



The 2026 NATO Ankara Summit:

Iran, Alliance Cohesion, and the Future of
NATO's Southern Flank

Issue No.7

TRENDS 360

Welcome to the seventh edition of TRENDS 360, the bimonthly newsletter from TRENDS Group. Each issue unpacks critical global developments shaping the international landscape, from shifting alliances and great power rivalries to emerging policy disruptions. This month, we are turning our attention to the 2026 Ankara NATO Summit, with a particular focus on the implications for NATO's Southern Neighborhood following the U.S.-initiated war against Iran. Although President Trump had urged the Alliance to join his maritime blockade against Iran and threatened to reconsider America's commitment to NATO when Allies declined his demands, the summit was nonetheless resoundingly positive, despite Trump's renewed calls to pursue his long-standing ambition of taking control of Greenland. European and Canadian Allies committed to increasing defense spending, a nod to Trump's long-standing call for Allies to "pay their fair share", while Ukraine received U.S. approval to begin domestic production of Patriot interceptor missiles under license—a request President Volodymyr Zelensky had pursued for years.

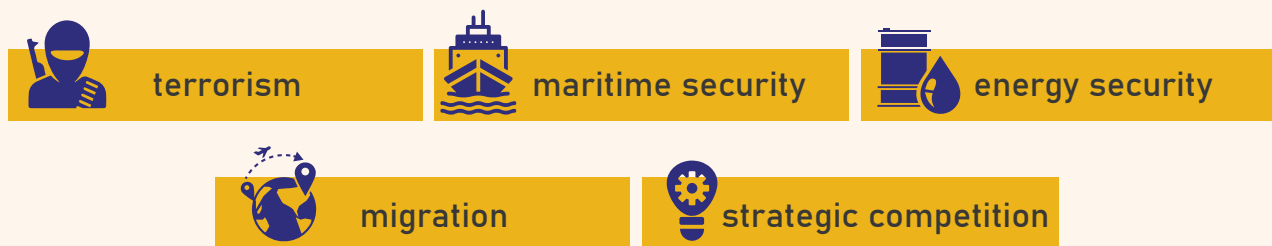


NATO summits, unlike the G7 or UN General Assembly, are not held annually but rather are organized during critical junctures or key moments during the Alliance's trajectory, especially when announcing policy, admitting new members, or launching major initiatives. During the Madrid Summit in 2022, leaders adopted a new Strategic Concept for the Alliance, outlining NATO's core priorities and strategic objectives for the next decade.

¹ Office of the Secretary of War, "National Security Strategy," <https://history.defense.gov/Historical-Sources/National-Security-Strategy/>. Accessed December 2025 ,8.
² Ibid.

During the 2024 summit in Washington, D.C., allies adopted the Southern Neighborhood Action Plan, which resulted in the appointment of Javier Colomina as the first-ever Special Representative for the Southern Neighborhood. This year's summit produced \$50 billion in defense industry deals, along with substantial commitments for Ukraine, including \$80 billion in military support for 2026, along with similar commitments for 2027.¹

NATO members may hold contrasting, but not necessarily conflicting, views on what their primary strategic objective may be for the months and years ahead. Allies increasingly recognize that instability across its southern neighborhood, which includes the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions, can have direct implications on:



However, Allies continue to remain divided on how much priority their southern neighborhood should receive, as well as what is NATO's appropriate role in the region.

During the Ankara summit, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte refused to commit to what type of role the Alliance could play with regard to the U.S.'s war with Iran, stating that "Iran is outside NATO territory", adding noncommittally, "that if helpful, NATO is always willing to play a role."² From Rutte's perspective, NATO defines itself as a defensive alliance whose key priority is the security of its allies in Europe and North America. The challenge, however, regional confrontations with Iran are resulting in global repercussions.

¹ NATO, "The Ankara Summit Declaration," July 2026 ,8, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/08/07/2026/the-ankara-summit-declaration>.

² Lorne Cook and Suzan Fraser, "The main takeaways from NATO's summit in Turkey," AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/nato-summit-takeaways-trump-ukraine-iran-albania-4821e7c6f2ab0b8a729d0e798bfe6359>

While Russia continues to control nearly %20 of Ukrainian territory,⁶ peace remains elusive. Although several attempts at bringing peace have been made, including two rounds of U.S.-led talks in Abu Dhabi earlier this year, as well as one in Geneva, no breakthroughs have been made in ending the war. While NATO has stated Ukraine remains on an irreversible path toward joining the Alliance, the war with Russia remains the impenetrable roadblock to Ukraine’s accession, as NATO avoids admitting new members who are actively at war.

The Trump Factor

Since taking office in 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump has rarely minced his words regarding the grievances he holds with regard to the Alliance’s burden-sharing arrangements. Trump has never remained shy in vocalizing his criticism of the Alliance, lashing out publicly at members for not paying their ‘fair’ share.⁷ In 2014, the Alliance had called for Allies to commit to %2 of their GDP on defense and security-related investments—at the time, only three NATO Allies met the Alliance's %2 defense spending benchmark:⁸

NATO Member	United States	Greece	United Kingdom
Defense expenditure as a share of its GDP in 2014	%3.5	%2.2	%2.1

⁶ Jonathan Landay, Erin Banco, and John Irish, "U.S. intelligence indicates Putin's war aims in Ukraine are unchanged," Reuters, December 2025 ,19, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-intelligence-indicates-putins-war-aims-ukraine-are-unchanged-19-12-2025/>.
⁷ "Donald Trump tells NATO allies to pay up at Brussels talks," BBC News, May 2017 ,25, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40037776>.
⁸ NATO, "Defence expenditure of NATO countries (2025-2014)," 2026, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2025-en.pdf>.

During the 2025 Hague Summit, allies agreed to increase that figure to %5 by 2035—more than double the previous target. The commitment reflected Europe's deteriorating security environment following the annexation of Crimea and subsequent full-scale war in Ukraine, combined with Trump's persistent burden-sharing demands and threats to pull the U.S. from the Alliance.



Trump's dissatisfaction nonetheless continued to grow following his unilateral approach to war with Iran in February 2026. Following Iranian threats to restrict shipping in the Strait of Hormuz,⁹ the U.S. president requested allied support for a proposed joint maritime blockade of ships attempting to enter or leave Iranian ports. While NATO declined the president's request, several European allies did commit to joining a defensive, multinational maritime mission once hostilities come to an end.¹⁰ Although the Alliance's reluctance to support military operations against Iran stemmed from the fact that the Alliance was not consulted before the initial attacks, there is also little appetite to engage in yet another war in the Middle East.

For many members, the prospect of another conflict in the region, particularly one without a clear endgame strategy, evokes memories of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, as well as NATO's prolonged mission in Afghanistan—the last conflict it engaged in outside its territories, which ended with the chaotic U.S. withdrawal in 2021. These not-too-distant wars serve as powerful reminders to avoid entanglement in potential 'forever wars' in the Middle East—especially ones initiated by the United States and Israel—without alliance consultation.

In response to NATO's disinterest in engaging in offensive measures against Iran, Trump lashed out publicly ahead of the 2026 Ankara summit, labeling NATO a 'paper tiger', going as far as to threaten pulling the U.S. out of the 77-year alliance.¹¹

Should any Alliance member have concerns over an issue, particularly those related to their own security, NATO does have a mechanism in place for collective discussions. When invoked by a member, Article 4 of the Washington Treaty—NATO's founding doctrine—triggers consultations with the North Atlantic Council—NATO's principal political decision-making body.

⁹ Phil Stewart, "US blockade of Iran will be major military endeavor, experts say," Reuters, April 2026 ,13, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-blockade-iran-will-be-major-military-endeavor-experts-say-13-04-2026/>.

¹⁰ Michel Rose and John Irish, "NATO allies refuse to join Trump's Iranian port blockade," Reuters, April 2026 ,13, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-allies-refuse-join-trumps-strait-hormuz-blockade-13-04-2026/>.

¹¹ Gavin Blackburn, "Trump considers pulling US out of 'paper tiger' NATO," Euronews, April 2026 ,1, <https://www.euronews.com/01/04/2026/trump-considers-pulling-us-out-of-paper-tiger-nato>.

Article 4 states:



“The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened.”¹²

Should the U.S. have invoked Article 4 prior to launching unilateral attacks against Iran, NATO’s reaction to Trump’s requests for support, even defensive measures, might have received greater political consideration. Especially considering NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte’s claims that the renewed U.S. attacks against Iran were “absolutely necessary” following Iran’s violation of the initial ceasefire by attacking ships with missiles in the Strait of Hormuz.¹³

¹² NATO, “The consultation process and Article 4,” September 2025 ,23, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/the-consultation-process-and-article-4>.

¹³ “New US attacks on Iran were absolutely necessary, NATO chief says,” Reuters, July 2026 ,8, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/new-us-attacks-iran-were-absolutely-necessary-nato-chief-says-08-07-2026/>.

Translating Spending Commitments to Actual Capabilities

The 2026 NATO Ankara Summit built on the commitments made at the 2025 Hague Summit, where allies agreed to increase annual defense spending and security-related spending to %5 of GDP by 2035.¹⁴ Of this target, %3.5 will be allocated to traditional defense spending, while the remaining %1.5 is dedicated to protecting critical infrastructure and resiliency in networks and civil preparedness to further buttress essential systems, from electrical grids to satellites, ensuring such systems are less vulnerable to sabotage, cyberattacks, and hybrid threats—particularly as we enter an era of increased hybrid warfare.

As the United States has become a less reliable ally, increasingly prioritizing its "America First" agenda, European Allies and Canada increased their core defense expenditures by %20 in 2025 compared to the previous year.¹⁵ Such commitments represent the Alliance's largest increase in defense spending in decades—reflecting both today's deteriorating global security environment, and a recognition that years of underinvestment must be reversed. Trump's calls for greater burden sharing and expectation that the U.S.'s European allies should take on a larger responsibility for their own security have resuscitated European efforts at prioritizing collective defense on the home front. Europe is no longer promising to discuss burden sharing but starting to truly deliver on that commitment.

Yet, substantial budgets only matter if they are translated into military capabilities. NATO's focus is now shifting from spending commitments to what is actually produced and delivered.

¹⁴ NATO, "The Hague Summit Declaration," June 2025 ,25, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/25/06/2025/the-hague-summit-declaration>.

¹⁵ NATO, "Defence Investment Update: Record Spending in Europe and Canada," July 2026 ,7, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/07/07/2026/defence-investment-update-record-spending-in-europe-and-canada>.

In the age of hybrid and asymmetrical warfare, the Alliance's main core defense priorities include:

- Air and missile defense
- Drones and counter-drone systems
- Long-range strike capabilities
- Naval power
- Space capabilities
- Larger ammunition and equipment stockpiles



Yet, it's important to recognize that scaling up remains another challenge for the Alliance. The pace of innovation in advanced defense technologies, including autonomous systems – particularly in the private sector—is high. Likewise, significant private-sector investments can serve as a force multiplier for public dollars. Advanced technology will be critical for future deterrence and defense capabilities, both on and off the battlefield—but their strategic value will ultimately remain dependent on how quickly systems can be scaled.

The Iran crisis brewing on NATO's southern flank: renewing support for the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative

The Alliance has remained steadfast in its support for Ukraine, providing 99% of all military assistance to the war-torn nation.¹⁶ The war in Ukraine represents the most destructive conflict in Europe since WWII, and for Europe, Ukraine's security has become inseparable from its own. Yet as the Alliance remains focused on its eastern flank, another crisis is emerging to the south: the war with Iran. This war has generated far-reaching repercussions, including freedom of navigation, impacts on energy security, global trade, and supply chains—all of which have direct implications for Euro-Atlantic security.

Ahead of the foreign ministers' meeting leading up to the summit, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte said the crisis with Iran underscores how interconnected today's security challenges have become and why closer cooperation with regional partners is increasingly necessary.¹⁷ Similar sentiment was shared ahead of the summit by Belgian Foreign Minister Maxime Prévot, who said the stability of Gulf states, with regard to the recent Iranian attacks, was "inextricably linked" to Europe's stability—particularly the EU's energy security.¹⁸

Following the renewal of regional attacks as a result of an unraveling of the ceasefire between the U.S. and Iran, during this year's summit, for the first time, the NATO Secretary General and the NATO Deputy Secretary General met with the foreign ministers of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).

¹⁶ NATO, "Relations with Ukraine," July 2026, 9, retrieved July 2026, 20, from <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-ukraine>.

¹⁷ NATO, "Press conference by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Helsingborg, Sweden," May 2026, 22, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/22/05/2026/press-conference-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte>.

¹⁸ John Irish and Lili Bayer, "NATO allies to discuss Hormuz tensions, mission with Gulf Arabs," Reuters, July 2026, 7, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/nato-allies-discuss-hormuz-tensions-mission-with-gulf-arabs-07-07-2026/>.

The ICI was established in 2004 in response to the security environment following the Iraq War and the global war on terrorism. Member states include Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. While all GCC members were invited to join the initiative, Oman and Saudi Arabia prefer to engage in ICI activities more selectively. This partnership forum was developed to support both regional and global security, allowing the Gulf-based members opportunities to collaborate with NATO, based on six core principles:¹⁹

non-discrimination	self-differentiation	two-way engagement
non-imposition	diversity	complementarity to other international initiatives in the region

While the ICI serves as a political platform for security-related dialogue between NATO and the Gulf-based members, ranging from counter-terrorism concerns to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the program also provides support in defensive capabilities. In addition to civil preparedness, the initiative offers ICI members support in strengthening defensive postures and guidance on defense budgeting and planning.

During the Ankara summit, discussions between NATO's top leadership and the foreign ministers from ICI nations focused on recent developments in the Middle East, Iran's attacks on the Gulf states, and strengthening security cooperation between NATO and the Gulf countries.

¹⁹ NATO, "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative," October 2024 ,3, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/istanbul-cooperation-initiative>

A key outcome of the Ankara summit was the launch of a new set of NATO-ICI Flagship Projects²⁰ centered on:

- maritime security
- counter-drone capabilities
- as well as protection against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats, and counterterrorism



All this signals that the ICI is becoming more practical and capability-driven, rather than simply a forum for political dialogue.

These projects will serve as a means for NATO to deepen its practical cooperation in the Gulf, while boosting ICI allies' capabilities in response to ongoing Iranian threats in the region. Having Secretary General Mark Rutte at the table for such a discussion underscores the priority NATO is giving to the current crisis. Following the announcement, NATO's Special Representative for the Southern Neighborhood, Javier Colomina, the first official appointed to the role established in 2024, explained that the flagship projects reflected Gulf states' ongoing reassessment of their security partnerships.²¹

²⁰ NATO, "NATO deepens security cooperation with Gulf countries through the launch of flagship projects," July 2026, 10, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/10/07/2026/nato-deepens-security-cooperation-with-gulf-countries-through-the-launch-of-flagship-projects>.

²¹ Lizzie Porter, "NATO launches anti-drone and maritime security projects to boost Gulf security," The National, July 2026, 8, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/08/07/2026/nato-launches-anti-drone-and-maritime-security-projects-to-boost-gulf-security/>.

Colomina also underscored that despite more than two decades of coordination, the relationship that NATO has with the ICI today is much different from that in the early 2000s. During its inception, the ICI-NATO partnership prioritized countering Al-Qaeda, the stabilization of Iraq, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. However, the current regional security environment has evolved significantly.

Regional allies are facing a barrage of Iranian ballistic missiles and drones, cyber-attacks, as well as attacks on critical energy infrastructure, and continued maritime disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. Colomina has described the relationship as entering a 'new phase,' one primed for deeper cooperation, particularly in the areas of bolstering maritime security and counter-drone efforts in the face of regional tensions.

However, the significance of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in 2026 is not that it transforms NATO into a security guarantor for the Gulf. The initiative was always intended to focus on cooperation, not formal security frameworks or collective defense. However, a long-time challenge, prior to the recent regional tensions, hasn't been the absence of a framework for collaboration. The challenge has been insufficient implementation and resources, reflecting the relatively low political priority Allies have placed on the region, particularly as the war in Ukraine continues to rage on. The distinction today is that the U.S.'s war with Iran has demonstrated that instability in the Middle East is no longer solely confined to the region. The impacts have extended to limited freedom of navigation, both in the Gulf and now also in the Red Sea, as well as impacts on global energy security, trade, and supply chains.

One ICI partner that is looking to transform its ICI partnership from collective cooperation to one of bilateral collaboration is Qatar. In response to the recent regional military escalation, Qatar announced during the summit that an agreement had been reached on the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) between the state of Qatar and NATO.²² ITPP programs are NATO's strategic framework for bilateral engagement, tailored specifically for each partner, addressing their security needs. The ITPP spans four years, during which the specific needs and priorities of the partner country are identified. The comprehensive strategic framework then translates these priorities into practical cooperation through joint exercises, training, policy dialogue, and defense cooperation, with activities regularly reviewed and adjusted as needed.²³

Qatar also announced that it is reaching the final stages of a NATO-sponsored regional peace support center, which will be based in Qatar. The statement, made by Qatar's State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, expressed similar concerns shared by Rutte, whereby the recent security challenges in the region called for closer cooperation, and that "security and political threats are increasingly intertwined."²⁴



²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar, "Qatar participates in ministerial meeting on Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO member states," July 2026 ,7, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/07/07/2026/qatar-participates-in-ministerial-meeting-on-istanbul-cooperation-initiative--nato-member-states>.

²³ NATO, "Partnership programmes and tools," July 2024 ,27, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-programmes-and-tools>.

²⁴ "Qatar and Kuwait press for deeper NATO cooperation at Ankara Summit meeting," Türkiye Today, July 2026 ,8, <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/region/qatar-and-kuwait-press-for-deeper-nato-cooperation-at-ankara-summit-meeting-3223464>

Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Jarrah Jaber Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah also used the summit to express his country's condemnation of the regional attacks, which Kuwait has been increasingly subject to, following the collapse of the ceasefire, labeling recent strikes "a clear violation of his country's sovereignty." Considering the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative regional center is based in Kuwait, Sheikh Jarrah reaffirmed his country's commitment to "coordination and constructive dialogue" within the partnership, while calling for a joint ministerial meeting between ICI and NATO allies in 2027—underscoring the momentum the Iranian attacks have fueled in solidifying the initiative's purpose.

Together with the new Flagship Projects, the announcement of the ITPP with Qatar, and calls for closer coordination from Kuwait, suggest the ICI is moving away from broad political dialogue and more toward tailored, capability-driven partnerships in the Gulf.

If the Iran war demonstrated anything, it is that NATO's southern flank is no longer a peripheral issue, but an integral component of the Alliance's security environment. By supporting the defensive capabilities of its Gulf allies, such efforts only further solidify NATO's 360-degree approach—a concept first articulated in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, outlining that potential threats can arise from all geographical locations and across multiple domains. Accordingly, the Alliance identified three core tasks to support this approach: deterrence and defense; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security.²⁵

²⁵ NATO, "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept," June 2022, 29, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/290622/2022-strategic-concept.pdf>.

While Secretary General Mark Rutte continues to identify NATO's core priorities as defense spending, military readiness, defense industrial production, and long-term support for Ukraine, this year's Summit Declaration included a specific paragraph on Iran, stating the Islamic Republic must never have a nuclear weapon and calling for Iran to fully respect freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. The significance lies in the mention of Iran, particularly as Ukraine has dominated the Alliance's agenda since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. A once-theoretical threat—that Iran could truly close the strategic waterway—has now materialized, creating global repercussions, including impacts on the Alliance's energy security.

While the U.S. initiated this war without consultation from its allies, the impacts nonetheless have essentially become everyone's responsibility. As a result, regional and transatlantic allies should continue to expect sporadic limitations of maritime navigation, fluctuations in energy prices, and a continuation of delays and disruptions with global supply chains; all challenges that will not dissipate overnight.

Yet, despite consisting of only six points, this year's declaration explicitly referenced Iran. This raises an important question: does this language signal a willingness by the Alliance to support efforts to uphold freedom of navigation and to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon? Or was the statement included to acknowledge President Trump's priorities as a means of preserving transatlantic cohesion?

While Gulf allies continue to diversify their defense partnerships to prepare for a prolonged and uncertain regional security environment, the ICI remains a strategic component of those. Rather than solely serving as another platform for dialogue, NATO and ICI members should prioritize expanding practical cooperation in missile and air defense, maritime security, cyber resilience, critical infrastructure protection, and intelligence sharing.



The broader lesson from the Iran war for NATO is clear: Middle East conflicts are no longer confined to the region. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have reverberated across global energy markets, maritime shipping and supply chains, pushing up inflation and creating economic uncertainty.²⁶ It is understandable that the Alliance does not wish to entangle itself in another war in the Middle East; however, these developments should fundamentally reshape how NATO engages its southern neighborhood. NATO does not need to intervene in every crisis on its southern flank, but the consequences of instability, if left unaddressed, will increasingly affect Euro-Atlantic security.

²⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2026). OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2026 Issue 1: Under pressure. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/2/10.1787d1956f0-en>



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