

The 75th Anniversary of the NATO Summit and the Future of the Alliance

Azriel Bermant and Shimon Stein | No. 1887 | August 4, 2024

Amid concerns over the stalemate in Ukraine, alarm over Russia's hostile actions against member states, and a heightened threat from China, NATO has seen fit to take actions to strengthen the alliance in a bid to hedge against a hostile US administration, should Trump return to the White House in January. From an Israeli perspective, it is important to note the language of the alliance in regard to Iran, which is viewed as a malign actor that poses a threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Given NATO's efforts to engage with its "southern neighborhood," Israel should explore an opportunity to strengthen its dialogue with the alliance.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, questions arose regarding NATO's continued relevance in the wake of the perceived diminishing threat of Russia, and in spite of the alliance's role in conflicts outside the European arena, such as Afghanistan. These questions persisted well into the new millennium. Yet following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO has rediscovered its sense of mission and has been revitalized. The recent accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO amid fears of the heightened Russian threat has only strengthened the alliance's sense of purpose.

The NATO summit, which took place in Washington DC on July 9–11, was intended to be a celebration of the alliance's 75th anniversary. In its concluding statement, NATO underlined that it remained "the strongest alliance in history." The outgoing secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, had described it as the world's most enduring military alliance. Yet the upbeat rhetoric could not conceal the widespread concern at the summit over the long-term durability of NATO amid the external and internal challenges it faces. One of these challenges is the US leadership role against the backdrop of Trump's possible reelection, given his position toward the future of NATO and his opposition to US support of Ukraine. Both Trump and his pick for vice president, JD Vance, have expressed opposition to US support for Ukraine, sympathy toward Russia, and skepticism of NATO. During his first term in office, Trump had [threatened to withdraw](#) from NATO and stated this past February that he had warned NATO allies that he would encourage Russia "to do whatever the hell they want" if NATO's members failed to meet their defense spending commitments.

The growing fears surrounding Donald Trump's possible return to the White House influenced much of what unfolded at the NATO summit. NATO has placed great emphasis on the fact that [two-thirds of the member states](#) have this year met or exceeded its target of spending 2% of GDP on defense, and this number is expected to rise. In doing so, the outgoing secretary-general has sent a message to Trump that his criticism regarding the need for a greater balance in burden-sharing was taken on board. Whether this will change Trump's mind on NATO remains to be seen. Nevertheless, there is concern within NATO that a future Trump administration could weaken the alliance and embolden Russia. Indeed, there are already [clear signs](#) that Russia is testing the stamina and cohesion of NATO. Russia has stepped up its coercive nuclear signaling and has deployed nuclear weapons in Belarus, which is widely viewed as a form of strategic intimidation. It has also escalated its hostile hybrid actions against NATO member states, often through proxies, including acts of sabotage, malign cyber activities, electronic interference, and disinformation activities that constitute a threat to the alliance. The fear within NATO is that if Ukraine is defeated by Russia, other countries on Europe's eastern flank will become increasingly vulnerable to attack and the entire European security order will be severely undermined.

Arguably, during the summit, the "Trump effect" was felt most clearly in the policy toward Ukraine. Some of the coordination for arms and training for Ukraine was shifted from the Pentagon to NATO, in an attempt to ["Trump-proof"](#) the alliance. This reorganization was carried out to ensure that Ukraine will continue to receive military support, even if a new Trump administration decides to halt it. NATO has also promised to provide Ukraine with \$43 billion in military aid in the coming year. However, the controversial subject of Ukraine's future membership in NATO posed more questions than answers. The allies in the summit communique declared that Ukraine's progress toward NATO membership was "irreversible." Yet neither Germany nor the United States is willing to extend full NATO membership while Ukraine is still at war with Russia. Alliance leaders stressed that the support they are providing to Ukraine does not "make NATO a party to the conflict." Instead, the communique stated that the decisions at the summit and the work of the alliance would "constitute a bridge to Ukraine's membership in NATO." In reality, NATO membership for Ukraine has been kicked a long way down the road. The summit acknowledged that an invitation would be extended to Ukraine to join the alliance only when member-states agreed, and conditions were fulfilled.

Leaders from four countries in the Indo-Pacific region joined the summit to underscore the gravity of the threat posed by China. NATO issued stern warnings about China's support for Russia's war in Ukraine and its efforts to challenge the world order. The concluding statement cautioned that China "cannot enable the largest war in Europe in recent history without this negatively impacting its interests and reputation." During

the summit, Stoltenberg asserted that China was a “decisive enabler” of Russia’s war in Ukraine. This too could be viewed as an attempt by NATO to [win over](#) a future Trump administration, which is more likely to take a hawkish approach on the issue of China. [Beijing responded](#) swiftly and angrily, describing the NATO-summit declaration as a “scaremongering piece about the Asia-Pacific, a product of the Cold War mentality and full of belligerent rhetoric. Its paragraphs on China contain a load of biases, smears and provocations. We strongly deplore and firmly oppose it, and have lodged a serious protest to NATO.”

A further sign of the deteriorating security environment was the joint statement by the US and German governments announcing that the United States would, in 2026, begin “episodic deployments” to Germany of long-range missiles, including SM-6, Tomahawk, and developmental hypersonic weapons that would have been [prohibited](#) under the now defunct Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The irony here is that it was the Trump administration that withdrew from the INF Treaty in 2019, in response to Russia’s violation of the treaty, thereby enabling the deployments of long-range missiles to Germany. The summit’s agreement on NATO’s industrial capacity expansion could also be viewed as a means of addressing the volatile security situation. The agreement facilitates the strengthening of transatlantic defense industrial cooperation and helps member states to replenish their arsenals.

Although the concluding statement did not mention the October 7 attacks or the war in Gaza and the hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in the North, the communique states that conflict in the Middle East has direct implications for NATO and its partners. Countering terrorism is described as “essential to [NATO’s] collective defence.” Iran’s direct military support for Russia’s war in Ukraine clearly makes it a potential threat to Europe. The communique [states](#): “Iran’s destabilising actions are affecting Euro-Atlantic security.” The growing threat posed by [Iran’s missiles](#) and the anxiety that Tehran could utilize them for nuclear weapons have driven Washington’s efforts over the past 20 years to develop and deploy NATO’s [ballistic missile defense system](#).

Israel is a participant in the Mediterranean Dialogue that was launched in 1994. It is a partnership forum that seeks to enhance security and stability in the wider Mediterranean region and advance friendly relations and understanding among participating countries and NATO Allies. This year’s summit marked the thirtieth anniversary of the dialogue, and presents an opportunity for Israel to strengthen its cooperation with NATO. Moreover, the summit highlighted the importance of developing stronger security and stability in the Middle East and Africa. It is noteworthy that NATO has adopted an action plan to address threats, challenges and opportunities in the “southern neighborhood” and will open a liaison office in Amman.

While the main focus of the summit remained Russia's war in Ukraine and the growing threat it poses to NATO-member states, the concern expressed over Iran's malign role is significant for Israel. It has an interest in exploring with NATO the possibilities of becoming an active participant in the dialogue between the alliance and the southern neighborhood.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg