

# Previewing NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit

July 5, 2023

Leaders from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) 31 member states (see **Figure 1**) [are scheduled to meet](#) in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 11-12, 2023. The allies are expected to address [a number of issues of interest to Congress](#), including efforts to deter and respond to a possible Russian attack, NATO's relations with Ukraine, allied defense spending, security threats posed by China, and Sweden's pending accession to the alliance.

## Enhanced Deterrence and Defense

Since Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine, NATO has [bolstered its force posture](#) in the eastern part of the alliance, including by deploying eight [multinational battlegroups](#) in the region. Since early 2022, the number of allied soldiers deployed to Central and Eastern Europe more than tripled, bringing approximately [40,000 allied troops](#) in the region under direct NATO command. The United States has been a leading proponent of the enhanced defense posture and has deployed about [20,000 additional military personnel](#) to Europe since February 2022, including some under NATO command; as of mid-2022, U.S. forces in Europe totaled approximately [100,000 personnel](#).

In Vilnius, the allies are expected to adopt new regional defense plans and force structure requirements that NATO leaders characterize as [the most comprehensive](#) since the end of the Cold War. NATO leaders [stress](#) that implementation will require increased defense investments from NATO members. Some allies, including Poland and the Baltic states, also [have called for](#) permanent stationing of more combat forces on their territory.

## NATO-Ukraine Relations

In Vilnius, NATO leaders [are expected to](#) reaffirm support for Ukraine to eventually join the alliance, call on allies to continue providing Ukraine with robust security assistance, and announce enhanced partnership programs with Ukraine. Underscoring its role as a defensive alliance, NATO [has declared](#) that it would not deploy forces to Ukraine. NATO has, however, helped coordinate an estimated [\\$26 billion in security assistance](#) provided to Ukraine by individual allied governments, and has provided about [\\$82 million](#) in nonlethal support to Ukraine, including medical supplies and fuel.

Since 2008, NATO has reiterated a [broad pledge](#) that Ukraine will one day become a member, but has not outlined a timetable or specific benchmarks for a formal invitation. The Biden Administration and some

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other allied governments [have said](#) that Ukraine will not join the alliance while the war is ongoing. Other allies, including Poland and the Baltic states, [have called for](#) a more defined pathway to membership and have cautioned that postponing membership decisions could incentivize Russia to prolong the war.

Given a lack of progress in advancing Ukraine's membership prospects, [some allies argue](#) that NATO members should offer Ukraine explicit, long-term security guarantees. Most proposals under consideration [envision a coalition](#) of individual members—primarily NATO's most capable militaries, including the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany—adopting binding commitments to provide Ukraine with long-term security assistance.

## Defense Spending

Russia's war in Ukraine has added urgency to NATO efforts to increase allied defense spending and investment. At the Vilnius Summit, allies are expected to adopt new defense spending targets, building on NATO's [current guideline](#) for member states to aim to spend at least 2% of GDP on annual defense spending by 2024 (as agreed in 2014). NATO leaders [expect](#) 2% of GDP to be viewed as a minimal spending requirement, rather than a ceiling, though allies [continue to disagree](#) on whether to specify a higher level of GDP. NATO [reports](#) that defense spending within the alliance has increased for eight consecutive years, and [seven allies](#) met the 2% of GDP benchmark in 2022. A total of 17 allies [reportedly have plans](#) in place to meet or exceed the 2% target by 2024.

## Addressing Security Threats from China

NATO's 2022 [Strategic Concept](#) is the first NATO strategic blueprint in which the allies identify security challenges posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). A key NATO response has been to enhance cooperation with governments in the Indo-Pacific region, including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, each of which are scheduled to attend the Vilnius Summit. At the same time, some European governments remain [reluctant to antagonize](#) a major economic partner and concerned about the broader implications of a more confrontational relationship with Beijing.

## Finland and Sweden

The Vilnius Summit will be the first NATO summit attended by NATO's newest member, Finland, which formally joined the alliance on April 4, 2023. U.S. and NATO officials [had been working](#) toward welcoming Sweden as NATO's 32<sup>nd</sup> member at the summit, but accession remains delayed due to [concerns raised by Turkey and Hungary](#) (see CRS Insight IN11949, *NATO: Finland Joins as Sweden's Accession Faces Delay*).

## Considerations for Congress

In Vilnius, allied leaders plan to address a number of policy issues that have been of [sustained interest](#) to Congress, including the following:

- **NATO and U.S. Force Posture in Europe.** NATO has reoriented its collective defense posture in Europe to respond to the threat from Russia. Key questions remain, however, about the longer-term sustainability of these efforts, whether the alliance's current force posture would be adequate to deter or defend against a possible Russian military attack, and the U.S. role in such a response.
- **NATO Support for Ukraine.** While some in Congress have [voiced support](#) for Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations and a majority have voted in favor of U.S. bilateral assistance to Ukraine, others have [expressed opposition](#). The outcome of NATO

deliberations over Ukraine's membership prospects and possible security guarantees for Ukraine could be a factor in congressional consideration of potential longer-term support for Ukraine.

- **Allied Defense Spending.** Throughout NATO's history, Congress has consistently urged European allies and Canada to increase defense spending. Some Members have suggested that allied defense spending levels could influence congressional deliberations over potential future U.S. security commitments in Europe.
- **Possible Accession of Sweden.** Congressional majorities have voiced support for pending NATO enlargement to Sweden. In 2022, the Senate passed a resolution of ratification approving Sweden's (and Finland's) accession by a vote of 95-1; the House passed legislation in support of accession by a vote of 394-18 (H.Res. 1130).

**Figure I. NATO Members and Aspirants**

#### NATO Enlargement

**1949** Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, U.K., U.S.

**1952** Greece and Turkey

**1955** West Germany  
(East and West Germany were unified in 1990)

**1982** Spain

**1999** Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland

**2004** Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia

**2009** Albania and Croatia

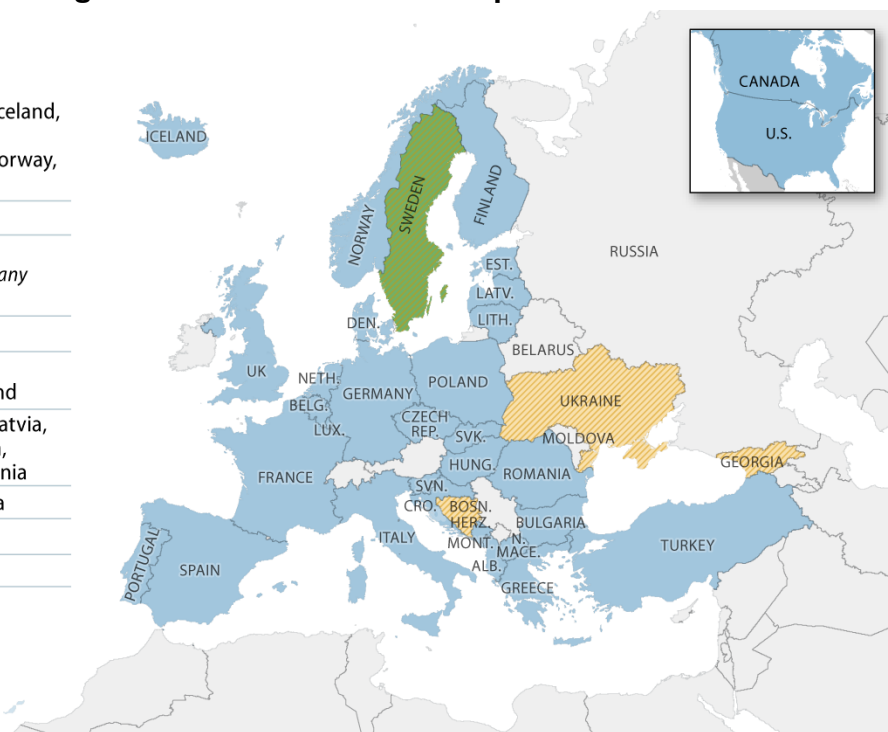
**2017** Montenegro

**2020** North Macedonia

**2023** Finland

■ NATO Invitee

■ NATO Aspirants



**Source:** CRS Graphics. Map updated April 2023.

## Author Information

Paul Belkin  
Analyst in European Affairs

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