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Policy Commentary

Main Takeaways from NATO Summit in Vilnius

The very fact that the NATO Summit took place in Vilnius is important not only for Lithuania but for the entire region. This Summit took place during very difficult times in the context of the second year of Russia's extensive war against Ukraine. The Alliance had to make inward-driven decisions focused on its own security and defence and at the same time it had to send a strong message to Ukraine regarding its membership in NATO and ensure Allied long-term commitment of support.

A year ago, in Madrid, the Alliance adopted a new NATO Strategic Concept (NATO, 2022), which underlines, that Europe is no longer at peace. NATO acknowledged that the security environment has changed, and Russia is the most significant and direct threat to NATO. Madrid was marked by a fundamental shift in threat perception, in collective defence and brought concrete commitments and assuring the Allies that NATO is ready to defend every inch of the Alliance.

Decisions taken at the Madrid Summit indeed paved the ground for the Vilnius Summit. That was a sound foundation to move ahead. Especially as for many years, NATO was focused more on crisis management and cooperative security than collective defence. So, the Vilnius Summit was to be a litmus test for the Alliance. It also served as a probability not only to evaluate the implementation of Madrid decisions but contribute to new directions and to set new priorities. One of those new directions became the obvious need to invest more in the defence industry to ensure continuity of support to Ukraine

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and at the same time to ensure collective defence needs.

At the outset of the Summit, numerous experts argued, that after the fundamental decisions taken in Madrid, Vilnius will be only a minor stop on its way towards the Washington Summit in 2024. In fact, the Vilnius Summit was more than a minor stop, it marked NATO's continued focus on collective defence, concrete steps towards strengthening of deterrence and defence posture, and agreement on the new quality defence plans. The Allies also welcomed Finland as a new NATO member and committed to a higher defence spending bar, 2 per cent became the floor instead of the ceiling.

Forward Defence and New Defence Plans

The Madrid Summit also “set out a new strategy of forward defence to deter Russian aggression against Allies” (Monaghan, Martinez, & Svendsen, 2023). The concept of forward defence comes back to the NATO vocabulary, but with a new contemporary meaning, with its flexibility, and political will to deter aggression and defend if the need to be. NATO acknowledges that contemporary security and collective defence are developed in a multi-domain environment. The forward defence approach “requires more troops stationed along NATO's borders, heightened readiness of an increased number of quick response forces, and crucially, reliable methods to prevent surprise attacks” (Koziej, 2023).

In Madrid Allies committed to move towards the forward defence and have better prepared and more troops in the Eastern part of NATO. The Madrid Summit declaration states that “Allies have committed to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battlegroups to brigade-size units where and when required, underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements” (NATO, 2022a).

The Vilnius Summit Communique refers to “ongoing efforts by Allies to increase their presence on NATO's Eastern Flank, which further adds to credible deterrence and defence. All these forces demonstrate our resolve and readiness to defend every inch of Allied territory” (NATO, 2023). The eight Enhanced Forward Presence battle groups stationed in the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary can be scaled up to brigade-size units. “Before the Summit, Canada offered to double its contingent in Latvia, adding 1,200 troops, while Germany confirmed it would send a permanent brigade of up to 4,000 troops to Lithuania in the future” (Monaghan et al., 2023).

The Alliance also took a decision, to enhance NATO air defence posture, by establishing the rotational model that is aimed to increase readiness of NATO air and missile defence capabilities and to strengthen air exercises. “Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania also signed a Declaration of Cooperation on cross-border airspace management” (Monaghan et al., 2023). The three Baltic States (NATO, 2023a), highlighted the importance of air and missile defence, committed to establishing airspace volumes for NATO exercises and training, and underscored that closer cooperation between the Baltic States is of utmost significance under the current security environment.” The Baltic states highlight the significance of investments and procurements of air defence systems and will continue to focus on enhancement of national capability and their interoperability” (Lithuania MOD, 2023).

The Alliance makes a robust step towards a sound collective defence posture with new-generation defence plans, that will allow it to react faster, and be more vigilant. “This also corresponds with NATO’s increased commitment to ensure logistical security and compatibility, including pre-positioned equipment in nations (Monaghan et al., 2023). “The Vilnius Summit Communique states that NATO:

“Agreed that our defence plans are the main driver for the organisation of our forces and the specific military requirements NATO asks of them, allowing us to respond faster and at a greater scale. With the new NATO Force Model, agreed at the Madrid Summit, Allies are delivering a larger pool of dedicated combat-capable forces, including forces at high readiness, improving our military responsiveness, and harnessing regional expertise and geographic proximity” (NATO, 2023).

The enhanced collective defence posture is marked by the agreed new generation defence plans, increased NATO presence in the Eastern Part of the Alliance, and enhanced air and missile defence posture by establishing the air defence rotational model. In Vilnius, the Allies underlined that they

“Agreed significant measures to further enhance NATO’s deterrence and defence posture in all domains, including strengthening forward defences and the Alliance’s ability to rapidly reinforce any Ally that comes under threat. We will fully implement these measures and deny any potential adversary any possible opportunities for aggression” (NATO, 2023).

NATO's Decision on Ukraine

A number of different think tanks and political experts underline that the most significant Vilnius Summit decision was related to Ukraine. NATO decided to elevate the format of cooperation with Ukraine from Commission to Council. It is underlined, that "Allies went further than ever before on Kyiv's membership by removing the requirement for a Membership Action Plan and creating a new NATO-Ukraine Council" (Monaghan et al., 2023). The establishment of the Council raised the level of NATO - Ukraine relations where the Allies and Ukraine are as equals. It marked the "upgraded political ties and allowed all sides to call crisis talks if needed" (Cook, 2023). With this decision, the MAP was taken out of the negotiation table, and it became irrelevant for future debates. By taking the MAP off the table the Alliance also minimised the possibility for additional requirements and conditions for Ukraine to become a NATO member. Notably, NATO also enhanced the Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine (CAP), committing to short, medium and long-term support and underlining that "the assistance provided will help rebuild the Ukrainian security and defence sector and transition Ukraine towards full interoperability with NATO" (NATO, 2023). Besides, in the context of the NATO Summit, the joint G7 declaration on Support for Ukraine and security commitments as well as commitments to military assistance was signed. It was portrayed as a transitional security measure paving the path of Ukraine to future membership in NATO and the EU.

The Summit outcomes and expectations concerning Ukraine were intensively debated in the public domain. Vilnius and Lithuanian citizens expressed very strong support to Ukraine by covering Vilnius in "yellow and blue, with 33,000 Ukrainian flags around the city" (Lutsevych, 2023), referring that Ukraine would be a 33rd NATO Ally after Sweden. "A flag from war-torn Bakhmut was raised in the city's central square and large crowds welcomed President Zelenskyy" (Lutsevych, 2023). The public expectations were higher. Ukraine's President V. Zelensky was disappointed that Ukraine did not receive an invitation to join the Alliance. However, the Summit marked "a step change in the discussion about Ukraine's membership prospects" (Monaghan et al., 2023), and as CSIS experts underline, in the Madrid Summit Declaration Ukraine was mentioned 13 times, whereas in Vilnius 58 times, this shows that Ukraine is getting more space in the NATO agenda. Moreover, Ukraine is becoming a significant actor in the Transatlantic region, a strong country with a value system, which marks Ukraine's normative belonging to this regional security community. "Ukraine has proved its worth to NATO on the battlefield and that its growing military prowess would serve the alliance

well in deterring future Russian aggression” (Monaghan et al., 2023). It is evident that Ukraine’s membership will be a pivotal topic on the Washington Summit agenda.

Enlargement of NATO: Integration of Finland and Sweden

Another very important issue in Vilnius was NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden. For many years Finland and Sweden were the closest NATO partners, participated in NATO operations, attended joint exercises, and engaged in very close cooperation on different security and defence-related issues. The political will in Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance occurred in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Soon the integration processes started. It is important that two previously neutral states decided to become NATO Allies and to commit to collective defence of the Alliance.

Right before the Vilnius Summit came out the announcement of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s support to Sweden’s membership, sent a promising message to Sweden and all Allies. However, the ratification process and Hungary’s decision will determine when Sweden will join the Allies at the North Atlantic Council table. So, the Allies could greet only Finland who recently joined NATO.

Finland was welcomed at the Vilnius Summit as the newest Ally, Sweden received some promising signs that it will become a NATO member soon. This wave of enlargement will contribute to the Baltic Sea region and will strengthen the Nordic-Baltic security, the Baltic Sea will become the inner lake of NATO, and the membership will enhance Arctic security and defence. Finnish and Swedish membership will contribute to Allied readiness in the region, “streamline operational planning and information sharing in the Baltic-Nordic region and strengthen NATO’s deterrence in the Arctic” (Monaghan et al., 2023).

Vilnius Way Ahead

Vilnius hosted the Summit against the backdrop of a deteriorating security environment in Europe and a full-scale war against Ukraine. This Summit will be marked by pivotal NATO decisions related to collective defence and deterrence, Allied defence spending, and enlargement. It is also marked by changing paradigms and perceptions of regional security and NATO's focus on forward defence. Naturally, Ukraine was at the centre of attention, and the Allies remained committed to debating further its membership in NATO and providing lethal and non-lethal support helping Ukraine to win the war.

In sum, Vilnius laid the solid ground for the Washington Summit in 2024. Membership of Sweden and Ukraine, defence spending and enhanced collective defence posture most likely will find their way to the upcoming Washington agenda.

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