

NATO's Ankara Summit: The Indo-Pacific Dimensions

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Key points

- On July 7 and 8, 2026, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) held its 77th Leaders' Summit in Ankara, Türkiye. Although the focus of the summit was the alliance's plans and progress in moving toward NATO 3.0, security affairs in Asia were also addressed.
- Leaders attended from NATO's four Indo-Pacific partners: Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan (collectively called the IP-4). However, only one IP-4 head of state—President Lee Jae Myong from South Korea—attended.
- China was called out several times, including for its firing of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) on July 6, for being an enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine, for nontransparency in its conventional and nuclear military modernization, and for its security ties with North Korea, Russia, and Iran. General Secretary Mark Rutte stated that NATO "cannot be naive about China."¹
- However, the end of summit communiqué, the "Ankara Summit Declaration," did *not* mention China. In contrast, it labeled Russia "a long-term threat" and stated that Iran "must never have a nuclear weapon."² In commentary on the summit, People's Republic of China (PRC) state-run media claimed that division, friction, and dissention existed among the alliance's members.
- A key focus was the need for NATO members to cooperate in expanding the alliance's defense industrial base (DIB). Participants from the IP-4 countries indicated that their nations' defense industries are well positioned to support those efforts. Going forward, DIB cooperation, systems co-development, and sales will likely become key features of collaboration between the IP-4 and other NATO nations.

Introduction

On July 7 and 8, 2026, NATO held its 77th Leaders' Summit in Ankara, Türkiye, to gather heads of state and other high-level national leaders. The alliance is currently moving toward "NATO 3.0," in which its European members and Canada will take on a greater share of the defense burden in response to concerns about Russia, uncertainty about future US force posture on the continent, and, of course, goading by the US. This transition was the primary focus of the summit, but Indo-Pacific security affairs were still addressed. This paper provides a brief overview of summit discussions related to Indo-Pacific security affairs (based on public reporting), and it highlights key statements of IP-4 and other NATO leaders.

July summit overview: onward to NATO 3.0

The July summit confirmed the alliance's new direction and its intended metamorphosis to NATO 3.0. Other notable features included the following:

- The very first sentence of the “Ankara Summit Declaration” reaffirmed, once again, the alliance’s “ironclad commitment to our collective defense under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty” (1949) and the critical proviso that “an attack on one is an attack on all.”³ Although Article 5 had been invoked in previous summit communiqués, doing so again signaled unity of purpose and alliance cohesion along with change.
- NATO Secretary General Rutte seemed to use every possible summit platform to recount the progress being made by nearly all the alliance’s members toward achieving the increased defense budget target set at The Hague Summit in June 2025 (i.e., 5 percent of gross domestic product by 2035).
- The gathering hosted the first-ever “NATO Summit Defence Industry Forum,” which brought together in Ankara representatives of key defense manufacturers from across the alliance, including from some of NATO’s IP-4 partners. The outcome was reportedly around \$50 billion in deals, as well as bright prospects for future sales.
- Also of note was the very positive meeting between President Donald Trump and Ukrainian leader Vladimir Zelensky, along with the possibility of the US granting Kyiv licenses to produce Patriot interceptors.

All in all, the alliance weathered what could have been a contentious gathering given persistent uncertainty over the future US force posture in Europe, the issue of Greenland, and US pique over limited support from European allies for Operation Epic Fury.

Participation by NATO’s Indo-Pacific partners was good—but not as good as in 2024

Among NATO’s four Indo-Pacific partners, the only head of state to attend was South Korea’s President Lee Jae Myong (a first-time summit attendee), accompanied by his Foreign Minister Cho Hyun. In contrast, all four IP-4 heads of state participated in the Washington Summit in 2024. Still, the Ankara meeting had noteworthy high-level representation. In addition to President Lee, other attendees included Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and Defense Minister Koizumi Shinjiro from Japan, New Zealand Defence Minister Chris Penk, and Australia’s Minister for Defence Industry and Minister for Pacific Island Affairs Pat Conroy. In addition to attending key sessions, they engaged in sidebar meetings with other leaders from Europe and North America, and they interacted with the media.

Rutte: NATO “cannot be naive about China”

Whether by coincidence or design, on July 6, right before the summit’s kickoff, Beijing launched an intercontinental ballistic missile from a People’s Liberation Army Navy nuclear submarine, demonstrating its progress in developing a credible nuclear triad. The launch also took place at the start of the combined Russia-China naval exercise Joint Sea-2026 off the coast of Shandong, China. When queried about the PRC

missile launch at the pre-summit press conference, NATO Secretary General Rutte responded by saying it underscored that NATO “cannot be naive about China,” that the Atlantic and Pacific theaters “are getting more intertwined,” and that “what happens in the Indo-Pacific is relevant to what is happening in the transatlantic.” Rutte pointed out that China, North Korea, and Iran “are key enablers of Russia’s unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine.”⁴

China, Russia, and Iran “are working together”

Rutte also referred to Indo-Pacific security issues in his keynote speech at the Defence Industry Forum. China, he said, “continues to modernize its armed forces and expand its nuclear capabilities without transparency.” He pointed to North Korea’s intentions to expand its nuclear program and Pyongyang’s ongoing support to Russia in its war against Ukraine. Finally, Rutte stated that China, Russia, and Iran “are increasingly working together. That should concern us all. Because I assure you, they do not have our best interests in mind.”⁵

IP-4 delegation met with Secretary General Rutte

Secretary General Rutte held a separate meeting with IP-4 representatives on July 7. According to a read out of the meeting from Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the group exchanged views on the security situation in the Indo-Pacific—particularly developments concerning China, North Korea, and Russia—and discussed “strengthening their coordination in areas such as defense industry cooperation, cyber, and technology.”⁶ For his part, Rutte indicated that NATO intends to continue to strengthen ties with the IP-4.

South Korea: looking to expand defense industry ties with NATO

At the Defence Industry Forum, President Lee expressed Seoul’s willingness to expand cooperation with alliance members in defense-related research and development as well as the production of weapons systems. Lee called for upgrading current ROK-NATO initiatives to become a “South Korea-NATO defense industry partnership 2.0.”⁷ Lee’s first-time meeting with Ukrainian President Zelensky at the summit occurred shortly after a pledge by Seoul to provide an additional \$100 million in nonlethal aid to Kyiv.⁸ However, the ROK reiterated that it will not provide weapons or other lethal systems to Kyiv, even indirectly, such as through NATO’s Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) initiative.⁹

Japan: raising concerns about China and deepening Tokyo’s defense ties with Australia

Defense Minister Koizumi’s NATO engagements began even before he arrived in Ankara. While en route to the summit, he and Rutte exchanged text messages about Beijing’s SLBM launch.¹⁰ After the NATO-IP4 meeting, Koizumi (attending his first NATO Leaders’ Summit as defense minister) told the press that “China’s military activities—including its extensive and rapid expansion of nuclear and missile capabilities

without sufficient transparency—are a source of serious concern for Japan and the international community.” Koizumi shared that “many NATO member states had expressed similar views...of the situation in the Indo-Pacific region” and that they “recognized that security in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic are inseparable.”¹¹

In his bilateral meeting with Minister for Defence Industry Conroy from Australia, Koizumi reiterated Tokyo’s commitment to deepening defense equipment and technology cooperation with Canberra, as outlined in the Takaichi-Albanese “Leaders’ Statement on Enhanced Defence and Security Cooperation” issued during the May 2026 Japan-Australia Summit Meeting.¹² Notably, this statement includes the Japan-Australia Mogami-Class Frigate Program, whereby Mitsubishi Heavy Industries will produce 11 frigates for the Royal Australian Navy.¹³

Australia: the collective defense industrial base must be expanded

Minister for Defence Industry Conroy had a consistent message throughout the summit: NATO and its IP-4 partners must enhance cooperation to expand the collective DIB. This message echoed a major theme throughout the larger conclave—the need to expand defense industrial capacity and to do so quickly. Indeed, a panel at the NATO Defence Industry Forum was dedicated to DIB issues. Expanding the DIB, said Conroy, will require less protectionism among member countries and a new risk-tolerant mindset among its partner defense industry suppliers—a mindset that recognizes “there is enough work for everyone, we just need to find a way to cooperate so we can grow our defense industrial base.”¹⁴ In an interview with Anadolu Ajansi, Türkiye’s state-run news agency, Conroy is quoted as saying that “one of the key topics that NATO is grappling with is how to increase our defense industrial base. Lots of countries are increasing their spending on defense, but we need to increase the defense industrial base to go with that. Otherwise, we’ll just be spending more to buy the same equipment.” Observing that Asia is experiencing the biggest arms race since 1945, Conroy also pointed out that both NATO and the IP4 countries “are facing massive challenges to the rules-based order that need to be confronted and challenged.”¹⁵ Along those lines, in June 2026, the Albanese government pledged another \$100 million to Ukraine for critical military equipment in addition to the \$50 million already earmarked for NATO’s PURL.¹⁶

New Zealand: increased defense spending must produce results

Like participants from other IP-4 partners, New Zealand’s Defence Minister Chris Penk saw opportunities for his country’s defense industries to assist NATO allies in acquiring the systems required on the modern battlefield. In advance of the summit, he stated, “As New Zealand focuses on building a more combat capable and interoperable Defence Force, we need to continue to explore opportunities for Kiwi businesses and look for innovative ways to deliver capability faster and with resilience. The [NATO Defence] Forum presents an opportunity for this.”¹⁷ He also underscored that as NATO and IP-4 countries begin to increase defense spending, they must ensure they are getting the results they need: “Some of the themes emerging [at the summit are] about making sure we get best capability for the extra defence spend[ing] that we’re all leaning into, and of course the agility of moving quickly enough, given the deteriorating strategic environment

across the world.”¹⁸ Penk noted that China’s SLBM test was on the minds of many summit attendees, saying it garnered interest “and, to some extent, dismay.”¹⁹

No direct mention of the PRC in the “Ankara Summit Declaration”

During the summit, China was called out numerous times, including for supporting Russia’s war in Ukraine, for its SLBM launch, for nontransparency in its conventional and nuclear military modernization, and for working with North Korea, Russia, and Iran. However, the summit communiqué—the “Ankara Summit Declaration”—did not mention China, nor was there any mention of the Indo-Pacific. In contrast, the document referred to Russia as a “long-term threat” and stated that Iran “must never have a nuclear weapon.” One vague statement in the document could be interpreted as an oblique reference to China: “The Alliance continues to respond and adapt to the strategic competition, pervasive instability, hybrid threats, and recurrent shocks that define our broader security environment.”²⁰

PRC media commentary: accentuating the negative

In commentary on the summit, PRC state-run media claimed that division, friction, and dissension existed among the alliance’s members. Hewing to a standard PRC media practice, local voices (in this case Turkish interviewees) were cited as corroborating Chinese assertions of intra-alliance problems.²¹ President Trump’s negative comments about Spain and his comments about Greenland were also featured in the PRC media. Sample headlines from Xinhua included the following:

- “Trump Orders Cutoff of US Trade with Spain During NATO Summit”²²
- “EU Stands in Solidarity with Denmark Over Sovereignty, Spokesperson Says”²³
- “Analysts Say Ankara Summit Shows NATO Unity Fragile as Divisions Persist Over Defense Spending, Approaches to Iran Conflict”²⁴
- “Anti-NATO Rallies Held in Ankara During NATO Summit”²⁵
- “NATO Summit Opens in Ankara as New Defense Deals Fuel Militarization Concerns”²⁶
- “NATO’s Push for Deeper Defense Industrial Cooperation Faces Challenges”²⁷

Concluding thoughts: NATO-PRC tensions will persist

Although Indo-Pacific security affairs were not the primary focus of this summit, IP-4 leader participation is now a standard feature at these meetings. Going forward, DIB cooperation, co-research and development, co-design, co-production, and sales will likely become key features of collaboration between the IP-4 and other NATO nations. In addition, each of the IP-4 countries are conducting defense and security initiatives with NATO through their Individually Tailored Partnership Programs. The Japanese and South Korean DIB

industries in particular are well developed, and Japan's support to Australia's frigate program demonstrates what is possible. President Lee of South Korea made clear at the Defence Industry Forum that the ROK believes it can contribute to NATO's buildup.

NATO will continue to monitor Beijing's deepening security ties to Russia and North Korea and the implications for the war in Ukraine; its combined military exercises with Moscow, including in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic; its enhanced nuclear capabilities; and its sophisticated applications of artificial intelligence. In addition to security concerns, the countries of Europe and the PRC are experiencing mounting trade frictions, which some are referring to as a potential "China Shock 2.0"—a reference to the "China Shock 1.0" negative effects on the US economy after Beijing joined the World Trade Organization in 2001.

For its part, China will continue to keep a wary eye on NATO. Beijing bristled in 2022 when NATO's "Madrid Summit Declaration" stated that the alliance faces "systemic competition" from the PRC and included Beijing among those countries "who challenge our interests, security, and values and seek to undermine the rules-based international order."²⁸ Beijing stays ever vigilant for any sign that NATO plans to move into the Asia-Pacific region, and it regularly decries the Pacific military operations of Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada, even though these operations are not under a NATO mandate. Of particular concern to Beijing is Tokyo's participation in NATO as an IP-4 partner. NATO discussions in 2023 about the possibility of opening a NATO liaison office in Tokyo (plans since shelved) generated concern in Beijing. In addition, Chinese media reports in June 2026 claimed that Japan Self-Defense Force personnel will be assigned in Germany to the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine headquarters; Beijing is using these reports to argue that Tokyo's cooperation with NATO is a smokescreen for Japan's remilitarization and an attempt to bring NATO to Asia.

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³ NATO, "The Ankara Summit Declaration."

⁴ NATO, "NATO Pre Summit Press Conference."

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