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**“The North Atlantic Treaty Organization at 75: Reflecting on Past Successes and
Planning for the Future”**



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Madam Chair Shaheen, Ranking Member Ricketts, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am honored to speak before this esteemed Committee on the topic: “The North Atlantic Treaty Organization at 75: Reflecting on Past Successes and Planning for the Future.”

My name is Luke Coffey. I am a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of Hudson Institute.

Before any analysis or discussion of NATO can happen, it is useful to remember why Europe is important to the U.S. While there are many normative and values-based reasons Europe is significant (e.g., a shared belief in basic freedoms and the fact that some of America’s oldest and closest allies are in Europe), the main reason the continent—and by extension, NATO—matters to the U.S. is economic.

The countries of North America and Europe together account for approximately [48](#) percent of the global economy.¹ Europe is America’s largest source of foreign investment. Crucially, Europe is America’s largest export market. In 2022, 45 out of 50 states exported more goods to Europe than to China.² Our largest Pacific facing state, California, exported twice as many goods to Europe as to China.³ New York exported eight times more, Florida six and a half times, and Texas three times more. Europe matters to the American heartland too. For example, Missouri, Illinois, and Kentucky each export about four times more to Europe than China.⁴ Even Belgium, a small European country about the size of Maryland with a population like Ohio, was the top export market for six U.S. states in 2022.⁵ NATO is the primary security guarantor of America’s largest export market.

When Americans build something to export, that means American jobs are being preserved or created. European stability, which Russia is trying to undermine, not only impacts the U.S. economy but also affects the American worker. In addition to a robust NATO, aiding Ukraine helps preserve stability in Europe.

NATO’s future is based on its past.

As NATO leaders gather in Washington, DC, in July to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the alliance’s establishment in 1949, there will be a lot of discussion on what the next 75 years should bring for the alliance.

NATO needs to use the Washington summit to prepare for the future. For inspiration,

¹ Data compiled from World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

² Daniel S. Hamilton and Joseph Quinlan, *Transatlantic Economy 2023* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy Institute, Johns Hopkins University SAIS/Transatlantic Leadership Network, 2023), vii.

³ Hamilton and Quinlan, *Transatlantic Economy 2023*.

⁴ Hamilton and Quinlan, *Transatlantic Economy 2023*.

⁵ Hamilton and Quinlan, *Transatlantic Economy 2023*.

NATO should look to its origins. A good place to start is the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty,⁶ the alliance's founding document. In particular, there are four articles in the founding treaty that are just as relevant today as they were in 1949 and throughout the Cold War. They should serve as guideposts for NATO's future.

Article 3: The issue of defense spending.

Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty covers the issue of defense spending and capability. This article states that NATO members, at a minimum, will “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”⁷ Only a handful of NATO members can say that they are living up to their Article 3 commitment. Over the years, low defense spending across Europe has led to a significant loss of capabilities and embarrassing gaps in readiness for NATO. By failing to meet or enforce Article 3 commitments, NATO reduces its ability to deter adversaries militarily.

The debate about defense spending is nothing new. In 2006, NATO defense ministers agreed to spend 2 percent of their GDPs on defense. Only a few members ever achieved this goal in the following years. Within months of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO leaders used the Wales summit to recommit to the 2 percent goal with 2024, NATO's seventy-fifth anniversary, as the deadline to achieve this spending target.

As this year's summit approaches, NATO's defense spending commitment has produced mixed results. Yes, progress has been made. Each year since 2014 has seen a real-terms increase in European defense spending. However, in 2023, a majority of NATO's members do not meet the 2 percent mark. In the aftermath of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many countries announced increases in defense spending. Even so, only a handful more NATO members are expected to meet the 2 percent target this year. The inability of so many members to spend just 2 percent of GDP on defense is worsened by the fact that NATO's definition of defense spending is both broad and generous. For example, retirement pensions for civilians working in defense-related government jobs can be included in the tally.⁸

While there is no easy answer to the defense-spending crisis, one new approach the alliance should take is getting the finance ministers, or their equivalents, involved. In most parliamentary democracies in Europe, finance ministers hold the purse strings. In this way, most of Europe is unlike the U.S., where the legislative branch holds the powers both of authorization and appropriations for public spending.

Also, in most European parliamentary democracies, the position of defense minister ranks

⁶ The North Atlantic Treaty, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 4, 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

⁷ The North Atlantic Treaty.

⁸ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Defence Expenditures and NATO's 2% Guideline,” September 27, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49198.htm.

low in terms of seniority and influence. Meanwhile, the finance minister is often the most influential and important member of the government after the prime minister. This contrasts with the U.S. system, where the position of defense secretary is constitutionally mandated to rank high in the cabinet and is therefore an influential and important member of the government.

This is why the upcoming Washington summit should include a special session for the finance ministers, or their equivalent, to meet and discuss defense spending. Between summits throughout the year, NATO's finance ministers or their equivalents should meet regularly as their defense and foreign minister counterparts already do. Introducing the finance ministers into the NATO world would help them understand why defense is so expensive and why the geopolitical stakes are so high.

As an intergovernmental security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its individual member states. This is why Article 3 is so important and why the 2 percent target is a reasonable goal. While getting finance ministers involved in the NATO process is not a silver bullet to increase defense spending, it can only help. Ultimately, giving finance ministers a stake in the NATO process could help lead to better policy and higher defense spending at home.

Article 5 and Article 6: NATO must remain focused on the transatlantic community.

NATO was founded in 1949 with the mission of protecting the territorial integrity of its members and—if required—defeating the Soviet Union. While NATO's members are no longer worried about the spread of communism, many current NATO members are legitimately worried about protecting their territory from Russian aggression.

The United States should work to ensure that NATO's collective defense mission and the threat from Russia are the top focus of the alliance. Therefore, as NATO begins its next 75 years, the organization needs to return to the basics of 1949, when territorial defense was its primary goal.

Russia represents a real and potentially existential threat to NATO members in Eastern and Central Europe, and a significant threat and challenge to the rest of the alliance. Therefore, collective defense should become the alliance's number one mission. Article 5 of the 1949 treaty serves as NATO's mutual defense clause based on the principle that an attack on one member is an attack on all members.⁹ NATO must ensure it can live up to its Article 5 commitments and be prepared to counter Russia. Everything else that the alliance does should be secondary to this mission.

Many policymakers advocate for NATO to take a greater role around the world, particularly in the Indo-Pacific in response to China's rise. There is no doubt that China poses a significant threat to the U.S. and its allies and partners. It is important that NATO's

⁹ The North Atlantic Treaty.

members remain vigilant to China's aggressive acts on the global stage. NATO should also continue to deepen and advance relations with key countries in the Indo-Pacific region. However, Article 6 of the 1949 treaty states that Article 5's mutual defense clause applies to "the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America . . . on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer."¹⁰ NATO, as an institution, doesn't have to be everywhere in the world doing everything. But it does have to be able to defend the territorial integrity of its member states in the North Atlantic.

Some of the biggest challenges China poses to NATO's member states are Beijing's investments in critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns, and encroachments in the technology sector—particularly the spread of Huawei's 5G network. Policymakers should acknowledge NATO's institutional limitations when confronting some of China's non-military threats, and push NATO's member states to do more outside the NATO framework. This would complement NATO and make the alliance more secure. Individual NATO member states, and even the supranational European Union with its particular policy competencies, have more tools to deal with an emboldened China than does NATO as an institution. As a defense-focused alliance, NATO should not pretend to lead on an issue for which it lacks the required policy competencies.

Member states should look to NATO for robust conventional and nuclear deterrence. But only the national capitals (and in some cases the EU) have the political and economic tools to combat China's economic and political challenges. NATO should keep a close eye on China, but until Beijing poses a military threat to "the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer," Russia must remain the number one focus for the alliance.

Article 10: NATO enlargement

NATO should use the upcoming summit to reenergize the debate about adding new members. NATO has underpinned European and North American security for 75 years, so it is no surprise that many countries in the transatlantic region that are not already members want to join the alliance. NATO's open-door policy has been a crucial driver of modernization and reform in candidate countries, has promoted stability and peace in Europe, and has made it easier for the alliance to coalesce around collective defense.

NATO's open-door policy for qualified countries has contributed greatly to transatlantic security since the first round of enlargement in 1952, helping to ensure that the alliance became the prime guarantor of security in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty's Article 10 states that any "European State" that is "in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area" can be invited to join the alliance.¹¹

¹⁰ The North Atlantic Treaty.

¹¹ The North Atlantic Treaty.

While Russia has described any further NATO enlargement as a “provocation,” no third party should have a veto over the decision of the sovereign member states of NATO.¹² All decisions made by the alliance require unanimity, including those regarding enlargement. It is for the democratic countries that make up the alliance to decide whether to admit new members, and which ones to admit.

NATO has done more than any other organization, including the European Union, to promote democracy, stability, and security in the Euro-Atlantic region. NATO accomplished this by enticing countries to become a part of the club. Considering the importance of allies in a multipolar world, and the vital role that NATO plays in securing America’s largest export market, it is in the U.S. interest that NATO’s door remains open to deserving European countries.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in the early 1990s, NATO (then with only 16 members) had to develop a new enlargement policy for the newly independent states in central and eastern Europe. This led to the 1995 “Study on NATO Enlargement.”¹³ This document served as a useful guideline for the subsequent enlargements, especially in 1999 and 2004, when several Eastern European countries joined the alliance. However, that document is now almost 30 years old. With Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the geopolitical situation in Europe has changed once again. Unlike many of the newly independent countries in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the remaining countries that aspire to join the alliance have complicated geopolitical and security circumstances (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Georgia, and Ukraine). Therefore, it would benefit the alliance to conduct a new study on NATO enlargement to develop a new approach to get the remaining aspirant countries into the alliance in a reasonable, realistic, and timely manner.

For future enlargement, NATO should also take a long-term and pragmatic approach with other European countries. In the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the idea of countries like Poland or Estonia joining NATO seemed unrealistic, if not crazy. Almost 30 years later, former Warsaw Pact or Soviet-occupied countries are some of NATO’s most steadfast members. Article 10 states that any European country can join if it meets the criteria. However unrealistic it might seem for a country like Belarus or Azerbaijan to someday join NATO, the world will be much different 50 years from now. The door must always be kept open, and policymakers must keep an open mind.

Seven guiding principles for the next 75 years.

As NATO marks its first 75 years and looks to the future, it should follow seven guiding principles.

¹² “NATO’s Planned Balkan Expansion a ‘Provocation’: Russia’s Lavrov,” Reuters, September 29, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-balkans-russia-idUSKCN0H011W20140929>.

¹³ “Study on NATO Enlargement,” The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 3, 1995, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm.

1. NATO's primary mission must be collective defense; everything else the alliance does is secondary to the task of defending its members.
2. In this context, for the foreseeable future, Russia represents a real and existential threat to NATO members in Eastern and Central Europe and a significant threat and challenge to the rest of the alliance.
3. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO must remain a nuclear alliance.
4. There is much for NATO to do in "the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer." The alliance should not create a problem by looking for a solution elsewhere in the world.
5. As an intergovernmental security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its member states. Members must recommit to meeting defense spending requirements—and follow through.
6. NATO's open-door policy is the world's most effective tool for democratic change, economic reform, and improvements in military capability among its members. The alliance must remain open to new members.
7. Policymakers must realize that there are limits to what NATO, as an intergovernmental institution, can do. When policymakers expect NATO to take on challenges it was never designed to face, they set up the alliance for failure.

The Washington summit and Ukraine.

Regardless of the fanfare and celebration leading up to and surrounding the seventy-fifth anniversary of NATO, the summit's main focus will be the situation in Ukraine. This is to be expected. For the U.S. and NATO, the stakes are high. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the first time since 1990, when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, that one country used military force to annex a section of another country. Allowing Russia to get away with its reckless behavior on the international stage would set a very dangerous precedent for the 21st century.

The outcome of the war in Ukraine will establish the geopolitical conditions across the Eurasian landmass for the foreseeable future. A Russian victory in Ukraine could further destabilize Europe, which is America's largest export market and the source of millions of jobs in the U.S. As the war continues, Russian-Iranian arms trade and technology transfers continue to grow. As Russia grows desperate in Ukraine, there is no doubt Moscow is pushing Tehran to escalate against us elsewhere. Recent events in the Middle East are proof of this.

A lack of U.S. and NATO resolve to arm and equip Ukraine could embolden North Korea and China to act in an aggressive manner in East Asia. A Ukraine fully under the Kremlin's control would mean even more Russian troops and equipment along NATO's borders. Closer to home, Venezuela's dubious claims on territory that is considered by the international community to be a part of Guyana are no doubt inspired by Russia's action in Ukraine. A Ukrainian defeat, on the heels of America's disastrous retreat from Afghanistan, will embolden Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela to challenge American influence around the globe. No serious policymaker should find this outcome satisfactory for U.S. national interest.

America's friends and foes alike will be watching the outcome of the Washington summit closely. This is why NATO must ensure a good outcome regarding Ukraine at the summit.

The U.S. and its partners must start arming Ukraine to win the war—and not merely survive. However, the decision to provide the weapons needed for a Ukrainian victory, such as ATACMS missiles and more air-launched cruise missiles, will be taken by the national capitals and not by NATO. Therefore, for the Washington summit to be a success, Ukraine must be given an invitation to join the alliance with the final date of membership to be determined once allies agree that the security environment inside the country is satisfactory.

Most members do not want Ukraine to formally join the alliance while Kyiv is in an active war against another country. Last year, President Zelenskyy acknowledged that Ukraine “will not be a NATO member, while the war is waging.”¹⁴ Even the UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation published earlier this month offered *future* British security guarantees to Ukraine if it “is ever attacked by Russia again.”¹⁵ Even so, this should not prevent the alliance from extending Ukraine an invitation at the summit. An invitation does not mean immediate and automatic membership. Therefore, I humbly propose the following wording to be used in the Washington summit communique to extend Ukraine an invitation for NATO membership:

“We fully support Ukraine’s right to choose its own security arrangements. We reaffirm the commitment made at the 2008 summit in Bucharest that Ukraine will become a member of NATO. We reaffirm the commitment made at the 2023 summit in Vilnius that Ukraine’s future is in NATO. Today we extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the alliance with the final date of membership to be determined when Allies agree that the security environment inside the country is satisfactory. Ukraine has become increasingly interoperable and politically integrated with the alliance and has made substantial progress on its reform path. We reaffirm the decision made at the 2023 summit in Vilnius that Ukraine’s path to full Euro-Atlantic integration has moved beyond the need for the Membership Action Plan. NATO’s commitment made at the 2008 summit in Bucharest, Ukraine’s reforms in the defense and security sectors since 2014, its candidacy status for EU membership in June 2022, the official commencement of accession talks for EU membership in December 2023, noting that the EU has a mutual defense clause (Article 42.7 TEU) based on the ideas of NATO’s Article 5, the G7’s Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine in July 2023, and the United Kingdom’s Agreement on Security Co-operation with Ukraine in January 2024, all underpin our decision to extend an invitation to Ukraine today.”

Since the Vilnius summit last year, NATO has not made much progress to find a consensus among its members on extending a formal invitation to Ukraine. Time is running out.

¹⁴ Christian Edwards, “What Zelensky Wanted from NATO—and What He Got,” CNN, July 13, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/13/europe/zelensky-nato-vilnius-explainer-intl/index.html>.

¹⁵ Press Release, “PM in Kyiv: UK support will not falter,” The Prime Minister’s Office, January 12, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-in-kyiv-uk-support-will-not-falter>

NATO leaders need to start working overtime to find a consensus. Russia would see a failure to resolve this issue before next year's summit as a sign of weakness.

In addition to extending an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO, the alliance can do the following to help bring NATO-Ukraine relations closer in the short term:

- **Publish a separate summit declaration on fostering NATO-Ukraine relations and Ukraine's path to membership.** In addition to the main communique, NATO leaders often agree on separate declarations that cover specific issues of importance during a summit. Russia's large-scale and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has changed the security environment in Europe in a way not seen since World War II. This warrants a separate declaration that should focus on NATO's strategy and support for Ukraine, NATO and Ukraine's deepening relations, and Kyiv's path to membership. A separate summit declaration of this nature would send a message to the Ukrainian people that the alliance takes the situation seriously.
- **Create a NATO-certified center of excellence on modern warfare jointly with Ukraine.** For the past two decades, NATO has primarily focused on low-intensity conflict and counterinsurgency operations. Now the alliance faces a different environment. NATO's recent *Strategic Concept* [stated](#) that "the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." NATO members need to adapt to the hard-earned lessons from the war in Ukraine. Creating a center of excellence on modern warfare would be a good way to start this process. The center would provide an opportunity for allies to engage in meaningful dialogue and training on how to address the challenges associated with state-on-state warfare in the twenty-first century. Additionally, it would offer another opportunity for the NATO and Ukrainian flags to fly together.
- **Invite Ukraine to contribute troops to the NATO Response Force.** Of course, Ukraine is fighting a war of national survival and needs every available soldier on the front lines. However, at any given time, thousands of Ukrainian soldiers are outside Ukraine being trained across Europe and the US. If Kyiv so desires, NATO should invite Ukraine to designate a small number of forces already outside Ukraine for training to be certified by NATO and earmarked for NATO Response Force duties. Ukraine has contributed a small number of troops to the NATO Response Force in the past, so there is a precedent.
- **Announce that a special North Atlantic Council (NAC) meeting will take place in Ukraine.** The NAC is the principal decision-making body inside NATO, and the secretary general chairs its meetings. A special NAC in Ukraine would bring immediate firsthand awareness of the war to the alliance. Such a meeting would also be symbolically important. Ideally, it would take place in Kyiv, but if the logistics make this impossible, then Lviv would be a suitable alternative