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**The NATO Summit in The Hague:  
Outcomes and Lessons Learnt**

**By**

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**13 August 2025**

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Sarah Ghotme

## The NATO Summit in The Hague: Outcomes and Lessons Learnt

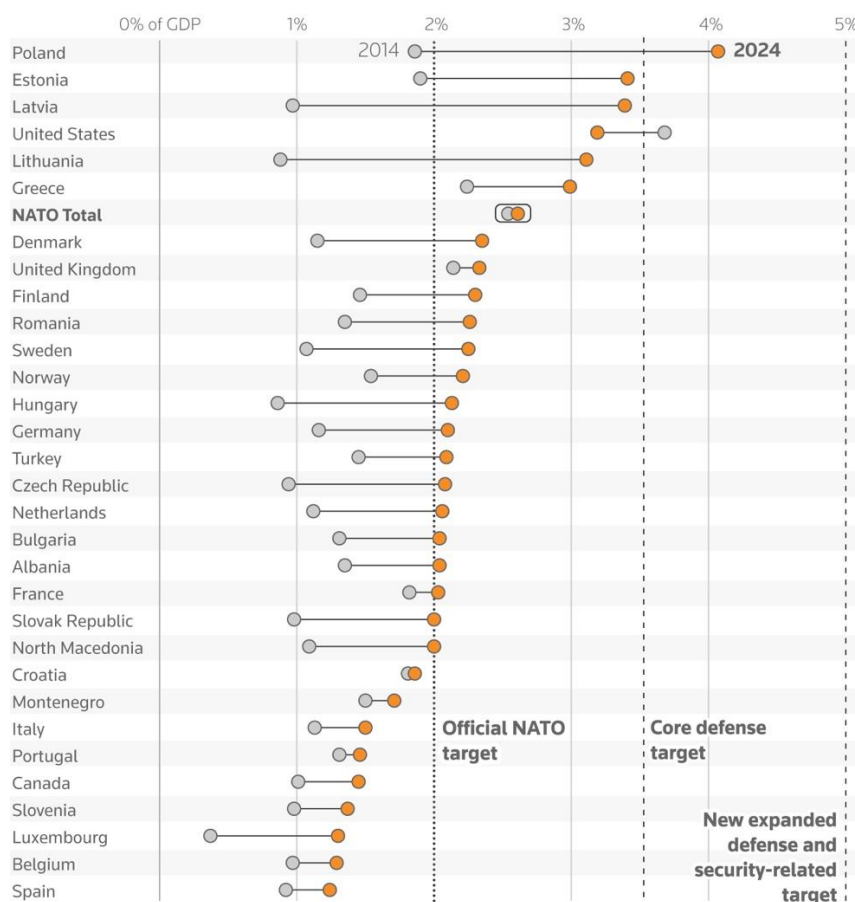
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### Executive Summary

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- ✦ The 2025 summit in The Hague focused less on political symbolism and more on concrete outcomes, marking a shift from the tone of the 2024 Vilnius summit.
- ✦ Leaders endorsed the Hague Defence Investment Plan, committing member states to spend 5 percent of GDP on defense by 2035, up from the previous 2 percent target.
- ✦ Spain rejected the 5 percent target, citing the strain it would place on domestic budgets.
- ✦ In cyber and space, NATO announced new initiatives like Cyber Defense Pledge 2.0 and the Space Security Dialogue, but these remained mostly frameworks for discussion rather than binding plans or operational tools.
- ✦ Protests in The Hague drew around 6,000 people, reflecting opposition to increased military spending, NATO's handling of Ukraine and Gaza, and concerns about shifting national priorities.
- ✦ The Hague summit showed that NATO has momentum, but also made clear that delivering on its ambitions will require political will, financial resources, and public support that may not be guaranteed

### KEY PICTURE: Defense Expenditures as Share of GDP (based on 2021 prices)



Source: [NATO on Reuters June 17, 2025](#). Note: 2024 is an estimate. No data for Iceland

## *“The Allies have laid the foundations for a stronger, fairer, more lethal NATO.”*

This year’s 2025 NATO Summit, held from July 24 to 25 in The Hague, Netherlands, was not just the usual annual gathering. It came at a time when the stakes for transatlantic security have rarely felt higher. Set against the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific, and renewed instability in regions like the Middle East and The Sahel, the leaders from all 32 member states were joined by Indo-Pacific partners — Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand — whose growing role in NATO conversations signals a shift in the alliance’s perimeter of concern. Indeed, there were no new accessions or dramatic withdrawals, but the tone of the summit was unmistakably different: urgency over ceremony, delivery over declarations.

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### **1. Raising the Bar**

Unlike the 2024 Vilnius summit, which leaned heavily into performative unity and political signalling, The Hague was about tangible delivery.

The key outcome this year was the unveiling of the Hague Defence Investment Plan, an initiative to ensure NATO’s multi-domain resilience and readiness. Allied leaders agreed on a declaration that significantly raised the bar for defence investment, committing member states to move 5% of their GDP toward defence. Divided between 3.5% for core defence capabilities and an additional 1.5% for related security investments such as infrastructure and industrial capacity. This represents a large increase from the previous 2% GDP benchmark.

Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasised the historic nature of these commitments, highlighting the evolving security threats from Russia, terrorism, cyberattacks, and sabotage to strategic competition, reaffirming that NATO remains prepared to “defend every inch of Allied territory.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a collective acknowledgement that the current geopolitical conditions may be the new normal, and not just a temporary crisis. Especially when focusing on the scale of this increase, one historically unprecedented in ‘peacetime’. However, it also brings severe fiscal pressures, especially on European NATO countries already struggling with debt and aging populations<sup>2</sup>.

### **2. Fiscal Realities**

While the Hague Defence Investment Plan marked a historic shift in NATO’s posture, the fiscal consequences for Europe are already drawing complaints. Spain openly opposed the new 5% GDP target, with Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez warning that the increase would undercut essential domestic spending and demanding flexibility ahead of the summit<sup>3</sup>. His concerns were matched by street protests in major cities, reflecting broader anxieties across the continent. Unlike previous summit declarations, this target comes with hard numbers and a fixed timeline, forcing countries to choose between politically risky strategies: raising taxes, slashing social programs, or expanding already heavy debt burdens. S&P Global’s Frank Gill projected that borrowing alone could add roughly \$2 trillion in debt to European NATO states by 2035, while in France, high-level warnings from figures like François Bayrou suggest interest payments could surpass €100 billion annually by 2029, making debt the largest line item in the national budget<sup>4</sup>. The EU moved to ease pressure, exempting defense-related increases from its strict deficit rules and proposing a €150 billion loan facility to soften the blow. But these measures may only postpone a tougher financial reckoning<sup>5</sup>. As economic conditions tighten and populist movements gain traction, the question here is not whether NATO can build a more capable military force, but whether its democracies can afford to fund it without fracturing internal consensus.

### **3. Expanding Domains of Security**

The Hague summit put a spotlight on NATO’s growing focus on cyber and space. But honestly, most of what was announced still felt more like a statement of intent than a real shift in how the alliance operates. The new Cyber Defence Pledge 2. reaffirmed that allies would invest in better cyber hygiene, information-sharing, and workforce training<sup>6</sup>— all good ideas, but there’s still no plan for what happens if a major cyberattack hits one

member, let alone how they'd respond together. The Cyber Defence Centre set up in Tallinn, which seems promising, especially given Estonia's leadership in this area, yet it remains primarily an information-sharing hub rather than an operational command or a joint force.

NATO also launched an Information Integrity Task Force to counter disinformation, which sounds like progress, but they didn't really explain how it's going to work, who's involved, or what tools they'll actually use.

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The most novel element was the formal launch of the *Space Security Dialogue*, which marked NATO's intent to treat space as an operational domain, especially in response to threats from Russian and Chinese anti-satellite systems<sup>7</sup>. Now part of operational thinking for the first time, that dialogue is still just that: a conversation. No binding plans yet, no real coordination mechanisms in place.

Indeed, the tone has shifted compared to previous years; cyber and space aren't side issues anymore, but most of what came out of this summit still feels like groundwork rather than action. The recognition is there, but the actual follow-through isn't yet.

#### 4. Protests

Around 6,000 protesters gathered in Malieveld Park and other central spots in The Hague in the days before the summit, pushing back against rising military spending, NATO's stance on Ukraine, and the alliance's silence on Gaza. People also raised environmental concerns and questioned whether growing defence budgets would come at the expense of housing, healthcare, and social services. Slogans like "Wages not War" pointed to a broader discomfort with how priorities are shifting across Western governments. While the summit itself focused on strengthening deterrence, the size and mood of the protests showed there's a real disconnect between NATO's strategic goals and how some parts of the public view them.

There was also disagreement inside the summit, less visible but still important. Turkey voiced concerns about NATO's growing focus on China and the Indo-Pacific, suggesting that moving too far beyond the Euro-Atlantic region could weaken the alliance's original purpose. Some European countries seemed to share that hesitation, even if they didn't say so directly, raising quiet worries about NATO stretching itself too thin or drifting out of step with national priorities. At the same time, the return of President Trump added its own layer of uncertainty. While Washington reaffirmed its commitments during the summit, many allies remain cautious about what U.S. leadership will look like in practice over the next four years, especially given past tensions over burden-sharing and alliance priorities.

#### Conclusion

The 2025 Hague Summit showed that NATO is trying to move from broad statements to real delivery. It's shifting toward a more operational alliance that sees cyber, space, and regional coordination as part of its core business. But with that comes harder questions. Stretching NATO's focus beyond the Euro-Atlantic area raises concerns about doing too much with too little. Member states are facing inflation, high debt, and political pressure at home — and not everyone is on board with the same level of urgency. As Guntram Wolff put it, who spends what on defence has less to do with summit declarations and more to do with how close a country is to Moscow. That kind of uneven commitment is going to be hard to manage, especially if economic or political conditions worsen.

The Hague didn't solve NATO's biggest problems, but it did push the alliance in a new direction. There was less emphasis on unity for show and more focus on what needs to be done and how much it will cost. New domains like cyber and space are now firmly on the agenda, and so are uncomfortable questions about money, political will, and public support. The summit gave NATO momentum, but whether that turns into long-term capability depends on what happens next — not just on the battlefield, but in parliaments, finance ministries, and at the ballot box.

## NATO

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<sup>1</sup> NATO. "NATO Leaders Agree New Defence Investment Pledge." July 24, 2025. *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. [Available here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Horowitz, Jason. "NATO Wants Europe to Spend More on Defence. Can It Afford It?" *CNN*, July 21, 2025. [Available here](#).

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<sup>3</sup> Euronews. "Spain's PM Pedro Sánchez Rejects NATO's 5% of GDP Spending Plan as 'Unreasonable.'" *Euronews*, June 19, 2025. [Available here](#).

<sup>4</sup> Ainvest. "French PM: Interest Payments to Reach EUR 100 Billion by 2029, Crushed by Debts, Represents 'Mortal Danger' to Country." *Ainvest*, July 25, 2025. [Available here](#).

<sup>5</sup> European Commission. "European Commission Proposes Defence Investment Exception and New Financial Facility." *European Commission Press Corner*, July 23, 2025. [Available here](#).

<sup>6</sup> SecureWorld. "NATO Considering Cybersecurity Resilience Proposal for Member States." *SecureWorld*, July 2025. [Available here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Atlantic Council. "What's in NATO's First-Ever Commercial Space Strategy?" *Atlantic Council*, July 2025. [Available here](#).