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Trump's Trillion and NATO's Credibility Gap

The Ankara summit produced impressive numbers and a "very disappointed" president. Both things are true. Neither resolves the alliance's actual problem.

Donald Trump arrived in Ankara on Tuesday for the NATO summit and announced, before bilateral meetings had even begun, that he was "very disappointed with NATO." He added that he might not have attended at all if the summit had been held anywhere other than Turkey, where his relationship with Erdogan gave him a reason to show up. This is an unusual opening statement for the leader of the alliance's founding member, delivered at a summit where NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte had just announced what he called "Trump's Trillion" — a cumulative \$1.2 trillion in European defense spending since 2016, with billions more in new commitments announced in Ankara.

Both things are true simultaneously, and the gap between them is the story. The spending numbers are real. Trump's disappointment is real. The reason both can be true at the same time is that the numbers and the operational reality they are supposed to represent keep diverging in the specific moments that matter — and Ankara, like every NATO summit before it, is generating more of both.

The Iran Test

The specific grievance driving Trump's disappointment is not abstract. When the United States asked NATO allies to assist in protecting Strait of Hormuz shipping lanes during military operations against Iran, European allies declined. Spain, France, and Italy reportedly restricted US access to their airspace and military bases for offensive operations. The same allies now arriving in Ankara to pledge billions in defense spending refused, months earlier, to provide the operational support Washington specifically requested in a live military situation.

This is not hypocrisy in the casual sense. Each of those governments had genuine legal and political reasons for their positions. The Iran war was controversial within their domestic coalitions, legally ambiguous under their constitutional frameworks, and not covered by Article 5's collective defense provision since it did not involve an attack on a NATO member. They were not violating their treaty obligations. They were exercising their sovereignty, exactly as their domestic politics required.

That is precisely the problem. An alliance whose members exercise their sovereignty at the moment of maximum operational pressure is an alliance whose deterrence value depends entirely on whether the next crisis happens to align with every member's domestic political situation simultaneously. The probability of that alignment decreases as the number of members increases and as the diversity of their domestic political pressures grows. NATO has thirty-two members. The alignment problem is structural, not incidental.

Trump's Trillion and What It Buys

The spending numbers deserve honest assessment before the gap argument proceeds, because the numbers are genuinely significant. All NATO members met the 2% GDP defense spending benchmark in 2025 for the first time since the benchmark was established in 2014. European allies and Canada increased their core defense investment by \$139 billion between 2024 and 2025 alone. The Ankara summit announced \$40 billion committed to counter-drone capabilities over five years, \$26 billion in integrated air and missile defense, and defense industry contracts involving Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Palantir, Rheinmetall, Airbus, and Saab. These are not paper commitments. Defense industrial investment at this scale takes years to materialize as capability, but it represents a genuine and historically unusual shift in European political willingness to fund defense.

The steelman case for Ankara is real: the alliance is doing something it has not done in decades, and doing it at speed. The question is what the spending buys operationally, and how quickly. Only five NATO members are projected to meet the 3.5% core defense spending target in 2026. The commitment is to reach 5% by 2035 — a decade away. Military experts consistently note that most of Europe would still be unable to defend itself without the United States in a near-term conflict with Russia. The spending trajectory is moving in the right direction. The capability gap is being closed on a timeline that does not match the threat timeline Rutte himself has identified: Russia potentially ready to use military force against NATO by 2030.

The Communiqué Gap

While the spending announcements were being made, Italy was blocking Ukraine commitments in the Ankara Declaration draft. Reuters obtained the text. Article 5 remains ironclad. The €70 billion Ukraine support figure is in. Russia remains the long-term threat. And one member state — in an alliance of thirty-two that makes decisions by consensus — was using its veto to shape the language on the commitment that most directly affects the war being fought on NATO's eastern border.

This is the alliance's structural condition stated in real time: thirty-two sovereign governments, each with domestic political cycles, coalition dynamics, and electoral pressures that the NATO secretariat cannot override and that the summit communiqué cannot paper over, regardless of how many billions are announced in the surrounding press conference. The gap between "Trump's Trillion" and Trump's disappointment is the gap between what the alliance commits to on paper and what it can deliver operationally when the delivery is politically inconvenient for any single member.

Three weeks ago, the G7 summit in Evian produced sweeping language on Ukraine while leaving a \$52 billion budget gap explicitly unaddressed in the room. Today, the NATO summit in Ankara is producing sweeping spending commitments while Trump arrives to announce his disappointment with allies who declined operational support months earlier. The pattern is not specific to either institution. It is the operating condition of Western multilateral architecture in the current era: impressive headline commitments, genuine spending momentum, and operational reality that keeps lagging behind the press release.

What Deterrence Actually Requires

The spending momentum is real and should not be dismissed. The direction is correct. The timeline is the problem. A Russia that Rutte says could be ready to use military force against NATO by 2030 does not wait for European defense industries to reach 5% of GDP by 2035. The capability gap is being closed on a schedule that the threat environment did not negotiate.

The operational credibility gap is harder to close than the spending gap, because spending is a number that can be announced and tracked while operational credibility is a pattern of behavior that can only be demonstrated under pressure. The Iran episode demonstrated the pattern. Twenty-seven members of the world's most powerful military alliance declined to provide operational support when Washington specifically requested it — not because they lacked the capability but because their domestic political situations made the cost of support higher than the cost of refusal. That calculation does not change because the defense budget increased.

Trump's disappointment is analytically correct even if its expression is characteristically blunt. An alliance that produces a trillion dollars in spending commitments and declines operational requests in the same twelve-month period has not resolved the credibility question. It has funded the hardware while leaving the software — the political will to use it collectively, under pressure, when it is domestically inconvenient — on the same uncertain foundation it has always rested on. The spending is necessary. It is not sufficient. Ankara demonstrated both.

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