

# THE PROBLEMS STILL PLAGUING NATO



**T**his week's NATO summit in Washington is, by any measure, a grand affair, full of the pomp and ceremony befitting the bloc's 75th anniversary. It also offers up a useful opportunity to reflect on the state of the most successful military alliance in history.

On the surface, the verdict is positive. Today, the Alliance appears to once again be on the march, thanks largely to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the bloody war of aggression it has waged against Kyiv since, has breathed new life into a bloc that just a few years

ago was [being written off by its own leaders as "brain dead."](#)

Over the past two-and-a-half years, the practical necessities of protecting Ukraine have [jump-started conversations across the European continent](#) about a reinvigorated defense-industrial base. In response to the specter of further Russian aggression, the bloc has increased its [operational tempo, interoperability and area of military operations](#). And it has expanded, adding two members (Sweden and Finland) that eschewed their traditional neutrality to seek the protection from Moscow's imperial designs offered by collective defense. As a result, the NATO alliance is now more dynamic and robust than at any time in recent memory.

Dig a bit deeper, though, and some serious internal contradictions become visible.

The first is the Alliance's lingering "free rider" problem. For years, U.S. officials have struggled to get

NATO members to shoulder their fair share of the financial burden for collective defense. A decade ago, at its summit in Wales, the bloc formally announced a "defence investment pledge" committing each member to increase defense spending to 2% of national GDP. (That commitment was reaffirmed at last year's Alliance gathering in Vilnius).

Significant progress has been made on that score in recent years, largely—though European officials may be loath to admit it—as a result of political pressure during the Trump era. As Marc Thiessen [notes in the Washington Post](#), Trump's policies, however unartfully expressed, "put Germany and the rest of NATO on notice: The United States would no longer tolerate their failure to contribute adequately to our common defense."

The results have been notable. When tallied last year, 11 of the Alliance's then-31 members were

AFPC  
NSIGHTS



By Ilan Berman

found to be [meeting the Wales criteria](#), up from just 3 in 2014. Since then, concern over Ukraine's defense has led to further investments, and 23 NATO member states [are on track](#) to meet the 2% target this year.

Still, a number of countries remain conspicuous underperformers. [According to NATO's own statistics](#), six nations (Canada, Luxembourg, Italy, Slovenia, Belgium and Spain) spend less than 1.5% of their GDP on defense, and two others—Croatia and Portugal—are nominally better but still under the Wales goal. Such a state of affairs is unacceptable at a time when, [as some experts have convincingly argued](#), mounting global challenges require Alliance members not only to meet previous targets but to invest still more on collective defense and deterrence.

The second problem plaguing the Alliance is the trajectory of its only Middle Eastern member, Türkiye. During the decades of the Cold War, Türkiye played an indispensable role in safeguarding the bloc's southeastern flank against Soviet encroachment. But in the

post-Cold War era, shifting policies on the part of the country's long-serving strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have made Türkiye the Alliance's most grudging member—and arguably its weakest strategic link.

Today, it's easy to forget that NATO cohesion was sorely tested by Ankara's policies in the not-so-distant past. For roughly a year, Turkish opposition to Sweden's accession effectively deadlocked Alliance politics. The impasse was only broken last summer, after Erdoğan successfully [wrangled a series of political and strategic concessions](#) from Stockholm, as well as from Washington.

More troublesome still is Türkiye's larger strategic outlook, which increasingly views itself as separate from the West. Earlier this month, Erdoğan traveled to Astana, Kazakhstan, where he told Chinese president Xi Jinping in no uncertain terms that his country [has aspirations](#) to join the Moscow- and Beijing-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a full member. If Erdoğan gets his wish, Türkiye will simultaneously be a member of an alliance intended to safeguard the West, and one that (as Xi and Putin have made all too clear) was built to oppose it.

Chances are, these subjects won't receive much attention at the NATO summit. Much of this week's deliberations will doubtless be taken up by discussions over America's future role in the Alliance in the wake of President Joe Biden's disastrous late June debate performance and the mounting political momentum of his Republican rival, former President Donald Trump. Hopefully, however, officials will also find time to focus on the bloc's lingering internal contradictions. Because, as much as anything else, those factors will help shape the future effectiveness of the Alliance.



*Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.*

*Follow Ilan Berman on Twitter @IlanBerman.*

