

Belgium's View on the Ankara Summit and Türkiye's Role in NATO

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ABSTRACT *This commentary examines Belgium's priorities and expectations for the Ankara NATO Summit. It argues that the Summit should be structured around three core agenda items: defense-industrial integration, Europe's growing responsibility for its own security, and the expansion of NATO's geographical area of strategic attention. Drawing attention to the structural constraints of the alliance's defense-industrial capacity, the commentary rejects a "buy European only" approach and proposes a model of defense-industrial cooperation based on transcontinental joint production lines and industrial partnerships. Within this framework, Türkiye's expanding defense-industrial ecosystem is identified as a strategic asset, particularly through the contributions of actors such as ASELSAN, Roketsan, and Baykar. The article further argues that, as the United States increasingly shifts its strategic focus towards Asia, European allies must assume greater operational responsibility on NATO's eastern flank. Finally, it contends that secure access to critical raw materials in Africa and reducing Chinese dominance over these resources are of existential importance to the alliance's long-term defense capacity. It therefore calls for an expansion of NATO's maritime agenda to encompass the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean.*

Keywords: Belgium, Türkiye, Ankara Summit, Future of NATO

Insight Turkey 2026
Vol. 28 / No. 2 / pp. 35-42

Received Date: 3/5/2026 • Accepted Date: 15/6/2026 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2026282.3

Introduction

In July, Türkiye will host the NATO Summit for the second time in its history. The first one, in 2004 in İstanbul, can rightly be called historic. Seven new members were welcomed to the Alliance: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Moreover, NATO expanded its geostrategic focus, with a mission to Afghanistan and an “İstanbul Cooperation Initiative,” strengthening ties with partners in the Middle East. Expectations for the upcoming summit in Ankara are equally high.

Since 2004, the alliance has witnessed increasing internal tensions. Despite a hard promise in the Wales Summit (2014) that each ally would commit a minimum of 2 percent of its GDP to defense, many Western European allies continued to neglect their armed forces. “Free riding” behavior went on for nearly two decades, despite a gradually worsening security situation. Time and time again, American presidents warned Europe their patience has limits. It took the bluntness of the Trump Administration, together with vocal calls for budget increases from Scandinavian and Eastern European allies, to finally get things moving. The Hague Summit last year was a resounding success. The 2 percent target was finally achieved in practice. At the same time, a higher target of 3.5 percent core defense spending was agreed upon by 2035.

The Road to the Ankara Summit

As host of the Ankara Summit, Türkiye now has a golden opportunity

to build upon that success and fully restore cohesion within the alliance, while preparing it for the challenges ahead. According to Belgium, three priorities need to be addressed. Some were already discussed during the Hague Summit but failed to materialize sufficiently afterwards. Others have largely been absent from NATO discussions. These priorities are defense-industrial integration, an increased European role in European security, and the gradual broadening of NATO’s geographical scope of attention to other theaters beyond our immediate environment.

We are living through a perilous moment in the history of the alliance, a moment in which the bond between industrial capacity and military credibility has become crystal clear. In times of global peace, production volumes and supply chains can be treated as technical, administrative questions. But in the era of great power competition we find ourselves in, they are strategic facts.

The deterring power of our armed forces is not determined merely by our inventories. It depends as much on our capacity to innovate, to manufacture at scale, and to build industrial partnerships. Because without these foundations, industry cannot deliver what our armed forces need, at the speed and scale the security environment demands. Sadly, we must accept and realize that these fundamentals today are lacking. Two high-tech wars are currently being fought in two distant theaters. What would happen if a third one erupted? Al-

ready, the strategic effect of the wars in the Gulf and in Ukraine is unmistakable: We are witnessing a structural stress test of NATO's industrial base. Defense companies cannot keep up with increasing demand, pushing delivery times and unit costs to unacceptable levels.

Given these structural industrial limitations, a second round of increase of defense spending across the alliance would not result in more military strength, but in even longer delivery times and even higher unit prices. Industry must catch up before that next step can be taken. This matter should concern every NATO ally. For if we do not fix it, the deterring effect of our combined armed forces will fade quickly. Our geopolitical adversaries are watching closely. And they are taking notes.

The worst approach to tackle the problem would be to fragment our know-how, our technology, and our industrial capacity along continental lines, as some in Europe mistakenly suggest. Belgium does not support the "buy strictly European" logic that is prevalent in some EU-member states. Instead, we advocate to maximize the industrial potential of the entire alliance. NATO should not only be a defensive alliance. It should also become a defense-industrial alliance.

This requires the courage to overcome the stubborn tendency of protectionism that is both plaguing Europe and the U.S. Allies should instead opt resolutely for the duplication of pro-

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duction lines of critical platforms and munitions on both sides of the Atlantic. Genuine industrial cooperation, via cross-border mergers and joint ventures, is the way forward. That implies the transfer of technology between allied nations. There is no need to regard that as problematic, as long as intellectual property rights are respected.

In this regard, allies should appreciate the progress made by the Turkish defense industry. In terms of innovation, cost efficiency, and production at scale, it ranks among the most promising ecosystems of the alliance. Therefore, it should be fully on board in NATO's endeavor to become a genuine "defense-industrial alliance." After a long period of focusing on the domestic market, Turkish defense companies are exploring the European market in earnest. Moreover, this is being done as it should be, by creating joint ventures with major industrial players in European NATO allies. This formula can create

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unprecedented win-wins, combining expertise and scale of the industries of the various allies.

Integrating our defense industry is not only about boosting production. It is also about making supply chains more robust. In an age where production sites and logistics can easily be targeted from great distances, the concentration of the production of crucial systems and munitions in one single country creates a vulnerability our alliance can ill afford. Distributed production and supply chains, on the other hand, strengthen industrial resilience in times of conflict. This second rationale makes the logic for industrial collaboration not only convincing, but compelling.

The strategic environment of the 21st century will reward the side that can replace, repair, replenish, and sustain its military capabilities in a protracted conflict. In that regard, it would be most unwise to underestimate the industrial potential of our geopolitical rivals. In-

stead, we should ask ourselves this question: How can we turn the demand for greater magazine depth into deterrence fast enough? That will require us to work together on the defense-industrial field, without hesitation. To quote the American wartime President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “We should become ‘the arsenal of democracy’ once again.” But this time together, as one great defense-industrial alliance.

However, more steps will be needed if the Ankara Summit is to succeed in its primary goal: restoring cohesion among the alliance. If we Europeans are serious about rebuilding trust within NATO, we must start assuming primary responsibility for the conventional defense of the European continent. Our American partners have been talking about their need to pivot to Asia for 15 years by now, ever since President Obama. As reliable allies, we should give them the operational breather to make that happen. Not with words, but with genuine commitment: by putting more military assets to the disposal of NATO and by assuming a greater portion of NATO’s integration command structure.

Türkiye and the Ankara Summit

As the second most powerful conventional army in NATO, Türkiye has an important role to play in this regard. Already, it is contributing directly to NATO’s enhanced forward presence in Eastern Europe, committing troops to the NATO battle groups



in Bulgaria and Hungary. Likewise, Turkish F-16s have been deployed on NATO Air Policing-missions in Poland and Romania, with new rotations planned in Estonia and Romania. Within its possibilities, Belgium will be equally forward leaning in the discussions on NATO's operational plans in the upcoming years.

When the U.S. pivot to Asia slowly materializes in the years to come, European allies must step up and assume a bigger responsibility in securing Europe's eastern flank. Lowering deterrence is not an option. Belgium is fully aware of this and will contribute to the maximum of its capabilities. We are counting on Türkiye to do likewise. Why is this important? European armed forces still lack a wide range of critical enablers to project military power, from in-flight refueling to secure satellite intel. For at least a decade

more, we will remain dependent on the U.S. to provide them. Relieving the U.S. of as many tasks as possible will be vital to convince our American ally to preserve these enablers in Europe. If Europe commits, the U.S. is far more likely to preserve these critical enablers in Europe. The credibility of the trans-Atlantic bargain depends on shared responsibility. Without the operational support of Türkiye, this new equilibrium will be much harder to achieve.

Finally, in the same spirit of the İstanbul Summit of 2004, the Ankara Summit should be a pivotal moment for the Alliance in a geostrategic sense. Yes, we must be clear-eyed about the long-term threat emerging from Russia, even if the war in Ukraine would freeze or subside. But NATO does not have the luxury to focus on one single problem. The many partnerships NATO has built in the Middle East

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and Allied defence ministers pose for a family photograph during the NATO Defence Ministers' Meeting at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. DURSUN AYDEMİR / AA

via the İstanbul Cooperation Initiative face acute problems. We cannot let them down, because that would mean letting ourselves down.

The Middle East is a vital source of energy, as well as a strategic bridge between Europe and Asia. Moreover: Europe is economically dependent on the freedom of navigation through its seas and straits: the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, Belgium is open to a discussion in Ankara on strengthening NATO partnerships and security efforts in this region and along its vital waterways. In this regard as well, Türkiye has a major role to play.

Being the only major Muslim country within the NATO alliance, Türkiye enjoys a high level of trust and understanding in the Muslim world. This enables it to play a stabilizing role in volatile countries in North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Both regions are vital for European security. Over the years, Türkiye has become an increasingly important security actor in Libya, Syria, and Somalia. This matters to European allies. In doing so, Türkiye directly reduces illegal immigration to Europe, minimizes the threat of terrorism, and protects international shipping between Europe and Asia from the threat of piracy.

The Turkish military presence in these countries, and its good relations with the national authorities thereof, indirectly offers the Alliance an opportunity to contribute to regional stability and to the security of mari-

time trade between Europe and Asia. Like the French and American bases in Djibouti, the Turkish presence in Somalia could help shield and sustain possible future NATO maritime operations in the Sea of Aden, the Gulf, or the wider Indian Ocean.

Future Expectations

When looking ahead at the decades to come, there exists another compelling reason to broaden NATO's geographical scope of attention to these vital sea lanes: the protection of maritime access to the natural resources from Africa in times of conflict. Armies are not static entities. They are consumption machines. In a high-intensity war, they devour enormous quantities of ammunition, parts, electronics, batteries, sensors, chips, optical instruments, and fuel. A defense industry that manages to replenish all this quickly enough is the real basis of military power, and thus also of military deterrence. That brings me to a final priority Belgium wants to bring to the fore at Ankara: the importance of critical raw materials and the role of Africa in this regard.

During World War II, access to the mineral riches of Africa was guaranteed for the Allies. At the time, the Belgian Congo was far more important to the Allied war effort than is often recognized. Without Congolese uranium, the American atomic program would likely have faced significant delays. In addition, the Congo was a vital supplier to the allied coalition of copper for ammunition

and electrical wiring, of cobalt for heat-resisting alloys, of tin for electronics and munitions, and of tungsten for armor-piercing ammunition. The impressive production volumes that secured the Allied victory would have been impossible without access to all these resources.

Today, this access is no longer guaranteed to the NATO alliance. Over the decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has built up a dominant position in the extraction of critical raw materials from Africa and continues to expand this systematically. As a result, China currently mines about 70 percent of the world's rare earth ores. Equally important, it performs roughly 90 percent of its refining. Beijing has spent decades building this near-monopoly, aided by cheaper costs, lax environmental standards, and ruthless pragmatism in dealing with local political elites. This is not without danger to NATO. China already uses this dominance as a political and economic weapon against the alliance.

In April 2025, China introduced licensing requirements for seven key rare earths, all of which are essential to produce advanced weapons systems, semiconductors, and satellites. Exporters must obtain government approval and disclose end-user information before shipments can proceed. In addition, China has maintained an effective ban on exports of certain critical minerals to the United States and has stated that exports destined for foreign military end users will not be approved in principle.

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This policy grants the PRC the power to hamper the output of NATO's defense industry greatly, a power it already wields. NATO has responded by elevating critical raw materials and supply-chain resilience to a core security concern. In June 2025, NATO defense ministers approved a Defense-Critical Supply Chain Security Roadmap, aimed at securing access and reducing dependence on China. The strategy, however, remains limited to encouraging diversification of sourcing, stockpiling, closer cooperation among allied defense industries, and the development of alternative processing and refining capacity outside China.

Will that suffice, given the extent of our dependence? No. A more ambitious approach is required. American, European, and Turkish mining companies should engage directly in the extraction of these minerals in Africa and in the refining process. That is, of course, a matter that goes far beyond the competences of NATO. Yet, the alliance has a role to play in this re-

gard. The oceans and sea lanes along which these minerals are transported to NATO-member countries need to be protected. In the decades ahead, that will require NATO navies to pay operational attention to the southern Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, two theaters that have been largely absent in NATO's planning thus far.

Twenty-two years separate the Istanbul Summit from the Ankara Summit. At the time, NATO rightly

expanded its gaze beyond its immediate environment to the Middle East. The world has gotten smaller ever since. Year by year, the reach and speed of communication is expanding. The same is valid for weaponry, both manned and unmanned. Therefore, at the Ankara Summit this July, NATO should once again question its geographical scope, especially in the naval domain. There is a whole world out there. Let us secure our place in it. ■