



Stoltenberg Out, Rutte In

What Can Be Expected From Mark Rutte as the New Secretary General of NATO?



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1. Introduction

NATO

is entering a new era of leadership after Jens Stoltenberg announced his departure following a decade-long tenure as the alliance's Secretary General.

NATO's Secretary General:

NATO's Secretary General serves as the chief spokesperson and head of multiple committees, facilitating communication and coordination among member countries. They oversee the political and military aspects of NATO operations, ensuring that collective defence and security policies are effectively implemented.

The man filling his shoes is the thirteen-year prime minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte. After being the longest-ever serving prime minister of the Kingdom (Sterling, 2022), Rutte took over as NATO's Secretary General in October 2024. His tenure will be crucial as tensions in and outside Europe have been growing for years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the increasing influence of China, and renewed crises in the Middle East have turned all eyes towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Strong leadership is more crucial than ever, given the increased attention and questions regarding the organisations' capabilities and functions. It is, therefore, critical for NATO to analyse what can be expected from Rutte as the new Secretary General of NATO. Specifically, this article seeks to answer the research question: "What can be expected from Mark Rutte as Secretary General of NATO, given his thirteen years of crisis management as prime minister of the Netherlands?"

This article will answer this research question by

exploring the role and responsibilities of NATO's Secretary General as leader of the alliance's political division, analysing difficulties mentioned in the conclusion of Stoltenberg's rule, depicting what is crucial for a Secretary General during times of geopolitical instability, and analysing crucial moments in Rutte's administration in the Netherlands. It is essential to first prove the Secretary General's influence level of NATO as a basis of justification of relevance for this research. The authors will then continue to analyse Mark Rutte's leadership style in critical past events and crises in the Netherlands.

This will be done by exploring Rutte's response to the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic, the more recent outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, and the shoot-down of flight MH17. It will investigate these case studies by examining Rutte's defence, foreign-, and specific aspects of domestic policy. Doing so will allow the authors to draw expectations of Rutte's leadership perspective during his upcoming tenure as Secretary General of NATO. Researching the transfer of leadership and crisis experience from a national to an international context can aid in setting expectations for NATO's future under Rutte's leadership. In this article, a reputation of camaraderie and coalition-building emerge as the leading expectations of Rutte's appointment as Secretary General.

2. NATO and its Secretary General

2.1. NATO, an Overview

After the First and Second World Wars, the international community was determined to prevent such atrocities from occurring again. In Europe, the epicentre of both wars, leaders started to change their outlook on international relations and set the path for practical international cooperation (Office of the Historian, n.d.). With that, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was founded in 1949 (Office of the Historian, n.d.) and has been expanding ever since. While the idea of NATO was born following the end of the Second World War, the roots of the alliance can be found in the

Atlantic Charter of 1941. The Atlantic Charter is an agreement between the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) that outlined the two nations' joint goals following the war's end. The main goals of the charter stated that neither the U.S. nor the U.K. would seek to make their territories larger. Still, the charter also outlined the future of international cooperation between the two countries (Churchill & Roosevelt, 1941). As written in the treaty, all signatory states are "determined to safeguard the freedom, common

Headquarters and the International Staff, and the Military Budget includes the operational costs of the NATO Command Structure and the support of NATO missions. The NSIP budget funds larger-scale military infrastructure investments, such as constructing and maintaining airfields and radar systems and establishing military headquarters for NATO military operations (NATO, 2024). Indirect funding, on the other hand, refers to the financial contributions of states that do not go directly to



Figure 1: NATO Headquarters in Brussels (Arnold, 2024)

heritage and civilisation of the peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law" and "seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area" (North Atlantic Treaty, 1949). NATO operates through direct and indirect funding. Direct funding by member states helps contribute to the alliance's programs and capabilities, such as the Civil Budget, Military Budget, and the NATO Security Investment Program (NSIP). The Civil Budget funds the operations of NATO

NATO but are used to help NATO's goals. The most prominent example is a member state's defence budget. When a NATO member state invests in new military equipment, these investments can be deployed in NATO missions, supporting the alliance while not directly contributing to the alliance's budget. NATO identifies indirect contributions as the most significant component of the alliance's funding (NATO, 2024). NATO encourages its allies to spend two per cent of national gross domestic

product (GDP) on defence, and in 2014, heads of state and governments of NATO states agreed to commit to this benchmark. At the same time, not every member state meets this requirement. As of 2024, 23 allies do, compared to a mere 3 in 2014 (NATO, 2024a). Understanding where the funding of NATO's budget is crucial in providing a deeper understanding of the modern-day challenges that NATO faces, which will be discussed later in this research.

2.2. Roles and Responsibility of NATO's Secretary General

NATO is led by its Secretary General, the first being Lord Ismay and the most recent, until October 2024, Jens Stoltenberg (NATO, n.d.). NATO's mission is to "safeguard the freedom and security of all its members by military and non-military means" (NATO, n.d.) It focuses on collective defence through democratic and liberal values (North Atlantic Treaty, 1949). Because of NATO's mission, being NATO's Secretary General is a big responsibility and comes with certain expectations. The Secretary General has three leading roles. First, the Secretary General acts as a chair of all central committees within the organisation.

The three central committees that the Secretary General heads are accompanied by significant influence. Starting with the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO's principal political decision-making body comprises representatives from all allied countries, typically as ministers or ambassadors. Together, these representatives reach decisions on NATO's policies, strategic directions, and operations. Functionally, the NAC allows for discussions amongst member states, permitting more effective coordination of their positions and creating unified responses to security challenges. NAC decisions are typically made by consensus to ensure that all allied nations have a voice, thus strengthening collective commitment. Besides ensuring collaboration and improved strategic priorities to new-found threats, the NAC is also influential in working with non-allies. Lastly, in its crisis

management capacity, the NAC can help de-escalate tensions and find diplomatic solutions to conflicts. In sum, the NAC is crucial in ensuring that NATO remains cohesive and is always ready to respond to current and upcoming challenges (NATO, 2024c).

The second committee that the Secretary-General is tasked with chairing is the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which, as its name suggests, focuses on the alliance's nuclear policy and strategy. It develops and reviews NATO's nuclear posture to ensure alignment with the rest of NATO's defensive strategy. The NPG also engages with NATO's strategic partners to ensure their inclusion in critical atomic decisions (NATO, 2022).

Lastly, the Secretary General is chair of NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, a forum established to facilitate dialogue and enhance cooperation between European and North American partner countries. The EAPC provides a space for political discussions on security challenges and regional stability, allowing members and partners to share perspectives and insights. Further, it assists in coordinating crisis responses to security challenges. It supports and builds partnerships with countries that are not a part of NATO and promotes the establishment and operations of military training and exercises (NATO, 2024d).

The responsibility of acting as the chair of these committees grants the Secretary-General the role of mediator, guiding disputes and policy-making (NATO, 2023). Additionally, such a role offers the privilege, or sometimes the burden, of communicating with all other heads of state and government. Further, the Secretary General acts as a spokesperson for the organisation, which connects to international communication. As the representative of all member states, the Secretary General regularly participates in conferences and lectures.

Lastly, the Secretary General acts as head of the international staff, which aims to provide advice and guidance and administrative support to national delegations at NATO's Headquarters in

Brussels (NATO, 2024e).

In practice, the Secretary General's role and responsibilities are not so neatly lined out as suggested in the previous paragraph. Over the last ten years, Jens Stoltenberg has faced multiple challenges as leader of NATO. The significance of the Secretary General is highlighted by the challenges identified during NATO's annual summit in Washington D.C., this year. First, Russia has posed a challenge to the strength and credibility of the alliance long before their 2023 invasion of Ukraine (NATO, 2024b). However, with the full-scale Russo-

further threat during the Washington Summit of 2024 due to its policies that challenged the interests and values of NATO allied states. In addition, the PRC is deepening its strategic partnership with Russia, which NATO identifies as a threat to "undercut and reshape the rules-based international order" (NATO, 2024b, para. 4).

Part of NATO's credibility problem is tied to politics. The war in Ukraine and the more recent war between Israel and Palestine have shown a significant divide among world leaders, making unity far from guaranteed (Jacqué and Ricard,



Figure 2 – NATO's Secretary General (Own Work)

Ukrainian war being one of the few aggressions on European soil since the commencement of the alliance, all eyes are directed towards NATO for a defence strategy. As Ukraine is not formally a member of the alliance, NATO is in no position to respond directly to the invasion. However, speculations have been ongoing as to what kind of response should be expected if Russian offensive forces were to cross the border onto NATO territory. So far, NATO's credibility in enacting a strong uniform response has been low (McGee, 2023). Moreover, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was identified as a

2024). Additionally, European domestic politics are shifting towards the right side of the political spectrum, favouring conservatism and sovereignty (Cunningham et al., 2024). This challenges an organisation such as NATO, where funding comes from the national budget. While some more traditional right-leaning politicians support defence spending, newer forms of conservatism, such as the Make America Great Again movement in the United States, favour an isolationist worldview (Lindsay, 2024). They still view defence as an essential expenditure, but only to further American

interests and not to support other countries. Therefore, this shift towards more national independence threatens NATO's defence budget. Monetary concerns would only grow should Donald Trump be re-elected as President of the U.S. in November of this year.

During his previous term as President, Trump mentioned his desire to cut down this spending towards NATO or leave the alliance altogether if other countries do not match, or at least increase, their defence budget.

At the 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels, Trump threatened a US withdrawal from NATO if the two per cent GDP defence spending was unmet (Foy, 2024). Despite the U.S. not being on European soil, they provide a majority of NATO's budget, around sixteen per cent (Reuters, 2024). The world looks increasingly like the 1930s pre-Second World War period (Shapiro, 2024). The above mentioned challenges mean that NATO and other international organisations are heading towards an uncertain future. Therefore, a leader who can strengthen the organisation in these times of crisis is needed. The Secretary General has considerable responsibilities and influences on the future of NATO in these challenging times. As chairs of all relevant committees, they can mediate the policymaking process and settle disputes. As the spokesperson for NATO, the Secretary General participates in conferences and lectures, thus strengthening NATO's confidence. As head of international staff, the Secretary General is granted the authority to influence the composition of NATO's internal retinue. All of this influence is now vested in Mark Rutte. Thus, for the aim of this research, the following section will be devoted to analysing crucial moments that defined Rutte as a leader and prepared him for his role as Secretary General of NATO. By doing so, the authors attempt to find patterns in Rutte's leadership style from his premiership and link those findings with what can be expected from his tenure as Secretary General. Accordingly, the committees' roles show that cooperation is perhaps the most

critical component for a functioning NATO. As the chair of all these committees, the Secretary General must be someone who can cooperate with and unite leaders who all have differing opinions. Further sections of this article will introduce Mark Rutte and showcase how his record, especially on the international stage, may have been the decisive factor in his appointment as NATO's Secretary General.

3. Mark Rutte

To understand why Rutte has been appointed as the new Secretary General of NATO, it is essential to comprehend how a Secretary General is appointed in the first place. Traditionally, the Secretary General is a senior politician of a European NATO ally, preferably in a leadership position.

They are appointed by member states and then hold the position for at least four years, after which re-election is possible (NATO, 2023). Mark Rutte held the highest leadership position in the Netherlands for thirteen years (Drs. M. (Mark) Rutte, n.d.-b), making him a suitable candidate for the NATO Secretary General based on the abovementioned preferred requirements. However, to answer this article's research question, the following section will focus on analysing Rutte's critical moments in his career as prime minister of the Netherlands. The country might be small, but it has experienced several crises. After thirteen years of leadership, Rutte can be labelled an experienced crisis manager. Rutte's communication style during the COVID-19 pandemic, his handling of former and possible future President of the U.S.. Donald Trump, Rutte's response to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in terms of internal and international defence strategy, and the shooting down of flight MH17 will be examined. Doing so will indicate Rutte's preferences and leadership style in (domestic) communication- and affairs, defence strategy, and foreign affairs. These events, in particular, were selected as they are relevant to analyse all aspects mentioned above of leadership styles that the authors aim to

investigate to appoint expectations for Rutte's tenure as Secretary General of NATO.

3.1. Rutte as a Domestic Politician

Rutte's interaction with domestic affairs and communication towards the public has been described as creative in language and a prominent voice on the European Union stage. Being soft in personal relations but still firm regarding the content of political affairs (Hart & Selten, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these descriptions became evident to most as he took on the position of teambuilder. Hart & Selten (2021) described him as "onverwoestbaar optimistisch" (p.1), which translates from the Dutch to undestroyable optimistic. As prime minister, Rutte had to take on the role of crisis communicator and decision-maker, being the centre of public scrutiny.

One characteristic that sets Rutte apart from other leaders is that he is open to a broad perspective and regularly deviated from scientific advice from the Dutch COVID-19 crisis team to make way for societal needs and wants. "Those who make a lot of noise will be heard by this prime minister" (Hart & Selten, 2021, p.3). This indicates that Rutte's leadership style leaves room for the ideas and opinions of others.

Another notable aspect during the pandemic was Rutte's communication style towards his domestic population. Instead of using politically tricky words and sentences, he uses local and personal metaphors, making him feel like a fellow citizen rather than an unrelatable prime minister. Rutte arranged commonplace press conferences broadcast on national television during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hart & Selten, 2021). Notably, instead of monopolising communication rights, he made way for fellow ministers such as Hugo de Jonge and others to provide the newest guidelines and updates to the public. This last aspect is distinctive for Rutte's leadership style even until his last day in the chamber, where he engages in conversations and debates within the broader national coalition and parliament.

Additionally, more often than any previous prime minister, he provides accountability to his civil servants for his decisions (Hart & Selten, 2021). Therefore, his domestic leadership style can be summed up with the "Logos, Pathos, and Ethos-strategy" appealing to facts, emotion, and domestic norms and values (Hart & Selten, 2021, p.6).

3.2. Rutte on the Global Stage

Mark Rutte's appointment as NATO's Secretary General may be tied to his previous domestic communication and communication with other world leaders. As mentioned before, Donald Trump's return to the American political scene could be one of the challenges NATO is facing, depending on the outcome of the United States elections in November. In a meeting room at NATO headquarters in 2018, Trump pressured the leaders of other NATO allied states for not spending enough GDP on defence. He issued an ultimatum: either other countries had to step up their defence spending, or the U.S. would pull out of NATO (Foy, 2024). Of all the leaders in the room that day, including then Secretary General Stoltenberg, only Mark Rutte employed a practical approach to responding to Trump's demands; "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" (Foy, 2024). Foy (2024) writes that Rutte's response ticked all the boxes that prove effective with Trump: flatter, defer, and agree. Ambassador Sondland said that Rutte "has a history with him of pushing back when he thinks Trump is wrong, and he does it right to his face", which Trump finds "refreshing" (Herszenhorn, 2024).

Rutte's premiership overlapped with the entirety of Trump's presidency, from 2017 until 2021. Rutte made a name for himself by his ability to handle the often volatile then-US president, with some even dubbing him a "Trump whisperer" (Hartog and Lau, 2024).

Besides the positive aspects of Rutte's communication skills, there is a perceived weakness in Rutte's strategy for defence

spending. When it comes to defence strategy, Rutte says he believes in cooperation over sovereignty and national retreat, referencing in a speech that “the solution for tomorrow is cooperation, cooperation, and cooperation. We must not retreat into our own countries, behind walls, barriers, and borders” (Rutte, 2016, p. 11). However, Starcevic (2024) writes that Rutte had historically opposed the European Union’s increasing defence budget. Under fourteen years of Rutte, the Netherlands’ military spending never reached the two per cent threshold set by NATO. In 2014, the Netherlands, under Rutte, spent 1.15% of its GDP on defence spending (Lau et al., 2023). Bentinck (2018) notes that the first significant increase in Dutch military expenditures came in 2016, six years into Rutte’s premiership. This increase was only to increase readiness and handle the most necessary equipment updates rather than to boost the strength of the Dutch armed forces. Bentinck (2018) notes that a lack of defence spending had even left the Dutch military incapable of meeting its Article 5 commitments, which mandates all signing parties of the North Atlantic Treaty to treat an attack on one member state as an attack on all and militarily support the attacked state (North Atlantic Treaty, 1949).

Finally, in 2024, the Netherlands is expected to reach the GDP guidelines by NATO, with defence spending expected to reach 2.03% (Lau et al., 2023). Some prominent voices, including US Senator Dan Sullivan, have expressed their opinion that his poor defence budget should have disqualified him for the role of Secretary General at NATO (Lau et al., 2023).

3.3. Rutte as a Crisis Leader

One significant event in Rutte’s premiership affects this analysis’s defence and international relations aspects. Described by Rutte in his farewell address to the country as the most defining moment in his career was the shootdown of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 (Rutte, 2024). On July 17, 2014, amid Russia’s aggressions in Eastern Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists shot

down a Boeing 777-200ER operating a scheduled passenger flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, killing all 298 occupants onboard (Dutch Safety Board, 2015). The separatists responsible for the attack were armed with a Buk surface-to-air missile provided by Russia meant to be used in the battle against Ukraine.

Dutch nationals were the most significant number of people on board, with 193 passengers carrying Dutch citizenship (Dutch Safety Board, 2015). The tragedy of MH17 significantly influenced Dutch foreign policy towards Russia. Before the shootdown of the Boeing 777, the Dutch stance on Russia’s aggression against Crimea was to find a political solution and not introduce sanctions due, in part, to the dependence of the Dutch energy grid on Russian gas (Vitkus, 2015). MH17 changed Rutte’s government’s position on sanctions, as the Netherlands became one of the leading EU voices favouring sanctions against Russia (Vitkus, 2015). Even in the initial aftermath of the shootdown, the Netherlands wanted to proceed with cautious relations with Russia. Still, the Netherlands’ stance toward Russia harshed as Putin continued to deny any involvement in the shootdown of the aircraft, leading to sharp public rebukes of statements from the Kremlin, as well as the publishing of tactics used by the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence service (Donaldson et al., 2018). There is evidence that the shootdown of MH17 affected Rutte’s worldview, leaving some to perceive him as more pessimistic (Van Willigen & Bakker, 2021). This could highlight Rutte’s human-centric approach to governing. When he has dealt with situations that strike close to his heart, Rutte’s decision-making seems to favour what he perceives as justice to those he serves rather than what might be in the best financial interests of his country.

4. Discussion

Reflecting on all the moments mentioned above in recent history in Mark Rutte’s political life, the authors will now discuss how these specific career events can indicate what can be expected

from Rutte's leadership style with the future of NATO in his hands.

It has become evident that Rutte is a uniter of leaders. From right to left, top to bottom, Rutte has been a connecting cornerstone in international relations. These skills are also shown in the fragmented nature of politics in the Netherlands, where multiple coalitions have failed under Rutte's administration and opinions in the parliament are uncompromised (Kabinetformaties Sinds 1945, n.d.). Working in this environment for years could reflect an outstanding breeding ground for a future leader of NATO up against ensuring cooperation when interest in national sovereignty is growing, and collaboration seems more complicated than it has in decades (Kalinowski, 2022). Furthermore, in democracies, where the people have voting power, it is essential that the regular citizens believe in NATO's mission and, consequently, support more significant defence expenditures. Therefore, as a future leader of NATO, Rutte has to be favoured by the people. As proven by his tenure in the Netherlands, Rutte is an unrestricted and open communicator to ordinary citizens, providing a voice to those wanting to be heard whilst publicly presenting himself as an equal. His public management of the numerous crises in the Netherlands, primarily the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggests Rutte might be a suitable candidate for this particular aspect needed from the new Secretary General.

Looking further at Rutte's relations with other leaders, as mentioned earlier, he sets himself apart in his interactions with Donald Trump. In the past, most leaders who met with Trump and had been subjected to his isolationist outbursts would sit in silence as he would go off script and mention policies that would be negative for other countries. Still, Rutte stood out for his country and the European Union. Some, such as Trump's ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, say that Trump was impressed with Rutte's response, saying it was an example of Rutte's Dutch directness (Herszenhorn, 2024).

We will presumably never know whether Rutte's

response to Trump prevented the ex-president from pulling the U.S. out of NATO. However, should Donald Trump be re-elected in November, a NATO headed by someone who has, so far, possessed an effective strategy towards him, which differs from that of most other leaders, will likely be more resilient. Contrastingly, while this article found evidence that Rutte has a talent for uniting leaders and building consensus, many take issue with his past views on defence spending. His defence policy has shifted over the years, and while he appears to have toughened his views on spending more recently, his lax defence policy is a cause for concern. Even if Rutte, as Secretary General, were to attempt to persuade NATO allied nations to increase their defence spending, he would very likely face questions about his past aversion to significant defence expenditures.

On an international level, Rutte's response to MH17 about his defence spending and stance on Russian sanctions show that his core positions and beliefs are not set in stone and can be influenced. Van Willigen and Bakker (2021) show that the shutdown of a passenger jet carrying over 100 Dutch citizens deeply impacted Rutte's worldview and stance towards Russia.

Based on his handling of past crises, Mark Rutte meets the particular demands and qualities that seem critical for the Secretary General of NATO, given the organisation's current challenges.

5. Conclusion

Rutte is effective at reaching deals and uniting people. Still, certain past positions, most notably his lax defence policy as prime minister of the Netherlands, could cause concern for his tenure as Secretary General. However, given that his small defence budget was well known by the leaders of NATO member states - those who endorsed him as the new Secretary General - perhaps it can be assumed that Rutte's strong qualities as a consensus builder were prioritised over questions of defence spending. The current political landscape in Europe and the U.S. could explain this with the rise of right-wing conservative parties and the possible return of Trump as president of the most significant financial contributor of the alliance. Given the roles of NATO's Secretary General, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Rutte's reputation as a uniting voice makes sense, given that the Secretary General is less involved in policy making and more involved in mediation roles. What do these findings mean regarding the research question of:

"What can be expected from Mark Rutte as Secretary General of NATO, given his thirteen years of crisis management as prime minister of the Netherlands?" This article finds that Rutte can be expected to act as an alliance- and cooperation builder rather than a firm decision-maker twisting the arms of NATO members regarding their defence spending. The latter might lead NATO into further stress later down the road of his tenure as Secretary General, especially if Trump were to be reelected and carry out his previously made warnings of cutting down NATO's funding by the U.S.. Contrastingly, Rutte can be expected to use this role to influence and perhaps ease the needs and wants of the more rigid leaders within the organisation, especially regarding Trump. Looking at NATO, this could guide his approach to Russia's offensive actions against Ukraine and might lead him to take a more hawkish stance against the Kremlin. Only time will tell what Mark Rutte brings to NATO as its Secretary General. It will be interesting to monitor and analyse new developments in Rutte's NATO over the years to come.

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