

WEBVTT

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<v SPEAKER_2>In this episode, recorded June 20th, I'm talking to Dr.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Davis Ellison, the Chair of the Initiative on the Future of Transatlantic Relations at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies.

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<v SPEAKER_2>We discussed the role that Davis and his team are playing in organizing the NATO public forum taking place on the sidelines of the NATO summit next week, and what to expect for the NATO summit itself, including the anticipated revised investment pledge, and how allies will reach consensus on some key issues, including Ukraine.

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<v SPEAKER_2>David, welcome to Defence Deconstructed.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Thanks so much for having me on.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Could you just start this conversation off by introducing yourself and your organization to my mostly Canadian listenership?

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah, absolutely.

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<v SPEAKER_1>As you said, I'm Davis Ellison.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I'm a researcher at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies based here in the Netherlands on primarily our defense and security research team, but also am the chair of our Initiative on the Future of Transatlantic Relations, also a former NATO Allied Command Transformation Employee.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So all of this kind of crunched together made me the guy at HCSS in charge of working on the NATO Summit here in the Hague next week.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But our broader research profile covers a lot.

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<v SPEAKER_1>We work with the Armed Forces quite a bit with NATO to do the range of things, everything from nuclear deterrents on one end to

arms control on the other to NATO politics in another realm.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So it's a pretty broad box of stuff that we work in.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Okay.

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<v SPEAKER_2>And so you mentioned that you've got a role in the Summit coming up in a few days.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Just tell my listeners a little bit about what exactly that role is that you folks will be playing next week.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So we are working specifically on the NATO Public Forum, which is sort of this side show next door to the Summit.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It's happened every year for the last couple of summits now, where NATO partners with local organizations.

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<v SPEAKER_1>For example, last year in DC, it was with Center for New American Security and a few others.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And now this year, it's us, HCSS, as well as our other local co-hosts, Klingendal and the Dutch Atlantic Committee.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So the three of us are working together to help put on the show at the public forum with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and NATO Public Diplomacy.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Okay.

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<v SPEAKER_2>So you have both from your research perspective with the Institute, as well as from organizing all this activity next week, I presume a solid understanding of at least what the realm of possibilities are for the actual summit, I guess, for a largely Canadian audience, I guess, can you give us a bit of perspective about what you are expecting is going to happen over the next week?

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<v SPEAKER_1>Sure.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I think by far in terms of substance of what we're going to see, I think the topic, and this has of course been the driver for the US government under the second Trump administration now, is the increased defense spending pledge.

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<v SPEAKER_1>The exact numbers of which have sort of been refined by the new Secretary General Mark Rutte, former Prime Minister here in the Netherlands.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So that new number is a 3.5% of GDP on defense, plus a 1.5% on sort of a grab bag of other things, predominantly things like infrastructure, cybersecurity, transport, things like that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So I think that's definitely going to be the biggest item.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You know, one of the challenges of course being that within NATO, in the last 11 years now, since the Wales Summit, you know, a fair amount of allies have still struggled to hit that number.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You know, economic situations can be complicated in a lot of countries.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And when it's a percent GDP thing, you know, it's, you know, if that GDP is already, you know, sort of struggling from a production perspective, you know, that doesn't necessarily fit.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So all of that defence spending pledge, that's mainly a political target, but it is also reinforced by actual concrete defence planning measures.

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<v SPEAKER_1>That's mostly done on the military side of the house in NATO, you know, where they are working to fill what they call, it's this new NATO initiative, you know, to basically make the new defence plans possible.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So it's a whole new set of reinforcement plans.

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<v SPEAKER_1>There's a tier system where they're trying to get to a certain number of troops within a certain number of days in the event of a war.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And they're trying to make sure that that is actually credible.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So part of the exercise is also taking that plan and then looking at all the forces that Europeans and Canadians and Americans have and trying to map those on top of one another.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So that's the, there's the political side, which is mostly the percentage piece.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And then there's a little bit more of a concrete side that the military is handling as well.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Is it fair to say, in my observation, that those two sets of activities, the political discussion around a percentage is ultimately tied into a cumulative contribution or investment into armed forces.

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<v SPEAKER_2>And well, that's obviously been set in a way that I think would be difficult for somebody to come in and say that if you were off of that target by 0.01% that suddenly all the plans go out the window.

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<v SPEAKER_2>At the same time, there's more rigor on connecting the math and the capability investments that could come from it to that more detailed and more rigorous planning process that you were just outlining there.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Would that be a fair characterization?

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah, that would very much be the case.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Because again, with the percentages, it breaks it down a

little bit into now defence and infrastructure.

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<v SPEAKER_1>There's a bit in there that's just pure military and then R&D side, which was the old 2%, but 20% of that 2% should be R&D.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But that still leaves a lot of room for one of the criticisms that I saw of the 2% measure for example, was you have the Greeks that spend a huge amount of money on their land forces, especially tanks, which to some extent makes sense, tensions with Turkey and so on and their situation in the Balkans.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But from a broader sort of NATO defence planning spectrum, that's not really how people are thinking about things anymore.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It's not about a big tank battle with the Bulgarians on the Eastern Front.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It's a bit different.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So the numbers, they're more of a solidarity statement if anything.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It's more of just the political challenge of burden sharing.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But they're trying to actually map that a little bit more onto the actual defence and operational planning that the military is doing now.

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<v SPEAKER_2>I don't want to just talk about the money, but I do want to get a better sense from you of a couple of pieces of both the investment pledge before we move on to some other issues.

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<v SPEAKER_2>What would you say is the general mood in Europe about those revised targets?

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<v SPEAKER_1>I think there's a mixed bag.

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<v SPEAKER_1>The further east you go, the more it's treated as an imperative.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Some allies are already hitting really high numbers.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You have the Poles, the Baltics.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So they're just looking over their shoulder and telling everyone else to catch up.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But again, that's percent GDP and that's a little bit different when you're Lithuania, love them, but then if you're Germany or France or something like that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Here more in the west and center part of Europe, I think there's a little bit of a almost a bemused skepticism and a great example.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I was in London last week talking to the Brits and they were, they had their strategic defense review, which is tied into all this.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Then they did their spending review right afterwards.

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<v SPEAKER_1>There's a big mismatch there because some of it is just how much you can realistically get going and what amount of time, especially when you're talking about developing your own defense infrastructure, that takes a, you're not going to do that in 18 months and be able to hit some target.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So it does take a while to do that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And it's also just a case of, you have a lot of governments that in some cases are still coming out of certain austerity measures from over a decade ago.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You even are still hearing things like economic responses to COVID and the downturn that happened then.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So I think there's a general skepticism in the most of the western part that it's a nice target to have.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But same with 2% that they know it's going to be very hard.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And a great example, it's completely at the whims of the politics of the thing.

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<v SPEAKER_1>The government has just fallen here in the Netherlands, there's a political crisis now in Spain.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Leadership challenges and elections can pop up left and right in all of our parliamentary systems.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So you never know.

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<v SPEAKER_1>One government can pledge something and then the next faces an economic crisis or a natural disaster and that sort of goes out the window.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Related to this, relative to the first Trump administration, I've seen and I try and be cognizant that in Canada we have a bit of a unique media market and we have saturation coverage of lots of things about the United States, not all of which might be the most important for these types of discussions.

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<v SPEAKER_2>But here at least, the coverage that you get in Ottawa, I've seen more of the rhetoric about the importance of the investment pledge coming from the secretary general than I have from the American president.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Is that your sense across the Atlantic?

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<v SPEAKER_2>If so, what do you make of that?

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah, I think this is really...

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<v SPEAKER_1>And I'm not surprised by this.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Mark Gruda has always seen himself as the Trump whisperer.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It was the same when he was prime minister in the first administration.

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<v SPEAKER_1>This was a preemptive move for what he rightfully assumed would be demands for higher defense spending.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So the idea and these numbers were developed by his office down in Brussels.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So I think it was a bit of a preemptive political move to sort of make NATO and the Allies look a little bit more proactive.

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<v SPEAKER_1>It also is more helpful politically here, and I think a lot of European countries to appear that way, rather than we're being prodded into doing this by the Americans.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I think especially with the hostility that we've seen in the second administration towards some of the, Canada being an example, Denmark as well, a few others here, especially after some of the speeches by people like Vance and Hegset in the last six months or so, that the concept of sort of being seen in any way of being sort of pushed along by the US is just such a politically dead idea at this point.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So I think that was a fairly smart move by Ruta to sort of get out ahead of that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>That of course coupled with that, you sort of get these general statements out of DC saying, the Allies need to spend more, we don't want to come rescue them, we're no longer the security gang.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So where the DC side has been a bit more of a vibe, it's been more just the tone taken towards Allies.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Ruta's approach has been actually a little bit more practical in trying to actually read that vibe and get ahead of it before the summit.

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<v SPEAKER_2>I guess one further thing on this, to your point, you've seen pointed language from the American administration about specific allies, Canada included, and Greenland, and therefore Denmark, but less negative rhetoric about the Alliance.

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<v SPEAKER_2>You had former people that had served in the first Trump administration who had essentially predicted that he was going to steam ahead to take the United States out of the Alliance.

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<v SPEAKER_2>On the one hand, you've got very negative things about specific allies that have huge complications for the Alliance at writ large.

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<v SPEAKER_2>You even had a bunch of musing about various articles and whether or not some of the statements from the administration should invoke some wider Alliances discussions and response, but not the same kind of pointed criticism of NATO writ large that we saw during the first administration.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Granted, it's only the end of June and there's been a lot of things going on.

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<v SPEAKER_2>I guess what do you make of that?

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<v SPEAKER_2>What do your European colleagues make of all that?

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So, you know, especially of course, again, pending, you know, what's going to happen in the next 96 hours, you know, whatever he's going to say upon landing.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I think it generally has been less about the Alliance as a whole.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I think part of that is probably due to some pretty successful relationship management by some of the Allies like Italy and Poland, whose leaders have at least in one case, his previous administration, you know, been a little bit closer to Washington under the Trump administration.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So I think there's been a little bit downplayed of that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And I think some of it too has been a little bit tied to this idea of that's grown not only in the Trump world, but also sort of just other foreign policy circles in Washington that the best mechanism to not just burden share, but burden shift towards the Europeans and the Canadians within the space is through NATO.

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<v SPEAKER_1>You know, sort of using it as that mechanism to do that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So rather than sort of just burn that bridge and pull out or anything like that, that said, I think there's still a piece of it, which is we want to draw down in Europe and we want the Europeans to step up more within the NATO context.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So yeah, I don't think, and some of it, I think in the previous administration also spoke to some personal animosities even between Trump and Merkel, between Trump and Stoltenberg.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So again, I'm curious to see what some of the, especially at this level at a heads of state summit, it's such a personality driven thing.

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<v SPEAKER_1>They're basically all just locked into a room with one

another plus three or four staff, and that's how it gets managed.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So I think the post summit press conferences are going to tell us a lot about exactly how that criticism is taking shape, about whether it's still three or four allies that he's very fixated on, or it's just the concept, the whole idea of sort of Atlanticism, which we know part of the administration doesn't like, JD Pantz being the example.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Well, if you want to have a glass half full approach, we just hosted the American president for at least one of the days of the planned G7 summit, and it seemed to have gone reasonably.

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<v SPEAKER_2>So maybe there's some optimism that some of these leaders meetings can go a little bit better than they had in the past.

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<v SPEAKER_2>I did want to get a sense from you.

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<v SPEAKER_2>So you mentioned kind of similar coverage to Canada from the sounds of it, that the new investment pledge really is taking up a lot of the oxygen and the attention.

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<v SPEAKER_2>Are there a couple of issues that you're looking at to come through from the summit that in your view are going to be either ones that would get some significant attention or might not, but would still be really meaningful and important?

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<v SPEAKER_2>So what beyond just the overall investment pledge, the money and that political piece?

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<v SPEAKER_2>Maybe take a second to point to one or two other issues that could get attention or not get attention but be substantive.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah, I think the second thing right behind the defence spending are almost equal to is of course going to be Ukraine, and how that features.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I'm not privy to any of the drafting of the communique itself, but I can imagine that there's probably quite a fight over the paragraph of what to say about Ukraine.

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<v SPEAKER_1>The previous versions have had the irreversible path towards membership in the alliance, whether or not that phrase will survive or not.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Of course, the various types of talks between the US and Russia and the Ukraine and Russians.

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<v SPEAKER_1>The topic of Ukrainian membership comes up routinely, and the US has now set that it's off the table.

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<v SPEAKER_1>How that gets squared within the NATO communique, I think, is going to be a big area of focus.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I can imagine for a lot of people, when that communique comes out, the partnership stuff is always in sort of like maybe the latter third of the communique.

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<v SPEAKER_1>A lot of people are going to be scrolling to the end to see exactly what is said.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Within that, also, you know, that's the whole membership question, which is one thing.

00:18:24.700 --> 00:18:42.060

<v SPEAKER_1>But then, you know, defence support to Ukraine, how that features, you know, it's come in the news here that Zelensky is going to be here on the first night, on Tuesday night, at this dinner, hosted by the King of the Netherlands, along with all the 32 leaders.

00:18:42.060 --> 00:18:46.900

<v SPEAKER_1>And that they're going to, there's going to be some substance on that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>But what exactly that is, I don't know.

00:18:52.020 --> 00:19:17.240

<v SPEAKER_1>And then connected to that, I think, one thing that is probably not going to feature that might surprise some people, is this idea that had a lot of steam maybe three, four months ago on the idea of sending actual troops to Ukraine under some sort of flag, probably not NATO, but Anglo-French, some sort of combination of countries

within NATO.

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<v SPEAKER_1>I picked up in London as well, but connected to this, that that conversation is just effectively done, because the US saying, we're not going to have a backstop, which made it politically untenable for many of us in Germany, for example, to continue talking about it.

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<v SPEAKER_1>That's on the Ukraine front.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Some of the other things that I think we're going to see, that I think is going to be interesting is the IP4 countries, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea are going to be joining again, at different levels.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And whether or not that's going to be a concrete discussion, possibly about Ukraine, possibly about, you know, any other very, you know, they solve a lot of side issues, usually at the heads of state level as well.

00:20:08.820 --> 00:20:15.520

<v SPEAKER_1>Or is it just going to be, it would be awkward now if we didn't, given that they've come the previous years.

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<v SPEAKER_1>So now we kind of have to make it happen.

00:20:20.340 --> 00:20:36.500

<v SPEAKER_1>And I think that's kind of what it's coming down to, whether it's the investment, Ukraine, IP4, any of these topics, it's whether or not it's just going to be deep breath, let's try to get through this summit, get a summit communique agreed and get to the other side of this thing.

00:20:36.500 --> 00:20:51.560

<v SPEAKER_1>Or is there something going on in the policy space that has some more meat to it in terms of defense planning or some specific capabilities we all want to buy, or some new funding package for Ukraine that's going to get announced?

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<v SPEAKER_1>I think that's the thing that people are going to be looking for to come out of those discussions about whether it's just, figly feels a little too mean somehow, but whether it is that or if it's something actually practical.

00:21:06.380 --> 00:21:34.540

<v SPEAKER_2>I would sort of, my own kind of sense the last few years had been that there had been an overall substantive shift from concrete, sorry, away from the more sort of performative solidarity, expression types of discussions to concrete, substantial, effectively taking the measures that you need to collectively prepare for war and support the ongoing one that Ukraine is waging.

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<v SPEAKER_2>And so there had been a significant kind of reallocation of, the energy between reinforcing solidarity and those kinds of things and actually engaging in more concrete actions to prepare and plan for all of our collective defence.

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<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah.

00:21:49.580 --> 00:22:10.600

<v SPEAKER_1>And I think that that's going to be the thing is, under the Biden administration working, of course, with Stoltenberg, that was very, with obviously having the very close focus because of Ukraine and that a lot of assessments about what Russia may or may not do next, that was a big, big piece of it and being able to do that.

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<v SPEAKER_1>And I think the thing to watch is going to be whether or not that is sustained into this one and whether, and I think the probably the most concrete thing is going to be the defence spending.

00:22:23.200 --> 00:22:31.000

<v SPEAKER_1>Purely also from the political point of the US does want to do this burden shift towards the Europeans here.

00:22:32.700 --> 00:22:40.360

<v SPEAKER_1>So I think that's most likely to be the most concrete thing that falls out of this.

00:22:40.360 --> 00:22:54.020

<v SPEAKER_1>And given how relatively short the summit is as compared to previous versions, I think that honestly might be all they wind up having time for because I imagine it will be pretty contentious as well.

00:22:54.020 --> 00:22:57.700

<v SPEAKER_2>But it would also, pun intended, be a big shift.

00:22:57.760 --> 00:22:59.780

<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah, yeah, exactly.

00:23:01.080 --> 00:23:03.620

<v SPEAKER_2>Well, Davis, thanks very much for coming on and join us.

00:23:03.780 --> 00:23:08.020

<v SPEAKER_2>You got a busy schedule here as you're into the short strokes of preparation for the public forum.

00:23:08.080 --> 00:23:10.140

<v SPEAKER_2>I very much appreciate your time.

00:23:10.140 --> 00:23:18.060

<v SPEAKER_2>The last question to you that we ask all our guests is, I can't presume you have a ton of time to be reading for outside of public forum preparation.

00:23:18.060 --> 00:23:21.160

<v SPEAKER_2>But if you are, what are you reading?

00:23:21.160 --> 00:23:24.620

<v SPEAKER_1>Yeah, so I kind of actually have two answers.

00:23:24.640 --> 00:23:49.160

<v SPEAKER_1>One, on the non-fiction world, it's a book actually by my PhD examiner, a guy named Hugh Bennett at Cardiff University wrote this fantastic new book on the troubles in Northern Ireland, which he uses to have a broader discussion about civil military relations and strategy, and even the politics of the UK brings it forward to now.

00:23:49.160 --> 00:23:53.280

<v SPEAKER_1>That's a fantastic one and really recommend it to everyone.

00:23:53.600 --> 00:24:03.860

<v SPEAKER_1>It's and it engages with a lot of the historical myth-making about that period that happens with a lot of these periods.

00:24:03.860 --> 00:24:06.280

<v SPEAKER_1>So that one fantastic one.

00:24:06.280 --> 00:24:08.900

<v SPEAKER_1>I would love to write something like that one day.

00:24:08.900 --> 00:24:18.140

<v SPEAKER_1>Then in fiction, strange, after a trip to Seoul last year, I started getting into a lot of South Korean authors.

00:24:18.140 --> 00:24:23.420

<v SPEAKER_1>One of their biggest is a woman named Han Kang, and she has this new book called We Do Not Part.

00:24:24.220 --> 00:24:36.380

<v SPEAKER_1>It's bleak and cold and snowy, but I'm from, well, I'm speaking to a Canadian, but I'm from far enough north in the US that it's sort of fun read and two great ones.

00:24:36.380 --> 00:24:45.400

<v SPEAKER_1>If anything, it's nice to distract myself either with 1970s Belfast or this isolated island off the coast of Korea.

00:24:45.460 --> 00:24:46.280

<v SPEAKER_2>Okay.

00:24:46.280 --> 00:24:46.800

<v SPEAKER_2>Fantastic.

00:24:46.800 --> 00:24:49.820

<v SPEAKER_2>Well, Davis, thanks again for joining us on Defence Deconstructed.

00:24:49.820 --> 00:24:50.080

<v SPEAKER_1>All right.

00:24:50.080 --> 00:24:52.560

<v SPEAKER_1>Well, thank you so much again for having me.

00:24:56.140 --> 00:24:58.340

<v SPEAKER_2>Thanks for listening to Defence Deconstructed.

00:24:58.340 --> 00:25:03.800

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00:25:03.800 --> 00:25:10.380

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00:25:10.380 --> 00:25:13.000

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00:25:13.000 --> 00:25:14.300

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00:25:14.500 --> 00:25:16.640

<v SPEAKER_2>This episode was produced by Jordyn Carroll.