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Contribution to Periodical — Published Version

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Suggested Citation: Kumm, Mattias (2025) : The Failures of the NATO Summit and the Future of Peace: How European Leaders' Obsequiousness Threatens Europe's Security and Undermines International Law, Verfassungsblog, ISSN 2366-7044, Max Steinbeis Verfassungsblog gGmbH, Berlin, pp. 1-3,
<https://doi.org/10.59704/cdfb6706217f2739>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/322273>

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The Failures of the NATO Summit and the Future of Peace

[Mattias Kumm](#)

27 June 2025

How European Leaders' Obsequiousness Threatens Europe's Security and Undermines International Law

Reflecting on the June 24-25 NATO summit in The Hague – one day after the 80th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter –, it is difficult not to be overwhelmed by a sense of failure and depression. During the NATO Summit, the key topics under discussion included strengthening NATO's deterrence and defense capabilities, increasing defense spending and building up the defense industry, and maintaining support for Ukraine. These are important issues. But there are three points that were conspicuously missing from the agenda.

First, the wavering position of the United States with regard to what it would do if Russia attacked NATO's eastern flank. This concern is distinct from the broader question of whether the United States remains a Member of NATO and whether it will honor its Article 5 obligations. As the President rightly pointed out when pushed about his commitment to Article 5 on Air Force One, what that means is a question of interpretation. Article 5 requires that all Member States consider an attack against one Member State as an armed attack against all members and that each government will take the actions *it deems necessary* to assist the ally attacked. This does not commit the United States to send US troops to fight a conventional war with integrated forces along the lines that NATO has trained for since its inception. If the United States decided that it would instead deem it sufficient to keep sea lanes across the Atlantic open to ensure that weapons procured by European Members in the US could be duly delivered, and otherwise refuse to put US boots or equipment in play, this would arguably not be a violation of Article 5 – even if it would contradict established understandings.

These concerns are not merely hypothetical. Both the US President and the US Secretary of Defense are on record saying that the conventional defense of Europe should not be the business of the US. And the ongoing US Global Posture Review is widely believed to end up proposing significant reductions of US forces deployed in Europe. It is of central importance that the US administration commits to synchronizing any future US troop drawdowns with an agreed timetable allowing for increased European defense capabilities to take their place. No clarity was achieved on these central concerns.

Second, it was also not on the agenda that the leading Member of NATO, the United States, has openly threatened the independence of one Member State (Canada) and the territorial integrity of another (Denmark). Clearly the understanding of the alliance as a community of self-respecting sovereign states requires that such grotesque misbehavior of one of them, even if it is the most powerful Member, cannot be left unaddressed. A collective security alliance should be distinguishable from an assemblage of vassals seeking shelter under the military umbrella of an imperial power. That difference is enshrined in Articles 1 and 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty, firmly anchoring NATO in the principles and purposes of the United Nations.

It would be timely for Members to remind themselves of these commitments and hold each other accountable with regard to their observance, and not just silently seek refuge in new security agreements, as Canada and the EU have done.

That leads to a third point. On the occasion of a NATO meeting in The Hague, the home of both the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, a day before the 80th anniversary of the UN Charter, there is something deeply depressing about the NATO Secretary General obsequiously congratulating the US President on a clearly illegal military strike in Iran (while the German Chancellor expresses his thanks to Israel for “doing the dirty work for us”). At the same time, NATO agrees to massively expand its core military spending to 3.5% (plus 1.5% for defense-related expenses) of its GDP by 2035, at a time when military spending is on the rise globally.

To be clear, as things are, that kind of commitment to military spending is not unreasonable for European States in the short to mid-term and indeed most states should raise their spending to that level well before the agreed upon 2035 deadline. But that should not detract from the fact that there is something deeply troubling about a situation in which it has indeed become necessary to raise defense spending in such a dramatic way. Might there be a link between the need to raise defense spending and the casual disregard for core norms of international law by NATO’s protagonists?

The point is not to tie together specific events or enter into a policy discussion regarding specific decisions in the past, but to suggest a wider and deeper failure, a failure of imagination: Why has it become so farfetched to imagine NATO Members deliberating on how they could contribute and bring reforms to a world in which the promise of the UN would have a chance to be realized, a world in which it would not be necessary for states to spend so much on defense? More concretely: Why was there no insistence by NATO States that military expenditure would have to be coupled with new efforts and initiatives in diplomacy and in diplomacy’s domestic and international infrastructure, including institutional reforms? Why not insist on a requirement that a state has an obligation to spend at least 10% or 15% of what it spends on defense on diplomacy, support of international institutions and foreign aid? The proposed defense budget in the US for 2026 has been raised to approx. \$1 trillion, with State Department budget cut back to under \$30 billion – roughly 3% of the defense budget. The deeply dysfunctional US tendency of the past two and a half decades to militarize its foreign policy should not be the model to emulate. And why was there no pressure put on those NATO States who have so far failed to accept the universal jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and to join the International Criminal Court? The US administration should, at the very least, have been required to justify its [decision to sanction the ICC](#) for doing its job.

It is true: There are contexts in which to avoid war, you have to prepare for war – *si vis pacem, para bellum*. But it is always also true that to achieve peace, you have to imagine its possibility, support and build the legal structures that help assure it, persistently work towards and invest in it – *si vis pacem para pacem*. That was what President Roosevelt understood when he brought the US into the Second World War in 1941 and simultaneously started to plan for a new world order for the time after the war. By the time World War II ended, the United Nations as well as other multilateral institutions had been established to provide a framework for future work towards disarmament and peace. Whereas the North Atlantic Treaty States clearly state its commitment to that new world of international law, there is little indication that NATO Member States today are engaging with what it would mean to take those commitments seriously.

In the end, there can be no stable and believable NATO alliance without a shared commitment to international law. A state will only take an armed attack on another Member State as an attack against itself if they share the sense of violation of a core norm of international law – one that cannot be tolerated. If only geostrategic or economic considerations underpin the alliance, it is doomed. The assessment of such factors in the highly dynamic contemporary political context – as opposed to the times of the Cold War – depends heavily on the particular orientation of a government. This is not a stable foundation for an alliance.

Of course, it is no mystery that these points were not brought up at the NATO meeting. Addressing any of them would have led to an acrimonious meeting and might even have accelerated the end of NATO as a US-led alliance. Yet, not facing these issues now only makes things worse and European security even more precarious than it already is.

If European States are about to spend significantly more money on defense, as they have good reasons to, they need to know what existing resources and contributions they can rely on and what they need to provide for themselves to ensure independent capacities. Additionally, if the US is not a reliable part of the alliance and indeed takes hostile positions against core Member States' interests, weapons systems should presumptively not be procured in the United States. And the enduring presence of US bases on European territory would be an issue which would also have to be addressed.

In times of crisis and uncertainty, it is necessary to heed basic principles, find orientation and seek clarity about how things are, what one should orient oneself towards and what needs to be done. Without such clarification, with European leaders unable or unwilling to face these realities, Europe's security remains precarious. Worse still, there will be little hope for changes to strengthen Europe's defensive capacities and NATO's role as a regional organization committed to the principles of the UN Charter through successful collective action. With the United States on board if possible, and without it if necessary.

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SUGGESTED CITATION Kumm, Mattias: *The Failures of the NATO Summit and the Future of Peace: How European Leaders' Obsequiousness Threatens Europe's Security and Undermines International Law*, *VerfBlog*, 2025/6/27, <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-failures-of-the-nato-summit-and-the-future-of-peace/>, DOI: [10.59704/cdfb6706217f2739](https://doi.org/10.59704/cdfb6706217f2739)