

As NATO's seventy-fifth anniversary summit unfolded in Washington, DC, the festivities were noticeably tinged with an air of uncertainty. The looming shadow of the upcoming U.S. presidential election, with the specter of Donald Trump's potential return to the White House, cast a pall over the celebrations. The summit, originally intended to mark a milestone in transatlantic unity, instead found itself grappling with the question of its own future in a rapidly shifting political landscape.

At the heart of the summit were two primary objectives. First, NATO sought to reaffirm to the American public why the alliance remains a crucial and beneficial arrangement for the United States. European members, long criticized for lagging in defense spending, have stepped up their contributions. Twenty-three out of thirty-two NATO allies now meet or exceed the goal of spending 2 percent of their GDP on defense—a significant increase in collective investment that underscores a renewed commitment to shared security responsibilities.

The second focal point was institutionalizing support for Ukraine. The alliance aimed to bring various support structures for Ukraine under a NATO umbrella. This includes coordinating weapon deliveries, training programs, and building Ukraine's future military force, with a new command center in Germany and a civilian representative in Ukraine. These moves signal a concerted effort to streamline and solidify NATO's support for Ukraine, particularly in the face of ongoing Russian aggression.

Yet, these strategic decisions also reveal a deeper intent: to "Trump-proof" the alliance and its commitments. The summit's cautious approach to defining criteria and terms for Ukraine's potential NATO membership reflects a broader strategy of securing existing policies rather than advancing new ones. The priority, it seems, is to safeguard the alliance's integrity and ensure continuity of support for Ukraine, regardless of potential political upheavals in the United States.

Complicating matters further, questions about President Joe Biden's future and his re-election

campaign loomed large over the summit discussions. Concerns about Biden's candidacy brought to the forefront the uncomfortable reality that NATO's future is inextricably linked to the outcome of the U.S. elections. Despite European allies' hopes for greater independence from American political fluctuations, the alliance remains deeply intertwined with the U.S. political sphere.

A NATO led by a second-term President Trump would likely be a stark departure from its current incarnation. Rather than a values-based alliance, it could transform into a transactional, pay-for-service arrangement. This shift would come at a particularly challenging time for NATO, as the alliance grapples with an expanding scope of threats. While NATO has traditionally focused on the North Atlantic, China's support for Russia's war in Ukraine and its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly drawing the alliance into new strategic theaters. The presence of Indo-Pacific allies at the summit underscored this evolving reality.

As NATO commemorates seventy-five years of collective defense, it stands at a crossroads. The alliance's future will be shaped not just by its members' commitments and external threats, but by the political winds in Washington. The upcoming U.S. elections hold the potential to redefine NATO's trajectory, either reinforcing its foundational principles or shifting it towards a more transactional model. In this climate of uncertainty, the unity and resolve of the alliance will be tested like never before.