

NATO 3.0 at Ankara: What “Less Dependent on America” Means for the Rest of the World

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Introduction

At the 36th NATO Summit, convened on 7–8 July 2026 at the Beştepe Presidential Compound in Ankara, Secretary General Mark Rutte offered a formulation that has since become the shorthand for a structural shift in the Alliance’s self-conception: NATO 3.0. The concept describes an Alliance in which European members and Canada assume primary responsibility for conventional deterrence on the continent while the United States retains its nuclear umbrella and broader strategic engagement, but no longer carries the majority of the conventional burden.² The phrase is deliberate and consequential: an alliance, in Rutte’s words, “that is less dependent on the United States, but in which the United States remains firmly rooted.” Analytical attention has focused,

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² Congressional Research Service, “NATO: Issues for the July 2026 Ankara Summit,” R49018 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2026), 1.

understandably, on what NATO 3.0 means for transatlantic relations, for Ukraine, and for European defense industry. Those are important but insufficient questions. The redistribution of strategic responsibility within NATO is not only a Euro-Atlantic event. It re-calibrates the global distribution of American strategic attention, re-configures the security architecture that non-NATO states navigate, and creates both openings and new vulnerabilities well beyond the Alliance's geographic scope. For the Global South — states that are neither Alliance members nor Indo-Pacific allies with formal US commitments — what was ratified at Ankara carries implications that the summit's own communiqué does not address.

What NATO 3.0 Actually Claims: A Version History

The version history matters. NATO 1.0 was the Cold War Alliance: collective territorial defense organized around the Article 5 guarantee and a heavy US forward presence that provided both the deterrent capability and the credibility that underwrote it. NATO 2.0 was the post-Cold War expansion of scope and membership: enlargement to former Warsaw Pact states, out-of-area operations from the Balkans to Afghanistan, and crisis management as the dominant organizing function, sustained by a steady decline in European defense spending premised on the assumption that American power remained available as the default guarantor. NATO 3.0, as Rutte articulated it at Ankara, marks a return to core defense — but under structurally different conditions in which European allies and Canada assume primary responsibility for conventional deterrence, with the United States providing the nuclear backstop, advanced capabilities, and political commitment on a more conditional basis.



Figure 1 NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, right, and US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby prior to a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels on 12 Feb 2026.³

³ https://images.euronews.com/articles/stories/09/64/86/18/1366x768_cmsv2_bbab75d1-0986-5be7-a699-b1d03ed86292-9648618.jpg

The Ankara Summit Declaration captures the operational formulation directly: “European Allies and Canada, working with the United States, are assuming greater responsibility for the Alliance’s defence.”⁴ The quantitative backdrop is substantive. In 2025, all NATO member states met the 2% of GDP defense spending benchmark for the first time, compared with only three members in 2014.⁵ European allies and Canada increased core defense investment by more than USD 139 billion in 2025 alone, a nearly 20% single-year increase, with new procurement contracts exceeding USD 50 billion announced at Ankara.⁶ The Hague commitment to reach 5% of GDP in defense investment by 2035, agreed at the 2025 summit, was already tracking at approximately 4% within one year of adoption — a pace of increase without precedent in the post-Cold War Alliance.

At Ankara, Rutte closed his post-summit press conference with a formulation that defined the political logic of NATO 3.0 more precisely than any communiqué paragraph: “We are re-balancing our security for the better, and that is what NATO 3.0 is all about.”⁷ The re-balancing is not presented as a concession to US pressure but as a structural rationalization: Europe is wealthy enough, populous enough, and industrially capable enough to carry conventional deterrence on its own continent, and the Alliance is stronger for recognizing this. The analytical challenge is to distinguish what NATO 3.0 claims from what it presupposes. What it claims is a stronger, more capable, more equitable Alliance. What it presupposes is a United States whose strategic attention is now organized around a hierarchy in which Europe is a managed commitment rather than the first priority — and that this is a durable fact rather than a contingent policy.

The American Pivot and Its Long Genealogy

The instinct to frame NATO 3.0 as a product of Donald Trump’s second-term foreign policy is analytically convenient but misleading. The structural logic of American strategic retrenchment

⁴North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Ankara Summit Declaration, July 8, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2026/07/08/the-ankara-summit-declaration>.

⁵Congressional Research Service, “NATO: Issues for the July 2026 Ankara Summit,” 5. All NATO member states met the 2% of GDP benchmark in 2025, compared with three members in 2014.

⁶Ankara Summit Declaration, July 8, 2026; see also NATO Secretary General Rutte, Post-Summit Press Conference, July 8, 2026.

⁷NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Post-Summit Press Conference, Ankara, July 8, 2026, transcript available at <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2026/07/08/press-conference-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-following-the-meeting-of-heads-of-state-and-government-at-the-2026-nato-summit-in-ankara>.

from Europe predates the current administration by more than a decade. The Obama administration's 2011–12 “Pivot to Asia” was the first formal policy acknowledgment that the center of gravity for American strategic competition lay in the Pacific rather than the Atlantic; the difference between the Obama and Trump approaches was not the direction of the drift but the candor with which it was acknowledged and the pace at which it was institutionalized.

The 2026 US National Defense Strategy makes the prioritization hierarchy explicit in a form that no prior administration had been willing to state in unclassified policy: homeland defense and Western Hemisphere security first, then deterrence of China in the Indo-Pacific, with allies in Europe and elsewhere expected to “take primary responsibility for their own defense with critical but more limited support from American forces.”⁸ The NDS does not characterize this as retrenchment; it characterizes it as rationalization, the application of burden-sharing logic to a global alliance architecture that was designed for an era in which the United States faced no peer competitor demanding simultaneous focus. But the effect is identical to retrenchment in practice: fewer US forces assigned to NATO defense plans, a reduced conventional force structure in Europe, and a political signal to allies that the era of automatic American assumption of the largest share of the conventional burden has ended.

The structural character of this shift is important for what it implies about reversibility. NATO 3.0 is not a Trump-era anomaly that will unwind with the next US administration. The defense industrial commitments made by European allies, the procurement contracts signed at Ankara, the restructuring of NATO Force Model contributions, and the political consensus in European capitals that conventional defense is now primarily a European responsibility — all of these are institutional facts that will shape the Alliance regardless of who governs in Washington. The US withdrawal from direct conventional primacy in Europe is being absorbed into the Alliance's institutional structure in ways that will be politically and financially costly to reverse, because the European buildup that compensates for it is now partly predicated on the permanence of the shift.

⁸US Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy 2026, quoted in “Europe and the 2026 U.S. Defense Strategy: A Transatlantic Shift,” BeHorizon, January 28, 2026, <https://behorizon.org/europe-and-the-2026-u-s-defense-strategy/>.

What Europe Gains, and What Remains Unresolved

European defense mobilization since 2022 is empirically substantial by any historical measure. The combination of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a galvanizing threat and sustained US pressure on burden-sharing targets has achieved what decades of Alliance exhortation could not: a genuine political consensus across European governments, including those traditionally most resistant to defense spending increases, that the continent's security is primarily a European responsibility. The pledges made at Ankara — EUR 70 billion in military equipment, assistance, and training for Ukraine for 2026 with equivalent levels committed for 2027, a EUR 27 billion investment to modernize fuel supply chain infrastructure, and over USD 50 billion in new defense procurement contracts — are structural commitments, not communiqué language.

What remains analytically unresolved is the conversion rate between political commitment and deployable capability. The fundamental challenge of NATO 3.0 for Europe is not financial — it is industrial, logistical, and institutional. Defense spending at 4-5% of GDP generates military capability at the speed of procurement, training, and force integration cycles measured in years to decades. As the Atlantic Council noted ahead of the summit, the more urgent task is developing a coordinated transition plan for the expected reduction in US forces and capabilities rather than simply announcing spending targets.⁹ Strategic bombers represent the clearest example of what European burden-sharing cannot substitute for in the near term: allied command has identified this as the one capability gap that European allies have not yet compensated for following US adjustments to the NATO Force Model.

⁹Atlantic Council, "From Burden Sharing to Strategic Delivery: NATO and Turkey's Priorities Ahead of the Ankara Summit," Issue Brief, 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/from-burden-sharing-to-strategic-delivery-nato-and-turkeys-priorities-ahead-of-the-ankara-summit/>.



Figure 2 Turkey's Fifth-Generation Fighter Jet: The KAAN

Source: Aviationfile¹⁰

Turkey's position within NATO 3.0 is illustrative of a broader pattern: strategic assets that were politically inconvenient in NATO 2.0 have become more valuable in a burden-sharing Alliance. Turkey's large standing military, its established defense industrial base of approximately 3,000 companies, its drone technology and Kaan fighter program, its geographic position controlling the Turkish Straits, and its simultaneous diplomatic relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and the Middle East all give Ankara leverage within the Alliance that Erdoğan has exercised with notable effectiveness.¹¹ The Ankara summit's explicit showcasing of Turkish defense industry was the

¹⁰ <https://www.aviationfile.com/turkeys-fifth-generation-fighter-jet-the-kaan/>

¹¹ Royal United Services Institute, "NATO 3.0 to Emerge at Ankara Summit Amid Fragile Unity," RUSI Commentary, July 2026, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/nato-30-emerge-ankara-summit-amid-fragile-unity>.

defense-industrial expression of that leverage. That the 2026 summit was hosted in Ankara, rather than in a Western European capital, is itself a signal about where institutional weight within a redistributed Alliance is shifting.

The Redistributed Security Landscape: What the Rest of the World Absorbs

The analytical focus on NATO 3.0 as an intra-Alliance event obscures its most consequential systemic effect: the redistribution of American strategic presence and attention that it presupposes has effects well beyond the Alliance's geographic perimeter, and they fall unevenly. The states most exposed are those in the Global South that are neither NATO members nor Indo-Pacific states with formal alliance relationships with the United States — states whose security environment is shaped partly by the stabilizing function of American engagement without being anchored in treaty commitments that guarantee its continuation.



Figure 3 The First Island Chain: The focal point of US retrenchment¹²

The first-order effect is the intensification of Chinese strategic opportunity. NATO 3.0 presupposes US focus on Indo-Pacific competition, but the actual reallocation of American strategic bandwidth such as, military presence, diplomatic energy, development financing, security partnerships — does not flow exclusively toward the Pacific theater. It is redistributed from Europe

¹² <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/illustration/the-dispute-between-china-and-taiwan-royalty-free-illustration/1373011478>

across a range of competing demands including Western Hemisphere priorities that the 2026 NDS explicitly ranks second. The Indo-Pacific that receives enhanced US attention is geographically concentrated: the First Island Chain, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and Australia. The vast arc from the Persian Gulf through the Indian Ocean to the Bay of Bengal is not the beneficiary of American retrenchment from Europe — it is its collateral exposure.¹³ Chinese strategists, as documented by the Observer Research Foundation, interpret US strategic recalibration not as absence but as constraint-driven opportunity: a more preoccupied and more transactional Washington creates operating space for expanding Chinese economic, diplomatic, and selective military influence precisely in the regions where American engagement is thinning.

The second-order effect is institutional. The Munich Security Report 2026 identifies the Indo-Pacific's structural disadvantage with precision: the region finds itself in much the same position as Europe — confronting a less committed and more transactional American power — but without mechanisms of cooperation on a par with the EU or NATO.¹⁴ The institutional architecture that allows Europe to absorb reduced US conventional commitment — a Common Security and Defence Policy, a PESCO framework for collaborative procurement, NATO's integrated command structure that European states now populate at higher levels — does not exist in the Indo-Pacific or in South Asia in equivalent form. ASEAN centrality, the Quad, BIMSTEC, and bilateral frameworks provide functional cooperation but not collective deterrence. The redistribution of security responsibility that European states can manage within existing institutional architecture falls instead on states that lack the equivalent, and must navigate the resulting exposure through individual diplomatic hedging rather than collective institutional response.

The third-order effect is on the diplomatic calculus of non-aligned and hedging states. A more transactional United States — one that engages states as issue-by-issue partners rather than through the framework of durable strategic relationships — changes the incentive structure for states that have historically navigated between competing great powers through selective alignment without

¹³Observer Research Foundation, “Constraint, Not Collapse: Beijing’s View of US Indo-Pacific Strategy,” ORF Expert Speak, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/english/expert-speak/constraint-not-collapse-beijing-s-view-of-us-indo-pacific-strategy>.

¹⁴Tobias Bunde and Sophie Eisentraut, eds., *Munich Security Report 2026: Under Destruction* (Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2026), <https://doi.org/10.47342/JWIE5806>.

formal commitment. Bangladesh's diplomatic trajectory in the months surrounding the Ankara summit illustrates this directly. Bangladesh's Foreign Minister visited Beijing in May 2026, following an April visit to India, reaffirming the Bangladesh–China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership and pledging deeper cooperation across trade, investment, and infrastructure.¹⁵ Simultaneously, China signed a defense agreement with Bangladesh reported to include a drone manufacturing facility, while the United States increased defense engagement with Dhaka as part of its broader Indo-Pacific recalibration.¹⁶ Bangladesh is not choosing sides — it is exercising the multiple-engagement strategy that a more fluid, more transactional security environment rewards. The same pattern is visible across South Asia: smaller states are exploiting the strategic uncertainty created by a less committed United States to diversify relationships in ways that would have attracted more pressure in an earlier era of clearer American strategic primacy.

The structural exposure this creates for South Asian states is not primarily military. It is the erosion of the stabilizing function that US strategic engagement historically provided — not through direct alliance guarantees, which non-aligned South Asian states never sought, but through the implicit constraint its presence and attention imposed on the coercive behavior of larger regional powers. A more preoccupied and more transactional Washington is less likely to absorb the diplomatic and political costs of checking sub-threshold Chinese pressure or managing regional imbalances simply because the principles of a rules-based order are at stake. The transactional logic of NATO 3.0 — you receive what you commit, and what you commit is audited — is not explicitly extended to the Global South. But the strategic orientation it reflects applies globally. States that cannot offer the United States the kind of measurable burden-sharing contribution that NATO 3.0 demands of European allies will find themselves further down the US engagement hierarchy in ways that the new strategic order does not advertise but does operationalize.

¹⁵Asia Society Policy Institute, “South Asia Snapshot,” June 1, 2026, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/south-asia-snapshot-june-1-2026>.

¹⁶YIP Institute, “Bangladesh's Geopolitical Moment: Between India, China, and the United States,” 2026, <https://yipinstitute.org/article/bangladeshs-geopolitical-moment-between-india-china-and-the-united-states>.

Implications

The first obligation NATO 3.0 imposes on security scholarship is to resist periodizing the transformation as a Trump-specific phenomenon. The structural forces behind American strategic retrenchment from Europe — the China challenge, finite US resources, the political economy of burden-sharing — have been accumulating across multiple administrations and have now produced institutional facts that will outlast any single presidency. Scholarship that treats the current US posture as an aberration awaiting correction will systematically underestimate the durability of the strategic environment it analyzes, and will generate recommendations premised on a return to conditions that are not returning.

Second, the analytical literature on alliance burden-sharing has been almost entirely developed from within the framework of formal alliance relationships. The effects of burden-sharing adjustments on states outside those relationships — on non-aligned states, on Global South states, on states whose security environment is structured partly by the presence of a stabilizing great power without a formal alliance guarantee — have received comparatively little attention. This is a significant gap. The redistribution of American strategic presence that NATO 3.0 presupposes does not take effect only within NATO's 32 member states; it reshapes the security environment of states that had no seat at Ankara and whose interests were not represented in the Summit Declaration. Research programs that trace these secondary and tertiary distributional effects — asking which states are most exposed to a more transactional United States, and through what mechanisms — would produce more complete accounts of NATO 3.0's actual strategic significance.

Third, the institutional gap between Europe and the Global South identified in the Munich Security Report 2026 deserves more systematic analytical development than it has received. The absence of a collective deterrence architecture in South Asia or the wider Indo-Pacific is not merely a capability deficit — it is a structural condition that determines how states in those regions respond to exactly the kind of great-power recalibration that Ankara represents. Comparative analysis of how states in structurally similar positions — non-aligned, regionally exposed, institutionally unanchored — manage the transition from a US-led order to a more genuinely multipolar environment would produce insights that neither the NATO literature nor the China-US competition literature currently generates.



Figure 4 Image generated by Google Gemini

Finally, the question of what non-NATO, non-aligned states can actually do to manage the security implications of NATO 3.0 — beyond individual diplomatic hedging — remains under-explored. The BIMSTEC framework, the Bay of Bengal as a potential maritime security cooperation space, and bilateral defense engagement with multiple great powers are all instruments available to South Asian states, but they do not aggregate into anything equivalent to the collective deterrence that European states can now construct through existing NATO institutional infrastructure. Whether regional institutional alternatives to great-power dependence are feasible in South Asia, or whether the structural conditions — India-Pakistan rivalry, China's presence as both partner and coercing power for most regional states — make such alternatives unrealizable, is a research question that NATO 3.0 has made more urgent.

Conclusion

NATO 3.0, as consolidated at Ankara, is a structural event in international politics rather than a moment of Alliance management. It ratifies a redistribution of American strategic responsibility within the Euro-Atlantic theater that has been accumulating for over a decade, translates political commitments into institutional facts through procurement contracts and force posture adjustments, and signals a more durable change in the hierarchy of American strategic priorities than any single summit declaration can convey. The implications for European security are being actively managed through the institutional architecture NATO 3.0 is designed to strengthen. The implications for the rest of the world — for non-aligned states, for the Global South, for the arc of

smaller states navigating great-power competition without alliance guarantees — are being managed, where they are being managed at all, through individual diplomatic hedging in a more fluid and more transactional security environment. The Ankara Summit Declaration opens with the phrase “For the one billion citizens in our Alliance.” The most important analytical question it leaves unanswered is what NATO 3.0 means for the other seven billion.