

NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit

Updated July 20, 2023

Leaders from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) 31 member states (see **Figure 1**) met in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 11-12, 2023. The allies addressed numerous 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 these efforts and has deployed about 20,000 additional military personnel in 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 adopted new regional defense plans and force structure requirements, which NATO leaders characterize as the most comprehensive since the end of the Cold War. NATO officials stress that implementation will require increased defense investments from NATO members.

NATO-Ukraine Relations

In Vilnius, NATO leaders declared that "Ukraine's future is in NATO"; called on allies to continue providing Ukraine with robust security assistance; and announced enhanced partnership programs with Ukraine, including the creation of a new NATO-Ukraine Council. Underscoring its role as a defensive alliance, NATO has declared it will not deploy forces to Ukraine. Allied governments have collectively provided an estimated \$79 billion in security assistance to Ukraine (including about \$47 billion from the United States), and NATO has provided about \$82 million in nonlethal support, 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 other allied governments have said Ukraine will not join NATO while the war is ongoing. Other allies, including Poland and the Baltic states, have called for a more defined pathway to membership and have

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cautioned that postponing membership decisions could incentivize Russia to prolong the war. In Vilnius, allies pledged to work closely with Ukraine to enact the reforms necessary for NATO membership. They also announced that Ukraine had “[moved beyond](#)” the need for a Membership Action Plan, typically required for aspiring members.

[Some allies have argued](#) that NATO members should offer Ukraine explicit, long-term security guarantees. In Vilnius, the Group of Seven (G7) industrialized economies—including NATO members Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States—[announced commitments](#) to provide Ukraine with long-term assistance.

Defense Spending

Russia’s war in Ukraine has added urgency to efforts to increase allied defense spending. At the summit, allies strengthened NATO’s defense spending guidelines, which called on NATO members to aim to spend at least 2% of GDP on annual defense spending by 2024 (as agreed in 2014). The allies stressed that 2% of GDP be viewed as a minimal spending requirement and that “[in many cases, expenditure beyond 2% of GDP will be needed](#).” NATO [reports](#) that defense spending within the alliance has increased for eight consecutive years and estimates that [11 allies](#) will meet the 2% of GDP benchmark in 2023. 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). In Vilnius, the allies reiterated that the PRC’s “[stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge \[NATO’s\] interests, security and values](#).” 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 attended 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 the PRC.

Finland and Sweden

The Vilnius Summit was the first NATO summit attended by NATO’s newest member, Finland, which formally joined the alliance on April 4, 2023. On the eve of the summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced his government would [lift its objections](#) to Sweden becoming NATO’s 32nd member and move to ratify accession [in October](#). Sweden’s accession has been 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

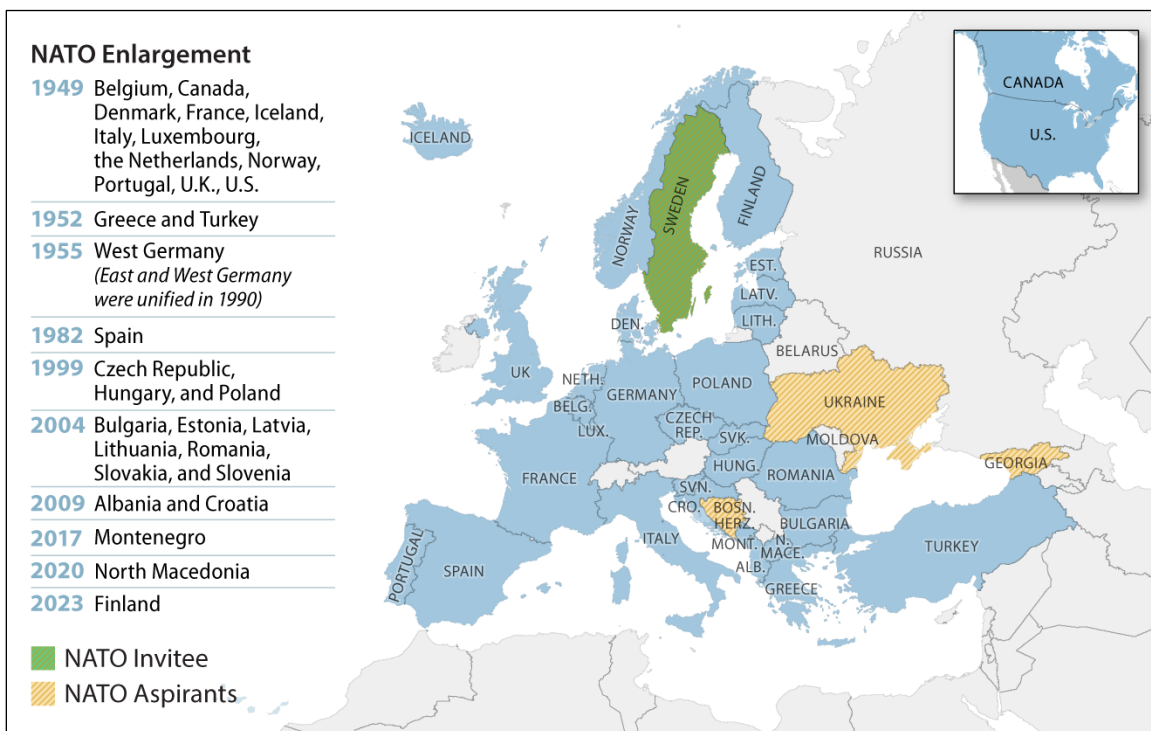
In Vilnius, allied leaders addressed numerous policy issues that have been of [sustained interest](#) to Congress, including the following:

- **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](#). Ukraine's membership prospects and possible security guarantees for Ukraine could factor into congressional consideration of potential longer-term support for Ukraine.

- **Allied Defense Spending.** Throughout NATO's history, Congress has [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 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 H.Res. 1130 in support of accession by a vote of 394-18.

Figure I. NATO Members and Aspirants



Source: CRS Graphics. Map updated April 2023.

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