NATO defence ministers' censure Russian cyber attacks and INF Treaty violation while taking forward decisions from July Summit:

A review of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, Brussels, 3-4 October 2018

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Key activities and decisions taken:

- The Defence Ministers addressed "serious concerns" about Russia's "reckless pattern of behaviour", including an "indiscriminate campaign of cyber attacks around the world" and alleged violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and called on Russia to address those concerns.
- The Defence Ministers were briefed about a foiled Russian military intelligence service cyber operation against the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; several member states, including the United States, offered their cyber capabilities to NATO.
- Defence Ministers from Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia signed a Memorandum of Understanding to create a Multinational Special Aviation Programme, which will establish a new training centre in Croatia by the end of 2019 dedicated exclusively to training air crews, who will conduct the insertion and extraction of Special Operations Forces.
- Defence Ministers from thirteen NATO allies signed a declaration of intent to cooperate on the introduction of Maritime Unmanned Systems.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The NATO defence ministers met in Brussels for a two-day meeting to discuss issues arising from the July NATO Summit. (For a detailed account of what was agreed at the July 2018 NATO Summit, see the NATO Watch Observatory No.48). The agenda was focused on three main issues:

- progress in strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence, which included a meeting of the Nuclear Planning Group and discussions on Russia's alleged violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, as well as NATO's continued adaptation in response to conventional, hybrid and cyber threats;
- ongoing efforts to achieve fairer burden sharing within the alliance; and
- working with partners, including a meeting of the NATO-Georgia Commission and meetings with EU representatives.

A pre-ministerial press conference was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 2 October. The first day of the ministerial meeting (3 October) began with a media background briefing on NATO-Russia relations, and this was followed by a general doorstep statement by the NATO Secretary General. Two bilateral meetings then took

place between Stoltenberg and the Defence Minister of Georgia and the US Defence Secretary. No details of those discussions were made public. Later in the day, the NATO-Georgia Commission met in Defence Ministers session, and aside from a few opening remarks by the NATO Secretary General, that meeting was a closed session.

An official portrait of the ministers was taken at 17.35 and this was followed by another press conference by the NATO Secretary General. A signing ceremony for a Declaration of Intent on Maritime Unmanned Systems by the Defence Ministers of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, United States was followed by a closed working dinner.

The second day of the ministerial began with signing ceremony for a Memorandum of Understanding on Multinational Special Aviation Programme by the Defence Ministers of Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia, and this was followed by a meeting of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) in Defence Ministers session, and as is the convention for this Group, there was no information publicly available.

(NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg arrives at the meeting, 4 October 2018 – photo credit: NATO)

The last session was a meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Defence Ministers format to discuss progress on NATO's strengthened deterrence and defence. Again, outside of a few opening remarks by the NATO Secretary General, that meeting was a closed session. After the NAC meeting there was another press conference by the NATO Secretary General, as well as by the US Secretary of Defense. A final bilateral meeting took place between Stoltenberg and the French Defence Minister.

The following more detailed analysis of key aspects of the ministerial meeting draws on a combination of the above links, wider press

reporting of the ministerial meeting and NATO Watch insights in attempt to fill the information gaps.

Defence and deterrence

NATO's deterrence and defence includes conventional capabilities, cyber defence, missile defence and a nuclear dimension.

The Nuclear Planning Group and the INF Treaty

There was only limited public disclosure of the scope and nature of the discussions in the NPG. During his final press conference, the Secretary General described the NPG, as "part of our work to ensure we have the right tools and procedures in place. So NATO nuclear forces remain safe, secure and effective".

He also stated that the NPG addressed concerns about the INF Treaty, which the ministers considered to be in danger because of Russia's actions:

After years of denials, Russia recently acknowledged the existence of a new missile system, called 9M729. This system is destabilising. It is a serious risk to our security. Allies agree that Russia has not been transparent. And refuses to provide any credible answers. The most plausible assessment is that Russia is in violation of the INF Treaty. We call on Russia to address our concerns.

The INF treaty banned all missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. It protected the European continent from those weapons, and also banned US Pershing cruise missiles, which had been deployed by the US and Germany. Since 2014, the United States has accused Russia of violating the treaty, and Washington has imposed sanctions intended to pressure Russia into compliance. Russia has denied violating the treaty but has accused Washington of doing so with a missile defence system deployed in Europe.

The United States has threatened to abandon the treaty and develop its own medium-range cruise missile if Russia refuses to come back into compliance, raising the risk of a [new nuclear arms race](#).

On the day before the defence ministers meeting, during a press conference the US ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison appeared to go further in [saying](#) that the United States might "take out" Russian missiles it views as violating the treaty. Although Ambassador Hutchinson later the same day clarified [on Twitter](#) that she did not mean to suggest that Washington was considering a pre-emptive strike against Russian missile sites, her earlier comments generated a [sharp reaction from Moscow](#).

(Jim Mattis, US Secretary of Defense, with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, at the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, 4 October 2018 – photo credit: NATO)

Certainly, any US threat of a pre-emptive strike against Russia would be unprecedented since the end of the cold war, and a dangerous new departure in rhetoric and military posture towards Russia. When asked about this at the start of the NATO defence ministers meeting, the NATO Secretary General [sought](#) to play down Ambassador Hutchison's comments:

> *The Ambassador clarified that what she meant was that it is important that Russia complies with the INF Treaty. And all allies fully agree that it is extremely important that Russia, in a transparent way, comply with the INF Treaty.*
>
> *….we call on Russia to comply with the INF Treaty in a transparent and verifiable way. They don't do that now, because they're not transparent on what they do when they develop a new missile. A missile they for a long time denied existed, now they have admitted that the missile exists, and therefore we have called on them to answer our questions. And as long as they don't answer our questions, the most plausible*

conclusion is that this is a violation of the INF Treaty.

Cyber security and allegations of Russian cyber attacks

In a [press release](#), the NATO Secretary General gave a statement on Russian cyber attacks, in which he said the Netherlands had briefed NATO Defence Ministers on the targeting of the offices of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) by the GRU, the Russian military intelligence service. The attack was apparently disrupted by Dutch intelligence services in partnership with the UK. The UK also [identified](#) the GRU as being behind a number of other cyber-attacks around the world.

The Secretary General [referred](#) to "Russia's indiscriminate campaign of cyber-attacks around the world" and said that "in response, NATO will continue to strengthen its defence and deterrence in the cyber domain". At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO recognized cyberspace as a warfighting domain, but the emphasis to date has been on defending NATO networks and those of its members, not offensive cyberwar. This might be changing, however, despite a [lack of clarity](#) or common standards on what constitutes a cyber attack, how severe it is and how to respond.

The Defence Ministers discussed the progress being made in setting up a new Cyber Operations Centre and Counter Hybrid Support Teams (the latter to provide "tailored assistance" to member states), integrating national cyber capabilities into alliance missions and operations, and bolstering NATO's cyber resilience. It was noted that some member states have successfully used their cyber capabilities against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to suppress terrorist propaganda, hinder the group's ability to coordinate attacks, and to protect forces on the battlefield. Some of these were clearly

offensive cyber operations and the Secretary General confirmed that "these are the same kind of capabilities we now are creating the framework to integrate into NATO missions and operations".

In addition, several NATO member states—most prominently, the United States (which released in September an unclassified summary and fact sheet on its 2018 Cyber Strategy, which replaces the 2015 DoD Cyber Strategy), but also Demark, the Netherlands and the UK—have offered their cyber capabilities to NATO, and the Secretary General suggested that these will make NATO "as strong in cyberspace as we are on land, at sea and in the air". The Secretary General also reiterated that NATO would always act and react to a cyber attack "in a proportionate way. And in accordance with international law".

When asked by a journalist whether the current Russian cyber efforts were at a level whereby NATO might take offensive cyber action in response, the NATO Secretary General emphasised cyber defence—through resilience, disruption and intelligence—while leaving a degree of ambiguity on offensive options:

> *When and if and how we will use our national cyber capabilities in NATO missions and operations I think it will be very wrong if I started to speculate now about that. That will only create unnecessary uncertainty, so we will decide when we use that in the different missions and operations depending on the circumstances.*

This ambiguity as regards when and how offensive cyber operations might be undertaken by NATO creates several problems. First, the lack of a unifying standard will lead to individual member states over- and under-stating such incidents, which in turn may weaken public understanding of the threat. Second, it hinders collective cyber defence efforts within the alliance and, most importantly, muddies the rules of engagement.

Two new joint programmes: Multinational Special Aviation Programme for Special Forces and cooperation on Maritime Unmanned Systems

Defence Ministers from Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia signed a Memorandum of Understanding to create a Multinational Special Aviation Programme, which will establish a new training centre in Zadar, Croatia by the end of 2019 dedicated exclusively to training helicopter crews, who will conduct the insertion and extraction of Special Operations Forces. This will be NATO's first international centre in Croatia.

NATO's Deputy Secretary General, Rose Gottemoeller, said: "As the world changes, NATO must continue to adapt to meet evolving security threats. And Special Forces have proven to be a highly valuable and versatile tool for effectively responding to these challenges".

At the NATO Summit in July, alliance leaders endorsed the implementation of NATO's reinforced maritime posture. In support of this, Defence Ministers from thirteen NATO member states— Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States—signed a declaration of intent to cooperate on the introduction of Maritime Unmanned Systems.

The use of unmanned maritime vehicles and systems is seen as a potentially "game changing leap forward in maritime technology", enabling NATO to be significantly more effective in crucial areas such as detecting and clearing mines, and finding and tracking submarines. According to the NATO news release, working alongside traditional naval assets, these unmanned systems will "increase both our situational awareness and our control of the seas".

Burden-sharing within the alliance: progress being made

The issue of fair burden-sharing is one of the longest running fault lines within NATO, with accusations that Europe spends too little on

defence and is being protected at US taxpayer expense. While the United States does pick up a disproportionate share of the NATO tab, the imbalance is not as great a sometimes suggested.

Nonetheless, NATO member states agreed in 2014 to move towards investing 2 per cent of GDP on defence by 2024. They also agreed to invest more in key military capabilities and equipment, and to contribute personnel to NATO missions and operations. In 2017 NATO member states agreed to report annually on how they intend to make progress on all three commitments: more money, capabilities and contributions.

At the July NATO Summit, US President Donald Trump harshly criticized allies, particularly Germany, for not spending enough on defence and threatened to quit the alliance if they do not raise their military spending more quickly. It was no surprise, therefore, that the defence ministers discussed the continued effort to bring national military spending to an agreed-upon target of 2 per cent of GDP, with burden-sharing the focus of the working dinner on the 3 October.

(Meeting of the NATO-Georgia Commission, 3 October 2018 – photo credit: NATO)

In his final [press conference](#) the Secretary-General said that " It is clear we are making progress. This will be the fourth consecutive year of rising defence spending. But we still have a long way to go. allies have committed to have credible national plans. I would expect these to show real increases in defence spending year on year. And a realistic path to 2 per cent of GDP on defence. Allies will report on the national plans before the end of this year, and we intend to discuss them at our meeting of defence ministers in February. Allies should also invest in new capabilities".

Working with partners

Meeting of the NATO-Georgia Commission

Georgia is one of NATO's closest partners and one of the largest contributors to NATO's training mission in Afghanistan. It was agreed at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 that Georgia would one day become a member of the alliance. This decision was reconfirmed at successive NATO Summits, including the July 2018 Summit. The NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) serves as a forum for political consultations and oversees the practical cooperation between Georgia and NATO. Since 2008, Georgia submits to NATO an Annual National Programme with a wide range of reform objectives to support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. In return, NATO provides advice on Georgia's reform goals, both in civilian and military frameworks.

In addition to reviewing Georgia's progress in implementing the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, the NGC discussed the security situation in the Black Sea region and a NATO-Georgia military exercise scheduled for March 2019. After chairing the NGC meeting, Stoltenberg [said](#) that "NATO's door remains open". He also called on Russia to end its recognition of breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia "and to withdraw its forces from these regions of Georgia". Russia's prime minister warned in July that any attempt by NATO to incorporate Georgia could trigger a "horrible" new conflict.

Ukraine

NATO provides political and practical support to Ukraine. There was no meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission at the defence ministers meeting, and it is unclear whether Ukraine was discussed by the defence ministers. However,

Russian military activity in the Azov Sea was raised during the NATO Secretary General's press conference. Stoltenberg said, "we are concerned because what we see is that Russia is impeding normal civilian traffic, commercial vessels, and, of course, that's a problem for Ukraine, which has seen that normal traffic from some of its harbours - in Mariupol and other places - has been impeded or there have been problems with the normal traffic in and out". He added, that this was part of a "pattern" of Russia trying to destabilise Ukraine, but that NATO would continue to provide support to the country, as well "strongly support the efforts to find a political solution to fully implement the Minsk Agreement, which is the only viable way to a peaceful settlement of the conflict and the problems we see in and around Ukraine, including the Azov Sea".

Macedonia

It is not clear whether the situation in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia following the 30 September consultative referendum on the 'name change deal' with Greece—see this NATO Watch news brief for further details—was discussed by the defence ministers, but the NATO Secretary General was asked about it during his press conference. Stoltenberg stressed that the way forward is "up to the people, the politicians, the government, the National Assembly of the country to decide. I know that they're now looking into the possibility of having the necessary constitutional changes, and the government has also mentioned the possibility of a new election. But again, that's not for me, it's for them to assess and decide".

Accession talks for NATO membership have already begun and are expected to be concluded by January 2019. Once all the constitutional changes on the new name are completed, the accession protocol will be signed giving Skopje a seat at NATO's table as its thirtieth member.

Instability on NATO's southern borders

The Defence Ministers discussed NATO's responses to the instability on its southern borders, although few details were forthcoming. These responses include a new training mission in Iraq and continued support for other partners, such as Jordan and Tunisia, to "improve their defence and security capabilities". NATO's Hub for the South in Naples is a key resource for monitoring and understanding regional threats, like terrorism and failing states.

The new training mission in Iraq was officially launched at the July NATO Summit and will be led by Canada. According to the NATO Secretary General, the mission is gradually being built up, and he also expressed concern about "the destabilising activities of Iran in the region". Otherwise, there appeared to be nothing new on the table in relation to operations and partnerships in the South discussed during the meeting.

NATO-EU Cooperation

NATO-EU cooperation was discussed by the ministers, with participation by EU High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini, as well as defence ministers from Finland and Sweden. Again, few details were forthcoming about the discussions, but the focus of cooperation to date has been on cyber defence, military mobility, and in countering hybrid threats.