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Beyond "5% of GDP": NATO Negotiating Positions on the Hague Pledge

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Abstract

This article examines the political responses of NATO member states to the 2025 Hague Pledge, which combines a 3.5% core defence target with a 1.5% resilience component. Based on structured qualitative coding of official statements, government documents, and media reports, it develops the Hague Negotiation Score (HNS) for 25 member states. The findings show that formal consensus masks significant differences: strong support is concentrated among allies on the eastern flank and the United Kingdom, while others accept, reinterpret, postpone, or resist this commitment. The article adds an ex-ante perspective to debates on burden-sharing within NATO.

KEY WORDS: *NATO; Hague Summit 2025; defence spending target; negotiation position; allocation framing; political support; content analysis; burden-sharing*

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1. Introduction

The 2025 Hague Pledge represents a fundamental reevaluation of NATO's defence investment framework. Since the end of the Cold War, debates on burden-sharing within NATO have repeatedly centered on the question of the extent to which individual members should contribute to collective defence and how these contributions should be measured. The 2014 Wales Summit marked a turning point in this debate, as it transformed earlier political expectations into a clearer quantitative commitment. The Wales Summit Declaration states that allies who already meet the NATO guideline of spending at least 2% of GDP on defence should strive to continue doing so, while allies who fall short of this level should halt any decline in defence spending, increase defence spending in real terms in line with GDP growth, and strive to move closer to the 2% guideline within ten years. This declaration also reaffirmed the expectation that allies should allocate more than 20% of their defence budgets to major equipment, including related research and development [1].

The Hague Pledge builds on this earlier framework but changes both its scope and structure. Instead of focusing on the 2% defence spending guideline, it introduces a new 5% commitment to be achieved by 2035. This target is divided into two components. Allies have committed to allocating at least 3.5% of GDP annually, based on the agreed definition of NATO defence spending, to fund core defence needs and meet NATO capability goals. In addition, the Allies agreed to allocate up to 1.5% of GDP annually to broader defence and security-related expenditures, including critical infrastructure protection, cyber defence, civil preparedness and resilience, innovation, and strengthening the defence industrial base [2].

The two-part structure of the Hague pledge did not arise out of thin air. Infrastructure already existed within NATO defence spending prior to the Hague summit. NATO reports on defence spending include infrastructure spending as one of the main categories of defence spending, defined primarily as NATO common infrastructure and national military facilities [3]. However, this earlier treatment of infrastructure was narrower and, within the existing definition of defence spending, applied mainly to military facilities or NATO common infrastructure. The Hague pledge separates this traditional logic of defence spending from a broader category related to defence and security. The 3.5% component remains tied to the established definition of defence spending within NATO, while the additional 1.5% component opens the door to broader resilience-related and supporting investments that may not strictly fall under traditional Ministry of Defence spending.

This distinction reflects the changing nature of defence and deterrence. Today's defence capability no longer depends solely on the armed forces, weapons systems, readiness, and procurement. It also depends on transportation infrastructure, cyber resilience, energy systems, civil preparedness, industrial capacity, and the ability of companies to sustain military operations in crisis situations. The two-part formula therefore allows NATO to recognize investments that are relevant to collective defence but are not always clearly captured by the traditional logic of the defence budget. OSW describes the Hague Summit as a step toward the unprecedented 5% target, which consists of 3.5% for core military spending and 1.5% for other defence-related needs, noting that meeting this commitment will be crucial for the credibility of the Allies' deterrence [4]. The practical implication is that the Hague pledge is not merely a higher numerical target. It is also a political and accounting framework that allows allies to distinguish between hard defence spending and broader investments in security resilience. This new benchmark changes the political economy of burden-sharing within the Alliance. The 5% target substantially raises the expected level of national fiscal effort, while its two-part structure introduces flexibility in interpretation. Some states may view this target primarily as a hard defence commitment focused on military capabilities, readiness, and procurement. Others may emphasize the broader 1.5% resilience component and view this commitment as a more flexible framework combining defence spending with investments in infrastructure, cyber, industrial, and societal resilience. The Hague pledge thus raises not only the question of future compliance but also that of political interpretation.

This variability is important from an analytical perspective because NATO commitments do not function as legally enforceable fiscal rules. There are no direct enforcement mechanisms that could compel allies to meet their spending commitments. As a result, not all countries may ultimately fulfil the Hague pledge, even if they have formally adopted it at the Alliance level. The broader literature on international commitments warns that a formal agreement does not automatically imply deep cooperation or future compliance, especially when commitments are flexible or when states accept obligations that already align with their preferences [5]. In the NATO context, this problem is compounded by the dynamics of collective action within the alliance, where allies' contributions are shaped by perceptions of national threats, economic capacity, domestic political constraints, and incentives to under-contribute to the common security good [6], [7], [8]. Political support is therefore key to understanding whether a defence spending commitment is likely to be fulfilled. Sprinz and Vaahtoranta argue that states' preferences regarding international commitments are shaped by the interaction between vulnerability and expected adjustment costs [9]. This logic applies directly to defence spending commitments: states that perceive a higher security threat or face lower political and fiscal costs are more likely to support ambitious collective goals. At the same time, however, defence spending is not determined solely by external threats. Domestic politics plays an important role, as increased defence spending competes with other public priorities. Research on the "guns versus butter" trade-off shows that governments face electoral and partisan incentives when allocating resources between military and social spending [10], [11]. Public support for higher military spending is politically contingent and depends on citizens' willingness to accept trade-offs between defence and social welfare priorities [12]. This is particularly relevant to the Hague Pledge, as a shift toward 5% of GDP entails not only a technical budgetary adjustment but also a fundamental decision regarding the domestic allocation of resources.

In practice, burden-sharing within NATO is typically assessed ex post using expenditure indicators, particularly defence spending as a share of GDP. These indicators are essential because they provide a comparable measure of fiscal effort, but they are insufficient for understanding the political dynamics of adopting the commitment. They show whether states ultimately move closer to the target, but they do not reveal how states understood this target at the time of its negotiation, whether they supported it enthusiastically or reluctantly, or whether they sought to weaken, reinterpret, or oppose it. Negotiating positions and subsequent rhetoric in official government statements can therefore provide an early signal of willingness to fulfil the commitment [7]. An ex-ante assessment of approaches to fulfilling the commitment was previously conducted by Becker, Poast, and Haesebrouck, who analysed NATO allies' attitudes toward the Wales commitment and developed the Wales Negotiation Index (WNI) [13]. Their study showed that the allies' agreement on a common reference point did not imply uniform political enthusiasm. States differed in the timing, intensity, and conditions under which they accepted the Wales targets for defence investment. This article follows the same basic logic but applies it to the Hague pledge. It shifts the focus from future spending outcomes to the phase of concluding the agreement and the period immediately following the summit. The central research question is therefore: how did NATO member states politically position themselves toward the 2025 Hague Pledge, and what do these positions reveal about the credibility of the new 5% benchmark?

This article examines how 25 selected NATO member states responded to the Hague Pledge and what these responses reveal about the political credibility of the new 5% benchmark. It does not attempt to predict with certainty which countries will meet this target by 2035. Instead, it develops an ex-ante assessment of political stance through the Hague Negotiation Score, an anchored ordinal indicator based on structured qualitative coding of official statements, government documents, and high-quality reports. The main argument is that the Hague Pledge should not be understood as a uniform 5% GDP benchmark with the same political meaning across all member states. It is better understood as a politically flexible commitment that masks substantial differences in national accountability, rhetorical framing, and the credibility of implementation.

2. Method of investigation

This article employs a structured qualitative research design to assess how 25 selected NATO member states responded to the 2025 Hague Pledge. The aim of the empirical approach is not to measure actual future compliance with the 5% target, but to capture the prevailing governmental or political stance expressed during negotiations and immediately after the summit. The analysis therefore focuses on political positioning, rhetorical framing, and the credibility of implementation rather than on actual defence spending outcomes.

The unit of analysis is a NATO member state. The coded variable is the state's dominant governmental or political stance toward the Hague Pledge to allocate 5% of GDP to defence and resilience. The primary empirical output is the Hague Negotiation Score (HNS), an anchored ordinal indicator of political stance toward the pledge. The final empirical sample consists of 25 NATO member states for which a sufficiently identifiable dominant governmental or political position could be coded. The complete dataset, coding procedure, and methodological documentation are stored in the Open Science Framework repository: Müllner and Nečas, Hague Negotiation Score Dataset and Methodology [14]. The HNS should not be interpreted as an exact interval-scale measurement. The numerical values are category anchors assigned to substantively defined negotiating positions. The indicator captures whether a government acted as an instigator, supporter, ambivalent actor, dragger, or opponent of the Hague Pledge. It therefore measures political positioning toward the pledge, not the state's objective fiscal capacity to reach 5% of GDP. The primary coding time window covers the period from May 1, 2025, to November 1, 2025. This period captures the phases immediately before, during, and after the summit in relation to the Hague pledge. Sources from the pre-summit period were included if they directly addressed the upcoming 5% commitment or if they clearly shaped a national position that was later maintained after the summit. This time window was chosen to identify positions related to the formulation and early interpretation of the Hague pledge, rather than to later implementation outcomes.

For each country, coding was based on a small, structured corpus of publicly available sources, typically three sources per case. The corpus of sources combined official government or ministerial statements, where available, reports from major national media, and high-quality international reporting or analytical commentary. The country-level source corpus is presented separately in supplementary material and is linked to the OSF dataset [14]. This separation allows the main article to remain analytically concise while maintaining the transparency and reproducibility of coding decisions at the country level. France and Norway were reviewed during the coding process but were not included in the final HNS classification. In both cases, the available source material did not provide sufficiently consistent and directly relevant evidence to assign a reliable dominant governmental position toward the Hague Pledge. Their exclusion follows the coding rule that ambiguous or insufficiently documented cases should not be forced into the ordinal scale.

A hierarchy of sources was used to resolve conflicting evidence. The highest priority was given to official sources of executive power, including statements by prime ministers, presidents, defence ministries, foreign ministries, and official government communiqués. Official coalition documents or government policies and laws passed by the parliamentary majority were considered second-tier evidence. Renowned national media outlets quoting government officials, as well as high-quality international media or think tank analyses, were used as supporting evidence. Statements by the opposition or party representatives were included only as contextual information and did not in themselves influence the national score.

Four dimensions were tracked for each country. First, the negotiating stance captures whether the state actively promoted, clearly supported, accepted, accepted with reservations, opposed, rejected, or sought an exemption from the Hague obligation. Second, rhetorical tone captures how the goal was framed: as historical, necessary, reasonable, managerial, unrealistic, problematic, or unsustainable. Third, the specificity of the commitment captures whether the state's stance was backed by a plan, a timeline, a budget plan, parliamentary support, institutional steps, or merely general formulations without a clear path to implementation. Fourth, obstructive or evasive behaviour captures whether the state called for patience, sought an exemption, redefined metrics, advocated for flexibility in accounting, conditioned acceptance on external fiscal changes, or shifted the burden to the domestic political debate.

Coding was conducted in two steps. First, each country was assigned to a substantively defined negotiation category based on the four dimensions described above. Then, each category was converted into a numerical value. The HNS thus represents an ordered classification of political stances rather than a detailed numerical index. Several rules were applied to ensure consistency. First, official government sources took precedence over media interpretations and opposition statements. Second, post-summit statements carried greater weight than pre-summit reports if they directly clarified or corrected an earlier position. Third, opposition statements were used only to identify domestic controversy, not to override the government's position. Fourth, formal acceptance of a commitment was not automatically coded as support. If a state formally accepted a commitment but simultaneously requested exemptions, demanded long delays, questioned feasibility, relied on creative accounting, or lacked a credible implementation plan, it was coded as less supportive than an actual advocate. Fifth, concrete implementation of the commitment at the domestic level—such as a plan, budget allocation, parliamentary majority, or institutional steps toward implementation—could increase the score. Sixth, extreme scores required stronger evidence, typically at least one official source and one independent media outlet or analytical confirmation. These rules were used to standardise the interpretation of country source sets and to make the classification procedure transparent and replicable. They should not be read as a claim that the HNS captures hidden bargaining positions or confidential negotiations; it captures publicly observable governmental and political positioning.

The final score for each country reflects the dominant government stance derived from the entire set of sources. It is not a mechanical average of individual statements or articles. This approach is necessary because national stances on the Hague pledge often combine formal acceptance with domestic caution, fiscal constraints, or political disputes. The purpose of the HNS is therefore to create a transparent and reproducible ranking of states' negotiating positions, not to claim exact numerical precision. Hague Negotiation Score coding scheme are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Hague Negotiation Score coding scheme

HNS value	Category	Coding logic
1.0	Instigator	The country was the primary political driver of the pledge and actively pushed allies to adopt it.
0.9	Strongest supporter	Clear and strongly positive support, positive framing of the target, credible implementation path and no significant distancing.
0.8	Strong supporter	Unequivocal support and positive acceptance, supported by domestic political or institutional backing, but without a vanguard role.
0.7	Medium supporter	Clear support, but less emphatic, more strategically framed or less substantiated than in the higher-support categories.
0.6	Weak supporter	General acceptance and support, but with visible reservations, fiscal caution or weaker domestic internalisation.
0.5	Fence sitter	Mixed or ambiguous signals, significant domestic contestation, strong conditionality or absence of a dominant clear government line.
0.2	Dragger	Formal accession or acceptance, but with delay, fiscal caveats, accounting reinterpretation or lack of credible implementation pathway.
0.1	Strong dragger	Significant questioning of the target, claims that it is unrealistic, or pressure for alternative metrics.
0.0	Strongest dragger	Explicit rejection, strong delegitimation of the benchmark or a negotiated exemption from full implementation.

The research design has three built-in limitations. First, it captures only the agreement-making phase and the immediate post-summit period, not the subsequent implementation of the 5% target. Second, it relies on publicly available sources, meaning that countries with more explicit public communication are easier to code than those with vague or contradictory statements. Third, the indicator measures the dominant government stance, not public opinion, internal bureaucratic negotiations, or the entire legislative process. These limitations do not invalidate the HNS but define its proper interpretation: it is an ex-ante measure of political stance toward the Hague pledge.

In short, this method allows the article to distinguish between states that have strongly embraced the Hague Pledge, states that have accepted it with reservations, states that have remained ambivalent, and states that have weakened or rejected this benchmark. This makes it possible to analyse the Hague Pledge not only as a future spending target but as a politically contentious commitment whose significance varied across individual NATO member states.

3. Investigation Results.

The results show that the Hague Pledge produced formal alliance consensus but not uniform political ownership. The 25 coded cases reveal substantial variation in how governments framed, accepted, qualified, or resisted the new 5% benchmark. The analysis distinguishes between states that actively promoted the pledge, states that strongly supported it, states that accepted it cautiously, ambivalent actors, and states that weakened, questioned, or rejected the target.

France and Norway were not included in the final classification because the available source material did not allow a sufficiently reliable identification of their dominant governmental position. The final sample therefore consists of 25 NATO member states.

Scores range from 1.0, assigned to the primary political initiator of the commitment, to 0.0, assigned to a state that has explicitly rejected the common benchmark or secured an exemption from its full implementation. Coding follows the category definitions and decision rules outlined in the previous section. In particular, formal adoption of the Hague Declaration was not automatically considered support; states were assigned a lower score if their stance was accompanied by delays, fiscal reservations, revaluation of metrics, requests for exemptions, or weak credibility of implementation. This is consistent with the coding protocol, which distinguishes between negotiating stance, rhetorical tone, specificity of commitment, and obstructive or evasive behaviour.

The distribution of scores shows that the Hague Pledge rests on a politically asymmetrical foundation. The average HNS score within the sample is 0.57, while the median is 0.60, placing the average coded attitude between weak and moderate support. Thus, the pledge was not primarily met with outright rejection, nor was it uniformly accepted as a strong national priority. Country-level evidence reveals a spectrum of attitudes ranging from accelerated implementation and explicit framing of the threat to cautious acceptance, fiscal conditionality, accounting flexibility, and negotiated exemptions. Most of the coded allies fall into the camp of supporters. If weak, moderate, strong, and strongest supporters are combined, 15 out of 25 states—or 60% of the sample—are classified as supporting the Hague Pledge. However, this support is internally differentiated. Only eight states—the United States, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Greece—fall into the high-support category with a score of 0.8 or higher. In these cases, the commitment was either politically anchored at the domestic level, linked to specific spending trajectories, or presented as consistent with existing national security priorities.

The strongest support is particularly evident among allies on the eastern flank. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland did not formulate the Hague Pledge as an externally imposed fiscal target, but as a reaffirmation of existing security priorities. Estonia provides the clearest example of implementation with a front-loaded commitment: the Estonian government stated that at least 5% of GDP will be allocated to defence capabilities and that defence spending will increase to at least 5% of GDP in the 2026 budget [15]. Similarly, the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the Hague Pledge as a historic achievement and presented the 5% target as Latvia's top priority at the summit, while Foreign Minister Baiba Braže linked this commitment to deterrence and assessed that Russia remains a direct and long-term threat [16]. Lithuania and Poland are following the same pattern. Lithuania planned to increase defence spending from nearly 4% of GDP in 2025 to 5.25% the following year [17], while Reuters reported that Poland aims to reach 5% of GDP by 2026, having already planned for 4.7% in 2025 [18]. Hague Negotiation Score: summary of country positions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Hague Negotiation Score: summary of country positions

HNS category	HNS score	Countries	N	Share of sample	Interpretation
Instigator	1.0	United States	1	4.0%	Principal agenda-setter and political driver of the Hague 5% benchmark
Strongest supporters	0.9	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, United Kingdom	5	20.0%	States with clear, strong and credible support; the pledge is framed as necessary, urgent or consistent with existing defence policy
Strong supporters	0.8	Denmark, Greece	2	8.0%	States with unequivocal support and meaningful political or institutional backing, but without the agenda-setting role of the strongest supporters
Medium supporters	0.7	Albania, Romania, Türkiye	3	12.0%	States that support the commitment, but with less intensity, weaker domestication or more strategic/fiscal constraints
Weak supporters	0.6	Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Netherlands, Portugal	5	20.0%	States that accept and generally support the pledge, but with reservations, fiscal caution or limited implementation specificity
Fence sitters	0.5	Czechia, Hungary	2	8.0%	States with mixed or internally contested positioning; neither reliable supporters nor open opponents
Draggers	0.2	Belgium, Canada, Italy, Slovak Republic	4	16.0%	States that formally accommodate the pledge but weaken it through delay, fiscal caveats, accounting flexibility or weak implementation credibility
Strong draggers	0.1	Luxembourg, Slovenia	2	8.0%	States that significantly question the target, its feasibility or the metric itself
Strongest dragger	0.0	Spain	1	4.0%	State that explicitly rejected or secured exemption from the common benchmark

Source: Authors' coding based on Hague Negotiation Score Dataset and Methodology [14]

The United Kingdom also falls into the category of the most vocal advocates, though its stance illustrates a different interpretation of the Hague Framework. The British government has framed the 5% commitment as a broader pledge in the area of national security, combining core defence, internal security, and national resilience, with an anticipated breakdown of 3.5% + 1.5% by 2035 [19]. Greece, by contrast, represents strong but less agenda-defining support. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis welcomed the summit's decision, identified himself as a supporter of higher European defence spending, and stated that Greece would reach the 3.5% + 1.5% threshold by 2035 [20].

The second pattern is cautious acceptance. Bulgaria and Croatia accepted the Hague Pledge, but approached its implementation more in terms of longer time horizons and national priorities than immediate political mobilization. Bulgaria confirmed the 5% target by 2035, emphasizing that there are no annual targets and that the key point is achieving the target by the end of the given period [21]. The Croatian Minister of Defence supported the 5% target and distinguished between 3.5% for defence and 1.5% for defence- and security-related components, but the evidence does not indicate the same urgency or leadership role as in the cases of the Eastern Flank [22].

The third pattern is ambivalence or conditionality. This is most clearly illustrated by Hungary. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó described NATO's spending commitment as an opportunity for the Hungarian defence industry [23], while Prime Minister Viktor Orbán argued that meeting the 5% target would require changes to EU budget rules and stated that Russia is not strong enough to pose a real threat to Hungary [24]. This combination of formal support, fiscal conditionality, and low threat framing places Hungary closer to the fence-sitter category than to reliable support.

The dragger category reveals the limits of the Hague consensus. Belgium is a clear example of formal compliance without strong political ownership: The Brussels Times reported that Prime Minister Bart De Wever asked NATO allies to allow Belgium to invest at its own pace, noting that Belgium had not committed to 5% by 2035 [25]. Canada represents the most ambiguous version of the same problem. Although an official government statement indicated that Canada and its allies had agreed to invest 5% of GDP by 2035, a broader set of sources raised concerns about the credibility of the implementation plan and a possible reliance on accounting in the resilience category [26].

Slovakia and Spain are showing more pronounced resistance. Prime Minister Robert Fico rejected a rapid increase to 5% of GDP as “impossible” given Slovakia’s public finances and argued that Slovakia should retain sovereign control over the pace and structure of any increase in defence spending [27]. Spain represents the clearest case of resistance: the Associated Press reported that Spain reached an agreement with NATO for an exemption from the 5% target, while Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez stated that Spain will not spend 5% of GDP on defence and can meet its NATO commitments at the level of 2.1% of GDP [28].

Overall, the results suggest three broader patterns. First, the Hague Pledge has achieved broad formal acceptance, but strong political internalization is concentrated among a smaller group of allies. Second, the main dividing line runs not only between supporters and opponents, but between varying degrees of credibility, domestication, fiscal conditionality, and accounting flexibility. Third, resistance takes many forms: domestic ambiguity, requests for patience, fiscal reservations, reliance on resilience accounting, alternative metrics, and explicit exemptions. HNS thus reveals that the Hague Pledge is not a uniform 5% commitment with the same political significance across NATO. It is a formally shared reference point whose domestic interpretation and credibility of implementation vary substantially.

These findings demonstrate the analytical value of examining political positions before expenditure data becomes available. If the Hague Pledge were assessed solely on the basis of future expenditure outcomes, the political asymmetry visible at the time of adoption and immediately following the summit would be lost. The HNS shows that allies entered the implementation phase from very different starting points: some viewed the pledge as a confirmation of existing defence policy, others accepted it as a difficult but manageable compromise, and a few sought to postpone, reinterpret, or avoid this benchmark.

4. Discussion and Limitations

The main implication of the findings is that the Hague Pledge should not be treated as a uniform 5% benchmark with equal political meaning across NATO. The pledge created formal consensus, but the HNS shows that this consensus rests on uneven political foundations. Some allies entered the implementation phase with strong domestic ownership and credible spending trajectories, while others accepted the pledge primarily as a flexible political formula that can be delayed, reinterpreted, or partly absorbed through the resilience component.

This conclusion is consistent with the broader literature on burden-sharing within the alliance. Olson and Zeckhauser’s logic of collective action suggests that allies have different motivations for contributing to the common security good, particularly when the benefits of deterrence are non-excludable [6]. Oneal later demonstrated that burden-sharing within NATO cannot be explained solely by formal membership in the alliance, as allies’ contributions vary depending on the size of their economies, their perception of the threat, and the changing structure of collective defence [7]. Hartley and Sandler further argue that debates on burden-sharing are highly sensitive to the choice of indicator: defence spending as a share of GDP is only one possible measure, and different indicators can lead to a different ranking of allies’ contributions [8]. The Hague Pledge exacerbates this problem because it does not rely on a single defence spending indicator. It combines a 3.5% core defence component with a 1.5% broader resilience component. As a result, countries can rhetorically unite around the same 5% benchmark while differing substantially in the nature of their contributions.

The first significant contribution of this article is therefore to demonstrate that the policy of adopting the commitment must be analysed even before spending results are available. Standard assessments of burden-sharing typically evaluate allies ex post, particularly through defence spending as a share of GDP. Such indicators remain essential, but they do not capture how states understood the commitment at the time of its adoption, whether they accepted it enthusiastically or reluctantly, and whether they sought to reinterpret or weaken it. The Hague Negotiation Score adds an ex-ante perspective by measuring the political stance of allies during negotiations and immediately after the summit. This is particularly important in the case of The Hague, as the 5% benchmark is not only more ambitious than the Welsh commitment but also more flexible in its accounting logic.

This approach builds on the work of Becker, Poast, and Haesebrouck on the Wales Pledge. Their study showed that NATO allies did not agree to the Wales targets with uniform enthusiasm, and that willingness to agree was shaped by vulnerability and the expected costs of adjustment. The present article applies this logic to a different commitment and a different empirical setting. It does not reconstruct confidential negotiations or test the full causal mechanism statistically; instead, it uses structured public-source coding to assess early political positioning toward the Hague Pledge.

The second contribution concerns the difference between formal acceptance and actual political accountability. Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom warn that a high degree of formal compliance in international regimes can be misleading if states accept commitments that already align with their preferences, or if the commitments are flexible enough to avoid significant behavioural change [5]. This directly applies to the Hague pledge. Formal acceptance of the 5% benchmark does not automatically mean that all allies intend to implement corresponding fiscal or military adjustments. Belgium, Canada, Italy, and the Slovak Republic illustrate this problem. They formally accepted the commitment, but their positions were characterized by requests for time, fiscal reservations, accounting reinterpretations, or reluctance regarding the hard defence component. In these cases, it is not a matter of open rejection, but of limited political commitment.

The two-part structure of the Hague Pledge reinforces this ambiguity. The 3.5% core defence component is tied to NATO’s established definition of defence expenditure, while the 1.5% component creates room for broader resilience-related spending. This structure was politically useful because it made consensus easier to achieve. At the same time, it creates a risk of accounting divergence. Two states may appear to converge toward the same aggregate 5% benchmark while contributing very differently to deployable military capability, readiness, procurement, infrastructure, cyber resilience, or industrial capacity. Future assessments of the Hague Pledge should therefore distinguish between overall compliance, core defence effort, and the substantive content of the resilience component.

This problem is closely linked to the economic feasibility of the Alliance's commitments. Müllner and Nečas argue that the ability to ensure defence capabilities and meet NATO's spending and investment commitments must be assessed in relation to the current economic situation, fiscal capacity, and the structure of defence investments [29]. Their argument has a direct bearing on the Hague pledge. The transition from the 2% benchmark set in Wales to the 5% framework significantly increases the fiscal and political burden on allies. It is therefore likely that some governments will seek longer deadlines, broader accounting categories, or interpretations of compliance related to resilience. The categories of "weak supporters" and "reluctant" identified in this article should not be automatically interpreted as a rejection of NATO or collective defence. In many cases, they reflect the tension between Alliance-level commitments and domestic budgetary feasibility. The findings also correspond with the literature on domestic politics and defence spending. Bove, Efthyvoulou, and Navas show that governments face electoral incentives when allocating resources between military and social spending, tending to shift spending toward social spending and away from military spending during election periods, particularly where immediate security pressures are weaker [10]. Lopes da Silva similarly finds that political accountability can reduce military spending as a share of GDP, as governments must justify military spending to voters [11]. Sacchi, Buzzelli, and de la Porte show that public support for higher military spending is limited by resistance to cuts in social benefits, particularly when military spending is presented as requiring cuts in social policy [12]. These arguments help explain why several allies have embraced the Hague Pledge only cautiously. The transition to 5% of GDP is not a technocratic budgetary adjustment; it is a fundamental domestic decision on resource allocation. This is particularly evident among the categories of weak supporters and hesitant countries. Germany, the Netherlands, and Portugal accepted the general direction of the commitment but framed its implementation with regard to feasibility, fiscal prudence, or budgetary constraints. Italy and Slovakia went even further, linking the commitment to fiscal unsustainability, dual-use expenditures, or sovereign control over the pace and structure of defence spending increases. These cases show that domestic defence spending policies are likely to influence the implementation of the Hague pledge just as much as pressure at the alliance level. NATO can establish a common benchmark, but national governments must still translate it into budgets, justify it to the domestic public, and defend it against competing public priorities.

The third contribution of this article is the identification of various forms of resistance. Resistance to the Hague pledge does not take a single form. The Czech Republic and Hungary represent ambiguous or internally contentious positions. Belgium and Canada represent formal compliance with limited credibility regarding implementation. Italy and Slovakia illustrate fiscal resistance and reliance on flexibility or dual-use interpretations. Luxembourg and Slovenia directly question the feasibility or appropriateness of the benchmark. Spain demonstrates explicit resistance through a negotiated exemption. This variability is important because it shows that the challenge associated with implementation will not be the same for all allies. Some countries may need political persuasion, others fiscal space, others methodological clarification, and still others direct pressure from the alliance.

The results also clarify the interpretation of the 5% benchmark itself. If the Hague pledge is understood merely as a higher version of the 2% target from Wales, its political logic is lost. The Wales commitment primarily established a common fiscal threshold for defence spending and investment in equipment. The Hague pledge does something different: it combines defence spending with broader resilience-related expenditures. This makes it more adaptable to current security needs, but also more prone to accounting ambiguities. Future assessments of the commitment will therefore need to distinguish between three analytically separate questions: whether countries will reach the overall 5% level, how much of this amount goes toward core defence, and whether the 1.5% component represents actual investments in resilience or merely reclassified spending.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the Hague Negotiation Score is an anchored ordinal indicator based on structured qualitative coding. It should not be interpreted as a precise measure on an interval scale. The difference between 0.8 and 0.9 represents a substantive difference between coded categories, not a precise numerical distance. The purpose of the score is to create a transparent and reproducible ranking of policy positions, not to claim that it represents finely graded quantitative precision. A further limitation concerns case coverage. France and Norway were not included in the final HNS classification because the available source material did not allow a sufficiently reliable identification of their dominant governmental position toward the Hague Pledge. This reduces the number of coded cases to 25, but it also avoids forcing ambiguous cases into the ordinal scale and thereby protects the internal consistency of the coding procedure.

Second, the analysis draws on publicly available sources. This leads to inevitable differences in the quality and clarity of the evidence across countries. Some governments have clearly communicated their positions through official statements, plans, or budgetary decisions. Others have relied on more ambiguous political language, fragmentary media coverage, or indirect signals.

Third, the article covers the negotiation period and the immediate post-summit period, not later implementation. The HNS should therefore be interpreted as an ex-ante measure of political stance. It can identify early signals of willingness, hesitation, or resistance, but it cannot determine whether countries will actually reach the 5% benchmark by 2035. Some weak advocates may later become credible implementers, while some strong advocates may face domestic fiscal or political constraints.

Fourth, the analysis focuses on dominant government and political positions. It does not fully capture public opinion, coalition negotiations, parliamentary dynamics, bureaucratic capacity for implementation, or constraints in the defence industry. These factors may gain significance during the later stages of implementation, particularly in countries where the commitment is controversial or financially burdensome at home. Finally, the Hague Pledge itself remains methodologically complex. Since the 5% benchmark combines core defence spending with broader resilience-related expenditures, future compliance will depend not only on how much states spend but also on how they classify their expenditures. Without a clear and comparable reporting framework, the commitment may lead to a formal convergence of aggregate figures, while obscuring substantial differences in actual defence efforts.

Overall, the discussion suggests that the Hague pledge is best understood not merely as a spending target, but as a political test of allies' resolve. Its fulfilment will depend on the interplay of threat perceptions, fiscal capacity, domestic political support, and the credibility of national pathways to meeting it. The Hague Negotiation Score provides a timely overview of these differences and helps identify where future fulfilment of the commitment is likely to be politically straightforward, contentious, or prone to reassessment.

5. Conclusions

This article examined how 25 selected NATO member states politically positioned themselves toward the 2025 Hague Pledge. The analysis focused on the negotiation phase and the immediate post-summit period rather than on future compliance with the 5% target. Using the Hague Negotiation Score, the article assessed whether governments acted as an instigator, strong supporters, cautious supporters, ambivalent actors, draggers, or opponents of the new benchmark.

The results show that the Hague Pledge produced formal consensus within the Alliance, but not political unity. Of the 25 coded NATO member states, 15 were classified as supporters, yet only a smaller group demonstrated strong political internalisation. The United States was identified as the sole instigator, while Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the United Kingdom emerged as the strongest supporters. By contrast, Belgium, Canada, Italy, and the Slovak Republic formally accommodated the pledge while weakening its practical meaning through delay, fiscal reservations, weak implementation credibility, or accounting flexibility. Spain represented the clearest case of resistance.

The main conclusion is that the Hague Pledge should not be understood as a single uniform commitment with the same political meaning across NATO. It is better understood as a flexible political and accounting framework. This flexibility helped make the agreement possible, but it also created room for different domestic interpretations. For some allies, the pledge represents a firm defence commitment linked to deterrence, readiness, and military capabilities. For others, it is a broader framework in which resilience, infrastructure, industrial capacity, and dual-use spending can play a central role. For a smaller group of states, it is a benchmark to be delayed, mitigated, reinterpreted, or avoided.

This article contributes to the study of burden-sharing within NATO by showing that political stance matters even before the results of spending become apparent. Standard assessments of burden-sharing typically focus on defence spending as a share of GDP. Such data remain important, but they capture only the implementation phase. The Hague Negotiation Score (HNS) adds an ex-ante perspective by showing how governments positioned themselves at the time of commitment and immediately thereafter. This allows researchers to distinguish between genuine political commitment, cautious acceptance, ambiguity, and resistance even before data on long-term compliance become available.

Three avenues are particularly important for future research. First, the HNS should be compared with actual spending trends as soon as data become available. This would make it possible to verify whether early political stances predict later performance. Second, future analysis should carefully distinguish between the 3.5% core defence component and the 1.5% resilience component. Without this distinction, it might appear that countries are converging toward the same overall target, while their contributions to NATO's military capabilities differ greatly. Third, future research should examine domestic policies regarding the implementation of the Hague Pledge, including parliamentary support, public opinion, coalition negotiations, and competition with other public spending priorities.

The Hague pledge is therefore not merely a defence spending target. It is also a test of the Allies' political will. Its implementation will depend not only on economic capacity, but also on whether governments can translate the commitments made at the summit into credible domestic budgetary and political strategies.

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