On July 9 to 11, leaders of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states will meet in Washington, DC, for a major summit. This event will not just mark the alliance’s seventy-fifth anniversary; it also comes at a time of geopolitical uncertainty as Europe faces challenges caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

NATO was founded in 1949 with the mission of protecting the territorial integrity of its members and, if required, defeating the Soviet Union. Since then, the alliance has done more to promote democracy, peace, and security in Europe than any other organization—including the European Union. NATO today is more crucial to transatlantic security than at any other time in the post–Cold War era. While NATO members are no longer worried about the spread of Soviet Communism, Russia remains the most significant military threat to the alliance.
NATO Matters to Americans

Americans, and policymakers in particular, should remember why Europe is important to the United States. While there are many normative and values-based reasons Europe is important (like a shared belief in basic freedoms and the fact that some of America’s oldest and closest allies are in Europe), the main reason the continent—and by extension, NATO—matters to the US is economic.

The countries of North America and Europe—collectively referred to as the transatlantic community—account for approximately 48 percent of the global economy. Europe is by far America’s largest source of foreign investment. And crucially, Europe is America’s largest export market.

In 2023, 48 out of 50 states exported more to Europe than to China. The largest Pacific state, California, exported twice as much to Europe. New York exported 13 times more, Florida nine times, and Texas four and a half times more. Europe matters to the American heartland, too. For example, Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio each export about four times more to Europe than China. Even the Netherlands, a small European country about half the size of South Carolina, was the top export market for 10 US states in 2023. When Americans build something to export, American jobs are being created or preserved. European stability, which NATO guarantees and Russia is trying to undermine, affects the US economy and therefore the American worker.

Put simply, NATO is the primary security guarantor of America’s largest export market.

The Three Top Issues

By highlighting NATO’s accomplishments since 1949, US officials hope to make the alliance’s seventy-fifth anniversary the focus of the summit. Under normal circumstances, this approach might be appropriate. However, these are not normal times. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine is the largest in Europe since World War II. Moscow’s initial invasion in 2014 also marked the first time since 1990, when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, that a country has used military force to annex a section of another country. Many Eastern European NATO members view such actions as an existential threat. Allowing the Kremlin to get away with this reckless behavior would set a very dangerous precedent for the twenty-first century. So, however tempting it might be to pop the anniversary champagne, NATO needs to use the summit to focus on the crisis at hand.

There are three major issues that will take center stage at the upcoming summit: burden sharing, support for Ukraine, and deterring Russian aggression.

**Burden sharing: Good news but more work is needed.** The shock of Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine supercharged NATO members’ reinvestments in defense, a trend that began after Russia’s 2014 invasion. Last year was the ninth in a row that European allies and Canada have increased their defense spending. The number of allies that meet the benchmark of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense has risen from three in 2014 to 21 in 2024. Nearly every NATO member now meets the second benchmark of spending 20 percent of its defense budget on new equipment acquisitions.

The alliance should not be viewed as a protection racket where allies pay up or risk suspension from collective defense guarantees. But the failure of a few remaining allies to fulfill their Article 3 obligation to “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack” has cascading consequences. As an intergovernmental security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its member states.

Conversations around increasing NATO’s spending benchmarks have already begun. For example, the United Kingdom’s defense secretary, Grant Shapps, suggested...
in April that NATO increase the baseline to 2.5 percent. Additionally, many allies are moving well beyond 2 percent on their own. Every NATO member that shares a land border with Russia either spends above 2 percent of GDP or has announced plans to do so.

Although public support for NATO and defense investment is on the rise, policymakers should not take this trend for granted. Rather, it is essential that NATO leaders who are serious about defense make a consistent, forceful case for why the political decision to invest in defense is necessary.

Ukraine and NATO: Time to make history. America’s friends and foes alike will be watching the Washington, DC, summit closely. To prove the US is serious about its commitments, Washington should ensure Ukraine receives an invitation to join NATO at the summit this summer. While the final date of membership will be determined once members agree the security environment inside Ukraine is satisfactory, extending an invitation in July emphasizes that the destination of Ukraine is ultimately inside the alliance.

Understandably, most members do not want Ukraine to formally join the alliance while Kyiv is in an active war against another country. Last year, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy acknowledged that Ukraine “will not be a NATO member, while the war is waging.” Even so, this should not prevent the alliance from extending Ukraine an invitation at the summit. An invitation does not mean immediate or automatic membership.

Since the Vilnius summit last year, NATO has not made much progress in finding a consensus among its members on extending a formal invitation to Ukraine. Time is running out, and NATO leaders need to work overtime to reach an agreement. Russia would see a failure to resolve this issue before next year’s summit as a sign of weakness.

Russia: Dealing with an imperial power. For the foreseeable future, Russia will remain a threat to its neighbors. With Russia’s 500-year history of expansionism and imperialism, there is no reason to assume that Moscow will be a responsible or trustworthy player in European security for at least a generation or two. Therefore, the US and NATO have to base their force posture and strategies on the assumption of a hostile Russia.

Thankfully, NATO is more united than it has been in decades. The recent additions of Finland and Sweden give the alliance the geographic connection to the Arctic and Baltic regions that it has sorely lacked. NATO now has access to crucial territory that could be used for bases and stockpiles in the event of a future war. These locations would be close enough to the front lines to be useful, but also far enough away from Russia to be survivable.

On top of territorial enlargement, the alliance is expanding the NATO Response Force from 40,000 military personnel to 300,000 and is growing pre-positioned weapons and equipment stockpiles. Furthermore, NATO now has robust plans in place for defending every inch of member state territory. And as Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted, “For the first time since the Cold War, we will have pre-assigned forces to defend specific Allies so that we can reinforce much faster if needed.”

Last, the alliance is making its shift from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial a reality. The reinforcement of enhanced forward presence (EFP) battalions, like Germany’s move to permanently station 5,000 troops in Lithuania by 2027, is another important step to dealing with Russian aggression.

Three Underdiscussed Issues
There are three other important issues that NATO should feature more prominently at the summit: China’s rise, developments in the Arctic, and instability in the Western Balkans.
China: A realistic role for NATO. While many of the challenges posed by China are outside of NATO’s remit as a military alliance, or outside of the North Atlantic, the organization cannot afford to ignore Beijing’s ambitions. China’s propaganda campaigns, its efforts to control European infrastructure, and its offensive cyber actions—like the May hack of the UK Ministry of Defense—all pose significant risks for the alliance. Likewise, as noted by the latest NATO Strategic Concept, “The deepening strategic partnership between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests.” Chinese support for Russia’s war against Ukraine, including the provision of lethal assistance, directly undermines transatlantic security.

For these reasons, until China’s actions change, NATO should approach Beijing as an adversary. While hemming in China’s economic and political influence is beyond the competencies of the alliance, NATO should be clear-eyed about Chinese hostility toward NATO and Beijing’s support for hostile powers, such as Iran and Russia, that are closer to NATO territory.

The best way to counter Chinese aggression is by focusing on the most important threat to NATO: Russia. By ensuring that Ukraine defeats China’s key Eurasian ally, the alliance can help deter Beijing in the Pacific. Beyond that, NATO can (1) maintain a nuclear culture, (2) buttress key systems and infrastructure nodes against Chinese interference, and (3) encourage member states with interests in the Indo-Pacific to coordinate exercises and military strategy on a bilateral or multilateral basis.

The Arctic: A new geopolitical reality for the alliance. Of the Arctic states, all but Russia are in NATO. It is natural, then, to expect the alliance to focus on the region. But this has not always been the case. While NATO does occasional training exercises in Norway’s Arctic region—including Steadfast Defender 2024 just months before the Washington summit—NATO has no common position or policy on its role in the High North. No official NATO document even mentioned the Arctic region until the 2022 Strategic Concept.

While the military threat Russia poses in the Arctic remains minor, NATO may very well be unprepared for several contingencies in the region. Worryingly, NATO does not have issue-specific policy competencies over many Arctic concerns, from search and rescue operations and fisheries to energy and environmental issues. For these challenges, NATO will play a supporting role as national and EU law enforcement, border security, and other agencies take the lead.

The danger is that the Kremlin sees the Arctic as a low-risk opportunity to promote Russian nationalism. NATO’s limited Arctic cooperation allows Russia to flex its muscles without incurring any significant geopolitical risk. With Russian nationalism on the rise in recent years, this approach has been successful for Vladimir Putin, and may be for some time.

The Western Balkans: The Euro-Atlantic community’s unfinished business. NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept described the Balkans as a region “of strategic importance for the Alliance.” Throughout history, the region has affected Europe’s overall security. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 set the stage for World War I. NATO’s first test on the battlefield after the Cold War was also in the Balkans: after several bloody sectarian wars following the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, NATO forces stabilized the region through a series of peacekeeping operations. The geopolitical situation has since remained stable but fragile.

But the region’s fragile peace is now under a lot of pressure. Regional and international actors can easily exploit sectarian and religious divisions. The Balkans’ lackluster economic situation, exacerbated by poor governance across the region, is another threat to stability. Secessionist rhetoric from the
leaders of Republika Srpska threatens to undermine the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Meanwhile, Kosovo and Serbia remain in a state of constant tension over the ethnic Serbian population that lives in the northern part of Kosovo.

The Balkans region is a good example of Europe’s unfinished business of Euro-Atlantic integration. While major fighting has not broken out in the region in recent years, the possibility cannot be ruled out. So Balkan integration should be a topic of discussion at the Washington summit.

Ten Guiding Principles
The alliance needs to make a clear-eyed and sober assessment of the geopolitical challenges the transatlantic community faces and act accordingly. As NATO looks to the future, it should follow 10 guiding principles.

1. NATO’s primary mission should be collective defense; everything else the alliance does is secondary to the task of defending its members.

2. In this context, for the foreseeable future, Russia represents a real and existential threat to NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe and a significant threat and challenge to the rest of the alliance.

3. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will establish the geopolitical conditions across the Eurasian landmass for the foreseeable future. A strong, sovereign, and secure Ukraine inside NATO would solve many of the alliance’s geopolitical problems.

4. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO needs to remain a nuclear alliance.

5. As an intergovernmental security alliance, NATO is only as strong as its member states. Members should recommit to meeting defense spending requirements—and follow through.

6. NATO’s open door policy is its most effective tool to spread democratic and economic reform and improve military capability among like-minded states. The alliance needs to remain open to new members.

7. Policymakers should realize that there are limits to what NATO, as an intergovernmental institution, can do. When policymakers expect NATO to take on challenges it was never designed to face, they set the alliance up for failure.

8. Russia and China are global partners that work together to achieve common goals. While NATO needs to remain focused on Russia, it should also deepen relations with Indo-Pacific partners and stay aware of China’s rising ambitions and adversarial actions.

9. NATO cannot ignore important regions in the transatlantic community like the Arctic or the Balkans. For different reasons, both remain places where Russia can create problems for the alliance.

10. Fundamentals will remain determinative. Even with robust defense spending, an alliance risks failure when member states do not have the industrial capacity, know-how, and workforce to build necessary capabilities at scale, as well as the military personnel to operate them. NATO leaders need far more urgency to bolster industrial capacity and address the military recruitment shortages plaguing many alliance members.

Conclusion
Russia’s unprovoked, barbarous aggression against Ukraine has united the alliance and spurred decisions and investments that previously would have been unlikely. Politically, NATO is largely in agreement about the scale of the Russia threat and
the steps the alliance needs to take to address it. The task that remains for policymakers is to animate the political decisions of the past two years and make them a reality. This process will take years, not weeks, and will require leaders to repeatedly make difficult commitments. At 75 years old, the alliance finds itself facing significant peril should it fail to rise to the challenge of the moment. But the alliance also has a significant opportunity to reshape the transatlantic security trajectory for decades to come.
Endnotes


10. NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 4.

11. NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 11.
Luke Coffey is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. His work at Hudson analyzes national security and foreign policy, with a focus on Europe, Eurasia, NATO, and transatlantic relations. Coffey was previously director of the Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation from 2015 to 2022, in which role he oversaw and managed a team covering most of Heritage’s foreign policy and international affairs work. From 2012 to 2015, he was the Margaret Thatcher Fellow at Heritage, focusing on relations between the United States and the United Kingdom and on the role of NATO and the European Union in transatlantic and Eurasian security.

Daniel Kochis is a senior fellow in the Center on Europe and Eurasia at Hudson Institute. He specializes in transatlantic security issues and regularly publishes on United States policy in Europe; NATO, Baltic, and Nordic dimensions of collective defense; and Arctic issues. Prior to joining Hudson, Mr. Kochis spent 11 years with the Heritage Foundation’s Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, most recently as a research fellow in European affairs. There, he served as lead Europe analyst, authoring hundreds of publications and for a decade writing the Europe chapter of Heritage’s Index of US Military Strength.

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Hudson Institute
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Fourth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

+1.202.974.2400
info@hudson.org
www.hudson.org