

As the NATO alliance prepares to celebrate its 75th anniversary at this week's summit in Washington, it is also gearing up to welcome its first new leader in a decade: a man experienced at dealing with former President Donald Trump that many hope can keep the alliance unified in the face of a swirl of challenges including a potential second Trump presidency.

Former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was formally selected as the next NATO secretary general in late June and will begin the job on October 1. He takes up the role from longtime NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg, who has led the alliance since 2014.

Diplomats and officials who spoke with CNN said Rutte is seen as a staunch trans-Atlanticist and a consensus builder.

"He is really a seasoned political official, and this is essential to keep the cohesion of the alliance," a European official said.

Rutte is also seen as someone who can work with whoever is elected US president, officials told CNN, and some hope that Rutte's past relationship with Trump, from when they led their respective countries, could deter the former president from undermining the alliance if he is reelected.

The former president publicly railed against the alliance during his first term in office and did so again recently on the campaign trail, even going as far as suggesting Russia "do whatever the hell they want" to members who don't meet defense spending targets. Trump's stance on the campaign trail that his adherence to the alliance would be conditional has stirred concerns in the international community.

"Trump likes people that will push back, especially if they do it in a very respectful way," said Pete Hoekstra, Trump's ambassador to the Netherlands.

In a meeting where Trump was talking about the "trade deficit," Hoekstra recalled, Rutte pushed back, "with a smile on his face," that they did indeed need to address the trade deficit between the US and the Netherlands.

"It was just a very polite, slightly humorous way of dealing Trump, and Trump appreciated it," Hoekstra recalled to CNN. "There was no, 'You S.O.B.' or anything like that. It was just, 'Touche, Rutte, you got me.'"

Still, just because the former president and Rutte “have a good working relationship ... because they genuinely like each other,” it does not mean that Trump will be deterred from “his agenda,” Hoekstra said.

The former ambassador argued that “Trump was never against NATO,” but rather “was against a NATO that the Europeans didn’ t support,” referencing the fact that many European countries at the time did not contribute 2% of their GDP to defense.