NATO 3.0: Burden-Sharing or Strategic Retreat?

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Introduction

On 7–8 July 2026, Ankara hosted the annual NATO summit. The gathering brought together transatlantic decision-makers to negotiate a series of major commitments and decisions. Allies announced €139 billion in new defence investment from European members and Canada, €27 billion for energy security infrastructure, €70 billion in continued support for Ukraine, and USD 40 billion over five years for counter-drone capabilities under

NATO's Drone Edge initiative. Allies also reaffirmed their commitment to Article 5 and NATO's 360-degree approach to deterrence.

Beneath these commitments, however, lies a notable shift in tone, captured in the declaration's own phrase: "a stronger Europe in a stronger NATO." Secretary General Mark Rutte's articulation of this vision, termed here NATO 3.0, signals a redistribution of responsibility across the Alliance, with Europe and Canada expected to assume a greater share of conventional defence while the United States redirects attention toward its own hemisphere and global competition. This framing echoes the 2025 US National Security Strategy (NSS), which calls for European allies to take on a greater share of defence burdens. At the same time, US troop withdrawal data and the substance of the NSS point to a parallel trend: American resources appearing elsewhere, beyond Europe. This raises this brief's central question: does NATO 3.0's burden-sharing simply reflect a natural evolution toward a more balanced alliance, or does it function as the enabling condition for a deliberate US strategic retrenchment already set out in the 2025 NSS?

This brief addresses that question by first examining NATO 3.0 on its own terms, considering why rising European spending alone cannot fully settle the debate either way; it then explores the strategic logic behind American reallocation, and tests that logic against troop withdrawal data, before tracing where redirected US resources are going. Finally, it weighs this evidence against counter-arguments, including official denials and genuine analyst uncertainty over US intent, before drawing these strands together to assess where the balance of evidence lies.

Concept of NATO 3.0

To explain the concept of NATO 3.0, we can draw on the history of the alliance's evolution. NATO 1.0 was built as a Cold War alliance, marking the longest NATO period, lasting until the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then came NATO 2.0, lasting from the 1990s through the start of the second Trump administration, characterised primarily by a focus on eastward enlargement and crisis management.

This brings us to NATO 3.0. The tone behind it has been building since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with its roots becoming clearly visible in 2025 at the Hague summit, where the new spending framework was agreed, further reinforced by the tone of Trump's presidency, before crystallising in 2026 at the Ankara summit.

NATO 3.0 can be described as a strategic rebalancing, with a shift of roles and responsibilities in which Europe and Canada would take on more of the burden regarding conventional European defence. It includes industrial integration (also incorporating the lessons of Ukraine) and the new 5% spending target agreed at The Hague (3.5% for core military requirements and 1.5% for wider security and resilience needs). The €139 billion increase

for 2025 represents growth of nearly 20%, bringing combined European and Canadian defence spending to €574 billion, out of a NATO total of €1.4 trillion. On its own, however, this figure does not settle the question of what NATO 3.0 actually represents. Rising expenditure is consistent with genuine burden-sharing within a reinforced partnership, but it is equally consistent with a scenario in which higher European spending provides the political and material basis for a reduced US role. The spending data therefore establishes that a shift is underway, without indicating on its own which of these two interpretations is correct.

This marks a paradigm change for Europe: NATO 3.0 makes clear the difference with NATO 2.0 and reveals the gap between current reality and NATO 2.0's older form. What does this mean for the European Union? The new tone of NATO's policies raises questions about the concrete scale of autonomy Europe is now expected to assume. This includes greater EU-level defence industrial capacity, more autonomous command structures, and a larger role in shaping deterrence on the continent. Above all, it raises the question of whether Europe can reduce its reliance on US enablers such as air defence, logistics, and intelligence.

Alongside this European perspective, NATO 3.0 also reflects a distinct American motivation and paradigm. From Washington's perspective, it rests on three related ideas: strategic prioritisation, treating China and the Indo-Pacific as the primary long-term challenge to US power; European self-reliance, with European states and Canada expected to deter conventional threats largely on their own while Washington shifts toward a supporting role, providing enablers and nuclear guarantees; and burden-shifting, in which resources freed from European commitments are redirected toward other priorities, as later sections will show. Together, these ideas form the American paradigm behind NATO 3.0: a vision in which the Alliance survives and even strengthens numerically, but with its centre of gravity shifting away from Washington and toward European capitals.



Why the US Is Stepping Back: Strategic Relocation

The logic behind this shift is that the United States faces simultaneous geopolitical demands in the Indo-Pacific to counter China, in the Western Hemisphere, and in the Middle East. Limited resources force Washington to make choices, and not often easy ones, about where to concentrate its power directly and where it can allow itself to delegate responsibilities to capable regional allies. By delegating the defence of Europe to European nations, the idea is that the United States can step in directly only if the local balance is at real risk.

This strategic logic is not merely interpretive; it is reflected in concrete action. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy directly states that Europe should take primary responsibility for its own defence, signalling that the United States intends to move into a supporting role. While rhetoric alone does not prove intent, action-based evidence supports this policy shift: (1) Pentagon announced the withdrawal of 5,000 United States troops from Germany in May 2026, which is scheduled to take place over half a year and is mostly tied to diplomatic tensions between U.S. and European leadership; (2) The deployment of the MDTF-2 long-range fires battalion was cancelled; (3) There are reports of up to 10,000 additional troops, which are currently under consideration for withdrawal; (4) A Special Inspector General report to Congress (by OSW's Centre for Eastern Studies) provides these numbers: around 75,000 US personnel in Europe total, down from a temporary post-2022 surge of around 20,000 rotational troops. Concretely, the US withdrew a rotational infantry brigade from Romania in October 2025, then suspended armoured brigade rotations to Poland and Lithuania in May 2026. US army formations in Europe are back to pre-2022 levels.

Therefore, the following information can be compared to US presence in a pre-2022 war period.

Consequently, rising European spending is not independent proof of a stronger, unified alliance. Instead, it is the exact condition that makes the United States drawdown politically practical. Washington can point to European spending as diplomatic cover while reducing its own spending and presence. Accordingly, turning the correlation, where Europe is spending more and the United States deploying less, into a direct mechanism, where European spending enables the United States to reduce the presence of its troops.



Securing the North American Core: Where do the resources go?

If resources are being taken out from Europe, where do they go? The 2025 NSS introduces the "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, which prioritises the Western Hemisphere. This corollary rests on four pillars: securing the hemisphere, countering Chinese influence in the Americas, enforcing burden-sharing with regional partners, and rebuilding the United States' defence-industrial base. The heavy attention paid to the Western Hemisphere within the document demonstrates that the United States is stepping back from Europe specifically to redirect its strategic capacity back home.

A good example of this is the letter of interest issued by the US Export-Import Bank for a $120 million loan that was given to Critical Metals Corp for a rare-earth mine in Greenland. It was reportedly the US administration's first overseas mining investment, and it shows that the US is trying to secure critical supply chains.

Counter-Evidence

Experts point to a few significant flaws in this path. From a military viewpoint, analysts at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) argue that the troop reductions executed so far are relatively limited. They state that a smaller footprint can still deter adversaries effectively, provided that troop forces and strategic enablers remain credible.

Politically, there have also been strong official denials. The United States NATO ambassador has publicly denied any active withdrawal. Furthermore, analysts at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) note that it is unclear whether current actions represent rebalancing of the alliance or a unilateral decoupling, highlighting an environment of uncertainty.

However, these counterarguments can be systematically addressed. Official denials are exactly what is expected from a government attempting to manage a global alliance while quietly reducing its commitments; a press statement does not prove that a withdrawal is not happening. The National Security Strategies, on the other hand, are a foundational document written for domestic audiences that clearly states the goal of European self-reliance. When combined with the reductions in US troop presence and contribution, the weight of the evidence favours the retrenchment scenario, even if the final timeline remains uncertain.

Conclusion

Regarding the data presented, we can conclude that NATO 3.0's language of partnership overlaps closely with the 2025 NSS, functioning, at least in part, as a continuation of that strategy. The NSS states that Europe should take primary responsibility for its own defence, a position NATO 3.0 reflects closely. This is reinforced by concrete evidence: the announced withdrawal of five thousand US troops from Germany, the cancelled MDTF-2 deployment, force levels returning to pre-2022 baselines, the Poland rotation's suspension and reversal, and redirected resources toward the Western Hemisphere, including the Greenland investment.

This reading has limits: the further withdrawal of up to ten thousand troops remains unconfirmed, and the Poland reversal suggests an uneven, reactive process rather than a fixed trajectory. Regardless, the question carries real implications for European defence planning. If NATO 3.0 reflects genuine burden-sharing, Europe can plan around continued US support; if retrenchment, European and Canadian planners must prepare faster for conventional deterrence responsibilities.

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