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## Mark Rutte at the head of NATO: Negotiator, Teflon Mark, or the Trump Whisperer

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### Summary

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has a new leader. It is now headed by Mark Rutte, who replaced Jens Stoltenberg after ten long years of his rule. At first glance, it seems that he will continue in his footsteps. He faces challenges that cannot be delayed. First, there is the war in Ukraine. Second is the United States of America and Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election. Third, security across the transatlantic space from the perspective of global threats.

### Main Points

- The North Atlantic Alliance has new leadership after ten years. It is headed by former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte.
- He identified the war in Ukraine, the need to increase defence costs, and the protection of the entire transatlantic space as priorities.
- Rutte has been a big supporter of Ukraine in the past. As the new Secretary General, he announced that the member states must decide on the attacks deep in Russia.

The change in NATO leadership was not a surprise. It was known for a long time that Jens Stoltenberg would retire after ten years, and there should have been no questions about the choice of his successor. It was crucial for the former Dutch Prime Minister that he received the support of the strongest player - the United States. President Joe Biden spoke of him as “a passionate politician and good negotiator who, as the leader of a small country, proposed innovative ways to support NATO” (Hartog, E.; Lau, S., 2/22/2024). It was not difficult to get other states on their side. In the end, it also succeeded in the case of Hungary, which stated guarantees regarding Ukraine. The new Secretary General defined his priorities even before he officially took over the gavel. 1. Ukraine, 2. Defence spending, 3. Security.

## Mark Rutte? A Person Like You.

Who is Mark Rutte? 1.94 meters tall, slim, athletic figure, short brown hair, discreet glasses, always elegant and charming. He is the youngest of six children. His father survived a Japanese labor camp during the Second World War, Rutte's mother survived the Nazi-controlled famine (Hongerwinter 1944-1945), his older brother died of AIDS in the 1980s.

He lives in an apartment in The Hague, despite the smartphone boom, he has long remained faithful to his old push-button Nokia, and when he can't ride his bike, he has his old Saab. He drinks cappuccinos in a cafe, goes to the hairdresser and eats at a few restaurants in the area. He goes on vacation to the Swiss Alps in February and then to New York. In Brussels, according to his colleague, he lives in the same hotel every time and preferably in the same room. Privacy? Nothing. Nobody knows anything. The door is closed.

## Prime Minister of the Netherlands

He served as Dutch Prime Minister for 13 years, becoming the longest-serving Prime Minister in the history of the country (and also the second longest-serving leader in Europe – after Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán). He was called "Prime Minister Houdini" because of his ability to find a compromise even in the most heated situations. Rutte has been in power since 2010. During that time, he focused on common topics such as the social agenda, education or health care, or the housing exhibition. But he also had to solve the coronavirus crisis. According to voters his government held its own in managing the pandemic, despite criticism of some measures (especially the lockdown).

The first major crisis came last year and was related to ecology. The Netherlands was one of the biggest polluters in the EU per capita, and Rutte has long failed to meet European climate targets. The cabinet has drawn criticism over the case surrounding Europe's largest gas field, Groningen, which has been a key source of gas for a large part of Western Europe since 1963 - and especially the backbone of Dutch public finances. On the other hand, large-scale mining caused problems for the people who lived in the vicinity of the mining field. Among other things, they complained about the dismal living conditions, including constant ground tremors and earthquakes that destroyed their homes. The government finally decided to close the schools on October 1. And so Rutte narrowly survived a no-confidence vote in parliament.

In the end, the prime minister's stint was broken by the unmanaged asylum policy, specifically the problem with the ever-increasing number of immigrants. The hitherto tolerant Dutch population wanted to hear a solution that would at least stop the numbers where they are now. Rutte eventually introduced a conservative plan to limit the number of new arrivals by making it impossible for the children of war refugees to enter the country before two years (etc.). But the coalition parties

strongly rejected this proposal. Rutte, unlike his first 13 years in office, was unable to find a compromise and resigned from the cabinet in July 2023.

## The new NATO Secretary General

At first glance, the election of a new Secretary General seems like a perfect example of democracy and transparency, because all Alliance states must agree. In the background, however, there are long negotiations with member countries, compromises, and in the end it is basically decided weeks in advance, who will it be. It is crucial to get the support of a key player – the United States. Then Great Britain, France, Germany and other countries are added. Problems are traditionally expected in Hungary and Turkey.

Who could replace Stoltenberg? Behind the scenes, there was talk of Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas or Latvian Foreign Minister Krišjānis Kariņš. Given the current geopolitical situation it would be convenient if the leadership came from the states near the Russian border. But the most serious candidate was Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. And he became a real candidate after he resigned as prime minister and party leader last year. Former NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said, without further details, that the US had approached Rutte twice with the offer of the presidency, according to Politico. But he wasn't there then available due to domestic situations (Hartog, E.; Lau, S., 22/02/2024).

Turkey pointed out that there should be another European at the head of NATO, and therefore wanted guarantees that the states of the European Union would not be favoured in any way in NATO. Hungary remained. As one of the few politicians, Viktor Orbán was unable to charm Rutte. On the contrary. Their constant verbal spats are well known. In the past, this was due to violations of the rule of law or LGBTQ rights. Orbán claims that "that Dutchman hates his country", Rutte called on "that strongman to leave the EU". Budapest finally agreed when it received written assurances that the Alliance would not force it to participate in new plans to provide aid to Ukraine. In the end, Orbán negotiated what he needed and Rutte once again lived up to his reputation as a consensus player.

## Mark Rutte at the head of NATO

"It is easier for me to leave NATO when I know that he will take over the Alliance," said outgoing Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, as he ceremoniously handed him the gavel that the NATO chief uses to open negotiations. He spoke of Mark Rutte as a friend, colleague and collaborator, whom he has known since the days when both were prime ministers of their home states (ČeskéNoviny.cz, 1 October 2024).

Experts expected Rutte to continue with the established agenda – that is, supporting Ukraine, increasing defence spending and the US as a key partner for European security. And they weren't wrong. This is precisely what the new head of the Alliance named as his goals. "I have three priorities: to ensure that we are able to protect ourselves from any threat; to support Ukraine in the fight against Russian aggression and to address the growing global challenges for Euro-Atlantic security," Rutte said on the very day of his appointment (Rutte, M., 1/10/2024).

Of course, defence spending is also related to this, which, according to the new Secretary General, needs to be increased. He spoke to journalists about a stronger transatlantic defence industry, investment in innovation and modern technologies. Collective defence must be fairly distributed among all member states.

According to him, Ukraine deserves the support of the international community, especially when it comes to maintaining peace in Europe. "The cost of supporting Ukraine is much, much lower than the cost we would face if we let Putin get his way," he said (Rutte, M. 1.10.a; 2024). Kyiv must be supported and helped on its way to membership in the Alliance.

We need to look at the world from a global perspective and continue to look for allies, whether near or far. According to him, cooperation with the European Union is essential and must be further deepened. Rutte specifically talked not only about supporting Ukraine, but also about the need to face hybrid threats. It is also necessary to focus to the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel and the Indo-Pacific. "I can't wait to roll up my sleeves, get to know each of you, and start working together!" with these words, Rutte adjourned his first session (Rutte, M.b; 1/10/2024).

## **If anyone doubted Ukraine, they don't have to now**

As he said, so he did. Rutte did not stay long in Brussels and preferred to get down to work right away. It was possible to expect that one of the first foreign trips of the new Secretary General would be to Ukraine. However, it was still possible to count on the fact that it would really be the first trip. Nonetheless, few expected that he would appear in Kyiv unannounced and only 48 hours after taking office.

Rutte held talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. His country is defending itself against Russian aggression for the third year. The politicians talked to each other about the situation on the battlefield and about the so-called victory plan. Zelenskyy undoubtedly welcomed such a visit, and he himself was well aware of what the first foreign trip of the general secretary means - that is, strong support. Zelenskyy called on the member states to change their stance in protecting Ukrainian skies and cited the situation in Israel as an example.

Mark Rutte is known to be one of the most active supporters of Kyiv since the very beginning of the war. In addition, it was he who arranged the delivery of Leopard 2 tanks and actively supported the delivery of F-16 fighter aircrafts . According to him, the country's support must continue, especially for the safety of the whole of Europe.

During his visit to Kyiv, Rutte said that "Kiev's right to self-defence does not end at the border," (Rutte, 10/3/2024). NATO's new chief is determined to increase pressure on member states that are still hesitant about whether the country is allowed to use modern weapons to strike military targets deep in Russia. However critics, led by the United States, Germany and other European countries, warn that such a permit could lead to an escalation of relations. Rutte's support is now absolutely crucial for Ukraine. Zelenskyy talks about the urgent need to target Russian missiles and, above all, drones. Because winter is approaching and Kyiv is apparently rightfully worried, that at the turn of the year it may completely lose key energy infrastructure due to Russian attacks.

In addition to military support, other important topics for Ukraine were discussed, namely the country's membership in the alliance. Now more than ever, Zelensky has a chance to find an ally in the Secretary General, who will advocate his word for him with undecided member states. In Kyiv, Rutte reiterated that NATO should continue to expand and Ukraine's path leads to Washington, noting that several member states have already signed bilateral security agreements. According to him, Ukraine is better prepared for ascension every day to the Alliance and "the day will come when Ukraine will become a full member of NATO. And let me add, that if someone thinks otherwise, Russia has neither a voice nor a veto in this matter" (Rutte, 3 October 2024).

## Rutte's first fortnight

The war and Ukraine became the main topic of Rutte's first days as NATO Secretary General. Everyone—literally everyone—wanted to know the Alliance's view on the use of long-range weapons provided to Ukraine to flow deep into Russian territory. Many wondered how far Rutte's zeal would go for Ukraine. And so while President Zelensky toured European states with a request that the country needs more, much more, than it is getting so far. Rutte rode behind him, assuring his allies that there was no room for any deviation from above. It is solely and exclusively up to the member states whether they allow the use of weapons in the Russian rear or not. Regardless of how much the situation would demand it and apparently even the Secretary General himself would like it.

## Rutte's next challenge - Trump's victory in the US elections

When Rutte took over as Secretary General, he was preparing for either Kamala Harris or Donald Trump to win. Even then he knew that no matter how it turned out, he would have a tough job ahead of him. The United States made it clear that it would want Europe to invest much more in defence. NATO knew after the fifth of November it will certainly happen.

Now Rutte knows that Republican Donald Trump will become the President of the United States. It is now clear that the Secretary General will be going to Washington more than ever before. While Harris was expected to continue the agenda established by the current administration if she won, that is not the case with Trump. With him, it is not known in advance what kind of foreign policy he will set. On the issue of defence spending, Trump's position is known from the past period, and apparently nothing has changed so far. Regarding the war in Ukraine, the future president already talked about the agreement between the Russian head of state Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky during the campaign.

It is, of course, Mark Rutte, who as Dutch Prime Minister already experienced Trump in the White House during his first term and can certainly handle his second term as well. After all, Donald Trump called Rutte a friend when he visited Washington in 2019, and the Dutchman nodded in agreement. "All this whining and whining about Trump, I've heard it over and over the last few days, let's stop it with that," Rutte said according to Reuters at this year's Munich Security Conference (Irish, J. 12/07/2024). He also supported Trump in his criticism of countries that do not spend the required two percent of GDP on defence.

## Conclusion

The new Secretary General has set priorities that are A) expected and B) realistic. It is more than clear that the following winter and year will be crucial for Ukraine, and that NATO will play a crucial role - that is, the allies that supply the country with equipment and weapons. Now the issue is for permission to use these weapons on Russian territory. Rutte spoke like a politician in the right place when he said that it was up to others to decide. But he will certainly remain a man in the background, who will travel to individual states and promote "his cause".

The policy of increasing spending will continue as it did under Jens Stoltenberg. Considering to the global situation, other countries need to be made to invest 2 percent of GDP in defence. When Stoltenberg was leaving office, he talked about the fact that even these two percent will not be enough in the future. Rutte can be expected to demand an increase to 2.5 percent in the near future. At the same time, it is not only about the threat of war or the feeling of security, Europe and other

states must also spend resources on the development of modern technologies in order to maintain their competitiveness in the global world.

It can be assumed that Rutte will be an active Secretary General who will not warm up too much in NATO's Brussels apartment. If he was nicknamed Mr. Teflon in the past as Dutch Prime Minister and Trump's whisperer, we'll see what nicknames he earns as head of the world's largest transatlantic military pact.

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