Towards NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit

NATO's next summit, to take place from 11 to 12 July 2023, is being hosted by Lithuania, in Vilnius. Among the items topping the agenda will be support for Ukraine – including its eventual accession to the Alliance and security guarantees, NATO's defence plans and budgets, and Sweden's accession. The summit comes amid Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine and a fundamental overhaul of NATO's defence and deterrence framework.

Ukraine and NATO

Ukraine's defence minister has noted that he 'expects a guarantee that his country will be invited to join the military alliance at the conclusion of the war with Russia'. Allies have repeated the commitments they made at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 that Ukraine would become a NATO member at an unspecified time in the future, and reiterated their support for NATO's open door policy. Since Ukraine's bid for fast-track membership, made in September 2022, NATO Allies have been unable to agree on whether that membership 'should be full or partial; immediate; gradual, or once again postponed; unconditional or linked to the outcome of the war'. While, NATO may not be ready to offer Ukraine a concrete timeline for membership, Allies may offer security guarantees to Ukraine outside the formal NATO structures. What form they will take is unclear however, as the 'Western alliance is still divided over nearly every element of how to respond to the request'. According to former NATO Assistant Secretary-General Camille Grand, security guarantees can range from full-NATO membership to 'paper guarantees' such as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, while in between there are 'many variants – from bilateral treaties to de facto political commitments – and the challenge is to find the right spot'. One proposal is the Kyiv security compact, which would commit the West to provide political, financial, military and diplomatic support over decades, to increase Ukraine's ability to defend itself.

NATO Allies have been supporting Ukraine with military equipment and aid since before the start of the Russian invasion. These deliveries have been coordinated, inter alia, by the EU and the Ukraine Contact Group, which includes 54 countries. The summit is likely to result in a NATO plan to enhance interoperability with Ukraine, and further commitments to provide Ukraine with weapons and ammunition, and training. NATO also plans to invite Ukraine to a NATO-Ukraine defence council as an equal member. More details of this are to be announced at the summit. This will be an upgrade from the current NATO-Ukraine Commission, opening the door to a wide range of new areas of cooperation, such as joint exercises.

NATO's defence plans and budgets

At the Madrid Summit in 2022, the Allies agreed on a 'fundamental shift' in NATO's deterrence and defence posture, a new NATO force model (NFM), and a boost to NATO's enhanced forward presence (eFP) on the eastern flank. Concrete progress on these measures will be an essential determinant of success at this summit. The NFM is a significant expansion of NATO's readiness posture, calling for several hundred thousand troops at different readiness levels. There is doubt, however, about the Allies' ability to fulfil this vision. Important for this purpose will be to endorse updated defence plans – the centrepiece of which are three regional plans – but also to endorse the agreed expansion of the eight existing battlegroups to brigades. In a positive sign, Germany recently committed to permanently stationing a brigade in Lithuania.
within the eFP framework. The nuclear dimension of defence is also becoming increasingly important, given Russia’s constant nuclear-sabre rattling, the suspension of its participation in the New Start Treaty, the expansion of its nuclear arsenal and the recent announcement that Russia has deployed nuclear warheads to Belarus. Some analysts argue that NATO must commit to enhancing its nuclear deterrence faced with these new threats, and increase its overall nuclear credibility.

Sweden’s accession to NATO

Hungary and Turkey have yet to ratify the accession to NATO of Sweden, which together with Finland (which became a member in April 2023) applied for membership following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Sweden is one of NATO’s closest partners, with the status of an ‘enhanced opportunity partner’. Ankara accuses Stockholm of harbouring Kurdish groups that Turkey considers terrorists and is demanding their extradition. It also wants an arms embargo on the country lifted. The newly elected government in Sweden lifted the arms embargo in September 2022 and toughened its anti-terrorism laws. The Swedish prime minister even wrote a letter to the Turkish president noting that Sweden is ready to meet Turkey’s demands. However, Sweden has an independent judiciary and the extraditions Turkey is requesting are not for the government to decide. Turkey also hopes to gain US Congressional approval of a major defence package to modernise Turkey’s air force, which the US president has linked to Swedish NATO accession. Hungary is holding up ‘NATO expansion...[as a] trump card’, as it seeks to unlock billions of euros of EU funding that have been frozen due to concerns about judicial independence. Hungary is also expecting Sweden to cease its criticism of Hungary’s rule of law and lack of adherence to LGBTQI rights. Hungary has hinted repeatedly, however, that it will not block Sweden’s NATO accession on its own. Many experts believe that the Turkish president, having recently won his re-election bid, will give the green light prior to or shortly after the Vilnius Summit, but this is far from certain. Erdogan dealt a blow to Sweden’s hopes in the run up to the summit when he said that Turkey would not change its attitude unless Sweden prevented anti-Turkey protests by ‘terrorists’.

Defence budgets

Boosting defence spending will also be top of the agenda at the summit, as Allies will discuss a possible new defence investment pledge. At the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO allies committed to a 2% of GDP defence spending guideline within a decade. However, in 2022, only 7 (Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the UK and the US) out of 30 NATO members met the 2% of GDP spending guideline. The NATO Secretary-General has called for 2% to be seen as the absolute minimum rather than a ceiling, and noted that he will ‘advocate for a more ambitious pledge than the one made in 2014’ at the Vilnius Summit. Multiple NATO members have already announced significant increases in defence spending. However it remains to be seen whether these will ever be implemented, with a looming possible recession. Allies may be reluctant to commit publicly to higher defence budget targets. Atlantic Council pundits note however, ‘that success at Vilnius will require a commitment to increase defence spending’.

NATO Secretary-General

In recent months ‘Europe has been locked in an endless parlour game over who might replace Jens Stoltenberg’, who has led the alliance since October 2014. The NATO secretary-general, who is ‘responsible for steering the process of consultation and decision-making in the Alliance and ensuring that decisions are implemented’ is selected for renewable 4-year terms – or shorter – based on a unanimous vote by member states. The secretary-general is traditionally a senior European political figure. Many capitals called for the first female secretary-general or a nominee from eastern Europe, while others advocated continuity through extension of Stoltenberg’s term. On 4 July, the North Atlantic Council extended Stoltenberg’s mandate for a year, until 1 October 2024, to be endorsed by NATO leaders at the summit.

European Parliament position

In several resolutions, Parliament has recognised NATO’s role as the cornerstone of collective security for those Member States that are also NATO members. It has stressed the importance of enhancing and deepening the EU’s strategic partnership with NATO. Parliament has a delegation for relations with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (DNAT) for cooperation on common challenges. In a June 2023 resolution, Parliament called on NATO to invite Ukraine into NATO after the war is over and, in the meantime, to develop a temporary security guarantee framework, to be implemented immediately after the war.