

NATO's 2018 Brussels Summit

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Leaders from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) 29 member states are scheduled to hold a summit at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, on July 11-12, 2018. The summit comes at a time of heightened U.S.-European tensions. Despite stated Trump Administration commitments to NATO and European security, some European allies are increasingly expressing concerns about President Trump's [criticisms of NATO and individual allies](#). Various European leaders appear to be growing doubtful about whether the United States will remain a reliable security partner, especially amid [recent news reports](#) that the Administration could be reconsidering U.S. troop deployments in Germany. Significant divisions on other issues, including trade, Iran, and Russia, also exist. [Observers caution](#) that these tensions could negatively influence summit outcomes.

Despite these tensions, NATO officials say they expect the allies to announce new NATO initiatives in [six main areas](#) at the summit:

- **Enhancing [collective defense and deterrence](#)**—including improving military readiness and reinforcing NATO troops deployed in Central and Eastern Europe.
- **Defense spending and burdensharing**—including new commitments to meet NATO defense spending benchmarks.
- **Countering terrorism**—including a new mission to train Iraqi security forces.
- **Modernizing NATO command and decisionmaking structures**—including establishing [two new NATO commands](#): a naval command for the Atlantic in Norfolk, VA, and a logistics command in Germany.
- **Enhancing [NATO cooperation with the European Union](#)**—including on countering cyber and hybrid threats and improving military mobility in Europe.
- **NATO enlargement**—including the possible start of [formal accession talks](#) with Macedonia following a [June 2018 agreement](#) between the governments of NATO member Greece and NATO aspirant Macedonia over Macedonia's name.

Trump Administration Priorities for the Summit

Trump Administration officials have articulated three main [U.S. priorities for the summit](#):

Additional Defense Spending

In 2006, NATO members informally agreed to aim to allocate at least 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) to their national defense budgets annually and to devote at least 20% of national defense expenditure to research and development and procurement. These targets were formalized at NATO's 2014 Wales Summit, when the allies pledged to halt declines in defense expenditures and ["move towards the 2% guideline within a decade."](#)

U.S. and NATO officials say they are encouraged that 28 allies have [increased their defense budgets over the past year](#). Eight allies are expected to meet the 2% guideline in 2018, and 16 allies have submitted plans to meet the 2% and 20% targets by 2024. President Trump and others [continue to criticize](#) those NATO members perceived to be reluctant to achieve defense spending targets, however. This includes Europe's largest economy, Germany, which currently spends about [1.25% of GDP](#) on defense and has plans to reach 1.5% of GDP by 2024.

Although all allied governments agreed to the Wales commitments, many, including Germany, emphasize that allied contributions to ongoing NATO missions and the effectiveness of allied military capabilities should be considered as important as total defense spending levels. They note that an ally spending less than 2% of GDP on defense could have more modern, effective military capabilities than an ally that meets the 2% target but allocates most of that funding to personnel costs and relatively little to ongoing missions and modernization.

Bolstering Deterrence

The Trump Administration has been a strong proponent of several new deterrence and modernization initiatives expected to be endorsed in Brussels. Chiefly, Secretary of Defense Mattis has advocated a new [NATO Readiness Initiative](#), dubbed the "Four Thirties" initiative, under which the allies have committed, by 2020, to having 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 naval combat vessels ready to use within 30 days. Secretary Mattis also has sought to speed up NATO decisionmaking structures in response to crises and to enhance military mobility in Europe by improving infrastructure and reducing regulatory and bureaucratic barriers to cross-border troop movements.

Enhancing Counterterrorism Capacities

President Trump consistently has called on NATO to expand its counterterrorism efforts, and terrorist threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa are key European concerns as well. At the summit, NATO leaders are expected to endorse several counterterrorism initiatives, including a new [NATO training mission in Iraq](#), a new NATO regional [Hub for the South](#) headquartered in Italy, and a new terrorism intelligence cell at NATO headquarters.

U.S. Policy and Alliance Cohesion

Many Trump Administration officials stress that U.S. policy toward NATO is driven by a steadfast commitment to European security and stability as articulated in the Administration's [National Security Strategy](#) and [National Defense Strategy](#). They underscore, for example, that the Administration has requested significant increases in funding for U.S. military deployments in Europe under the [European Deterrence Initiative](#). The United States currently leads a battalion of about [1,100 NATO troops](#) deployed to Poland and deploys a U.S. Army Brigade Combat Team of about 3,300 troops on continuous rotation in NATO's eastern member states.

Despite stated U.S. policy, however, some European allies express unease about President Trump's commitment to NATO and his views on broader U.S.-European relations. In addition to refuting the President's [past statements](#) that NATO is obsolete, they take issue with [his claims](#) that European allies have taken advantage of the United States by not spending enough on their own defense. Although U.S. leaders have long called for increased allied defense spending, none are seen to have done so as stridently as President Trump or to so openly link these calls to a broader questioning of the alliance's utility.

Given the ongoing questions about President Trump's views on NATO, [many observers have articulated](#) what might be considered a basic, but symbolically important, benchmark by which to judge the summit's success—namely, whether the allies are able to agree on a strong, unified statement of support for NATO. NATO advocates argue that a clear signal of transatlantic unity, especially with respect to deterring Russian aggression, would be particularly important ahead of President Trump's scheduled meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 16, 2018. They note that President Putin has long portrayed NATO as a threat to Russia and could benefit from divisions within the alliance.