Briefing Paper No.126
18 June 2025

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Improving oversight and accountability of the NATO Defence Planning Process

The NATO Defence Planning Process has recently set capability targets that provide the rationale for NATO's likely new 5% military spending target that is set to be agreed at the Hague Summit next week. This process is little known outside of defence ministries and NATO headquarters. It has virtually no parliamentary oversight yet is driving the most consequential shift in European military spending in the last two generations. Improvement of democratic oversight of the NATO Defence Planning Process is needed at the national level, the alliance level and by increasing overall transparency within NATO.

I. Introduction

At a meeting in Brussels on 5 June 2025, NATO Defence Ministers agreed a new set of classified "capability targets", which according to the NATO news release will help "to build a stronger, fairer, more lethal Alliance, and ensure warfighting readiness for years to come".

At a press conference NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte confirmed that the targets "describe exactly what capabilities Allies need to invest in over the coming years… to keep our deterrence and defence strong and our one billion people safe". However, since the capability targets remain classified and are beyond the scrutiny of parliamentarians, independent experts and the public, it is impossible to know if these claims are correct.

The targets also form the basis of the new military investment plan which is expected to be approved at the NATO Summit in The Hague on 24-25 June (see NATO Watch Briefing no. 124). The proposal calls for NATO member states to invest 5% of GDP in defence, including 3.5% on core defence spending, as well as 1.5% of GDP per year on defence and security-related investment, including in infrastructure and resilience. It is surely no coincidence that the figure of 1.5% extra spending is designed to take the total to President Trump's 5% goal. However, the exact details of what can be included in each spending category, and the timescale for reaching the target are still being discussed but are expected to be resolved before the Summit.

As the NATO Secretary General said in his speech at Chatham House on the 9 June, the "5% is not some figure plucked from the air…..Our decisions on defence spending are driven by NATO's battle plans and capability targets". While adding that the "exact details are classified" he highlighted some of the headline targets as "a 400% increase in air and missile defence" to "strengthen the shield that protects our skies", as well as "thousands more armoured vehicles and tanks, millions more artillery shells" and a doubling of "enabling capabilities, such as logistics, supply, transportation and medical support".

He also stressed that there would be more investment in warships and aircraft, and gave the example of the United States' planned procurement of "at least 700 F-35 fighter jets in total". He also said there would be investment in "more drones and long-range missile systems", "space and cyber capabilities", as well as broader defence and

security related investments, including infrastructure. “Roads, rail and ports are just as important as tanks, fighters and warships”, he said. Finally, since “the home front and the front line are now one and the same”, there will also be more investment “in civil preparedness”, in protection “against cyber-attacks, sabotage and other threats”, as well as “financing and capital improvements to our defence industrial base”. In other words, a full spectrum military modernization by NATO member states is expected across all domains.

II. The NATO Defence Planning Process

So how was agreement reached on these capability targets? This was part of a NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which is the alliance's primary mechanism for translating political objectives into concrete military capabilities. It is a structured, formal process—a kind of corporate strategic planning cycle for a 32-nation military alliance—that is little known outside of defence ministries and NATO headquarters. However, it is a process that is driving the most consequential shift in European military spending in the last two generations.

The NDPP is meant to ensure that NATO as a whole has the right capabilities (the necessary forces, equipment and resources) to perform its core tasks, and meet current and future security challenges. It covers the full spectrum of military capabilities—land, sea, air, space, and cyber—and includes personnel, equipment, logistics, and readiness. It is a five-step, four-year cyclical process managed by the NATO Defence Policy and Planning Committee (DPPC) and with a major review every two years. These are its main elements, broken down by each step.

Step 1: Political Guidance

This is the starting point and the strategic foundation of the entire process. The classified Political Guidance defines NATO’s overall ambition by outlining the security environment, identifying the most likely threats and challenges (e.g., state-level aggression, terrorism, cyber-attacks) and by specifying the types and number of operations NATO should be prepared to conduct simultaneously. The aim is to give the military planners a clear, politically-approved ‘mission statement’ and level of ambition to work from.

The PG draws on the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO’s current Strategic Concept, summit declarations and ministerial guidance. NATO’s Military Committee and the two NATO strategic commands—Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT)—also supply input into developing the PG. The most recent iteration is the 2023 Political Guidance, which was approved by Defence Ministers in February 2023. The document remains classified, although at least one earlier version (the 2006 Comprehensive Political Guidance) is available online.

Step 2: Determine Requirements

This step translates the political vision into specific military terms. NATO's Military Committee supported by ACO and ACT draw up a detailed assessment of the total military forces and capabilities NATO needs to execute the tasks outlined in the Political Guidance. ACO focuses on the requirements for current and near-term operations, while ACT focuses on future capability requirements and long-term development. A single, consolidated list is produced called the Minimum Capability Requirements (MCR). This is essentially NATO’s total ‘shopping list’ of capabilities needed—from heavy tank brigades and combat aircraft squadrons to cyber defence teams and strategic airlift. Again, the MCR remains classified.

Step 3: Apportion Requirements and Set Targets

This is the critical step that was reached in early June where the collective need set out in the MCR is divided among the individual member states. The process of negotiating and assigning specific "Capability Targets" to each ally is a closed consultative process involving NATO's international staff and representatives from each member state. The total

requirements are not divided purely by a mathematical formula. The process considers factors like an ally's economic strength (GDP), population size and existing military capabilities. Extensive multilateral consultations take place within NATO with the aim of ensuring the specific package of Capability Targets are realistic, fair and achievable for each member state. For example, Country A might be asked to provide one armoured brigade, two squadrons of multi-role aircraft, and a specific cyber defence unit by a certain date. Each defence minister accepts their respective Capability Targets with the aim of incorporating them into national-level defence planning. Again, the Capability Targets are classified.

Step 4: Facilitate National Implementation

This step moves from planning at the NATO level to action at the national level to turn the agreed-upon targets into actual, funded military capabilities. Each member state takes its assigned Capability Targets and integrates them into its own national defence planning, budgeting and procurement processes. While ultimately remaining a matter of national sovereignty—it is up to each country's government and parliament to allocate the funds and resources to meet the targets, and NATO's role in this phase is to provide support, expertise and encouragement—the reality is that the closed nature of the process and lack of independent scrutiny is likely to result in little, if any, pushback against implementation

Step 5: Review Results

According to NATO this is the accountability and assessment phase that closes the loop. NATO staff conduct a comprehensive, collective assessment of the extent to which each member state—and the Alliance as a whole—is meeting its Capability Targets. The assessment by NATO staff is based on information submitted by the member states through the Defence Planning Questionnaire (DPQ). This culminates in a final Capability Review Assessment, effectively a detailed report card for each ally, highlighting strengths, shortfalls, and areas for improvement. This assessment (with an accompanying brief overview) is peer-reviewed by the other member states in the DPPC. The purpose is to measure progress, identify collective capability gaps, and provide data-driven feedback that informs the next cycle's Political Guidance (Step 1), thus making the process continuous and adaptive.

Again, however, this final part of the loop is closed to external, independent review since the assessments remain classified, although both the Netherlands and Denmark (in 2018, 2020 and 2022, the latter one heavily redacted) have previously published the overview of their own Capability Review. A freedom of information request for the overview of the UK's assessment in 2020 was denied by the UK Ministry of Defence on the grounds that it was written by NATO staff as a classified document and its release "would make relations between the UK and NATO more difficult". Following a failed appeal a decision was sought from the UK Information Commissioner which upheld the MoD decision even while accepting that there was a "clear public interest" in releasing the information.

The DPPC finalises the process by generating a biennial NATO Capability Report, which shows how well NATO is meeting its national and collective level of ambition. The classified Report, together with approved national Overviews, goes to the North Atlantic Council (NAC) for agreement and then to NATO defence ministers for endorsement.

III. Improving democratic oversight of the NATO Defence Planning Process

Improving democratic oversight of the NDPP is a complex challenge that strikes at the heart of the tension between military effectiveness, national sovereignty and democratic accountability. The NDPP sets collective targets, but the power to raise, fund, and deploy troops remains a sovereign national right, primarily overseen by national parliaments. However, there are several core challenges to national parliaments exercising this democratic oversight. First, most of the

NDPP, especially individual nations' Capability Targets and shortfalls, is classified. This prevents open parliamentary and public debate. Second, the executive branches (Ministries of Defence) and NATO's military command have a near-monopoly on information, creating a significant power imbalance with legislatures. Third, the process is filled with military jargon, complex metrics and long-term strategic analysis, making it inaccessible to most parliamentarians and the public.

Given that the NDPP is inherently technical, almost entirely classified, and driven by military experts and executive branches of government, this makes robust democratic oversight difficult, but not impossible. Several innovative steps could be considered to improve democratic oversight at the national level, the alliance level (through the NATO Parliamentary Assembly) and by increasing overall transparency.

Strengthening national parliaments

This is arguably the most crucial area, as parliaments hold the power of the purse and are the primary source of democratic legitimacy. Democratic oversight could be strengthened by creating more robust mechanisms for national parliaments to review and scrutinize NATO defence planning. This might involve:

- **Creating specialised, high-security committees**

National parliaments could establish or empower specific defence sub-committees with the necessary security clearances to review classified NDPP documents. Modelled on intelligence oversight committees, these bodies could receive confidential briefings from defence ministers and military chiefs about the capability targets assigned to their country and the government's plan to meet them.

- **Mandating regular reporting and debates**

Legislation could be introduced that mandates e a requirement for the government to present a regular (e.g., biennial) report to parliament on its progress in meeting NATO capability targets. This report could have a public, unclassified section and a classified annex for the specialised committee. This would trigger a mandatory parliamentary debate on long-term defence policy.

- **Enhancing parliamentary expertise**

Parliamentary defence committees could be provided with greater resources, including dedicated, security-cleared research staff with expertise in defence and strategic studies. This would help bridge the information gap with the executive branch.

- **Linking budgetary approval to NDPP goals**

During the annual budget process, defence committees could explicitly scrutinise how proposed spending aligns with the long-term commitments made within the NDPP. This would make the connection between spending today and collective security tomorrow more *

- **Creating standardised NATO-wide accountability frameworks**

Common standardised accountability frameworks for parliamentary oversight could be established across all member states, including some cross-national parliamentary review mechanisms.

Enhancing the role of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA)

The NATO PA is a vital forum for inter-parliamentary dialogue, but it currently has no formal power over NATO's decisions or the NDPP. It can only advise and recommend. While giving the NATO PA formal legislative power is politically unfeasible, its influence and oversight function could be significantly enhanced by:

- **Formalising consultation rights**

The NATO PA's charter could be amended to grant it a formal right to be consulted on major shifts in NATO's strategic posture and the broad outlines of each NDPP cycle. The NATO Secretary General could be required to present the political guidance for the NDPP to a plenary session of the Assembly.

- **Increased and structured dialogue**

Regular, structured dialogues could be instituted between the NATO PA's Defence and Security Committee and key NATO officials like

the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and the Chair of the Military Committee. These could move beyond general updates to substantive, closed-door discussions on capability challenges.

- **Joint meetings with national committees**

The NATO PA could facilitate joint meetings between the defence committees of various national parliaments. This would allow parliamentarians to compare notes, understand the collective nature of the challenges, and coordinate their national oversight efforts.

- **Peer review of national oversight**

The NATO PA could produce reports not just on NATO policy, but on the state of democratic oversight of defence in member countries, highlighting best practices and encouraging weaker parliaments to strengthen their procedures.

Increasing transparency and public engagement

A more informed public can create the political will for governments to take defence planning seriously. This could be achieved by:

- **Declassifying more information**

NATO and member nations could conduct a rigorous review of what parts of the NDPP truly need to be classified. High-level summaries of capability requirements, overall alliance-wide shortfalls (without naming specific nations), and the political guidance driving the process could be made public.

- **Adopting an information openness policy consistent with the access to information laws already in place in the 32 member countries**

NATO is one of the few major intergovernmental bodies not to have even a basic information disclosure policy. The right of access to information is firmly established in international and national law as a human right and is essential for upholding the values that NATO was created to protect. It therefore applies to all national and international public bodies and should also apply to NATO. Such a policy should include guidelines for proactive publication of core information, a mechanism by which the public can file requests for information, and an independent review body for hearing appeals against refusals or failures to make information public within a short time-frame.

- **Publishing a public 'State of the alliance' report**

NATO could produce an annual, unclassified report that explains the strategic environment, the general capability targets the alliance is pursuing and the progress made. This would mirror the public reports often released by national defence ministries.

- **Proactive government communication**

Defence ministers could be more proactive in explaining to their public why certain military capabilities (e.g., air-to-air refuelling, cyber defence units) are needed, linking them directly to the security guarantees provided by NATO.

- **Increasing civil society engagement**

Participation could be broadened beyond traditional governmental structures to provide more comprehensive democratic input. This could be achieved by: creating formal consultation mechanisms with think tanks, academic experts, and civil society organizations; hosting public hearings and forums to discuss defence planning priorities; and developing more accessible public communication about NATO's strategic planning processes. These civil society groups can help 'translate' complex issues for the public and provide independent analysis.

- **Leveraging modern technologies and governance approaches**

This might include digital platforms for more inclusive consultation and more sophisticated tracking of capability development and strategic objectives.

These recommendations aim to balance the need for strategic military planning with democratic principles of transparency, accountability and public engagement. The goal would be to create a more inclusive process that maintains NATO's operational effectiveness while ensuring robust democratic oversight. Opponents will argue that greater transparency could reveal

vulnerabilities to adversaries. This is a valid concern, which is why what is proposed here is a tiered access (e.g., secure committees) rather than full public disclosure of sensitive details. Two greater hurdles are likely to be political unwillingness and bureaucratic inertia. Governments often prefer to handle defence matters with minimal scrutiny to maintain flexibility and avoid difficult public debates about costs and risks. Moreover, the NDPP is a deeply entrenched, expert-driven process. Introducing new layers of political oversight is likely to be met with significant resistance from within the NATO military and civilian bureaucracy.

IV. Conclusion

Improving democratic oversight of the NDPP is not about replacing military expertise with political intervention. It is about ensuring that the long-term, high-stakes decisions made within NATO are understood, scrutinised and ultimately legitimised by the democratic institutions of its member states. Similar criticisms have been made of NATO's regional defence plans, which also received remarkably little public and parliamentary scrutiny. The most effective path forward is a multi-pronged approach: empowering national parliaments with the access and expertise to do their job, enhancing the consultative and coordinating role of the NATO PA, and carefully increasing transparency to build public understanding and support. This would not weaken the alliance but strengthen it by grounding its military power in a more robust democratic foundation.

Annex: Glossary

Allied Command Operations (ACO). A key military command within NATO, responsible for planning and executing all NATO military operations. It is headquartered at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) near Mons, Belgium, and is commanded by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)—a position traditionally held by a US four-star general or admiral, who also serves as the commander of the US European Command.

Allied Command Transformation (ACT). Another key military command whose primary role is to lead the military adaptation of NATO's military structures, forces, capabilities and doctrines to meet current and future challenges. It is headed by the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT), who is based in Norfolk, Virginia.

NATO Defence Policy and Planning Committee (DPPC). A key advisory body within NATO, responsible for providing strategic guidance on defence policy and planning. It is composed of senior representatives from each NATO member state, typically at Ambassadorial or Director-General level – in most delegations the person in the chair is the national "Defence Policy Director" (or the country's Permanent Representative to NATO, with a defence portfolio). Senior NATO officials from the political and military staffs may also participate to provide institutional expertise. The committee is usually chaired by NATO's Deputy Secretary General and it reports directly to the North Atlantic Council (NAC).

NATO Military Committee. The highest military authority within NATO and the primary source of military advice to the North Atlantic Council and the Nuclear Planning Group. It also provides direction to the two Strategic Commanders. The committee is composed of the Chiefs of Defence from all member states and is responsible for recommending military measures for the common defence of the NATO area.