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Challenges, and Implications for Canada

*MD Rakib Jahan & Dr. Stéfanie von Hlatky*

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### On The Cover

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"NATO + Country Flag"

Photo: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization Flag and Türkiye Flag.  
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## **Abstract**

The NATO Summit in Ankara was seen as a test to determine if Allies can credibly deliver on last year's 5 per cent pledge. First, this policy paper analyzes the shift from the 5 per cent GDP target to its implementation, observing new industrial initiatives like the “Front Door for Industry” and “NATO Engine”, even if growing financial inputs continue to tell us little about actual defence capabilities, and fiscal constraints continue to loom over key Allies. Second, it considers three immediate crises – the Greenland sovereignty issue, the Iran conflict and the Strait of Hormuz deadlock, and Ukraine – and contends each reveals the same structural problem: European dependence on American power without meaningful input over its deployment. Finally, the paper turns to Canada, where the transition from declaratory promises of defence spending to costly implementation, the adoption of European frameworks such as SAFE, the Canadian-led Defence, Security and Resilience Bank, and the increasing friction between the modernisation of NORAD and the American “Golden Dome” missile-defence concept are discussed. While the Ankara Summit advanced NATO's implementation agenda, it failed to answer its fundamental question: whether member states have a common understanding of consultation, sovereignty, risk, and strategic purpose.

## **Introduction**

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte introduced the 2026 Ankara Summit by hammering home the need for persistence in making NATO as “a stronger, fairer and more lethal Alliance”.<sup>1</sup> Held in Ankara, it was Türkiye’s second time hosting the Summit, having previously welcomed NATO allies to Istanbul in 2004. Back then, the Summit was memorable in that it marked a decisive shift in the Alliance’s post-Cold War transformation. Sitting at the crossroads of NATO’s eastern and southern flanks, Türkiye leverages these summits to strengthen its role as a strategically irreplaceable ally, while pursuing concrete priorities such as the lifting of sanctions, new security agreements, increased defence cooperation and greater trade opportunities with Europe.<sup>2</sup> President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s role as host was also criticized over the exclusion of numerous opposition-oriented and independent media from covering the event as claimed by independent Turkish journalism organizations.<sup>3</sup>

Türkiye’s own agenda aside, the Ankara Summit was also a test for NATO, as it needed to show that last year’s defence investment pledge would survive contact with implementation. Last Summit’s big win was the 5% target; Ankara’s task was to convert that pledge into “credible” national roadmaps, as Secretary General Rutte put it. More specifically, NATO allies (with the exception of Spain) pledged to allocate “5% of GDP annually towards core defence needs and defence-related expenditures by 2035”, comprising a minimum of 3.5 per cent for core military requirements and up to 1.5 per cent for critical infrastructure, cyber defence, civil resilience, innovation, and the defence industrial base.<sup>4</sup>

Moving the focus of the Summit from target-setting to delivery, Rutte stressed the

importance of “credible” national implementation roadmaps, rather than generic commitments.<sup>5</sup> He also stated that European partners and Canada were already spending about 4% of their GDP on defence, and the Hague timeline had only been in place for a year.<sup>6</sup> Although this showed quicker-than-expected progress toward the new standard, total expenditures did not reveal whether Allies were turning more funds into deployable forces, industrial capability, or sustained military preparedness.

Canada’s stance in Ankara was again defined by its declining bilateral relationship with the U.S. and intensifying partnership with Europe. While most of NATO’s allies find it difficult to navigate the unpredictability of their relationship with Trump, Canada is exposed in unique ways, given its geography, deep economic integration, as well as its overlapping security and defence infrastructure. Together, these factors have created additive stressors such as threats to sovereignty, expectations of support in operations launched without NATO consultation, and issue linkages tying continental defence to trade.<sup>7</sup> This Policy Paper argues that the Ankara Summit exposed the disparity between NATO’s aspirational commitments and its ability to fulfill them, as the U.S. actively plans to do much less within an Alliance context. It also analyzes the extent to which new defence spending is producing deliverable capabilities for NATO, examines three disputes that challenged alliance cohesion in the past year, contextualizes Ukraine’s unresolved status within NATO’s larger transformation, and highlights some policy recommendations for Canada.

## **From the 5 Percent Pledge to Strategic Delivery**

At last year’s Summit in The Hague, the 5 per cent defence investment indicated a revitalized emphasis on military readiness

amid an increasingly unstable geopolitical landscape.<sup>8</sup> Even though defence spending is increasing, achieving the 5 per cent spending target is still limited by political and fiscal constraints. For example, the French debt was 112 per cent of GDP in late 2024 (with two of three major rating agencies issuing a negative outlook), Italian debt reached 135 per cent of GDP in 2023, and Moody's downgraded the United States' credit rating in May 2025.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the NATO capability objectives behind the 5 per cent pledge are rarely made public, which makes democratic oversight difficult.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Allies are being asked to commit historically large amounts in defence spending to a set of obligations that their own parliaments cannot independently monitor. NATO's own challenge moving forward is to not only track Allies' military expenditures but also how these translate into the necessary troops, equipment, infrastructure, logistics, and command structures to bolster deterrence and collective defence.

The two-day Ankara Summit was not ambitious in scope but did focus on galvanizing the defence industry. NATO unveiled the "Front Door for Industry" and the "NATO Engine" at the Defence Industry Forum on July 7. The "Front Door for Industry" is meant to provide a single point of contact for businesses, and the "NATO Engine" is meant to connect the available industry capacity across allied economies. Additionally, NATO said it would release a unified, unclassified demand signal to make future capability goals clear.<sup>11</sup> Even with defence spending that is substantially higher than 2 per cent of GDP, the same structural flaw remains: it evaluates financial inputs rather than overall readiness or willingness to contribute to NATO's missions and operations. Larger budgets do not guarantee deployable formations, adequate arms stocks, resilient logistics, interoperable command

structures, or the ability to sustain operations over a long period. In other words, the 5 per cent goal is just a number. Moreover, the ability to reach it depends on political – as much as military – factors.

### **Crisis of Cohesion**

While NATO summits are always meant to showcase alliance cohesion, the Alliance's unity has been severely put to the test by three disputes since The Hague Summit. Initially, Trump's pressure to acquire Greenland resulted in a direct sovereignty dispute with Denmark and raised concerns about coercion within the Alliance. Then, the U.S.-led war against Iran intensified these tensions when Trump criticized NATO allies for declining to provide support for operations in the Strait of Hormuz after initiating the conflict without alliance consultation. On Ukraine, the growing disparity between European demands for sustained American engagement and Washington's efforts to assign more responsibility to Europe remain a significant point of friction within the Alliance. Across these very different conflicts, the bottom line is the same: European allies continue to be reliant on U.S. military and security capabilities while having limited say over their use.

#### *Greenland*

In January 2026, the Greenland crisis reached a boiling point as President Trump continued his threats of tariffs against Denmark and, for months, refused to rule out the possibility of using military force to seize the island.<sup>12</sup> Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 21, Trump stated that the United States "needs" Greenland and wants "total access" to the area, while also saying that he would not use force to obtain it. Danish and Greenlandic leaders rejected any suggestion that sovereignty itself was negotiable. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said Denmark could discuss everything

politically such as security, investments and the economy but “cannot negotiate on our sovereignty,” while Greenlandic Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen called the island’s sovereignty a “red line”.<sup>13</sup>

For NATO, the episode was widely seen as unprecedented: the U.S. used its central role in the Alliance’s security architecture to threaten the territorial integrity of another member, rather than defend it against an external threat.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the biggest constraint on Trump may have been his own domestic constraints rather than any emergency diplomatic actions undertaken by NATO.

#### *Iran and The Strait of Hormuz*

The Iran War revealed a different but related crisis of alliance cohesion. Operation Epic Fury, led by the United States and coordinated with Israel, commenced on February 28, 2026, targeting Iran’s military installations, nuclear facilities, and senior leadership. The operation resulted in the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran reacted by closing the Strait of Hormuz, the route for around 25 per cent of the global seaborne oil traffic, a move described as the most significant supply interruption in the history of the oil market.<sup>15</sup> Trump then called on other oil-importing countries and NATO partners to contribute military assets to reopen the Strait. The request was overwhelmingly rejected by European nations and Trump articulated his “disgust with NATO”, adding that he was “absolutely considering” the withdrawal of the United States from the organization.<sup>16</sup> This threat exemplified a variant of “extractive transactionalism,” wherein Washington used European reliance on U.S. security assurances to coerce Allies into endorsing an operation that lacked NATO authorization and was not firmly anchored in international law.<sup>17</sup> At the Summit, Trump again criticized NATO over Iran, expressing

further doubts about why Washington should continue to carry such high alliance costs.<sup>18</sup> Trump’s requests for allied support without consultation are likely to continue beyond this crisis.

#### *Ukraine: The Unresolved Strategic Core*

Ukraine remains NATO’s most significant unresolved issue. The Hague communiqué reiterated support for Kyiv but provided neither a definitive route to membership nor a new meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council. The Ankara Summit Declaration did not improve much in this respect but solidified Europe’s backing, as the U.S. continues to be an unreliable partner to Kyiv, stating: “European Allies and Canada now finance the vast majority of security assistance to Ukraine through bilateral and multilateral means”.<sup>19</sup> As with each summit since the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy refined his pitch for NATO membership, claiming that the combat-tested capabilities created during the war would boost the Alliance’s collective defence rather than add to its burden.<sup>20</sup> The Summit also reinforced NATO’s strategic focus to connect the Euro-Atlantic zone by cultivating stronger collaboration with its four Indo-Pacific partners: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Their participation in consecutive NATO summits has evolved into a comprehensive agenda that includes support for Ukraine, cyber defence, counter-disinformation initiatives, and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence. NATO is thus emerging as a progressively vital platform for orchestrating security collaboration across the transatlantic and Indo-Pacific regions.<sup>21</sup>

#### **Beyond Ankara**

Since the beginning of Trump’s second term, it has been clear that European allies and Canada have been future proofing NATO. The

United States anticipates that NATO's European members will assume responsibility for most of the Alliance's conventional, non-nuclear defence capabilities, including intelligence and missiles, by 2027. The reality is that Allies cannot catch up fast enough to match the U.S.' determination for doing less within NATO. This makes NATO vulnerable as it struggles to translate its defence spending pledges into the capabilities the U.S. no longer wants to share with NATO. For example, Europe faces production backlogs for equipment they were already in the process of acquiring.<sup>22</sup> A diminished American military footprint in Europe and the reallocation of U.S. assets to the Indo-Pacific, where China is perceived as the principal long-term adversary, is consistent with Trump's longstanding disdain for NATO.<sup>23</sup> It also indicates a significant transition within segments of the U.S. security apparatus towards delegating the duty for Europe's conventional defence to European states, as opposed to just wanting U.S. allies to do more.

The European response to this shift has been anchored in the concept of a more robust European pillar within NATO. This is not an independent European defence structure that exists outside the Alliance, but a reorganized distribution of roles in which Europeans provide the majority of conventional capability while the United States maintains its nuclear umbrella and high-end enabling assets, such as strategic lift and intelligence. The German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) has contended that this pillar must be defined in three dimensions: strategic (doctrine and command), economic (industrial base and procurement), and military (deployable forces).<sup>24</sup>

This strengthening of the European pillar is beginning to expand beyond the boundaries of Europe itself, drawing in states that wish to diversify their security and industrial partnerships, as evidenced by Canada's

involvement in emergent European defence arrangements. In an explicit effort to "enhance defence readiness on both sides of the Atlantic," Canada and the European Union signed a Security and Defence Partnership in June 2025, establishing the framework for Canada's participation in the EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) initiative. Canada officially joined SAFE by signing the Canada-EU SAFE Agreement in February 2026 at the Munich Security Conference. This initiative is a central pillar of the EU's Readiness 2030 plan.<sup>25</sup>

Now, Canada and 8 other countries – Albania, Belgium, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Romania, Türkiye, and Ukraine – have announced their intention to establish the Canadian Defence, Security, and Resilience Bank (DSRB), which Canada will host. The institution is intended to mobilize private resources, provide lower-cost financing, and loan guarantees for defence projects, and will be operating by 2027.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Canada's involvement suggests that the Europeanization of NATO is not just a shift of responsibility from Washington to EU member states; it has already led to Canada working alongside European allies that are seeking to reduce their susceptibility to American strategic unpredictability while protecting the integrity of the Alliance.<sup>27</sup>

### **Canada in Ankara**

On March 26, 2026, Prime Minister Mark Carney declared that Canada had surpassed the NATO 2 per cent GDP defence spending threshold for the first time since the fall of the Berlin Wall, supported by over \$63 billion in defence expenditures – the most substantial year-over-year increase in generations.<sup>28</sup> Carney also indicated that Canada's fiscal framework would be ready for total defence spending to reach 4 per cent of GDP by the end of the decade, inclusive of the Canadian Patrol Submarine Project. This provides Canada with

an intermediate benchmark, but still leaves a significant financial and capability gap between the end-of-decade target and the full 5 per cent commitment required by 2035.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, Canada's NATO stance is inextricably linked to its continental defence arrangements, which the government's departmental planning documents categorize as equally urgent. The 2026–27 DND Departmental Plan emphasizes Arctic sovereignty as Canada's foremost strategic vulnerability, recognizing the inherent contradiction that “less than 1 per cent of Canada's GDP is derived from the Arctic,” while Russia “gets at least 20 per cent of its GDP from its Arctic region”.<sup>30</sup> Russia has also developed military infrastructure along the entire Northern Sea Route, and stationed its finest fleet, the Northern fleet, in the area.<sup>31</sup> The government reported that Russia and China engaged in joint military exercises in the Arctic in July 2024, followed by coordinated naval patrols near the Aleutian Islands, which were monitored by NORAD, serving as clear evidence of escalating activity in proximity to North America.<sup>32</sup>

The Carney government has reacted with a series of substantial investments. In March 2026, the Prime Minister declared an allocation of \$32 billion for forward operational bases in Yellowknife, Inuvik, Iqaluit, and Goose Bay, clearly positioned to bolster both NORAD continental security and NATO deterrence and defence goals.<sup>33</sup> In Atlantic Canada, there is a planned investment of over \$3 billion to the infrastructure of CFB Halifax Dockyard, aviation support from 14 Wing Greenwood, and the acquisition of Halifax Gate, a waterfront industrial site that supports Royal Canadian Navy operations. The Enhanced Satellite Communications Project-Polar was announced in December 2025 through a strategic collaboration between Telesat and MDA Space to deliver secure wideband and narrowband connectivity for

Arctic operations, supporting NORAD and NATO priorities.<sup>34</sup> These moves were intended to expedite Canada's progress toward the NATO 3.5/1.5 per cent target.<sup>35</sup>

Against these promising developments are difficult conversations with the Trump administration over the Golden Dome continental missile-defence concept and the modernization of NORAD. NORAD's design entails a true bilateral partnership in being “the world's only bi-national command charged with aerospace warning, aerospace control, and maritime warning for Canada and the United States,” where its governance model “guarantees Canada an equal voice” in decision-making.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the Golden Dome “centralizes decision-making in Washington” and its procurement is “expected to flow largely through U.S. defence primes subject to Buy America provisions,” potentially making Canadian industry participation “conditional or limited” in a way it was not historically under NORAD modernization. Ultimately, Canada is doing the impossible, or attempting a balancing act that can only be sustained with continued increases in defence spending: more deeply integrating into a Washington-centred continental arrangement while pursuing new opportunities within European industrial and security architectures.<sup>37</sup>

The best strategy for Canada post-Summit is to remain steadfast in delivering what it has promised. Canada should safeguard the Patrol Submarine Project and its announced Arctic and Atlantic infrastructure investments by converting political commitments into transparent and credible implementation plans. Canada should publish a multi-year financial update, life-cycle cost estimate, procurement and construction schedules, with explanations for cost increases, delays, or capability reductions. Parliament recommended better procurement tracking, stable long-term contracts, and stronger supervision of major

defence acquisitions.<sup>38</sup> In that spirit, instead of reporting spending alone, Canada should publish an annual capability scorecard that separates financial inputs from operational outcomes like readiness, deployability, personnel strength, equipment serviceability, critical stock availability, infrastructure completion, and industrial capacity, to improve accountability around timelines and budgets.

Any Canadian engagement in Golden Dome should secure a bilateral agreement preserving sovereignty, operational access, and economic interests. Canada should ensure institutionalized political and operational consultation, guaranteed access to warning and tracking information relevant to Canadian territory, clearly defined national decision-making authorities, interoperability with NORAD modernization projects, and substantial Canadian participation in research, production, maintenance, and supply chains before committing funding.<sup>39</sup> Canada should replicate some of the key features of NORAD, such that the Golden Dome, even if primarily an American homeland-defense program, entail robust consultative arrangements, sovereign control over decisions affecting Canadian territory, and reciprocal data access.<sup>40</sup>

Canada should also use SAFE membership and DSRB leadership for long-term diversification. Canadian firms have preferential access to the EU's €150 billion initiative through SAFE, which allows Canadian content up to 80 per cent of qualified procurements.<sup>41</sup> Canada should measure the agreement's success by the number and size of contracts secured, joint production arrangements, improvements in supply chains, and access for Canadian small- and medium-sized enterprises. On the DSRB, Canada should prioritize growing the membership,

charter ratification, firm capital subscriptions, credible governance and lending standards, and a defined project pipeline.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Canada can also be an advocate for outcomes-based reporting at NATO, keeping the 5 per cent target in sight, to ensure the framework measures capability creation rather than spending recorded.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, this is the principle that will make Canada's European diversification a feasible compliment to continental defence, which is the surest pathway to enhance its status within NATO.

## **Conclusion**

The 2026 Ankara Summit did not resolve NATO's fundamental tensions, which arise from an alliance architecture that is overly reliant on the U.S. and that cannot transition fast enough for an increasingly disinterested Trump administration. The Summit did not achieve much, and its short communiqué once again reflects diplomatic risk aversion when it comes to public displays of NATO cohesion. One could argue, however, that the Summit, like Davos, delivered a symbolic victory for Canada in that Carney arrived in Ankara with a defence budget that exceeded 2 per cent of GDP, brandished its SAFE membership, could still bask in the prestige of having secured the Defence, Security, and Resilience Bank, and showed impressive momentum overall on the 2035 defence investment pledge. Canada is practically unrecognizable from just two years ago, when it was seen as a laggard on defence spending. Can this political momentum be sustained? Certainly, as long as Trump is President. Beyond that, continued political support in Canada will depend on efficient and rapid execution of key commitments: new Arctic infrastructure, enhancing its domestic industrial capacity, and communicating a credible multi-year plan to taxpayers.

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