

FT Magazine Nato

The untold story of the most chaotic Nato summit ever

Told by the people who witnessed the 2018 Trump show first hand

Henry Foy 8 HOURS AGO

Donald Trump was going to pull out of Nato. As the president's motorcade powered through the early morning light of July 12 2018, bound for a summit of the western military alliance, he called his national security adviser. "We're being treated unfairly," Trump said. "By January 1, all nations must commit to [increasing defence spending] . . . or we will walk out and not defend those who haven't."

Trump hung up, crossed his arms and smiled. As news of his decision spread through the US delegation that had travelled with him to Brussels for the summit, staff began to panic. But many of the alliance's other leaders, who were already milling around a large conference table and making small talk, were unaware of what was barrelling towards them.

Trump's hijacking of the 2018 Nato summit marked the biggest turning point in the history of the alliance that has guaranteed European security since 1949. The chaotic, 48-hour meeting crescendoed with the US president telling America's allies that it would no longer protect Europe "carte blanche".

Trump's first Nato summit, the previous year, had been a muted affair, during which he had largely kept his isolationist rhetoric — and his temper — in check. Back then, he was still being handled and hemmed in by his staff. But now, after almost 18 months in office, he'd come to Brussels determined to awaken Europe to a stark new geopolitical reality. The Nato that will meet in Washington next week for its 75th-anniversary summit has been vastly reshaped by that changed landscape. America's Nato allies have ramped up defence spending to unprecedented levels. They will spend a combined \$430bn this year, 55 per cent more than before Trump's Brussels' intervention.

Not all of that is due to Trump, of course. [Russia's war on Ukraine](#) has forced all European countries to make good on pledges to take more responsibility for their own security. But with Trump gunning for a second term, what his return would mean for the alliance is likely to be on the minds of diplomats and politicians at next week's meeting. Those taking that prospect seriously will be looking for precedent in the past. The following account of the 2018 summit is based on conversations with more than two dozen leaders, officials and advisers who were present then. All of them spoke on condition of anonymity; many winced at the memory.



© Barry Blitt

9.13am, Wednesday, July 11

Residence of the US Chief of Mission, Brussels

It was supposed to be a routine photo op, capturing a few anodyne minutes at the start of a meeting. Some handshakes, brief remarks, then the press are waved out and the doors close.

That's what [Jens Stoltenberg](#), the secretary-general of Nato, had in mind. The silver-haired Norwegian, who has the demeanour and rimless eyewear of an academic, had drawn up a plan for dealing with Trump — his temperamental, emotional and physical opposite — once they were behind closed doors. He was going to serve the president a delicately mixed cocktail of empathy and cajoling. And, above all, he would avoid confrontation.

As the cameras snapped shots of Trump, Stoltenberg and their two delegations, a reporter shouted: “Mr President, which countries did you want to spend more on Nato in particular?”

“Many countries are not paying what they should,” Trump responded. “And frankly, many countries owe us a tremendous amount of money, for many years back . . . They're delinquent, as far as I'm concerned, because the United States has had to pay for them.”

Trump was flanked by his core Nato team. On his left elbow was secretary of state Mike Pompeo, the former CIA chief who had flown straight to Brussels from meetings in North Korea. On his right was his permanent ambassador to Nato, Kay Bailey Hutchison, the former Texas senator who played a critical role as a back channel between the White House and Nato HQ. Secretary of defence Jim Mattis, a retired four-star general and former Nato commander was also present, as was John Bolton, an arch foreign-policy hawk and Trump's national security adviser.





Jens Stoltenberg, Nato secretary general, centre left, and US president Donald Trump, centre right, shake hands as world leaders gather for a 'family photo' © Marlene Awaad/Bloomberg

“Massive amounts of money is owed,” Trump went on. Occasionally, the president pivoted away from the press and towards his allies’ representatives, who mainly sat staring stoically at their glasses of orange juice. “The United States has paid and stepped up like nobody. This has gone on for decades, by the way. This has gone on for many presidents. But no other president brought it up like I bring it up. So something has to be done.”

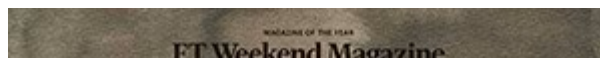
Trump’s team knew this diatribe by heart. Though few, if any, shared his views. As Trump knew, his delegation wanted to leave Brussels having delivered stern rhetoric, without having inflicted lasting damage to the transatlantic relationship that had underpinned US dominance of the west.

Stoltenberg sat across the large polished brown table unblinking as the lecture continued. Protocol was already far back in the rear-view, but Stoltenberg showed no signs of distress. He had been secretary-general for nearly four years and had witnessed variations of this monologue before. His colleagues sitting on either side of him, however, began to shift awkwardly in their seats. “I don’t know if [Trump] planned it like that or not,” said a person present that morning. “But it was an ambush, a total ambush.”

As Trump began to lose steam, he seemed to recall that the breakfast was envisaged as a two-way conversation. He gestured to Stoltenberg: “You going to say something?”

In the weeks leading up to the summit, Stoltenberg’s team had liaised with the president’s advisers on what to expect. They’d prepared for a number of Trump attack lines. Bolton, in particular, had spent hours in discussions with Stoltenberg and his powerful chief of staff. The moustachioed former attorney had been in the job for less than four months but had already surprised allies by promoting largely traditional foreign policy.

Some had feared what Bolton might bring, after his brief time as US ambassador to the UN, an organisation he had repeatedly stated had no purpose. But he had helped Stoltenberg devise his Trump-handling tactics. “It wasn’t a particular secret to us that this summit could be a challenging one,” said someone involved in those preparations. “President Trump is not actually that critical of Nato as such. He’s just very critical of European allies.”





Germany, in particular, was in Trump’s crosshairs. It spent less than 2 per cent of GDP on defence, despite being Europe’s most powerful nation. And it bought vast amounts of gas from Russia, the country Nato saw as its primary threat. “So we are protecting you against Russia, but they’re paying billions of dollars to Russia?” Trump asked sarcastically. “We’re going to have to do something because we’re not going to put up with it. We can’t put up with it. And it’s inappropriate.”

Stoltenberg gamely tried to stick to his talking points for the rolling cameras. “I think,” the Norwegian offered, “that two world wars and the cold war taught us that we are stronger together than apart.”

Trump frowned. “But how can you be together when a country is getting its energy from the person you want protection against? No, you’re just making Russia richer.”

The heavily one-sided discussion lasted just 13 minutes but, for many present, it felt like much longer. Around 9.30am, protocol officials finally instructed the cameras to leave the room. After they did, Trump continued talking. The new Nato headquarters, opened a year previously, were a mistake, he said. Instead of spending €1.1bn, he said, it would have been better to have built a €500mn bunker or spent the money on tanks. At one point, Trump claimed that Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission — the EU’s executive body, which is totally unrelated to Nato except for the more than 20 countries who are members of both — was controlling how much European members pay into Nato.

“Trump was very, very harsh,” said the person present. “But the secretary general was very professional, and he just took it in, he never expressed shock, dismay, nothing.

He just listened, so it was a venting session.” A Nato official was less diplomatic: “We got a beating. It set the tone for what was to come.”



Donald Trump and Theresa May at a dinner of leaders at the Art and History Museum at the Parc Cinquantenaire in Brussels © GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT/AFP/Getty Images

7.45pm, Wednesday, July 11

Working summit dinner, Brussels Art & History Museum, Parc Cinquantenaire

For the rest of the day, Trump kept his counsel. Through highly staged meetings, the US president held his tongue. Discussions over how to better protect Nato’s eastern flank from potential dangers passed without setting off rhetorical fireworks. A forgettable summit communique was duly agreed by all the leaders. Everything between the US and its allies was fine.

But at the formal summit dinner that evening, Trump’s mood seemed to darken, according to several people who attended. The president was accompanied by the first lady, Melania, and ambassador Hutchison. After taking a family photo and watching an acrobatic dance performance, guests had dinner prepared by Michelin-starred chef Maxime Maziers and wine in the adjacent art museum. (Trump had a Coke brought in by an aide.) Some officials who spoke to the president left with an ominous feeling about what was to come during the day ahead. For those who assumed the worst had passed, the summit was about to take an unfortunate turn.



Trump arrives to speak to the media at a press conference on the second day © Sean Gallup/Getty Images

9.15am, Thursday, July 12

North Atlantic Council chamber, Nato headquarters

“He was late,” recalled a Nato official involved in the summit. “Mattis was in the chair in his place. But then Trump turned up . . . lumbering through the Nato lobby all alone. He had this look of thunder on his face. And I remember thinking, hang on, this is not good at all.”

The overnight headlines about Trump’s first-day performance had been mild. Most focused on the communique and the positive noises being made by allies about spending more. “The good news is that we are making progress,” Stoltenberg was quoted as saying in the FT’s news report.

Few of the politicians and diplomats in attendance could really tell if Trump was serious about the threat. “I believe he was bluffing. I believe that is his way of operating,” said one official involved in the talks. “Bolton was horrified by it all. But Pompeo was the one that had the most influence with him. And Pompeo knew that he was not going to leave Nato because the military people knew the value of it . . . There was a very fragile tension, but it was holding things together.”

“Was it only a bluff? I’m not sure,” one European diplomat said. “Conceivably, yes, but I wouldn’t want to bet on that. There was a need to take him seriously.”

Trump wanted to be taken seriously. He’d indicated that much when he phoned Bolton to say he was going to formally threaten to withdraw, on his way to the vast glass and steel building laid out like interlocking fingers on the outskirts of Brussels. “No one really knew how we would even do that,” said a US official who was there that day. “Someone came to me and said, ‘Do you have a copy of the treaty?’ I didn’t. They said, ‘Get me a copy of the treaty because [Trump] is saying he wants to leave Nato.’” Then “we were all looking, scrambling [to see] what it said. And of course it said nothing. From that day forward, I carried a copy of the treaty with me. Never was without it.”

Trump finally got to the meeting room in the heart of Nato headquarters, a large space dominated by a huge ring-shaped table encircled by hundreds of seats for aides, ambassadors and note-takers. Almost all sessions are unbroadcast, and the minutes of what happens there are kept secret.

The president ambled around the outside of the table, behind already-seated heads of state, who were discussing the session’s topic, [Georgia](#) and Ukraine. The two aspirant Nato members had the same problem: Russia had invaded parts of their territory.

Trump signalled he would like to be given the next opportunity to speak. In the interim, Bolton leaned in for a short conversation, urging him to only imply that a US withdrawal was a possibility rather than to make a direct threat. Trump closed his eyes and nodded. A few minutes later, he had control of the microphone and no intention of talking about Georgia or Ukraine. “I see in the media coverage that everyone is happy,” Trump told the other leaders. “Well, I’m not. We need to discuss money.”

Stoltenberg knew what was coming, but many of the other leaders did not. “He did rant,” recalled a person who was present. “He was calling out individual nations on the percentage they were spending. But it was just the wrong setting.”

During a 15-minute-long oration, Trump called for European nations to raise their defence spending to twice the agreed benchmark and unfathomably high for almost all of the leaders listening. They were taking the US for granted, he said. Pay what they should, he urged, or the US would go it alone on New Year’s Day 2019. “I’m with Nato one thousand million per cent,” Trump said. “But not on these terms.”

“We all know now that Trump uses these events as a negotiation tool,” said one

observer. “But at the time it was pretty jaw-dropping when he went around the room telling people to pay up.”



Summit attendees at Nato headquarters © Turkish Presidency/Murat Cetinmuhurdar/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

9.40am, Thursday, July 12

North Atlantic Council chamber, Nato headquarters

During Nato meetings, countries sit in alphabetical order, with the secretary-general at the head of the table next to the US leader, the last in line. German chancellor Angela Merkel got out of her seat as soon as Trump had finished. Wearing a light blue blazer and a silver necklace, she strode around the table and crouched down next to Stoltenberg. Merkel whispered in his ear; Stoltenberg nodded; and then Merkel walked over to Trump, whispering in his ear, recalled one person present. “Then [she] goes back to the secretary-general and the secretary-general nods again. There was this kind of awkward, animated discussion between the secretary-general and Merkel — awkward because it’s happening right next to Trump” and was about handling Trump.

“Merkel was really quick to see that this could really get out of hand,” said a second person who witnessed her intervention. “There was a strong sense from her, and then Stoltenberg, that we need to contain this.”

Stoltenberg spoke up. “We’re clearing the room,” he said, according to another observer. “Everyone must leave except for the principals. And we are going to have an

observer. “Everyone must leave except for the principals. And we are going to have an important discussion, one that must be had.”

That meant the Georgian and Ukrainian heads of state had to leave the session intended to discuss their futures as independent countries and future Nato members. “That’s probably the only time that those two countries were happy they were not present during a Nato summit discussion,” remarked one diplomat. But “this was not a discussion to be had with partners; this was a discussion that needed to be had among allies”.

Stoltenberg was shifting to a restricted session, 1+1 in summit terminology, meaning only heads of states plus one official, typically their ambassador to Nato or a national security adviser. “Basically, they wanted to throw as many people out of the room as possible. It was deliberately done to try to really restrict the access into the room.”

This sudden shift in agenda was unprecedented for Nato summits, during which procedure and protocol dominate to the point of suffocation. And it led to a big commotion, as scores of advisers and aides were ushered out of the room. In the confusion, Nato security guards tried to stop a frantic Bolton from re-entering the session. “But that didn’t work,” the diplomat recalls. “It was pretty clear he was determined to be present.”



Flags of the Nato members outside alliance's headquarters © Dominika Zarzycka/NurPhoto/Getty Images

10:15am Thursday July 12

10.15am, Thursday, July 12

North Atlantic Council chamber

Even in such a setting, heads of state are not typically asked to speak without prepared remarks or briefing notes. But now, those present were told to cast aside their carefully prepared files on Georgia and Ukraine and negotiate with Trump. They'd have to rely only on their memory or what aides could quickly scribble down and set down in front of them. "It doesn't happen often at a summit that you break off the programme," said a long-standing Nato diplomat. "It was quite momentous."

"Trump had the facts on what every country was doing," said a second person," and he could cite who was putting in what per cent of their GDP into defence. He went around the room . . . castigating everyone."

Trump brought up Spain's spending, less than half the 2 per cent guideline. Then it was the Czech Republic's turn. President Miloš Zeman tried to counter that his country's GDP was rising too fast for defence spending to keep up. Trump was unimpressed.

Then he moved on to his old bugbear, Germany. He called Merkel out by name, adding a jab about Berlin letting in too many [immigrants](#). Trump claimed they could one day become security threats that the US would have to help defend against. "It was a meteorite moment," said one person who was in the room. "Leaders [were] having it spelled out to them: spend more or be left alone."

One head of state got noticeably softer handling by the American president. Slovenia's prime minister, Miro Cerar, watched on as Trump acknowledged that his wife, Melania, was born in his country. Cerar dodged a bullet, given his country's spending was the fourth-lowest in the alliance.

During the chaos caused by rearranging the room earlier, some of the European leaders had concocted an emergency plan, of sorts. Huddling in one corner, Stoltenberg, Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte had quickly debated how best to handle this mass bollocking. "They basically concluded three lines," said a person briefed afterwards. "Let's give him credit for calling us out; give him credit for getting more nations to pay up; and then promise to do more."

While the impromptu crisis committee was meeting, Trump was sitting a few yards away, arms crossed, in conversation with Bolton and Pompeo. Which one of the Europeans would deliver the message? "Merkel couldn't do anything right at that

summit because she already had the Russian gas encounters with him,” said the person. “Macron was not willing to play the main role in the room, but he understood what needed to be done.”

The choice was made by process of elimination. Rutte, the slick, silver-tongued Dutch leader who had remained in power by brokering impossible political coalitions, would attempt to engage Trump. “He was the right guy to do it. He had no problem at all in giving Trump credit, appeasing him instead of picking a fight. And he came from a serious country, but not one of the big ones.”

“Rutte was quite good,” said another person present. “He was one of the people who . . . kept his calm, who kept polite.”

Rutte managed to tick all the boxes: flatter, defer, agree. Trump, according to multiple people in the room, walked away from the conversation beaming. “Rutte won a lot of respect from Trumpworld that day,” said a European diplomat. “Of all the European leaders in general,” said a second observer, “he’s probably one of the only ones who will be able to manage Trump in the years to come if Trump again finds himself back in the White House.” (On June 26 this year, Rutte was [appointed as the next secretary-general](#) of Nato, succeeding Stoltenberg.)

Not everyone followed the playbook. The leader of the alliance’s lowest defence spender, Luxembourg, decided he wouldn’t take Trump’s lecture without giving some back. The government of Xavier Bettel, a polyglot with a theatrical flair, spent just 0.5 per cent of GDP on defence. “Bettel decides he is going to hit back,” said one observer, “which was totally not the right way to handle this. ‘On behalf of the one thousand proud men and women of the Luxembourg armed forces, I must object to your characterisation of us as freeloaders,’ he says. And the other leaders are like, ‘Oh my goodness what is he doing?’”

“Trump probably doesn’t even know that Luxembourg is a member of Nato,” said another person who was briefed on the exchange. “Everyone was rolling their eyes. And all it did was get Trump even more angry.”

Nato officials had prepared another line of defence: data. As soon as Trump knocked the meeting off course, functionaries began frantically dashing in and out with printouts of data worked up to try to demonstrate that the allies were already taking steps to comply with Trump’s demands. “There are excellent wizards of graphs in the Nato secretary-general’s private office,” remarked one official. “To come up with statistics that . . . are suddenly relevant.”

One number in particular — purporting to quantify the pledged collective increase in spending already that year — was held up as the tangible impact of Trump’s lecturing up to that point. It totalled \$33bn. Imagine, Rutte, Stoltenberg and many of the other leaders implored Trump, how much more they would spend in the years to come. “The tension sort of eased out of the room as the conversation went on,” said one of those present. “There was this sense that he had made his threat and his demands, we had acknowledged them both, and he was partially satisfied.”

After 90 extraordinary minutes, the closed session came to an end. The doors were reopened and the room began filling up again. Stoltenberg turned to the agreed agenda. Nato was back on track.



Trump takes questions during his press conference at the summit © Jaap Arriens/NurPhoto/Getty Images

12.21pm, Thursday, July 12

Nato headquarters

When Trump walked out of the summit room, his aides were hoping to whisk him off to Zaventem airport and away to the UK for a four-day visit, including an audience with the Queen. But the president wanted to talk to the press.

Protocol was again being torn up. “Normally, the secretary-general speaks to the press first after a summit,” said one Nato official. “But now we’re following Trump. So all

the prepared lines go out the window, and we're waiting and watching to see what he's going to say so that we can work out what to follow up with. We were all petrified he would blow the whole thing up."

In the press room, Trump strolled across the stage to the lectern. "We have had a very amazing two-day period in Brussels," the president began. "And we really accomplished a lot with respect to Nato." At the back of the hall, the Nato press team and Stoltenberg's aides watched nervously.

"I let them know that I was extremely unhappy with what was happening, and they have substantially upped their commitment," Trump continued. "And now we're very happy and have a very, very powerful, very, very strong Nato, much stronger than it was two days ago."

It took 75 seconds for the first smiles to break out among the Nato press team. Trump was repeating the \$33bn additional spending statistic that had been hastily offered to him just a few hours before. "It was one of those ones when you were just waiting for some bombshell to land," said one official. "But there was nothing. And actually, it was all fairly positive."

"He's up there saying 'I'm a big supporter of Nato.' 'It's a great organisation.' 'It's done great things.'," they added. "And we're all like, OK, this is fine."

A CNN reporter asked Trump if he thought threatening his Nato allies had worked. "I just want fairness for the United States," the president responded. But he was clearly enjoying the outcome of his ultimatum. "And if you ask Secretary General Stoltenberg, he gives us total credit, meaning me, I guess, in this case. Total credit, because I said it was unfair."

The rest of the Nato establishment looked on in muted disbelief. Said one: "It was, in its own Trumpian way, a perfectly normal and reasonably accurate depiction of the discussion that had taken place in the morning."

Trump spoke for 36 minutes. Pompeo got a 30-second cameo to talk about North Korea. Bolton didn't say a word. Towards the end, a Croatian journalist asked the question on many people's minds: after the results of the summit, would Trump stop bashing the alliance on Twitter?

"No," the president said. "I'm very consistent. I'm a very stable genius." Awkward laughter rippled through the room.

In the years since the 2018 summit, aggregated defence spending by Nato

In the years since the 2016 summit, aggregated defence spending by Nato members, excluding the US, has risen by 55 per cent, to around \$430bn. At the time of the summit, just three nations besides the US met the 2 per cent of GDP benchmark. This year, 22 will.

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a major catalyst for a surge over the past two years, particularly in Germany, the seeds of the increase can be traced back to Trump's interventions that summer in Brussels. "There was a sense that this was a really difficult moment and this was even potentially quite a dangerous moment," said an official present at the summit. "Yes, we got over it. But [we] understood something has to change."

"The motivation for increasing defence spending," said another, "it wasn't just about Trump. It was about a range of other issues to do with increasing threats, etc. I don't think you will ever find any European leaders who say that they increased defence spending as a result of Trump's hectoring, but I'm sure that had an impact behind the scenes for some countries as they were making their calculations at the margins."

During his 2024 campaign for the presidency, Trump has repeated belligerent statements about Nato allies who don't pay enough. He has said that, during a second term, he would allow Russia to do ["whatever the hell they want"](#) to countries who do not meet the spending benchmark. Even though the US Congress has passed legislation preventing an American president from unilaterally taking that step without legislative approval, some Nato officials despair at the prospect of a sequel. "I already lived through Nato during Trump's first term," said one. "And I really don't fancy another one."

Henry Foy is the FT's Brussels bureau chief

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