



NATO declares readiness initiative, while Secretary General plays down “serious differences” within the alliance:

A review of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, Brussels, 7-8 June 2018

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Key decisions taken:

- A NATO Readiness Initiative was agreed, committing NATO to having 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 naval combat vessels, ready to use within 30 days by 2020.
- It was confirmed that the new Joint Force Atlantic Command will be based at Norfolk in the United States, and the new Enabling Command in Ulm, Germany, (decisions to form these commands were taken at the February 2018 ministerial). The Command Structure will be enhanced by more than 1,200 personnel.
- Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the creation of a Composite Special Operations Component Command (C-SOCC).

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The two-day Meeting agenda was focused on five main issues: further discussions on adapting NATO’s Command Structure and military readiness; burden-sharing within the alliance; NATO-EU cooperation; fighting terrorism and projecting stability, with further discussion on plans for a NATO training mission in Iraq; and a review of NATO’s Resolute Support training mission in Afghanistan.

In advance of the ministerial meeting, a welcome briefing was given on 6 June by

NATO’s Deputy Spokesperson and the Head of Media Operations and later in the day, a pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General. This meeting was largely a continuation of work in progress from earlier ministerial and committee meetings (see, for example, the [February 2018 NATO Defence ministerial](#) and the [May 2018 NATO Defence Committee meeting](#)) in preparation for the NATO Summit in July.

The Secretary General spent much of his press conferences fielding questions about growing NATO disunity. Stoltenberg [acknowledged](#) that there are “serious differences” within the alliance “related to issues like trade, the Iran nuclear deal and climate change”, but he said, “we stand together in NATO when it comes to the core task of NATO ... to protect each other”. But even here, as noted below, tensions remain between the US and Turkey in Syria, and between Turkey and Greece, as well as differences over the nature of the threat from, and means to respond to, Russia.

The first day of the ministerial meeting (7 June) began with three media background briefings on NATO’s Partnerships, [NATO’s continued engagement in Afghanistan](#) and [NATO-EU relations](#), and were followed by a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. This was followed by two bilateral meetings between Stoltenberg and the Defence Minister of Ukraine and the US Defence Secretary. No details of the

discussions were made public. Later in the day, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) met in Defence Ministers session to discuss the Command Structure, readiness of forces and burden sharing. 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 towards the end of the day and this was followed by a [signing ceremony](#) of a memorandum of understanding between the Defence Ministers of Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands for the creation of a Composite Special Operations Component Command (C-SOCC). The day concluded with a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General and a closed working dinner.

The second day of the ministerial began with another meeting of the NAC in Defence Ministers session to discuss NATO-EU cooperation. Again, outside of a few [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, that meeting was a closed session. Instead, the media was given a background briefing on [NATO and Allied exercises](#). After the NAC meeting there was another [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

A final meeting of the NAC followed, with Resolute Support operational partner nations and potential operational partner nations at the level of Defence Ministers to review the situation in Afghanistan. They were joined by Afghanistan's Minister of Defence Bahramee. The NATO Secretary General made some [opening remarks](#) and then the session closed to the media. A final bilateral meeting took place between Stoltenberg and the Armenian Defence Minister, and the defence ministerial meeting concluded with three press conferences by the [NATO Secretary General](#), the [US Defense Secretary](#) and [Resolute Support Mission Commander Gen. John W. Nicholson](#).

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.

The NATO Readiness Initiative, two new NATO Commands and the importance of the Eastern Flank

NATO defence ministers had previously approved (in February 2018) two new military headquarters: an Atlantic Command to pursue maritime security and protect sea lanes from submarine threats to North American reinforcements of Europe; and a Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC), essentially a logistics command to improve the movement of troops and equipment within Europe.

At the latest meeting, ministers agreed to locate the new Joint Force Command for the Atlantic at Norfolk in the United States, and the new Enabling Command in Ulm, Germany. Both decisions had been widely previewed in advance. It was also announced that the Command Structure would be enhanced by more than 1,200 personnel.

The ministers also agreed a [NATO Readiness Initiative](#) – the ‘Four Thirties’, which would entail NATO fielding 30 mechanised battalions (the size of battalions vary across NATO, from 600 to 1,000 soldiers), 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels, to be ready within 30 days or less, by 2020. NATO Secretary General said, “This is not about setting up or deploying new forces, it is about boosting the readiness of existing forces”. Details of the plan, drawn up by the United States remain hazy, but an earlier [leaked report](#) suggested that the new force would be in addition to the already established [NATO Response Force](#), which has tripled in size in recent years to around 40,000 soldiers, with a new 5,000-strong Spearhead Force at its core, and the so-called [Enhanced Forward Presence](#) in the Baltics and Poland—four battalion-sized battlegroups, built around a single lead nation.

While not explicitly stated, these latest changes are clearly designed to help protect Europe in the event of a conflict with Russia. Relations between NATO and Russia are at their lowest since the Cold War, a fact the alliance says is due, among other things, to Russia's destabilization of Ukraine and its 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

In answer to a question on the nature of the threat that justified these changes, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg [said](#) “NATO has to adapt, and NATO has to make sure that we continue to remain the most successful alliance in history. And the only way to do that is to be able to respond when we see new challenges, change when the world is changing. And now the world is changing. We see a more assertive Russia, we see a lot of instability, violence in the Middle East and North Africa, close to our borders, we see proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and we see cyber threats”.

The Secretary General was also asked about the Polish ministry of defence [proposal](#) for the deployment of a permanently-based US division on Polish soil, which seems to run counter to the current emphasis on mobility and reinforcement rather than permanent forward-basing. Stoltenberg underlined the existing NATO and US presence in Poland, but refused to be drawn on the new proposal. “I think it's a bit too early to comment specifically on that concrete proposal. It remains to be seen exactly what Poland will propose”, he [said](#).

In a separate [meeting in Warsaw](#), Poland, on the 8 June, the leaders of the group known as the Bucharest Nine (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), which meets every quarter, discussed various issues of common security, and agreed that they remain fully committed to implementing all the initiatives developed as part of NATO's forward presence on the Eastern flank. The meeting ended with a joint [declaration](#) that outlined the Bucharest Nine's aims for the Brussels summit. The declaration cites Russia's build-up of conventional forces and hybrid warfare, which they said “threaten our long-standing vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace”.

The declaration also calls on the NATO 2018 Summit to provide “a coherent and integrated approach to the defence of the Eastern flank, underpinned by an effective and region-focused NATO Command Structure, reinforced maritime posture, strong air defence and a viable reinforcement strategy. Therefore,

increasing readiness and responsiveness of NATO forces and military mobility across of Alliance's territory is essential for deterrence and defence on the NATO Eastern flank. We remain committed to further progress in this direction”.

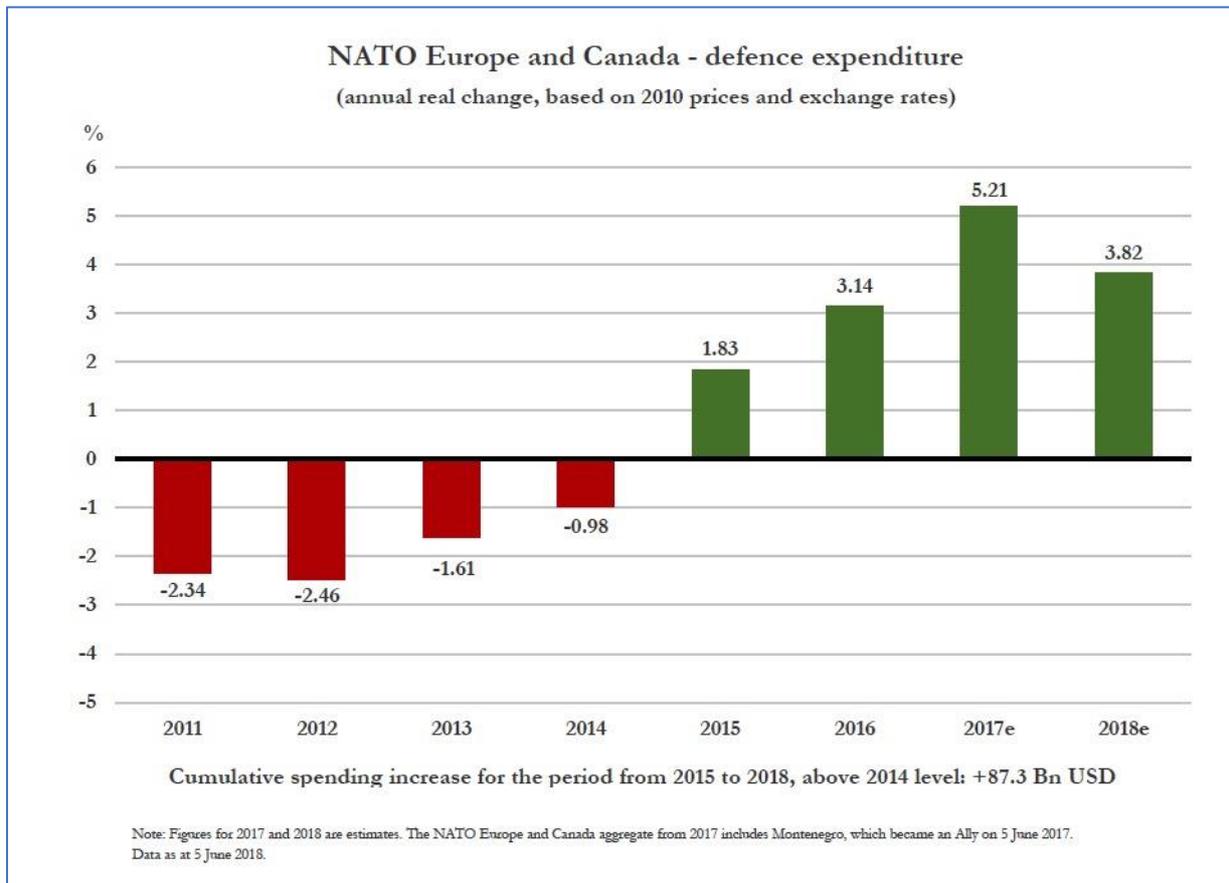
Burden-sharing within the alliance: progress being made

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 February defence ministerial meeting these plans were reviewed for the first time. “Substantial progress” was trumpeted despite none of the national plans being made public and fewer than half of NATO's 29 member states actually submitting one.

At this latest meeting, the Secretary General released new figures (see graph) showing that the allies have spent \$87.3 billion more on defence since 2014, and he [said](#) 2018 is the fourth year in a row that defence spending has increased. Eight NATO members will be spending the target of 2 per cent of GDP on military budgets this year, and 15 of them have now provided action plans laying out how they will close in on that benchmark by 2024.

Nonetheless, burden sharing will remain a key theme of the July Summit, and it remains to be seen if the European allies have done enough to placate President Trump, for whom this issue is of cardinal significance (as epitomised



in this [interview](#) with the new US ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell).

Projecting stability and fighting terrorism: a new NATO training mission to Iraq, US-Turkey tensions ease in Syria, but Greece-Turkey rift grows

In a session on fighting terrorism and projecting stability, the defence ministers discussed plans (previously announced in February) to launch a training mission in Iraq at the NATO Summit in July. They also discussed defence capacity-building support for Jordan and considered what more NATO could do help Tunisia, although few details were forthcoming.

NATO already has a small team of military and civilian personnel in Iraq and uses mobile teams to train Iraqi forces in de-mining, countering home-made bombs and dealing with explosives. NATO has also trained Iraqi troops in neighbouring Jordan.

While the scope and size of the new mission has yet to be determined, according to the

Secretary General [the aim](#) is to “train the trainers to enable... to help the Iraqis to help themselves, to build military schools, military academies, so they can build their own forces and educate their own soldiers and officers”.

While not, strictly speaking, an issue for NATO, the situation in [northern Syria](#), where two NATO allies—the United States and Turkey—are in confrontation, would undoubtedly have been a topic of conversation in the sidelines of the ministerial meeting. When asked about the issue during his press conference, Stoltenberg [said](#): “We welcome the fact that the United States and Turkey, two NATO Allies, have agreed on a roadmap on how to deal with the challenges, for instance, related to Manbij. The situation in Manbij was one of the issues I discussed with President Erdogan when I met him in Ankara recently, and also one of the issues I discussed with President Trump in the White House a couple of weeks ago. So NATO is not directly involved, but NATO Allies are – and I welcome the fact that Turkey and the United States are now working together to address the challenges in northern Syria”.

On the 4 June, Turkey and the United States [endorsed](#) a road map over the withdrawal of the Kurdish-dominated People’s Protection Units (YPG) from Manbij province of Syria after months-long negotiations. While details of the road map remain [vague](#), it is expected to direct the withdrawal of YPG forces from Manbij and their replacement with Turkish and US forces.

Meanwhile, [tensions between Greece and Turkey are ongoing](#), with Turkey suspending its bilateral migrant readmission agreement with Greece in response to a decision by a Greek court to release eight former Turkish soldiers who fled the country a day after the July 2016 coup attempt. In addition, two Greek soldiers who strayed across the border in March [remain imprisoned](#) in Turkey. As the Turkish navy ordered one frigate, two gunboats and units from its Under Water Attack Team to be on alert in the Aegean Sea, the NATO Secretary General [called](#) for “restraint and calm” and said he discussed the ongoing crisis with Turkish President and the Greek government.

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. Every year a progress report on the implementation of the common set of proposals endorsed by EU and NATO Councils on 6 December 2016 and 5 December 2017 is published jointly by the two organisations.

The focus of this latest NAC discussion was the [third progress report](#) dated 31 May 2018 on the implementation of the common set of proposals, and potential additional areas of NATO-EU cooperation, such as military mobility. Pointing to concrete progress in “74 concrete areas of cooperation”, such as real-time warnings about cyber-attacks and complementary maritime operations, Stoltenberg [noted](#) that going forward, military mobility could become a “flagship in our cooperation”.

The EU Council also [welcomed](#) the progress made. The EU’s latest plans on defence were set out in a programme launched in November 2017 called the [Permanent Structured Cooperation on Security and Defence](#) (PESCO). Pressure for a ‘[military Schengen](#)’ in Europe has been growing, and at the NATO Summit in July it is expected that NATO and the EU will sign a new declaration to deepen NATO-EU

cooperation, with a particular focus on mobility. “We need to deal with a wide range of issues – from legislation to infrastructure. So I have recently shared with my EU counterparts and all NATO allies our infrastructure requirements for transportation, including for bridges, roads and runways”, Stoltenberg [said](#). “Ultimately it is for our nations to make the decisions that will enable us to move across Europe as quickly as we need to, in an unpredictable security environment”, he added.

Tri-national Special Forces initiative

In the margins of the defence ministerial meeting, the Defence Ministers of Belgium, Denmark

EU-NATO cooperation

- Information sharing
- Coordinated planning
- Concrete cooperation

in the areas of:

- Hybrid Threats
- Operational cooperation
- Cyber Security
- Capacity building
- Defence capabilities
- Industry and research
- Exercises

and the Netherlands [signed](#) a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the creation of a Composite Special Operations Component Command (C-SOCC). Once operational, this tri-national Special Forces Command will participate in the NATO Response Force and could support NATO operations, as well as other multinational missions.

The three Ministers launched the preparatory work for forming the C-SOCC by signing a Letter of Intent in February 2017. The C-SOCC is scheduled to reach initial operational capability in 2019, and will be fully operational in 2021. NATO's Special Operations Headquarters in Mons is providing advice and support for the development of C-SOCC, ensuring that it is developed in line with NATO doctrine and standards.

At the [Spring Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly](#), the Defence and Security Committee debated the need to invest more in special forces. "Our special forces are increasingly overtasked, under-resourced, or insufficiently built up for today's requirements," said Madeleine Moon, a British MP and author of a draft report on [NATO Special Operations Forces in the Modern Security Environment](#). The draft report notes Special Forces are better adapted to deal with asymmetrical threats from Russia or Jihadist-inspired extremist groups and unpredictable lone-wolf attacks in the Euro-Atlantic area.

As an example of the expanding special operations mission in Europe, [Trojan Footprint 18](#)—a biennial US-led special forces exercise—recently concluded in the Baltic region. Described by one [columnist](#) as the "largest NATO special forces training exercise in recent memory", it was an exercise over land, sea and air that rapidly deployed 2,000 NATO and partner nation special forces from 13 nations on the Baltic Sea in and around Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Afghanistan: more funding and more trainers

The NATO Defence Ministers together with Resolute Support partners discussed the alliance's training mission in Afghanistan, and

its continuing [support to the Afghan government](#) and Afghan security forces.

Speaking at a press conference following the meeting, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) that "NATO Allies and partners aren't just maintaining their contributions to our Resolute Support Mission, they are increasing them". Around 3,000 more trainers have been added to the Resolute Support mission, which at as at the beginning of June has [39 contributing nations](#) and a total strength of 15,997 personnel. He also noted the "real progress" in the ability of Afghan forces "to conduct offensive operations", and expressed his confidence that NATO leaders will agree to extend [funding to the Afghan Security Forces](#) to 2024 when they meet at the July Summit. Current funding runs until 2020.

"Our aim is to strengthen the Afghan security forces so they can create the conditions for a peaceful solution", the Secretary General said. He also praised President Ghani's recent offer of peace talks with the Taliban, stressing that "an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process is essential to a long-term, inclusive political settlement".

On the 7 June, President Ghani announced a [temporary ceasefire](#) with the Taliban from the 12 to 20 June (during the Eid al Fitr holiday). On the 9 June, the [Taliban announced](#) that it would do the same, but only for three days (from 15 to 18 June). The Afghan government's ceasefire excludes foreign militant groups, notably the Islamic State, while the Taliban said its ceasefire will not extend to US and NATO forces. The US military commander in Afghanistan said the US will respect the truce.

Earlier, on the 4 June more than 2,000 of Afghan's most senior religious scholars [met](#) in Kabul and denounced the years of conflict in Afghanistan. They issued a religious decree, or fatwa, outlawing suicide bombing and demanding that the Taliban restore peace in order to allow foreign troops to leave.

However, formidable obstacles to a lasting peace in Afghanistan remain to be overcome, as set out in this [article](#) in Asia Times.