clear and predefined protocol for managing low-intensity incidents, they could, under different circumstances, escalate leading to undesirable or uncontrolled developments.

Washington showed strong dissatisfaction with this reticence when President Trump publicly criticized the European allies. The reaction was provoked because they refused to help protect the shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz during the American-Israeli operation. The tactic of public "shaming" has often proven ineffective or even counterproductive for long-term burden sharing within NATO (Becker et al., 2024). This fact intensified his criticism of the Alliance as a whole (CRS, 2026). In its analysis, the Institute for Politics and Society notes that the non-participation of Europeans in military operations against Iran was not due to a different point of view, but reflected a substantial strategic divergence within the Alliance. European member countries perceived the escalation with Iran as a threat to their energy security and as a destabilizing factor in their immediate neighborhood and not as a national security priority as Washington perceived it (politicsociety.org, 2026). The result was a noticeable institutional marginalization of NATO itself as a decision-making organization, as critical decisions were taken outside the alliance's consultation mechanisms (politicsociety.org, 2026). At the Ankara Summit, there was no honest discussion about this substantial distancing between the interests of European countries and the United States. The Allies limited themselves to a general, rhetorical proposal that Iran should not acquire nuclear weapons. This choice reflects the Alliance's attempt to "manage" the disengagement through avoidance rather than through substantive resolution. This strategy is considered politically "safe" in the short term, but in the long term it is costly for the credibility of collective defense (The Conversation, 2026).

6.4. The American withdrawal, Greenland and the credibility of the commitment

Another issue that did not receive any substantive institutional response in Ankara, while it dominated the "backstage" of the summit, is the progressive reduction of the US military

presence in Europe. As of October 2025, the US Pentagon ended the deployment of forces in Romania and in the spring of 2026 it canceled a mission specifically designed to counter the Russian missile threat in the region (govtschemes.org, 2026). The US government has considered the possibility of withdrawing military forces from Germany and Poland, while a report by the Congressional Research Service points out that the 2026 defense law prohibits the reduction of the US military presence in Europe below 76,000 personnel without prior consultation with Congress (govtschemes.org, 2026).

The situation is further complicated by President Trump's interest in acquiring Greenland, an autonomous territory belonging to Denmark. This interest has caused great concern among many allies (CRS, 2026). The fact that a founding member of the Alliance such as Denmark sees its territorial integrity publicly challenged by the leader of the most powerful ally constitutes an unprecedented test of the very logic of collective defense. Despite its seriousness, it was not explicitly mentioned in the Ankara Declaration.

Beyond the material costs, the perception of unequal contributions can undermine trust, strain leadership roles, and weaken the coherence of a collective security regime, even when formal mechanisms for participation are in place (Kiratli, 2025). The Ankara Summit, focused on projecting positive spending numbers, avoided directly addressing this underlying breach of trust.

7. STRUCTURAL WEAKNESSES OF THE ALLIANCE AND THEIR ASSESSMENT.

All the findings mentioned above highlight four structural weaknesses of NATO that were revealed in Ankara without being ultimately resolved. More specifically:

The first structural weakness is the rhetoric-implementation gap. The very form of the final Declaration, six short paragraphs compared to longer texts published in previous summits, is an indication that the allies chose to formulate general, consensual positions rather than detailed commitments to specific monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The production of symbolic consensus, avoiding substantive confrontations, is described in the literature as an inherent characteristic of multilateral alliances where image prevails over operational effectiveness (Hallams & Schreer, 2012).

The selective and sometimes contradictory management of crises outside the traditional Euro-Atlantic scope, as it demonstrated by the war in Iran. NATO's choice to stay out of the conflict, while its allies were simultaneously being directly attacked (CNBC, 2026; RAND, 2026), highlights the absence of a clear doctrine on when and how collective defense is activated in a multi-polar, "gray zone" threat environment. The transition from burden-sharing to burden-shifting shifts the burden of conventional defense to European allies without a corresponding institutional guarantee of American support in the event of a multi-front crisis (OSW, 2026). This weakness is not just technical; it is political, as it touches the core of the credibility of deterrence at the level of the entire Alliance.

Fourth, the absence of a coherent framework for managing simultaneous major threats such as Russia, China and Iran leaves the Alliance exposed to phenomena of "attention absorption", as occurred with the postponement of negotiations on Ukraine due to the war in Iran. This event was not a random event, but an illustrative example of a structural problem. NATO does not have mechanisms for managing multiple geopolitical crises in parallel without sacrificing attention or resources for one in favor of another.

8. POSSIBLE FUTURE EXTENSIONS. NATO INVOLVEMENT IN THE IRAN WAR.

The likelihood of NATO's direct, collective involvement as an organization in a war against Iran is assessed as low in the short term, but not negligible in the medium term. The very experience of recent months demonstrates that the threshold for triggering Article 5 remains deliberately high. Despite the incidents of Iranian missile interceptions over Turkish territory and the crash of an Iranian drone into a British base in Cyprus, the allies have systematically avoided any official reference to a possible activation of Article 5 on collective defense (CNBC, 2026; FDD, 2026).

The key factor that could change this dynamic is Iran's intention to control escalation. A RAND (2026) analysis suggests that Iran's "escalate to de-escalate" strategy is likely to fail, as the approach simultaneously hits US allies, Gulf states, and neighboring states, increasing the risk of broader international isolation of Iran rather than achieving the goal of limiting US and Israeli action. At the same time, however, the very logic of escalation creates structural risk. The more Iran strikes targets beyond the immediate US-Israeli axis (as the attack on Cyprus and the interception over Turkey demonstrated), the greater the likelihood of an escalation "accident," i.e. an incident with losses in allied territory or personnel, which would make it politically difficult to maintain the current policy of "non-engagement."

It is important to note that even in the event of a direct strike against an ally, Article 5 is not automatically triggered; it requires a unanimous political decision in the North Atlantic Council, with considerable room for interpretation as to whether an attack constitutes an "armed attack" within the meaning of Article 5 or an occasional incident within a broader conflict in which the Alliance itself is not involved (GovFacts, 2026). This, combined with the documented reluctance of European allies to militarily support US operations against Iran, leads to the conclusion that the most likely development is the continuation of a "managed distance" regime. Under this, NATO will continue to provide enabling support (anti-aircraft cover, information sharing) without formal collective engagement, unless a strike with a clear, unquestionably lethal effect is carried out on Allied territory.

However, this possibility should not be underestimated in the long term. Turkey's geographical proximity, its military presence in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and its role as a mediator in negotiations (through Erdogan-Putin and Erdogan-Trump contacts) make it particularly exposed to potential collateral consequences of a prolonged conflict in Iran, which could test the cohesion of the Alliance again, and with greater intensity.

9. POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS: NATO INVOLVEMENT IN THE UKRAINIAN WAR

In the case of Ukraine, the likelihood of direct NATO involvement as an organization remains equally low. The reasons are different, as the main strategic option that has emerged from the 2025-2026 peace negotiations is to provide security guarantees outside the institutional framework of NATO, through a "Coalition of the Willing" and a possible "Multinational Force for Ukraine", explicitly disconnected from the NATO flag and administrative structure (Al Jazeera, 2026; oiip, 2026).

This option is not accidental, but reflects an explicit binding condition of Russia. The deployment of NATO troops on Ukrainian territory has been set by Putin as a “red line”. The result is a vague, interim guarantee regime described as “Article 5-type” without actually being Article 5. This regime is characterized as insufficient (according to an analysis by the Austrian Institute of International Affairs - oiip) in deterring Moscow, precisely because it lacks the institutional weight of a real collective commitment (oiip, 2026).

This issue as a deeper dilemma was not addressed institutionally at the Ankara Summit. If security guarantees for Ukraine do not come from NATO, who is actually responsible for addressing the risk of escalation in the event of a potential ceasefire violation by Russia? The absence of a clear answer to this question means that, even after a possible ceasefire agreement, there is a significant risk of a resumption of hostilities. The expected result is the possible indirect involvement of European forces on the ground, without a clear collective self-defense mandate (Atlantic Council, 2026).

A second scenario of involvement could be a potential escalation within allied territory, as in the case of Russian long-range missiles (such as Oreshnik type) that have already hit targets near the EU-NATO borders, a fact that was described as an “unacceptable escalation” and raised fears of nuclear confrontation. To the extent that the war of attrition in Ukraine continues without a ceasefire, the risk of it spilling over into a wider conflict between European countries – institutions and Russia after an “accident”, misunderstanding or deliberate testing of the limits of Article 5 remains “frightening” but also realistic (oiip, 2026).

In general, the scenario of the “indirect” support regime remains the prevailing one, with continued equipment, funding and training, without direct participation of allied forces in combat. Given NATO’s inability to provide clear and binding protection without provocations to Russia, the scenario of future escalation remains possible due to the ambiguity of the guarantee regime and the possible presence of European forces on Ukrainian territory.

10. WHY DO PROBLEMS REMAIN UNSOLVED?

The question that arises is why the Alliance, while recognizing its problems, systematically fails to move forward with a substantive solution to them? The answer lies in the very nature of collective action within an organization of 32 states that have heterogeneous interests. Collective action theory (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966), as applied to NATO's burden-sharing disputes, has documented that these disputes have both cyclical and evolutionary characteristics (in Gould's sense of "time's cycle" and "time's arrow"). (Gould, 1987) An earlier classic study had already pointed out that alliance cohesion is restored either through the coercive power of the hegemonic ally or through internal political pressures on member states (Kupchan, 1988). There is a periodic recurrence without the problems ever being fully resolved, but at the same time, cumulative traces of deterioration in the cohesion of the Alliance remain (Koivula, 2021). This pattern explains why issues such as burden-sharing return at every summit, without ever being addressed in a radical way and “closed” definitively.

Perception management of the problem plays a decisive role. As a recent analysis of the policy of alliance cohesion demonstrates, the perception of free-riding, regardless of whether it is objectively accurate, undermines trust and burdens leadership roles, weakening cohesion

despite the existence of formal mechanisms of participation (Kiratli, 2025). The problem is not simply technical or budgetary, but political and psychological, and as such cannot be solved by numerical spending targets alone, such as 5% of GDP.

NATO's institutional architecture, which requires unanimity for any substantive decision, systematically favors the formulation of low-common-denominator texts. The more controversial an issue is, such as the stance toward China, the Greek-Turkish conflict, or the degree of involvement in Iran, the more likely it is to be completely absent from official texts rather than to be the subject of a compromise that would provide at least a partial solution to a problem that displeased a member. This creates a paradoxical result. The more serious a cohesion problem is, the less likely it is to be explicitly mentioned in official declarations and resolved, precisely because explicit mention would publicly expose the division. Finally, the asymmetry of power within the Alliance, where the United States, despite its retreat, dominates as a military and political actor, shows that the European allies lack real negotiating power. They are therefore powerless to impose institutional reforms that would limit American discretion to withdraw or fold. This explains why, despite repeated rhetoric about a "European pillar" and "strategic autonomy," the essential dependence on American command, information, and industrial supply chains remains essentially unchanged.

11. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above analysis, the following policy proposals are formulated, which aim to mitigate the identified risks as their complete elimination seems unfeasible.

- Creation of a common procurement mechanism with binding percentages. To address price inflation and industrial fragmentation, a binding target (e.g. a minimum percentage of common European procurement) is required that will enable the reduction of dependence on individual national equipment markets and enhance economies of scale.
- Creation of an independent mechanism for verifying defense spending. The Alliance should develop a transparent and verifiable mechanism for monitoring the quality, rather than the quantity, of national defense spending. This will prevent the accounting reclassification of pre-existing spending as "defense" without any real capability addition.
- Establish a clear protocol for handling "gray zone" incidents. Pre-defined criteria should be developed for when an incident (e.g. drone strike, missile interception) triggers Article 4 consultations and when it approaches the Article 5 threshold. This will reduce the uncertainty that increases the risk of miscalculation.
- An active role for the Alliance in mediating the Greek-Turkish conflict. Instead of passive "neutrality", the Alliance should use existing confidence-building mechanisms (e.g. Recognized Air Picture) as a basis for a meaningful, structured dispute resolution process, given that prolonged impasse undermines the functionality of NATO's south-eastern flank.
- Establish clear security guarantees for Ukraine. Allies should publicly clarify the precise legal and operational status of any future European military presence in Ukraine. This should include the case for self-defense, to avoid dangerous ambiguity with uncontrollable consequences in the event of a ceasefire violation.
- Develop and integrate planning for simultaneous and multiple crises. The Alliance needs a strategic coordination mechanism that ensures that a crisis outside the

traditional Euro-Atlantic scope (e.g. Iran) does not automatically "suck up" resources and diplomatic attention from existing commitments (e.g. Ukraine).

- Transparency in the China-NATO relationship: Even if full consensus on China is not reached, allies should at least institute a regular, public assessment of the impact of Chinese policy on Euro-Atlantic security, in order to avoid the complete silence observed at the Ankara summit.

12. CONCLUSIONS

The NATO Summit in Ankara in 2026 confirmed the structural weaknesses of an Alliance that is called upon to manage simultaneous challenges. Such challenges as the American withdrawal, the war in Ukraine, the consequences of the war in Iran and other long-standing internal frictions such as the Greek-Turkish conflict without adequate institutional tools create serious risks to cohesion. The very form of the final Declaration, extremely brief and focused on only three axes (spending, industry, Ukraine), functioned more as an attempt at management and image presentation than as a substantive strategic document.

While the official rhetoric projects progress in defense such as increased spending, new contracts, and continued support for Ukraine, the deeper reality is much more complex. The industrial system remains fragmented and dependent, a shrinking American commitment with no clear substitute, and a number of critical issues such as China, Greek-Turkish relations and the limits of engagement in Iran remain deliberately outside the formal debate. This management is chosen because openly addressing the aforementioned issues would expose to public view the deeper division of interests within the Alliance.

As for possible extensions to Iran and Ukraine, direct, institutionalized military involvement by NATO as an organization remains, in the short term, a low probability in both cases, due to both the high political threshold for triggering Article 5 and the conscious choice to avoid direct involvement through alternative mechanisms (e.g. the Alliance of the Willing for Ukraine). Nevertheless, the risk of unintended, gradual escalation through "gray zone" incidents, the collapse of a potential ceasefire, or a direct strike with deadly consequences on allied territory remains substantial and should not be underestimated.

Ultimately, the Ankara Summit confirms a broader finding in the academic literature on alliances. The survival of an institution does not necessarily equate to its operational effectiveness. NATO remains in place, symbolically expanding through new partnerships, and continues to produce declarations of solidarity. The structural tensions that permeate it are not addressed but merely temporarily managed, systematically carried over to the next summit. But for how long?

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Appendix

The Ankara Summit Declaration

08 July 2026
https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2026/07/08/the-ankara-summit-declaration

1. 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. Our unity, solidarity and collective strength remain the foundation of peace, security, and prosperity for the one billion citizens in our Alliance of free and democratic nations. We remain committed to our 360-degree approach to deterrence and defence.
2. To counter the long-term threat Russia poses to Euro-Atlantic security and stability, and the persistent threat of terrorism, Allies are delivering on The Hague defence commitment. In 2025, European Allies and Canada increased their investments in core defence requirements by more than $139 billion. Our investments are delivering the capabilities we need while strengthening our industrial base and resilience. Today in Ankara, we announce more than $50 billion in new procurements and commit to expanding collective manufacturing capacity and working with industry to accelerate innovation. We will continue our work to eliminate defence trade barriers among Allies and leverage NATO's partnerships to maximise defence industrial depth and cooperation.
3. We are building the future: a stronger Europe in a stronger NATO – a modernised Alliance. European Allies and Canada, working with the United States, are assuming greater responsibility for the Alliance's defence. NATO's deterrence and defence rest on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional, and missile defence capabilities, complemented by space and cyber assets. We are committed to maintaining our combat advantage**.** We are investing in our ability to deploy**,** enable and sustain our armed forces and deliver our capability targets in all domains, including in deep precision strike, integrated air and missile defence, uncrewed systems, cutting edge technologies, and intelligence capabilities. We are developing an interoperable transatlantic war fighting cloud and adopting powerful AI models.
4. Ukraine contributes to transatlantic security, and Allies stand united in our unwavering support for Ukraine in defending its freedom, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. European Allies and Canada now finance the vast majority of security assistance to Ukraine through bilateral and multilateral means. Allies underscore that this support must be equitable, predictable, and sustainable in the long-term. 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. To this end, we welcome the European Union's decision to provide multi-year funding to Ukraine through the Ukraine Support Loan.
5. The Alliance continues to respond and adapt to the strategic competition, pervasive instability, hybrid threats and recurrent shocks that define our broader security environment. 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.

6. We express our appreciation for the generous hospitality extended to us by Türkiye. We look forward to our next meeting.