

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Press Briefing
“Previewing the NATO Summit”

DATE
Friday, June 20, 2025 at 10:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING
Max Bergmann
Director, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program and Stuart Center, CSIS

Seth G. Jones
President, Defense and Security Department; Harold Brown Chair, CSIS

Kathleen McInnis
Director, Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative and Senior Fellow, Defense and Security Department, CSIS

Benjamin Jensen
Director, Futures Lab, and Senior Fellow, Defense and Security Department, CSIS

MODERATED BY
Alex Kisling
Vice President of Communications, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com

Alex Kisling: Each of our speakers will offer introductory remarks, after which we'll turn to your questions. If you want to ask a question please type it in the Q&A window or raise your hand to ask it verbally. We'll be distributing a transcript of today's call shortly after its conclusion, and we'll also post the transcript on CSIS.org.

So, with that, let's go ahead and get started. I'll turn first to my colleague, Max Bergmann, director of the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. Max, over to you.

Max Bergmann: Great. Thanks, Alex. And thanks for everyone for being on the call.

So this NATO summit, in some ways, comes on the heels of many NATO summits. There's been a summit every year since 2022. That's rather abnormal. Normally there aren't NATO summits every year. And of course, last year there was the big NATO summit in Washington for the 75th anniversary of the alliance. And that came on the heels of a big summit in Vilnius, where NATO rolled out its regional plans, and a summit before that in Madrid in 2022, right on the heels of the war in Ukraine, where NATO sort of announced its new strategic concept and it's kind of turn back to the kind of 1980s or Cold War posture toward viewing Russia as its major strategic challenge.

But it makes sense to have a summit this year. There's a new American president and everyone wants to sort of suss out U.S. commitment. And that is the big question, I think, that sort of casts a big shadow around the summit, of how committed to the alliance is the United States. And I think there's sort of, in some ways, not a coherent view coming from this administration, the Trump administration, about how it sees NATO. And right now, Europeans can kind of see what they want from the United States.

On the one hand, they can look at the comments from Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, from the Pentagon, about burden shifting being underway. The U.S. is undergoing a force posture review, and that may involve a shift of many thousands, if not tens of thousands, of U.S. forces and key assets and capabilities. Seth will talk a bit more about that after me. But that sort of hangs as a big cloud behind the summit, or around the summit, because Europeans are not sure how committed the U.S. is practically to this alliance, at least physically in terms of military assets.

Then they can look at many of the comments that are coming from the State Department, especially from the U.S. ambassador to NATO, and Marco Rubio, and others, and say, OK, America's talking points maybe are a little bit harsher than they have been, but essentially the U.S. remains committed, as long as we step up and spend more. And then the third sort of camp, you could say, is sort of the J.D. Vance Signal chat camp of - where there's a sense

of real hostility toward Europe, towards the NATO alliance, toward European allies, and a sense that maybe U.S. and Europe don't share the same values that have been used to sort of bind the alliance together.

J.D. Vance's speech in Munich is still reverberating around Europe in which he effectively called out or attacked Europeans for their digital regulations and it was sort of a – created a sense that maybe the U.S. and Europe didn't actually share the same outlook and perspective.

So there's a question of military commitment and a question of political commitment, and what I think we see from NATO is pushing forward on another commitment on defense spending, for Europeans to up their defense spending commitment to 3.5 percent and then they're going to use, I would say, some fuzzy math to get to 5 percent of investing in infrastructure.

And I think this is a pretty transparent effort by Mark Rutte, the NATO secretary general, to just put it cynically, to appease Trump, to try to keep the Americans in an engagement alliance, and to put a new goal out there for Europeans to increase spending.

Now, the 3.5 percent figure is not sort of out of the realm of possibility. It is a number that has been discussed for a long time. There are clear – there's a clear rationale for it. But this is being viewed in many parts of Europe, particularly in Spain and other countries, as really just trying to appease the Americans to keep them in but there's also a genuine fear that if you commit to this number then the U.S. is going to turn around and withdraw and say, look, now we can withdraw because Europeans are finally increasing their commitment.

What this spending figure, though, doesn't do – and maybe this will be the final point I'll make – is really address the kind of deeper structural problems with European defense, mainly that the Europe and European defense really doesn't exist, that it's the United States that has provided the backbone of European defense and that's, frankly, the way we have wanted it.

So as much as we've complained about European defense spending we've also complained when Europeans have tried to organize themselves as Europeans either through the EU or by creating a European pillar within NATO. We have strongly opposed that historically in a bipartisan way and so now Europeans are looking at the U.S. finally saying that it's really going to pull back and not having any sort of structures to replace us.

So I think there's a sense – a potential sense of real betrayal in Europe, that we are going to kind of pull the rug out from under them and that addressing

the major structural problems that plague European defense goes well beyond simply committing to another increase in defense spending.

So I think there's real questions, going forward, coming out of this NATO summit about how committed the United States will be and most European countries are going to look for signs that the president is actually committed to NATO – committed to the alliance and, frankly, I'm not sure that that's the signals that they're going to be receiving.

Mr. Kisling: All right. Thank you, Max.

Next, we have Seth Jones, president of the CSIS Defense and Security Department. Seth, go ahead.

Seth G. Jones: Thanks Alex, and thanks, everyone, for joining.

I'm just going to talk about three things to follow on from Max's comments. One is the Russian threat, both the conventional as well as the hybrid threat that the Russians continue and will likely to pose and so that's a big strategic concern.

A second strategic theme is the defense posture, which Max started to allude to, and then third is the defense industrial base. All issues that are kind of notable challenges that NATO faces.

Let me start with a Russian threat. I mean, I think it is certainly the case that at the moment NATO enjoys, at least in my judgment, a reasonably strong conventional and nuclear deterrent. That is at the moment, but there are several factors that could change that over the next several years.

One is the continuing revitalization of the Russian defense industrial base. The Russians continue to receive support from the Chinese, the North Koreans, in a whole range of ways, from various types of artillery and weapon systems to North Korean forces, and historically with items like Shaheds – the Iranians – although we can certainly talk about the implications of the Iran-Israeli crisis here.

So – but one big variable is the ability of the Russians to continue to revitalize their industrial base. And I think it's worth noting that the Russians still have a strong nuclear arsenal. They have still a relatively strong navy, and a submarine force and anti-submarine warfare capabilities that are infinitely better than, say, the Chinese.

There are also other variables that could change. One of them will be posture, but I'll get to that in a moment. I think it's – it is certainly true that Russia, particularly Vladimir Putin, has both the will and the intentions to

threaten one or more NATO countries, and is rebuilding its industrial base, as I mentioned.

In addition, Russia is escalating a violent campaign of sabotage and subversion. Happy to send the report we did on this recently. What we found in building a dataset of Russian attacks in Europe was that the number of Russian attacks primarily from the GRU, Russia's military intelligence – the main intelligence directorate – tripled between 2023 and 2024. So last year they tripled from the previous year. Russia's primary targets were transportation, government, critical infrastructure, industry. And then its main weapons and tactics were items like explosives, blunt or edged instruments including anchors used to cut fiber-optic cables, and electronic attack.

So the Russian threat persists in a range of different types, both at the conventional, the nuclear, and at the hybrid level.

And then, finally, the big variable on the future Russian threat, depending on what and how the war in Ukraine goes. Despite the Russian challenges, I would still say it's likely that the U.S. administration is going to decrease assistance, including intelligence, to the Ukrainians. But I'm not sure all decisions have been made.

That gets me to the second item, on U.S. posture. Both the ongoing National Defense Strategy discussions and interim documents continue to indicate that consistent, frankly, with what the U.S. president has said, the NDS is prioritizing defense of the homeland – so that includes things like Iron Dome – as well as deterring China in the Indo-Pacific. It is also prioritizing burden-sharing, including with Europe, which I think a few others including Kathleen will get to.

But what we've seen, including with the undersecretary of defense for policy in the Department of Defense, is a major focus on U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific. What that means is a notable decrease in U.S. posture from the 5+2 that existed by the end of the Biden administration. I don't think we have a final answer to what U.S. posture shifts. We have made – some of us have made some analytic judgments that the U.S. posture should be something along the lines of 4+2, which four brigade combat teams and two regional headquarters. But I think it's safe to say that the administration will go much lower than that. So happy to talk through some of the posture likelihoods, but I think we're likely to see a major withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe.

And then the third area is the industrial base. I think even just setting aside the budget issue and the defense budget issues, which Kathleen and others will get into, the U.S., in addition to European industrial bases, are simply not prepared at the moment for a protracted conflict. If you look at European

states, they still lack sufficient capabilities and combat support in short-range air defense and long-range indirect fires, airlift quantity, quality capabilities of ground forces, particularly heavy maneuver forces, sufficient quantities of long-range precision strike munitions – so think, for example, the LRASM. And also notable challenges, in addition to those munitions stockpiles, with supply chain weaknesses within the broader European and U.S. industrial bases, workforce. And some continuing thorns with technology transfers through ITAR and foreign military sales among allies, which are still too problematic.

Just one last note on budgets. I will highlight that U.S. defense spending itself is low as a percentage of GDP. It's lower than during any time during the Cold War, possibly except for the immediate World War II period. But the Trump administration's defense budget going into budget season as a percentage of GDP is likely to be lower than the Carter administration's defense budget in the 1970s, which gives one a sense of U.S. talks a big game on having everybody else increase their defense budgets, but the U.S.'s is actually quite small, historically speaking. So with that, Alex, I'll turn it back to you.

Mr. Kisling: Great. Thank you, Seth.

Next we have Kathleen McInnis, senior fellow in the CSIS Defense and Security Department, and director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative. Kathleen, go ahead.

Kathleen McInnis: Thank you, Alex. And thank you, everybody, for joining us this morning to talk about the NATO summit. I wanted to spend a little bit of time talking about this 5 percent target that's being kicked around, and why it's really meaningful for the alliance as well as – you know, historically speaking, but in terms of building the kind of capabilities that we'll need in the future, why this could be a real gamechanger. As, you know, NATO nerds on this call know, burden sharing, how much countries are spending of their – relative to their gross domestic product – what percentage of GDP nations are spending on their defense programs, has been an issue plaguing the alliance pretty much since the alliance has existed.

So there's always been frictions over who's doing what and how much is being spent. In 2014, allies got together – this was right after Russia annexed – illegally annexed Crimea. And they got together and said, we're going to work to make sure that we have 2 percent spend over the – and we're going to have plans to do so over the next 10 years. And a lot of NATO nerds looked at the progress subsequently and said, actually, in terms of real dollars, between 2014 and 2024 we actually saw a meaningful increase in defense spending which correlates with the kinds of outputs, the actual defense

capabilities, the equipment, the stuff that you need to support your militaries. So a lot of folks within NATO saw it as a win.

A lot of folks outside of NATO looked at the game and said, but – we think at that point it was only seven nations – seven NATO nations were actually meeting the 2 percent target a couple of years ago. And sort of saying, well, actually, the glass is half-empty here. So how do we actually build more capability in Europe, especially after Russia's initiation of the full-scale of invasion of Ukraine in 2022? It became clear that more resources were needed. That, as Seth mentioned, protracted conflicts is something that the alliance would need to be prepared for. But also looking at inventories, looking at capabilities, the capability of the NATO allies to actually wage that protracted conflict – it was increasingly clear that the capabilities were insufficient.

So that brings us to today. The Trump administration has been floating this notion of a 5 percent target since before the election. Now we are seeing it come to life. The idea is 3.5 percent of nations spending – 3.5 percent of gross domestic product, GDP, should be spent on defense capabilities. And that's a pretty well-organized and understood system of capability targets that have been organized by the Supreme allied Commander Europe, at the SHAPE headquarters.

What's interesting is getting to 5 percent, allies are considering, you know, allocating or earmarking 1.5 of GDP – 1.5 percent of GDP towards, you know, what they're calling resilience, the non-hard defense spending that will be critical for the actual prosecution of a protracted conflict with a main adversary, like Russia. Things like standardizing rail gages, things like hardening roads, things like making sure that equipment can get from ports up to the front line, those are not necessarily counted as part of the 2 percent, now 3.5 percent targets. And so what this allows the nations to do is take a much more holistic look at what they are spending on the overall security and defense of the alliance and start thinking about the kinds of things that they need to be doing, need to be investing in, to make the war plans actually functional, because you need a bunch of these capabilities that aren't necessarily counted as part of that – the defense investment pledge target set.

So what is Trump looking for at this summit? It is likely that he's looking for agreement to build real capability. CSIS, we did an analysis a couple of years ago about, you know, the responsibility sharing to – excuse me, burden sharing to responsibility sharing. And we assessed at the time – this was a couple years ago – that you could have a floor of 2 percent and then have another additional on top of that be for resilience and national security spending. That seems to be the kind of framework that NATO is adopting now.

When we did the numbers on what nations were actually spending, it looked like a good, I think, 14 allies were spending over 4 percent of their GDP on overall, you know, defense and national security spending. And so if you broaden the aperture, there's already a lot of stuff that nations are doing to contribute to the common defense and common security of the alliance. What the Trump administration is going to be looking for is, OK, and what else? What real capability can be added quickly? Because, as Seth has pointed out, and Max as well, the threat from Russia is very real. Ukraine is showing that protracted conflicts is probably the scenario to plan for, and there's real questions and concerns whether or not Europe is going to be capable of meeting that threat. So the extent to which the allies can agree on this target and start delivering capability quickly is going to be very important, and I think what the Trump administration is looking for.

There's a question in the comments about the DOGE-like job cuts to NATO. And it is true that – I think it's safe to say that the NATO headquarters is taking a hard look at efficiencies because they want to make sure – be able to make the case to not just President Trump, but other heads of state and government that they are being wise and efficient with the allocation of resources for NATO common budgets and the headquarters and things like that. It is also true that every secretary general, when they come in they do these kinds of reforms. But there definitely seems to be more urgency now with the Trump administration's focus on DOGE in the first couple months of his tenure.

With that, thank you.

Mr. Kisling: Kathleen, thank you so much.

We'll turn to our final speaker here. Just before we do, so I'll just mention that if you want to ask a question, which we'll – which we'll take Q&A after Ben speaks, please type it in the Q&A window or raise your hand to ask it verbally and we'll unmute you.

So, without further ado, our final speaker is Benjamin Jensen, director of the Futures Lab and a senior fellow for the Defense and Security Department at CSIS. Ben, over to you.

Benjamin Jensen: Well, I have big shoes to fill to end. But as kind of the resident mad scientist at CSIS, I want to both look back – so we can kind of contextualize what to expect from a NATO summit, and use that eye on the past to contextualize the present; what's going on in Ukraine, what it suggests; and General Cavoli's really aggressive reforms he's led at SACEUR along with political officials since 2023 Vilnius, and use those both to look to the future. So it'll be, really, three talking points: the past is prologue; what major trends are

actually shaping how people think about the changing character of war in Europe and what it means for NATO; and then at a much more practical level, you know, what do I think, you know, we as folks who are trying to hold our officials accountable should be looking for to come out of this summit.

So, first, I just want to highlight that actually sometimes it's easy to forget that NATO summits can actually be a big deal, and they often can serve as a focal point for really thinking about critical strategic shifts. So if you think about Paris 1957 and how that related to changing nuclear posture after Sputnik, if you think about Athens in 1962 and really the alliance trying to reconceptualize crisis management, the '67 Harmel Report, and really more recently in 2023 Vilnius – and I'll get back to Vilnius in a second because I still don't think the alliance is really digesting some of the magnitude of the changes there. But if you think about it, I think we're at another one of those inflection points because the Ukrainian stalemate doesn't appear to be going away anytime soon.

And it's not just that there's a stalemate in a protracted land conflict in Europe. It's how that war is being fought that changes how – what we expect when you hear General Cavoli and other leaders talk about a possible mass Russian invasion into the Baltics or elsewhere in Europe in as little as five years.

War is now increasingly defined by mass salvos of missiles and rockets targeting critical infrastructure. So what Russian doctrine talks about is SODCIT and noncontact warfare, and you can take a look at our reporting on that in our Firepower Strike Tracker and how we analyze those strikes statistically.

But this is something that's not going away. It's a strategic line of effort Putin can use to try to coerce Kyiv to make up for his inability to make battlefield gains of any meaningful consequence.

And, second, one of the reasons you have to rely upon those punishment campaigns against the Ukrainian people is that there is a new no man's land that's really emerged in Ukraine. There's a security zone fight where essentially unmanned systems make it very difficult to advance and very difficult to mass forces, and I think that's really important and I think – you've all covered it. You all understand it.

But I want you to really just put into context that over 70 percent of the casualties are produced by small quadcopters all the way up to Group 3 so think an unmanned plane scouting for rockets and artillery. And that creates a fundamentally different type of no man's land that every defense official I speak to in the U.S. and across Europe are laser focused on – is either how do

I break that stalemate, how do I reestablish mobility on that fight, or how do I make that stalemate work for me if I'm a small state in the Baltic and have a multinational battle group trying to deny Russia a fait accompli invasion.

And so that Ukrainian stalemate really also helps us think about the major trends that everyone at the summit is going to be thinking about and I think they really boil down to autonomy, demographics, and you already heard, you know, Dr. Jones highlight this, the convergence of conventional and unconventional conflict.

So I've said enough about autonomy. It's just a reality. Sadly, our defense industrial base is not well equipped to respond so that's why you're having this interesting moment where actually a lot of companies in Poland and the Baltics, who are really close to Ukraine, are starting to create new categories of products that some of the more traditional actors are struggling to keep up with.

I'd really watch some of the companies, both Estonia and Poland in particular, and even creating new defense deals to try to make up for the U.S. potentially pulling out, which you've seen in Poland and then some of the South Korean firms like Hanwha.

Demographics, though, is part of the story as well. Autonomy isn't just defining the modern battlefield because it's efficient. It's defining it because there's a fundamental demographic decline in Russia and Europe writ large.

In fact, Ukraine has to embrace autonomous systems because it's unwilling to sacrifice a smaller, younger population and force them to fight, and I think that demographic equation is also going to increasingly weigh on every defense official across NATO member states as they imagine building their force capacity for what Seth talked about – Dr. Jones talked about as that protracted conflict. They just don't have large young populations who are going to want to go fight, number one.

Number two, we don't even really talk about how popular war is or how unpopular it is. So can you really mobilize large segments of population in the middle of an era defined by mis-, dis-, and malinformation.

So I think this is going to increasingly put everyone to double if not triple down on autonomous weapon systems to create kind of a new frontier guard model along NATO's northern all the way down to its southern front.

And then, last, that convergence of conventional and unconventional here as a trend. We don't pay enough attention to the mass sabotage campaign that Dr. Jones highlighted taking place across Europe, and now imagine the Russians actually get their stuff together and pull off something like

Operation Spider Web where what we saw Mossad recently do with firing missiles inside Iran.

I can't imagine any future scenario where Russia would open its war against NATO as ham fisted as it did against Ukraine. That would mean a longer protracted series of efforts to win air cover, mass missile salvos, but accompanied by unconventional forces blowing up ridges, blowing rail, blowing dams, and even assassinating political officials which they've only so far failed to do against corporate officials.

And so, if you look at that kind of past, that these summits can be a big deal to make strategic statements, the fact that NATO is a – NATO is seeing a stalemate in Ukraine that embodies some of the major trends in warfare, like, what should you watch for in this summit?

I think, first, at the NAC level, it'll be interesting to see if they can articulate a strategic bridge that actually accompanies some of the new defense capability plans and some of the new S&T strategy. I'd be watching to see if there's enough of a cohesive statement. The worst thing you would want at a critical moment like this is a series of competing strategies. At a bilateral level, it'll be interesting to see if member states can start to talk more about fungibility, so making multiple uses out of weapon systems, and interoperability.

And I'll just give you one example of that would be, like, cannon-based air defense. Like, smart programs that turn any 30 millimeter cannon on a ground system into also air defense. And there's a lot of vendors that are working on that. Another major one like that is also some of the replacements to the MQ-1Charlie, that can actually use electronic intelligence and electronic war. So I'd look at the bilateral level for folks to find creative ways of upscaling existing weapon systems, since there's no conceivable way they're going to be able to make the budget targets because guns and butter debates are very real.

And then last, at the Military Committee level, I really think we've got to give General Cavoli, in particular, and a lot of the work he's done as he's leaving, credit. SHAPE is actually doing amazing work on using AI through its Project Maven. And Cavoli has really leaned into these new regional defense plans, and some of these C2 reforms around multinational brigades. What I would want to see coming out of that is some chatter around the Military Committee of starting to make their war games and scenario analysis based on those reforms more public. Because at the end of the day, if you're going to have to get closer to 5 percent, if you're going to have to really get closer to deterring Russia from future aggression, it's going to have to be a whole of society effort.

And you're going to have to find a way to convince citizens in Spain, or Portugal, in Italy, to be as afraid as citizens in Poland, or Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are. And that really requires actually taking some of the good work that's been done in private and finding creative ways to make it public. And that's something colleagues like Kathleen have been all over when she actually works with NATO to try to find creative ways of telling the story, even including bringing, like, top screenwriters over to kind of make sure that you can communicate to the public some of the good works behind the scenes. So I will stop there and look forward to answering any questions.

Mr. Kisling

Great. Thanks, Ben. And thanks to all of our speakers this morning.

We'll go ahead and turn to Q&A now.

So we have a few questions in already, so I'll just read them off. And Kathleen addressed the first one here, but I want others to have an opportunity to weigh in as well.

This is from Naomi Lim: Regarding NATO's appeals to Trump, are recent DOGE-like job cuts to NATO another part of that effort? Are there other non-defense spending ways NATO is trying to please Trump? And what will happen if those said appeals fail? And just as a follow on to that, Naomi asks: Has Trump's early departure from the G-7 last week rattled NATO in terms of the president's commitment to multilateralism? So we'll start with that. Anybody can jump in, Max. I don't know if you have thoughts, or, Seth, first, and we can go around the horn.

Mr. Bergmann

Yeah, maybe just quickly. I think Europeans were already rattled. And I don't think his early departure has changed very much in how they see the president and his commitment to the NATO alliance. I think they've questioned it and I think they continue to question his commitment to the NATO alliance and multilateralism. I mean, I think that sort of begins with U.S. sanctions, actually, against the International Criminal Court, pulling out of the Paris climate agreement. All these things that, you know, now aren't really talked about, but for Europeans was – I don't know if a shock, but was sort of expected. And I think that what they see is an administration not committed to traditional global multilateralism. And I think that is very much the policy of this administration.

I think, on the one hand, Trump's departure from the G-7 was sort of seen as perhaps necessary, given the events in Iran, but also a sign of Trump not caring that much. And I think where Europeans tend to come down is they are merely hoping to get through these summits with a sort of commitment to have another summit – (laughs) – next year or in the future. And they're just sort of hoping to kind of get through these events without sort of a broader rupture in the alliance. And in that sense, the G-7 was somewhat of a

success because I think there will be a G-7 summit next year and there wasn't sort of a broader rupture.

Mr. Kisling: Thank you.

Seth, Ben, Kathleen, you guys want to?

Dr. Jones: Yeah, just briefly. You know, my sense, much like Max, is that the president's early departure from the G-7, I don't – I'm not convinced it was a major rattling of NATO in terms of the president's commitment to multilateralism. Look, I think if there were any questions that people had about the administration's priorities I'm sure those were largely answered with the vice president's speech at Munich or the Signal leak, which were indicative of where a number of senior administration officials – where they prioritize Europe, which is not at the top. And also, the public statements about the National Defense Strategy that the Pentagon has released are crystal clear that the focus is on other areas than Europe.

I do think what could rattle NATO countries is, in my view, sort of less about the NATO summit per se and more about U.S. actions in areas like Ukraine. A U.S. decision that a peace deal is not likely, a U.S. president that gets tired of negotiating and ends all U.S. support – that is, military assistance, intelligence assistance – to the Ukrainians and walks away, and then the result is Russian advances on the battlefield, that to me would be an example of something that would much more likely rattle European capitals than a range of these sort of summit issues.

Dr. Jensen: This is Ben. I'll jump in quick.

I actually think we give the American president too much attention in relation to this. I know he says some bombastic things, his administration does. Europe is not on the top of the defense priority. News flash: even in Ukraine, I'm not sure it was for the Biden administration as well. There are larger structural conditions that affect any U.S. president's way of having to approach Europe, and NATO in particular. And actually, those aren't going away. Will they be the top priority? No. But the fact is, unless Putin can pull off a miracle and prove to Trump that he can give the Americans everything they want out of Iran without going to war, Trump will still be pulled back along with the American Senate and others into a confrontational relationship with Vladimir Putin. And Xi Jinping, both through dumping goods in the European economy and other measures, isn't showing himself someone that's necessarily, you know, BFF material.

So I know that Trump left alliance – left G-7 early. I know his administration says disparaging things. But I think it's better to really look at those larger structural conditions and the fact that even a smaller U.S. presence with

intelligence support, long-range fires, and logistics still will help – with the new defense plans that were developed – Europe defend itself against an emboldened Russia.

Mr. Kislring: Kathleen, go ahead.

Ms. McInnis: Yeah, if I could just jump in on the latter part of the question, are there other nondefense spending ways NATO's trying to please Trump. Your question is getting at the heart of this debate over burden sharing, right? If you look at how to protect your population, if you look at how to do deterrence effectively, if you look at how to win wars, the military is one component of a suite of government tools in order to be able to achieve national or multilateral objectives, right?

So we have focused like a laser on military spending as a percentage of GDP over time while recognizing that military spending is necessary but not sufficient to actually accomplish the job. So what are other nondefense spending ways that NATO could look at, incorporate into this 5 percent target? Again, it's things like critical infrastructure protection. That's not a part of the 2 percent – or, the defense spending pledge which has been represented by a 2 percent target thus far. Things like host nation support. Countries pay a lot of money to have U.S. troops stationed within their borders. That money is not accounted for in the defense spending pledges. So there are all sorts of things that nations can do that will contribute to the common security and defense of the alliance that are outside of that narrow military spending. And so this conceptual shift that security and defense is more than the military is actually pretty good news in terms of the overall strategic development of the alliance.

Mr. Kislring: All right. Thank you all.

I have a couple questions here from George Condon: Will Zelensky be at the summit, after he missed a chance to meet with Trump at the G-7? And a couple follow-ons to what we just discussed here. If Trump were to leave early from NATO or shows hostility, will we have to conclude the alliance has a different leader other than Trump? And who would that leader be? Max, do you want to take a stab at that?

Mr. Bergmann: Yeah, I believe Zelensky will be at the summit. And I think, let's remember, this summit, the whole – it was originally supposed to be about Russia. That was going to be the focus, and the threat posed by Russia. (Coughs.) Excuse me. The summit has sort of down – or, it's downplayed that because that was seen as potentially running crosswise with the U.S. And I think – you know, to pick up on what Seth said earlier – I think the Europeans are really looking at the United States and how we approach Ukraine. And that is sort

of a litmus test for our commitment. (Coughs.) Excuse me. And if the question of Trump leaves early, what does that mean?

Look, I think in some ways the worst possible outcome is a muddled outcome, is one where there's a lack of clarity, where the U.S. is in, but the political commitment of the United States, of whether we would actually deploy and fight the Russians if they came over the line in Estonia or the Baltic states, is fundamentally questioned, yet you still hear positive things from diplomats, and that there's sort of a muddled outcome where we're kind of neither in nor out. And hence, the Europeans don't really take action to kind of fill the gap. And I think this gets to the broader problem or issue with who would replace the United States?

The answer is, nobody. Because the United Kingdom's military, despite the U.K. talking a big game, their army is just not what it used to be. The U.K. does not have the military capacity. No European country right now has the military capacity to replace the United States. The one potential is that German military investment really transforms the German Army back into a real fighting force. But it's kind of amazing how much money the Germans spend right now and how little they have to show for it. They've sort of designed their military to not be that effective, to just be blunt about it. And so there's a lot of deep reforms that have to be done there.

And so the broader question is, can Europeans begin to work together as Europeans? Now, spending what they currently spend should be enough to deter Russia. But they spend it in an entirely fragmented and broken way. So what you see right now is, I think, a real sort of different approach, NATO being very member state-led. And then you have another approach emerging out of the EU, which is to try to get European states to work together as Europeans. And there's tension between that, between ministries of defense, between NATO officials, between the United States, between Europeans. And all of this was sort of a secondary conversation when the United States was fully in, because it was a very good deal for everybody.

The United States provided Europe security, provided that European force to effectively defend Europe, and the Europeans followed us around and basically did what we wanted on the foreign policy side. And that was sort of the grand bargain that we had. And, yes, we wanted the Europeans to spend more, but ultimately this was an alliance that was built around us. And so the question is, can this alliance sustain itself without us? And I think there's – it's a real open question. And this is something that is – you know, the Europeans are, rightly, very concerned about Russia and about Russia's intentions. And right now they are very thankful that the Ukrainians are fixing the Russian forces and bogging the Russians down. And if that were to stop, then the Europeans would have a really big problem, I think.

Mr. Kisling: Max, thanks.

Does anybody else want to weigh in on that before we move on to the next one? All right.

I'll go to a question here from Howard at CSM: How might the Israel-Iran conflict affect the summit, with Trump threatening joining Israel and the Europeans desperately wanting more serious diplomacy? Seth, can I turn to you first, or Ben?

Dr. Jones: Yeah, I can jump in. Good question, Howard. Good to see you – or, at least, good to see your question.

On the Israeli-Iran conflict, I mean, the decision by the president to pause for two weeks, I realize that seems to be a common refrain from him on a lot of issues, but the decision by the president to refrain from getting directly involved for roughly a two week period means that there is a likelihood for diplomacy, at least in the short term. I'm not convinced, actually, that there is a deal that is likely to happen with the Iranians on their nuclear program. I suspect that the Israelis may actually end up conducting an operation against Fordow if the U.S. does not. But I don't – I think if you actually look at the statements of a number of European leaders, they do not want an Iranian bomb. So I think the president appears to be giving diplomacy a chance, or at the very least is concerned about getting the U.S. involved in a war in the Middle East. But I think that actually helps, at least for the moment.

Dr. Jensen: Yeah, all I'll add on – this is Ben – to Seth's comments, is all of this really depends upon what the character of any U.S. involvement looks like. If it really is just a one B-2 bomber, one bunker-buster – you need more than one – a small number of bunker busters to hit Fordow and that underground facility, I think you might have European leaders publicly calling for restraint, but privately very at ease that an extremist-led regime that was within striking distance of Europe wasn't able to develop up to 10 nuclear weapons that they could mate with ballistic missiles and hold Europe hostage.

If those attacks, though, spread to targeting leaders and a wider rollback of Iranian military capability, it creates the risk of second- and third-order effects that would really cause concern in Europe. So you would both see a spike in oil prices. Most of Europe is still fundamentally dependent upon imported hydrocarbons, so that has a deeper impact upon their economy, and not in an ideal time. And then, two, if it really gets bad, you're talking about Europe having to grapple with another migration crisis. And just like guns and butter shapes defense, there still is a deeper debate in Europe we don't talk enough about, which actually is happening in the U.S. as well, about security for what?

Do I prioritize my marginal defense and security dollar on combating migration? Or do I do it on combating other states from invading me? And, ideally, the answer is both. But there's only so far the defense dollars go. And anything that triggers intense polarizing migration debates can have direct impacts upon national security dialog. So, again, it depends on how far this goes. And I think the president's playing an interesting kind of bargaining game right now.

Dr. Jones: Hey, Alex, if I could just add one other comment to Howard's question. It's a subject, Howard, we've already discussed in this forum. And that is, a protracted conflict in the Middle East, even if the U.S. doesn't get directly engaged and it is largely an Israeli, Iranian, and Iranian partner force conflict, still means that the Israelis will need help with air defense munitions. They'll likely need help with restocking bombs, small diameter, large diameter bombs, precision strike weapons.

And it will continue to highlight, I think, with a protracted conflict, the fragility of the U.S. industrial base, and highlight the issue that we've already talked about. The Ukrainian war has already strained the U.S. and European industrial bases. It will further strain – a protracted war in the Middle East would further strain the U.S.' as well, and including some of the – you know, the U.S. got a Patriot in in Israel as well that could be deployed elsewhere.

Ms. McInnis: If I could just jump in really quick.

Mr. Kisling: Please go ahead, Kathleen, yeah.

Ms. McInnis: Yeah, on – yes, the Israel-Iran conflict might affect the summit, but this is not the first time that conflicts outside of NATO's area of operations, or theater – the European theater, have become a subject of conversation at these summits, right? Think of 2014, the focus was initially about Crimea. The Islamic State issue happened almost right before the summit. And so that became a space for NATO leaders to start thinking through how they were going to tackle the Islamic State.

So the point is that the alliance serves as this incredible mechanism for its allies and partner nations to come together on issues that are outside of the NATO alliance's remit – direct remit. It's this incredible framework for taking on and considering broader issues. And so it would be par for the course for the allies to have a sidebar discussion about Israel-Iran, and that wouldn't be – yeah, that would just be par for the course.

Mr. Kisling: All right. Thank you all.

Have another question here, related to Greenland. As part of NATO through Denmark, do you anticipate President Trump raising any issues related to Greenland? Is a meeting between Trump and the Danish PM likely? And how do you expect the interaction between Trump and the Danish PM to play out at the summit? Maybe, Max, we can turn to you on that one.

Mr. Bergmann: It's a very good question. I guess I hope Greenland does not become an issue. Right now the Danish government is eagerly trying to ask the Trump administration what it actually wants from them and what it actually – what the U.S. wants in Greenland. We talk about the security threats and how Denmark has not met its – the needs of Greenland to ensure its security, yet at the same time the U.S. has dramatically withdrawn its forces from a Cold War high. And the Danes are basically saying, what do you want? Do you want to put more forces in? Fine. Do you want us to increase our force presence? Fine. And the Danes are doing that.

So I think the interaction between Mette Frederiksen, the Danish prime minister, and Donald Trump is something to watch for. Mette Frederiksen has not yet been to Washington, and there's been a lot of strain in the bilateral relationship, and that is quite concerning because Denmark has been one of the most pro-American allies within NATO and within the European Union.

I think the one other thing I would just flag is another relationship to watch is the relationship between Trump and Emanuel Macron, especially after Trump truthed on his flight back from the G-7 sort of admonishing Macron. And I think, just to highlight here, there's differing political interests here. And we tend to only think about our domestic political interests, but European leaders have their own domestic politics, and leaders like Emanuel Macron of France and Pedro Sanchez of Spain have their own domestic audiences. And for Spain, for instance, committing to 5 percent defense spending is not in the interest of the Spanish prime minister, who's a socialist. Spain is celebrating its 50th year of democracy when it had a military dictatorship, so investing in the military is in some ways quite controversial. And it's in his political interest maybe to pick a fight with Donald Trump, domestically. Yet, they also have to balance that with their own broader European political interest that play out at the EU level of not wanting Eastern European allies within the EU blaming them for abandoning the transatlantic alliance.

So there's a lot of different politics emerging here which I think point in the direction that everyone's just going to sort of play nice. But there is potential for a real rift and a potential explosion.

And also, Friedrich Merz and how he handles himself with Trump. They had a very good meeting in the Oval Office, or at least a cordial meeting. This is

the new German chancellor. But we'll see how that now plays out at the NATO summit.

Mr. Kising: Great. Thanks, Max.

We have just a few minutes left here, so if there are any final remaining questions please be sure to type them in the Q&A window or raise your – raise your hand and we'll try to get to as many as we can here.

Ben, I'm going to target this next one at you: What are the potential ways in which AI can pose dangers to NATO and, conversely, to Russia? So I'm sure you have plenty of thoughts. Go ahead.

Dr. Jensen: Sure. So AI is a technology, and all technology is neutral. It depends upon how people use it. So war is a continuation by politics by other means, so the deeper issue here are the politics around technological adaptation/diffusion, and how they relate to the armed of armed conflict and rules of engagement and authorities that exist within additional planning structures.

So what I am excited by, and why I think that NATO will have an AI edge over Russia, is, again, look closely at the experiments being run out of SHAEF right now. So there is – and it's public-facing. There's a whole effort to integrate Maven Smart System into SHAEF.

And why that matters is because if you have an alliance, especially given the C2 structure – so this new command and control – and multinational core entities that are envisioned to fight on the basis of these regional defense plans, anything you can do to increase operational tempo, streamline decision making, fundamentally makes up for the fact that you will not determine when you get to fight against Russia and you probably won't have as many forces at Russia at the decisive point. So if you lack an advantage in forces and you lack an advantage in space, you need an advantage in time and options, and AI, used correctly, can generate that. The devil is in the details of what it means to be used correctly.

So this means you have to do things like benchmarking, and I'd point you in the direction of our critical foreign policy benchmarking for AI work in the Futures Lab. You have to ensure that the foundation models that you're going to build military applications on aren't horribly biased or so generalist they make no sense in a military context.

Sadly, every foundation model knows more about pop culture and the Kardashians than it does about deterrence and warfighting so there's a degree of fine tuning that you need to do to be able to use it in these military settings.

Second, NATO is fundamentally a consensus organization and so that means you're really going to have to carefully negotiate the equivalent of national caveats of old into what you can and cannot use AI in for it to be effectively used in the alliance.

But I see a lot of upside here in some simple applications related to logistics, some simple applications related to intelligence fusion, and, really, just imagery recognition, early warning indicating of Russian troop concentrations, and also electronic signatures.

So Russia, sure, they are an authoritarian regime. They have a good STEM base, sadly, though, even though STEM workers are dying in needless meat assaults in Ukraine.

And authoritarian regimes actually struggle with this technology because they're not willing to embrace large, diverse data sets. They want things that only say how great Putin is.

So I think there are ways AI will only end up helping NATO if implemented properly.

Mr. Kislring:

All right, Ben. Thank you very much.

We're about to hit the hour here and I think we've exhausted all the questions that have come in. So I just want to thank everybody on the CSIS side for their thoughts today and thanks for – all of you for joining us for this discussion. Let us know if there's anything we can do ahead of the summit, during the summit, after the summit. We're here to help so don't hesitate to reach out.

We'll be posting a transcript of this call on CSIS.org later today and we'll circulate it by email to all those who RSVPed. So, again, thank you to everybody and I hope you have a nice weekend ahead. Take care.

(END.)