

ASG ANALYSIS

Europe's Hottest Club is in Vilnius: Outcomes from the NATO Summit

Key takeaways

- Despite differences in the leadup to the NATO Vilnius summit primarily between Central and Eastern European allies, on one side, and the United States and Germany, on the other, regarding Ukraine's potential NATO membership, the alliance agreed on a compromise that allowed leaders to project unity and spin the summit as a success.
- While Ukraine's NATO membership path is unclear while the war is ongoing, NATO allies reiterated commitment to Ukraine's membership aspirations. In a separate communiqué on the sidelines of the summit, the G7 committed to a series of bilateral security packages that would ensure longer term assistance to Ukraine, in the interim, while stopping short of providing formal security guarantees.
- Despite differences over Ukraine's membership prospects, the Vilnius summit delivered important progress on unlocking Sweden's accession. A deal with Turkey can pave the way for the Nordic country to become the 32nd member of the alliance within the next few months. Leaders also endorsed new NATO defense plans aimed at shoring up the alliance's deterrence posture on its eastern flank and confirmed that Jens Stoltenberg will remain Secretary-General for at least another year.
- President Joe Biden's eighth trip to Europe, which included a major speech in Vilnius and stops in London and Helsinki, underscored his continued effort to demonstrate strong leadership in the Western alliance and maintain a united international opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine. Biden sought to draw a sharp contrast to his Republican predecessor and possible future political opponent in the next U.S. presidential election.

Context

The U.S. leadership role in the Western alliance has been unmistakable in the face of Russia's brutal war in Ukraine, which has upended the post-Cold War European security order and lasted for more than 500 days with no apparent end in sight. Much focus is on the Ukrainian counteroffensive as both sides appear to be more entrenched. Ukrainian forces hope to grind out inches on the battlefield, and Russian troops seek to hold onto the land they have captured while making incremental gains elsewhere. Despite the chaos of the past few months, including the destruction of the Kakhovka dam in Ukraine and the Wagner Group mutiny in Russia, the fighting remains constant with minimal progress on either side.

In the leadup to the summit, the largest point of contention between the allies was regarding how far the alliance would go in issuing a formal invitation to Ukraine. While it was clear Ukraine would not enter NATO while the war is ongoing, Central and Eastern European allies, who sit much closer to the Russian border, argued that an invitation would be an important political signal and the only potential deterrent to Russia's continued rampage. Even France, which has traditionally been skeptical about including Ukraine, appeared to support the move as part of a broader shift in the French orientation on European security. By contrast, the Biden administration, along with the German government, expressed reservations about inviting Ukraine for fears that it would risk pulling NATO into the conflict. In the background of these discussions, there are also questions around Ukraine's anti-corruption standards, democratic institutions, and other key factors required to meet the NATO membership threshold, as well as the effect an invitation would have on any chance of getting Russia to the negotiating table at some point.

Main summit outcomes

Ukraine

The key takeaway from the summit was not if but when; while Ukraine had pressed for a formal invitation, the country's future membership prospects are now stronger than ever, even as the path and timeline remain uncertain. Central and Eastern European allies are now focused on the next NATO summit in Washington in 2024 as the next best opportunity for Ukraine to receive a formal invitation.

Nevertheless, NATO leaders agreed in Vilnius to create a new NATO-Ukraine Council to elevate Ukraine's status as a key NATO partner and facilitate further cooperation, such as on military interoperability. In addition, they waived the requirement for Ukraine to complete a Membership Action Plan, a bureaucratic exercise that prospective members typically must go through before joining. Individual NATO allies also announced new weapons packages to Ukraine—including an \$800 million U.S. package that includes controversial dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (or so-called cluster munitions), a €686 million package from Germany that includes air defense and tanks, and a pledge from France to deliver long-range cruise missiles.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who had been campaigning to join NATO even before the war began, was clearly frustrated by the lack of a clear answer and guidance around Ukraine's path to membership. These frustrations appeared to boil over in a [tweet](#) on July 11th, the first day of the summit, where he called the organization's vague promise for membership in the future "absurd," reportedly annoying U.S. officials. By the second day of the summit, Zelenskyy

appeared to change course, piling on thanks and praise to the partners who have provided military and economic support, seemingly aware of the politics surrounding public and government support for Ukraine in many Western countries.

As a way to solidify their promise to Ukraine for continued support, the G7 members—rather than NATO, in an effort to keep the alliance out of direct conflict with Russia—joined by Czechia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden issued a separate [statement of support](#) on the sidelines of the summit. The statement will launch negotiations with Ukraine to formalize continued commitment in a number of areas, including:

- Securing a sustainable force within Ukraine through security assistance, military equipment, training, intelligence sharing, and support for cyber;
- Strengthening Ukraine’s economy including through reconstruction and energy security; and
- Providing short-term and immediate support to facilitate Ukraine’s continued reform agenda.

The G7 declaration also outlines support in the event of a future Russian attack, as well as the need to hold Russia accountable for its actions, though falls short of providing formal security guarantees. In return, Ukraine commits to continuing the work of strengthening its transparency and accountability measures; ensuring anti-corruption, strong governance, commitment to democracy, and economic growth; and advancing defense reform and transparency across its defense institutions.

Sweden and NATO

In a surprise announcement following intense backdoor diplomacy, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lifted his block on Sweden’s NATO accession before the summit had even begun. Turkey’s demands were met by Sweden’s efforts to address Turkish concerns around counter-terrorism cooperation. Erdoğan also came away from Vilnius with a commitment from Biden to provide F-16 fighter aircraft. The agreement allows Biden to further make the case that he has strengthened the alliance by bringing in two new members—Finland recently joined in April—who both boast strong militaries and solid democracies. However, it is also a sign of Turkey’s growing regional importance and that Ankara may be rethinking its relationship with Moscow at a time when Russia appears to be struggling both economically and in its war with Ukraine.

Despite Turkey clearing the way, the parliaments in both Turkey and Hungary still must ratify Sweden’s membership; comments from President Erdoğan suggest that such approval may not occur until October though the Swedes are more optimistic. The likelihood that Sweden will join the alliance in the coming months is nevertheless high.

Upgrading NATO’s defensive posture

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the need to further enhance NATO’s deterrent posture. The alliance is thus moving towards a “deterrence-by-denial” approach, which is marked by a brigade of up to 5,000 NATO troops in each of the eight countries in the three regional defense areas—the Arctic and North Atlantic, southern Europe, and the Black Sea—along with the prepositioned weapons and equipment. An additional 300,000 NATO troops will be

put on standby under the newly approved plans, marking the biggest adjustment of NATO's military posture since the Cold War. To finance these efforts, and the necessary investments in military capabilities over the coming years, allies also agreed to raise the alliance's military spending target, making the current goal of 2 percent of national GDP a minimum requirement. Next year's NATO summit in Washington will mark ten years since allies committed to reaching the 2 percent goal, with some allies such as Germany still struggling to meet this threshold.

Indo-Pacific partners

While NATO is doubling down on its focus on security in the North Atlantic, partnerships with likeminded partners in the Indo-Pacific have become more important in light of China's more aggressive posture and its deepening ties with Russia. Four Indo-Pacific partners—Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and the Republic of Korea—were invited to Vilnius where they formalized partnerships with NATO. Secretary-General Stoltenberg [remarked](#), “what happens in Europe matters to the Indo-Pacific,” and “what happens in the Indo-Pacific matters to North America and Europe.” The [summit communiqué](#) also noted that China's “stated ambitions and coercive policies” challenge the alliance's “interests, security and values,” a win for the U.S. which has been pushing the alliance to take a stronger stance on China. Despite this, NATO leaders failed to reach agreement on establishing a liaison office in Japan due to French resistance.

Other outcomes

Areas such as AI, cyber, space, and other technology issues received a modest amount of attention during what was ostensibly a summit on Ukraine. The NATO Innovation Fund, which looks to invest in “deep tech” such as quantum technology and AI, revealed new leadership and locale (The Netherlands, with offices in the U.K. and Poland). Discussions also touched on climate action, with the establishment of a NATO Centre of Excellence for Climate Change and Security in Montreal. Bilateral meetings held on the sidelines also referenced climate action between key partners, including on green energy and emerging technologies. Secretary-General Stoltenberg, who was due to retire from his post over a year ago, was appointed for another year due to his stable leadership amid the Ukraine war and lack of any obvious alternative candidates.

What to watch

The summit was an inflection point for NATO, as Ukraine's Western backers begin to think more about long-term support alongside filling short-term needs, accepting that the conflict in Ukraine will not end any time soon. Biden, in his [closing speech](#) in Vilnius, alluded to more of a Cold War approach to the conflict, preparing domestic and international partners for a long and drawn-out fight, though also hinting that the Ukraine war may not last years. It is no secret that Putin thinks he can outlast allied support for Ukraine by waiting for political change in key countries, such as the U.S. in 2024 and beyond. By putting in place a G7 framework for security assurances, the West is looking to separate support for Ukraine from potential political changes in the hopes that regardless of who is leading in the West, Kyiv will continue to receive the military and economic support needed to face continued Russian aggression.

For now, if Putin thought that the war would highlight divides within the West, the NATO summit has once again proven the unity of the organization and Ukraine's allies. Differing views of Ukraine's accession clearly do exist but were cast aside to present a united front in support of

Ukraine. Even the deals with Turkey to secure Sweden's spot at the NATO table — at a time when Turkey is not everyone's favorite ally — demonstrate the need to come together for a greater goal of facing down Russia in support of Ukraine.

The next summit in Washington, DC in July 2024 will mark the alliance's 75th anniversary and be a critical moment for NATO. While there is potential for progress on Ukraine's membership prospects by then, much will depend on the outcome of the war itself, which in turn is partially a function of continued Western support for Ukraine.

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