



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on August 28, 2025

NATO Hits Two-percent Spending Benchmark, Driven by Trump's Push

NATO's latest defense [spending report](#) marks a clear turning point. For the first time, all 32 member states are estimated to meet the long-standing target of allocating at least two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to defense. The lone exception is Iceland, which has no standing armed forces.

The shift has been rapid. In 2023, only 10 allies reached the threshold. By 2024, that number had risen to 18. Now, in mid-2025, 31 of 32 have crossed the line — a dramatic reversal for an alliance long criticized for lagging budgets.



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Russia's invasion of Ukraine injected urgency across Europe. But it was Washington's relentless pressure, especially from President Donald Trump, that gave that urgency its political edge.

The Trump Effect

NATO's sudden leap toward the two-percent target was not born of quiet persuasion. It was forged under Donald Trump's distinctly unsubtle pressure campaign.

Back in January 2017, just days before taking office, Trump set the tone by [calling](#) NATO "obsolete" — because, he argued, it "wasn't taking care of terror." For a moment, it sounded like a promise of withdrawal — the kind of break from the Cold War alliance European leaders dreaded and many Americans hoped for. But in the same breath, Trump clarified that NATO was in fact "very important" to him — just not very fair. Only five of its 28 members were paying their share, he said, and that was "very unfair to the United States." The message was contradictory but unmistakable: the alliance would survive, but only if it came with bigger checks from Europe.

At NATO's 2018 summit in Brussels, Trump made the threat explicit, [warning](#) the United States could withdraw its support if allies didn't pay more, even hinting that Washington might "go its own way." Then he raised the bar to four percent of GDP. NATO's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, with Nordic understatement, [replied](#): "We should first get to 2 percent."

When speeches didn't land hard enough, Trump reached for paperwork. His administration sent [formal letters](#) to governments from Britain to Norway, warning that partnership with Washington could be at risk unless defense budgets grew larger still. [London received one](#) despite already meeting the threshold — a reminder that in Trump's NATO, compliance was never quite enough.

The rhetoric only sharpened as his political career advanced. On the campaign trail in 2024, Trump recalled telling one European leader:

You did not pay? You are delinquent?... No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would



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encourage them [Russia] to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills.

By June 2025, back in office, Trump pushed the ceiling higher. Following the [NATO summit](#) in the Hague, where allies agreed to commit five percent of GDP by 2035, the White House declared a “monumental victory.”

From “obsolete” to “monumental,” the rhetoric shifted, but the constant was clear: under Trump, NATO would not just survive, it would harden into a bigger military machine.

Trump’s June Victory Lap

When NATO leaders signed off on the new five-percent pledge, the White House wasted no time framing it as a [personal triumph](#) of the president:

In a defining moment for global security, President Donald J. Trump achieved a monumental victory for the United States and its allies, brokering an historic deal to dramatically increase defense contributions across the NATO alliance — and marking a new era of shared responsibility and strength against global threats.

The press release doubled as a highlight reel of praise. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte was quoted saying Trump “deserves all the praise.” Finland’s Alexander Stubb spoke of “the birth of a new NATO.” Poland’s Andrzej Duda said that “without Trump’s leadership, it would be impossible.” Estonia’s Kristen Michal called it “a historic moment.” EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas and Poland’s Radek Sikorski added that “everybody needs to do more,” and that “Trump was right in his first term.”

Even the press clippings came ready-made. The White House cited CNN calling it “a diplomatic masterstroke,” *Politico* proclaiming a “big win,” *The Wall Street Journal* declaring that “Trump Wins the Battle of NATO,” and *Le Monde* noting him “triumphant.”

In other words, the administration not only announced the deal but published its own chorus of validation — from allies, officials, and media alike — to cement the narrative of Trump as the indispensable architect of NATO’s revival.

Rubio’s “Taxpayers” Tale

Secretary of State Marco Rubio was quick to cast the five-percent pledge as proof of vindication. In early July, he wrote for [USA Today](#) that NATO was now “much better poised to project military, diplomatic and economic power,” proof that Trump’s tough love had worked.

He cast the surge as “fairness and strategic wisdom,” arguing that Europe had slipped into military irrelevance until Trump forced a reckoning. He pointed back to Trump’s 2016 complaint — “We are getting ripped off by every country in NATO” — and presented the Hague deal as the long-awaited correction. In Rubio’s telling, this was nothing less than “a win for American taxpayers.”

But the math tells another story. U.S. taxpayers are not paying less. Washington’s defense budget continues to grow year after year. What has changed is that Europeans are now paying more — and much of that money will flow into the coffers of American defense firms. The supposed relief is a mirage. The “win” Rubio trumpets is not a lighter load for Americans, but a bigger global arms race packaged as fairness.



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Hegseth's Hard-power Call

Unlike Rubio, Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth didn't bother to dress it up. At NATO's meeting of defense ministers in Brussels in June, he [called](#) plainly for a stronger, more heavily armed alliance:

We don't need more flags; we need more fighting formations. We don't need more conferences; we need more capabilities, hard power.

When a reporter directly asked whether the U.S. might withdraw from NATO, Hegseth brushed it off: "That's not what we're here to discuss."

He framed the conversation as one of shared urgency. Thanks to President Trump's pressure, he noted, allies had gone from mocking the "2 percent of GDP" defense goal to nearing a sweeping "5 percent commitment" ahead of the Hague summit.

In short, Hegseth delivered the de facto answer to the withdrawal question through action, not words. America wasn't stepping back — it was demanding that NATO get up and arm.

Who Wins?

The obvious winners are defense contractors. Trump himself [admitted](#) in September 2020:

The top people in the Pentagon [...] want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy.

With NATO budgets surging past two percent and racing toward five, those companies are happier than ever. Taxpayers are not paying less, just more alongside Europeans, while arms makers reap the rewards.

What began as a promise to end "endless wars" has become NATO's biggest military buildup — at the expense of constitutional principles and to the benefit of an industry Trump once openly called out.

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