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NATO Breathes Sigh of Relief After Tiptoeing Around Trump at Summit

By Charlie Hancock

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(From L) Spainish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, U.S. President Donald Trump, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte and Dutch Prime Minister Dick Schoof at the NATO summit. **John Thys / AFP**

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — The NATO leaders' summit was tailor-made for Donald Trump, with a truncated schedule and a headline defense spending commitment secured in advance so the U.S. president could arrive having already secured something of a victory.

While Trump's remark that NATO's collective defense clause was open to interpretation set teeth on edge before he touched down on Dutch soil, he left saying he saw the alliance differently, having seen the "love and passion" that European NATO leaders showed for their countries during discussions.

Heads of state affirmed their commitment to treat an attack on one member as an attack on

all and pledged to raise their levels of defense spending to 5% of GDP, up from 2%, by 2035.

This figure was split into two categories: 3.5% on core defense requirements such as the armed forces, and an additional 1.5% to build national resilience by upgrading national infrastructure and their manufacturing base.

A European defense official, speaking anonymously to The Moscow Times in order to discuss matters freely, said there is an additional document that sets out what kind of spending will contribute toward the 1.5% target.

But the document's wording was watered down to allow Spain, which spends the lowest share of its GDP on defense out of any NATO member state, to spend below 3.5% provided it meets the updated capability requirements set out on June 5. Multiple leaders expressed frustration with Madrid, though Belgium and Slovakia have signaled they might also struggle to reach the new benchmark.

Rutte told reporters on Monday that Spain had not secured an opt-out from the targets, but had a different interpretation of how much it would need to spend to reach its new targets.

"I have always had the highest respect for Spain's contribution to NATO," he said. "The fact is that Spain thinks it can achieve those targets on a percentage of 2.1%. NATO is absolutely convinced Spain will have to spend 3.5% altogether."

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The details of those capability targets are still under wraps.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys called for some of them to be made public, pointing to Europe's empty stockpiles of ammunition and air defense.

"[What NATO has is to] is known for Russians. So from whom are we hiding it? From our societies?" Budrys said.

Budrys' Polish counterpart, Radek Sikorski, was less certain.

"I'll have to think about that. We should have some secrets in NATO," he told The Moscow Times.

As well as the new spending commitments, the summit saw the signing of a new defense industrial plan to ramp up defense industry across the alliance and create jobs.

Speaking to journalists, Secretary General Mark Rutte said it would include the production of thousands of tanks and armored vehicles and millions of rounds of artillery munitions to build up stockpiles to deter Russia from a possible attack.

He also announced a planned fivefold increase in air defense capabilities.

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Many European countries have depleted their stocks by donating their missile systems and ammunition to Ukraine, which has been forced to use up these supplies to defend its cities and infrastructure from nightly Russian missile and drone attacks.

The resulting holes are expensive and time-consuming to fill, thanks to supply chain bottlenecks affecting manufacturers.

Speaking at a press conference at the end of the summit, Trump signaled support for sending more Patriot missile systems to Ukraine.

“We’re going to see if we can make some available. They are very hard to get. We need them too. We are supplying them to Israel and they are very effective,” he said.

But the U.S. president offered no details about Washington’s support for Ukraine.

“We’ll see what happens,” he said when asked whether the U.S. would add to the $8 billion pledged by NATO members for this year.

Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky both gave a positive assessment of their one-on-one meeting on Wednesday afternoon, with Trump saying the Ukrainian president “couldn’t have been nicer” and Zelensky describing the exchange as “good" and "substantive.”

But although Zelensky said that the two men discussed Kyiv buying U.S. air defense systems, Trump vaguely promised "to see if we can make some available,” adding that Washington was also supplying Israel with them.

In a departure from the past three summits since Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine, the final summit declaration did not condemn Moscow for its aggression. And despite the insistence by Rutte that Ukraine’s bid for membership remains “irreversible,” the statement avoided any mention of Kyiv's push to join after Trump ruled it out.

The European defense official denied that the watered-down wording was an effort to appease the U.S., which in February sided with Moscow to reject a UN resolution condemning Russia’s actions and supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

“The summit was not about Russia. The summit was about NATO, our own defense posture [and] our own defense capabilities. This was our main focus and the only focus, to be honest,” the official told The Moscow Times.

Moscow’s shadow loomed over the conference nonetheless.

Rutte reiterated that Russia remains “the most significant and direct threat facing this alliance” and noted that intelligence agencies like Germany have assessed that Russia could test NATO's unity by 2030.

“There is great worry in many circles of NATO ... that between three, five, seven years from now, Russia will be able to successfully attack us if we do not start investing today,” Rutte said.

NATO has also assessed that Russia can keep fighting in Ukraine at its current pace through at

least 2027, an anonymous senior official from the alliance told the BBC's Russian service at the summit.

John Foreman, the British defense attaché in Moscow from 2019 to 2022, said he believed the summit was a success because there were no major meltdowns or surprise statements from Trump.

"If we looked at the summit last year, the threat of Trump was like an orange asteroid on the horizon, with a question of whether Trump would remain committed to NATO," he told The Moscow Times.

The answer to that question, for now, remains yes.

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