



Alliance rebrands counter-terrorism role and burden sharing commitment in attempt to appease President Trump:

A review of the NATO Summit meeting in Brussels, 25 May 2017

By Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Key events and decisions taken:

- An Action Plan to do more in the fight against terrorism was agreed.
- NATO leaders also agreed to do more to ensure fairer burden sharing across the alliance.
- Montenegro will soon become the twenty-ninth member of NATO.
- NATO moved into its new headquarters in Brussels.

Summary of the Summit

This was a very short Summit meeting and one [designed not to tax the notoriously short attention span and interest of President Donald Trump](#). Significantly, there was also no post-Summit declaration, which NATO traditionally publishes to signal new strategies and key policy shifts.

The Summit agenda was focused almost exclusively on President Trump's wish list: stepping up NATO's role in the fight against terrorism and fairer burden sharing in the alliance. [Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary](#) subsequently boasted that "When you have an entire meeting that is focused on the

president's agenda, that shows the power of his message".

In addition to this being President Trump's first NATO Summit, it was also the first visit for newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron. NATO leaders also used the meeting to unveil their new headquarters in Brussels.

The day began with a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and this was followed by two bilateral meetings between Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of Canada and the President of Poland. No details of the discussions were made public.

After lunch, the Secretary General gave another [doorstep statement](#) upon arrival at the new NATO Headquarters. This was followed by photo opportunities of the arrival of NATO leaders and (at 16.00) the [unveiling of two memorials](#): President Trump unveiled a memorial to 9/11 with a sculpture made from fragments of the Twin Towers, and then Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany unveiled a memorial with pieces from the Berlin Wall. President Trump used the occasion [to lecture allies on their financial contributions](#), repeating his complaint that the United States was shouldering an unfair burden. At 17.00, the host nation Belgium [formally handed over the new building to NATO](#).

The day began in substance at 17.45 with a closed working dinner for the Heads of State, which mainly discussed and took decisions on counter-terrorism and burden sharing (see below). It was clear from the [body language during the photo sessions](#) that there are deep divisions between President Trump and most of the other alliance leaders, with Chancellor Merkel emerging as the strongest [counterweight to the President](#).

The meagre Summit outcomes can be characterised as a modest repackaging of existing NATO commitments in an attempt to placate President Trump. Whether this has the desired effect only time (and the next Summit meeting in 2018) will tell. From a European NATO perspective, the objective was about not diluting the programme agreed at the previous Wales and Warsaw Summits, and keeping the wider US administration (if not necessarily the US President) engaged in the implementation process. While there remains uncertainty about the future direction of US policy towards NATO, so far, the US administration has not backed away from those earlier commitments.



[Remarks by Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany at the dedication of the Berlin Wall Memorial – photo credit: NATO]

Improving NATO's counter-terrorism role

The NATO Summit took place only days after the [terrorist attack in Manchester](#), and the NATO leaders were attempting to send out a unified message of standing together in the fight against terrorism. The one concrete deliverable was an Action Plan for NATO to step up its efforts in this area. However, details of the Action Plan are sparse, especially since the plan itself has not been published (a not uncommon practice for such documents, but a disappointing lack of transparency on such a pivotal issue).

From the remarks given by the Secretary General the main aim of the Plan is to expand NATO's support to the [Global Coalition against Daesh](#), which was formed in September 2014. All 28 member states of NATO are already part of that Coalition, but NATO itself will now become a member. In practical terms, beyond this show of political unity, NATO is now committed to providing the Coalition with more AWACs flight-time, information sharing and air-to-air refuelling. It will also enable NATO to take part in political deliberations within the Coalition, including on the coordination of training and capacity building. However, as [the Secretary General was keen to clarify](#), NATO will not engage in counter-terrorism combat operations:

"There has been no request for any NATO combat role and there is no discussion at all about engaging NATO in a combat role in the Counter ISIL Coalition".

Is there a danger of this first step leading down a slippery slope to a future combat role? The history of the Afghan conflict does suggest there is some cause for concern, given that NATO's initial non-combat role in 2001 was overturned in favour of a combat role two

years later. However, the circumstances today are very different. After 9/11, NATO invoked Article 5, but NATO's participation in the military aspect of the 'war on terror' was declined by the United States, which preferred a national operation supported by a 'coalition of the willing' as less constraining. The change in 2003 was linked to Iraq. While NATO took no position on Iraq per se, it agreed to substitute for the United States in certain roles and missions in Afghanistan, to free US assets that were needed in Iraq. This turn of events is unlikely to be replicated in Iraq today, not least due to the absence of public support for another large-scale military intervention in the Middle East. Instead, the focus is on training, equipping and advising local forces (see below) and low footprint or

[‘remote control’](#) interventions with Special Forces and armed drones.

In addition, it was announced in Brussels that NATO has agreed to establish a new terrorism intelligence cell at NATO headquarters within its new Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD). This intelligence cell is expected to improve how the alliance shares intelligence, including on foreign fighters. However, this was not a new decision. The JISD was created at the Warsaw Summit to fuse military and civilian intelligence sharing, including connecting sources from the law enforcement community. Moreover, the ‘announcement’ in Brussels was rather overshadowed by the ongoing row over [intelligence leaks by the United States](#), not least on operational matters concerning the investigation of the Manchester terrorist attack.

NATO has also agreed to appoint a “senior NATO official” as a coordinator to oversee NATO’s efforts in the fight against terrorism, and “to ensure that our new Action Plan is implemented swiftly and effectively”. Work is also underway to establish “a Hub for the South” at NATO’s Joint Force Command in Naples. [According to the Secretary General](#), it will constantly monitor and assess regional threats, including terrorism. Finally, “the alliance is also looking into making greater use of NATO’s Special Operations Headquarters, which already offers tailored counter-terrorism training for allies and partners. This could involve more mobile training teams deploying to countries at risk”.

Ensuring fairer burden sharing

At the Wales Summit in 2014, NATO made a defence investment pledge to move progressively towards allocating 2% of member states’ GDP to defence and, perhaps as important, allocate at least 20% of their defence budgets to major equipment, including research and development. Since then most member states have stopped the

successive reductions in military spending that took place in the years after the end of the Cold War and have begun to increase military spending again.

At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, evidence was provided that the military spending of European member states was no longer falling and was beginning to increase. This message of improvement was continued by the [Secretary General at the Brussels Summit](#): “In 2015, cuts came to a stop. And in 2016, total spending across Europe and Canada increased by billions of dollars”.

However, President Trump didn’t appear to be too impressed and [upped the ante by declaring](#):

“Twenty-three of the 28 member nations are still not paying what they should be paying and what they’re supposed to be paying for their defence.

This is not fair to the people and taxpayers of the United States and many of these nations owe massive amounts of money from past years. And not paying in those past years..... We have to make up for the many years lost – 2% is the bare minimum for confronting today’s very real and very vicious threats”.



[Remarks by Donald Trump, President of the United States at the unveiling of the 9/11-Article 5 Memorial – photo credit: NATO]

This debate—and accusations that Europe spends too little on defence and is being protected at US taxpayers’ expense—is one of the [longest running fault lines within NATO](#). While the United States does pick up a disproportionate share of the NATO tab, [the imbalance is not as great as is sometimes suggested](#)—especially when comparing direct funding of NATO, rather than military expenditure per se. Indeed, regarding the latter, there is arguably a case for reducing and rebalancing US security resources, but is often the ‘elephant in the room’ during transatlantic burden sharing discussions. As indicated by [SIPRI data](#), the United States could generate a \$159 billion peace dividend by reducing its spending to the NATO 2% commitment.

At this latest Brussels Summit, NATO leaders agreed to develop annual national plans, setting out how member states intend to meet the 2014 defence investment pledge. The national plans will cover three major areas: cash (how nations intend to meet their 2% commitment), capabilities (how to invest additional funding in key military capabilities), and contributions (how nations intend to contribute to NATO missions, operations and other engagements).

According to the [Secretary General's closing press conference](#), "many allies set out tonight how they intend to meet these goals". However, given the short time available at the working dinner, this could have only been at a very rudimentary level. The first set of reports on national plans are expected to be completed by December this year and will be reviewed by NATO defence ministers at their February 2018 meeting. There is no indication as to whether the plans will be made public.

Persuading Europe's taxpayers to make further significant increases in defence spending remains an uphill challenge. Moreover, in the light of the complex security challenges that need to be addressed, whether increasing military spending is always the most appropriate response will continue to be contested.

NATO's 29th member: Montenegro

Montenegro's Prime Minister Duško Marković took part in the Summit in advance of his country's formal membership of the alliance in early June—the parliaments of all 28 existing member states and Montenegro having now ratified the country's accession to NATO. It is hoped that Montenegrin membership will provide a step forward for stability in the Western Balkans, although within the country itself [opinion on NATO membership](#) is deeply divided.

[NATO leaders walk through the Agora of the new NATO HQ – photo credit: NATO]



The decision also signals that NATO membership is not fixed, and that additional aspirant countries with a Membership Action Plan (MAP), such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, might join in the future. However, while future enlargement of NATO membership is not excluded, in the short term the prospects for expanding the alliance are limited.

The only remaining obstacle for Macedonia is Greece, while in Bosnia it is the problem of Republika Srpska (which will not be allowed to keep military assets outside federal structures). Georgia and Ukraine were both promised membership at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, but neither has a MAP and are unlikely to gain one any time soon. Instead, they are being kept in a dialogue process (the NATO-Georgia Commission and the NATO-Ukraine Commission) that should at some distant point lead to a MAP. Russia, however, is working to try and make sure that next step never happens.

The New NATO HQ

Construction of a [new NATO headquarters](#) building began with a ground-breaking ceremony in December 2010, and the official handover from host country Belgium to NATO took place at the Brussels Summit.

The building has been plagued by [delays and cost overruns](#)—there is now a ceiling of €1.12 billion for the project, almost three times the €460 million contract awarded in 2010. Construction is still not complete and the bulk of the staff are not expected to move into the building until later this year. Given his construction background, [a caustic remark from President Trump](#) was inevitable: "I never asked once what the new

NATO headquarters cost. I refuse to do so. But it looks beautiful".

The new headquarters will provide space for 1,500 personnel from national delegations, 1,700 international military and civilian staff, 600 staff from NATO agencies, and

frequent visitors, currently some 500 per day. The offices of NATO's partners will be located in a separate building on the NATO campus.

Problems on the horizon not discussed at the Summit

President Trump's seeming indifference to Article 5

During his election campaign, Donald Trump described NATO as "obsolete" and openly praised Russian President Vladimir Putin. After becoming president, however, Trump declared during a [meeting](#) with the NATO Secretary General in April that the alliance is "no longer obsolete". In addition, senior US administration officials, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Vice President Mike Pence, have publically reiterated traditional US commitments to NATO.

[Working dinner at the NATO Summit – photo credit: NATO]



Nonetheless, there remains a concern among European allies about the intensity and authenticity of President Trump's commitment to NATO, and there was an expectation that he would use the Summit to explicitly endorse NATO's mutual defence pledge. [NATO's Article 5 clause](#)—the 'one-for-all, all-for-one' principle—has been the foundation of the alliance since its establishment 68 years ago, after World War II.

President Trump did promise to "never forsake the friends that stood by our side" in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks — a pledge that according to the [New York Times](#) White House officials later said was an affirmation of mutual defence. In his [remarks](#) the NATO Secretary General was also keen to affirm that President Trump supported collective defence "not only in words but also in deeds", adding:

"Yesterday, the Trump Administration presented a budget where they increase funding for US military

presence in Europe by 40%. Which is a significant increase which comes on top of the increase we saw last year. And that enables an increase of military presence of US forces, more exercises, more equipment, more training, more prepositioned supplies, weapons, ammunition, and more investments in infrastructure. So after many years of a decline in US military presence in Europe we now see for the first time in many years an increase".

The sense remains, however, that many NATO allies continue to harbour fears about whether the United States would come to their defence in the event of an attack. This fear applied to successive US administrations, but has been amplified by the election of President Trump. For those in Eastern Europe, given their location and history, such nervousness is understandable.

While President Trump has not backed away from the [European Reassurance Initiative](#) agreed in Warsaw (and his budget increases funding for it), Europe's politicians and security analysts are likely to continue and deepen their [exploration of a European backup to NATO](#).

However, the task of building a European defence arrangement that is capable of deterring foes and defending the continent, should the United States disengage, would be a long-term effort, involving a sustained increase in resources focused on replacing the capabilities that only the United States has. It is not clear that there is appetite for this within Europe or whether it would be the best use of European resources.

NATO's 'train, equip and advise' missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya

Afghanistan

NATO's combat operations in Afghanistan ended at the close of 2014 and were replaced by a mission, Resolute Support, to train and build

Afghan forces. The mission currently comprises around 13,000 personnel from 39 NATO allies and partners. It operates with one 'hub' (Kabul/Bagram) and four 'spokes' (Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, Herat in the west, Kandahar in the south, and Laghman in the east).

At the 2016 Warsaw Summit it was agreed to sustain the Resolute Support mission beyond 2016 and keep it under review, and to fund the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) until 2020. Ahead of the meeting of NATO leaders in Brussels officials and operational partners reaffirmed the decisions taken in Warsaw.

While the NATO leaders appear not to have discussed Afghanistan in any detail during their working dinner at the Brussels Summit, during his [opening press conference](#) the Secretary General did state that "the security situation remains challenging", but that Afghan security forces have "proven capable, professional and they have been able to counter every time the Taliban has attacked. And they have proven also able to fight the many different terrorist groups including ISIS in Afghanistan".



[NATO delivered and demonstrated 160 sets of counter-IED equipment to Iraq's Ministry of Interior in March 2017 – photo credit: NATO]

This glowing reference for the ANDSF seems to belie the evidence on the ground of a [weakening Afghan regime and an unchecked Taliban resurgence](#). With the US administration pondering [a mini-troop surge to Afghanistan](#), the NATO Secretary General also announced that "our military commanders have asked for a few thousand more troops. We are currently in the process of force generation and I expect final decisions to be taken next month". He was also quick to avoid any comparison with earlier troop surges:

"So now when there is a request for a few thousand more troops it is something completely different than the surge back in 2009 and 2010. Because then it was a big surge in the combat operation. Now it is a request for a few thousand

more troops to do more training and capacity building. At least in the NATO framework. And the aim of that is to for instance further strengthen the Afghan special operation forces. They are proven extremely important in the fight against Taliban and terrorist groups. To strengthen the air defences, the air force of Afghanistan".

However, [some Afghans](#) fear a foreign troop increase by either NATO or the US could actually prolong the war.

Iraq

At the request of the Iraqi Government, NATO agreed in July 2015 on a package of defence capacity building measures in a number of priority areas, including: countering improvised explosive devices, explosive ordnance disposal and demining, security sector reform and civil military planning. Since early 2016 NATO has been conducting workshops and attending high-level meetings with Iraqi officials on security sector reform.

The first phase of training was launched in April

2016, with a 'train-the-trainers' course provided to 350 Iraqi officers in Jordan, and at the Warsaw Summit in July that year, NATO agreed to supplement that effort with a training and capacity building effort within Iraq itself, which started in January 2017.

There appeared to be no evaluation of that programme during the Brussels Summit meeting and no commitment to enhance it or provide an end date for those activities. Compared to the 2004 [NATO mission to train the Iraqi security forces](#) (which ended in 2011 after the alliance failed to obtain an agreement with Baghdad on the legal status of NATO troops serving there), the [current effort](#) is extremely modest. Most significantly, there appears to be no strategy for the country once the Islamic State has been defeated on the battlefield.

Libya

The NATO focus is also turning towards building local capacity and institutions in Libya. Again, while not a formal agenda item in Brussels, [the Secretary General set out the current state of play](#) as follows:

“we are in dialogue with Libya. I recently met with Prime Minister al-Sarraj, where we discussed how NATO can provide support for institution building, really building a modern Ministry of Defence, Joint Chief of Staff and establishing better intelligence systems. All of this is of great importance because they need the structures to be able to gradually stabilise Libya. It’s not about any sort of combat presence or military training. This is about institution building and our expert teams met recently and they continue to discuss how NATO can provide that kind of support”.

Relations with Russia

The relationship between Russia and NATO—and the West more generally—has deteriorated , taking on a fundamentally different characteristic. Since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, NATO has suspended all practical civilian and military cooperation with Moscow, while leaving a few channels open for dialogue.

[Russia-NATO flags – photo credit: NATO]



[According to the](#)

[Secretary General](#), NATO’s relationship with Russia was another topic of discussion at the Brussels Summit, in which “we reaffirmed our dual-track approach: strong defence, combined with meaningful dialogue, and we are delivering on both tracks”. However, in the time available this must have been a token discussion and one in which the differences of opinion between President Trump and many of the other allied leaders were again papered over.

Since 2014, NATO has implemented the biggest reinforcement of its collective defence since the end of the Cold War, including tripling the size of the NATO Response Force to 40,000 troops and a 5,000-strong Spearhead Force at its core. NATO has also introduced eight new headquarters in

the eastern part of the alliance, with four multinational battlegroups now deploying to the Baltic States and Poland. The United States has also increased its presence in Europe with more troops, infrastructure and exercises.

On the dialogue front, four meetings of the NATO-Russia Council took place in the last 12 months. The NATO-Russia Council can meet on different levels: ambassadorial level, ministerial level and at the level of Heads of State. However, all the recent NATO-Russia Council meetings have taken place at the ambassadorial level, and there are no immediate plans to resurrect higher level meetings in the Council.

Turkey’s role in NATO

Turkey has the second-largest military in NATO after the United States. The country has long been crucial to several NATO security concerns, not least due to its crucial location astride Europe, Russia and the Middle East. However, in the light of the purges of thousands of civil

servants, academics and military and security personnel following the [failed coup](#) in Turkey in July 2016 and the continuing drift towards authoritarianism in the country following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s [April](#)

[referendum victory](#), Turkey’s relations are tense with several other NATO member states.

First, [Turkey's relations with the United States](#) have been strained by Washington's decision to arm Kurdish militias (The People’s Protection Units, YPG) who are part of a force preparing to fight for the Islamic State-held city of Raqqa in Syria. Turkey regards the YPG as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), deemed a terrorist organization by the United States, Turkey and the EU. However, Washington sees the YPG as distinct from the PKK and as a valuable partner in the fight against Islamic State in Syria.

Second, as part of a dispute between Turkey and Austria over EU membership, [Turkey vetoed NATO's future co-operation with Austria](#) (a non-NATO member) in Kosovo, a move which had blocked the alliance's partnership activities with 41 countries. Hence, a few days before the Brussels Summit, NATO changed its procedures, allowing partnerships to go ahead on a country-by-country basis. However, Turkey is expected to maintain its veto on Austria's future involvement in operations.

Third, [Germany is reconsidering its air force deployment](#) at Turkey's Incirlik airbase after Ankara refused to grant Germany's parliament permission to visit staff serving there.

Fourth, there have been [calls](#) for the removal of [the 50 US nuclear weapons stored at Incirlik airbase](#), only 68 miles from the Syrian border. Largely a symbolic relic of the thousands of battlefield nuclear weapons once deployed by the United States and the Soviet Union to wage nuclear war in Europe, almost all have been withdrawn from deployment except those at Incirlik and approximately 100 others stored at NATO bases in Belgium, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands.

In 2016, the United States [temporarily lost access](#) to Incirlik during the attempted coup against President Erdogan and senior Turkish officers in charge of the base were said to be among the [leaders of the coup](#). The base was also subsequently [besieged by anti-US protesters](#) who demanded the closure of the base.

Even if NATO leaders believe the United States should keep tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, given the security risks of basing US nuclear weapons in Turkey, there is a compelling case for their removal to the United States.

Finally, [reports suggest](#) that the EU members of NATO and Canada are

looking to block Turkey from hosting the 2018 NATO Summit. The alliance meets in June to finalise the location of next year's summit, and during the Warsaw Summit Istanbul was tentatively agreed as the venue.

Conclusions

When the 'white noise' (about who pushed who in the photos, the handshakes and body language, etc.) is stripped back, the main outcome of the Brussels Summit was to basically keep implementing what was agreed at the earlier Wales and Warsaw Summits. NATO grudgingly tweaked things in Brussels to enable President Trump to spin the Summit at home as a 'win'. None of the other NATO leaders saw an advantage in picking a fight and are unlikely to do so in the future unless the United States does something to reverse an important decision.

Such a reversal cannot be ruled out by the unpredictable President Trump, but remains unlikely since this could lead to the resignation of either his Defense Secretary or National Security Advisor, both of whom are pillars of the US military and hence NATO-men through and through. With his major national security dilemmas in Asia rather than Europe, President Trump probably sees NATO and transatlantic security as relatively unimportant, and certainly not worthy of a confrontation with his Generals Mattis and McMaster.

[New NATO HQ handover ceremony and fly-past – photo credit: NATO]

