



## **NATO foreign ministers' meeting dominated by Ukraine-Russia conflict and INF Treaty:**

### **A review of the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, Brussels, 4-5 December 2018**

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

#### **Key activities and decisions taken:**

- The Foreign Ministers issued a [Statement on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#), in which they formally state that the deployment of Russia's new ground-launched cruise missile system violates the treaty. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the United States will abandon the treaty unless Russia returns to compliance.
- The Foreign Ministers called on Russia to release the Ukrainian sailors and ships seized on 25 November, near the Sea of Azov.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina was invited to take the first steps towards NATO membership.
- A [Resolute Support Foreign Ministers Statement on Afghanistan](#) reaffirmed the commitment of NATO and partners to the long-term security and stability of Afghanistan, and to an Afghan-led and owned peace process.
- The NATO Foreign Ministers will next meet in Washington DC in April 2019, marking 70 years since the alliance's founding. NATO leaders will also meet later in 2019.

#### **Summary of the Ministerial Meeting**

The NATO foreign 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](#)) as well as recent geopolitical developments impacting on transatlantic security. The agenda was focused on five main issues:

- the INF Treaty;
- the recent Sea of Azov conflict—the latest chapter in the broader Russia-Ukraine conflict—as well as NATO's cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine;
- security and stability in the Western Balkans;
- continuing instability in Afghanistan; and
- the alliance's approach to the Middle East and North Africa, with a focus on NATO's new training mission in Iraq.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 3 December. The first day of the ministerial meeting (4 December) began with a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General. Five bilateral meetings then took place between Stoltenberg and the Foreign Ministers of Armenia, Georgia, Greece and Ukraine, and the US Secretary of State. No details of those discussions were made public.

Early in the afternoon, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) met with Georgia and Ukraine in Foreign Ministers' session, and aside from a few [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, that meeting was a closed session.

After a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General, another meeting of the NAC took place dedicated to transatlantic security. Again, aside from some [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General it was a closed meeting. At the end of the session the ministers' released a [Statement on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#) (see below). This was followed by an official portrait and another [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General and one by the [US Secretary of State](#) Michael Pompeo. The first day ended with a closed working dinner.

(Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs, NATO headquarters, Brussels, 5 December 2018 – photo credit: NATO)



The second day of the ministerial began with a two-hour meeting of the NAC in Foreign Ministers format to discuss the security and stability of the Western Balkans. Again, outside of a few [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, that meeting was a closed session. A second and concluding NAC meeting followed, this time with Resolute Support mission partners and the Afghan Government. In addition to the Secretary General's [opening remarks](#), the public record was favoured by a [Resolute Support Foreign Ministers Statement on Afghanistan](#). The ministerial ended with a final [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General, and a final bilateral meeting between Stoltenberg and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan.

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 INF Treaty

NATO Foreign Ministers, like their counterparts in the previous Defence Ministerial in October 2018 (see NATO Watch [Briefing No 65](#)) discussed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. "This Treaty eliminated an entire category of weapons, but it has been put in jeopardy by Russia", [said](#) the Secretary General. He noted that Russia has developed, produced and deployed a new missile, which "could reach European cities with little or no warning". Stoltenberg added that the United States is in full compliance with the INF Treaty. "There are no new US missiles in Europe, but there are new Russian missiles," he said.

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. Every year 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 Foreign Ministers issued a [Statement on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#), in which they formally agree that the deployment of Russia's new ground-launched cruise missile system violates the treaty. Following the meeting, Stoltenberg said: "All allies have concluded that Russia has developed and fielded a new ground-launched cruise missile system, the SSC-8, also known as the 9M729. Allies agree that this missile system violates the INF Treaty and poses significant risks to Euro-Atlantic security. And they agree that Russia is therefore in material breach of its obligations under the INF Treaty".

He added, "These missiles are in particular dangerous because they are hard to detect,

they are mobile and they are nuclear-capable. We will continue to keep Russia's military posture and deployments under close review."

The NATO Foreign Ministers agreed to begin planning for a post-INF Treaty world, while once again calling on Russia to comply with the treaty. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announced](#) at the meeting that the United States will abandon the treaty unless Russia returns to compliance. But rather than issue a formal withdrawal notice—which would have started a six-month clock for formal US withdrawal—he established 60-day window in which European allies could continue lobbying Russia to eliminate the disputed missile system. In his press conference, Pompeo [said](#) "On at least 30 occasions since 2013, extending to the highest levels of leadership, we have raised Russia's noncompliance and stressed that a failure to return to compliance would have consequences".

However, inconsistencies within Pompeo's remarks and across other official US statements [left some confusion](#) about what exact legal remedy the United States intends to pursue once the 60 days are up. (The possible legal routes through which the Trump administration could seek to exit the INF Treaty are discussed [here](#)).

Moreover, the allegations that Russia is in violation of the INF treaty are difficult to evaluate, not least because the inspection regime for verifying INF commitments [ceased in 2001](#). The Russian missile at the centre of the allegations, [the Novator 9M729 missile system](#), which carries the NATO designation SSC-8, was first tested in 2008 according to reports in the *New York Times* in 2014. The US State Department has [said](#) that the missiles have been deployed for "offensive purposes". However, independently verified technical details about the missile and its development remain thin on the ground.

While Russian officials have belatedly admitted the existence of the 9M729 missile system, they claim that it does not violate INF provisions. (For the official Russian viewpoint on the INF Treaty and US accusations, see this

[briefing](#) by Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergey Ryabkov, dated 26 November 2018).

**NATO Watch view:** The INF Treaty was a milestone in ending the Cold War and building a degree of confidence and trust between the opposing sides. Its demise would be a huge set back to arms control, risks undermining the overall architecture which controls nuclear weapons and raises the risk of a [new nuclear arms race](#). It is far from clear that Russia is in violation of the treaty and both sides should resume negotiations to resolve their respective concerns.

## The Sea of Azov conflict and NATO's cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine

The NATO Foreign Ministers met with their colleagues from Georgia and Ukraine, and stressed the alliance's strong political and practical support for both countries. They expressed particular concern about Russia's actions near the Sea of Azov and called on Moscow to release the Ukrainian sailors and ships seized on 25 November. However, no new measures were announced to deter Moscow.

It was also agreed to keep working to prepare Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership. "They both face serious security challenges from Russia, and we will continue to give both countries practical and political support," said NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

### **The latest spark:**

On the 25 November, [the Russian coastguard opened fire](#) on several Ukrainian Navy ships in and around the Kerch Strait. News reports showed a cargo ship blocking the strait and preventing passage of the Ukrainian ships. Ukraine's navy said that several of its sailors were injured, 24 were taken captive and a tug and two gunboats were seized. Ukraine says they were travelling in shared waters on a routine passage to the Sea of Azov, which they have a right to patrol under a bilateral treaty. Russia blames Ukraine for illegally entering its

territorial waters and carrying out “provocative actions”.

Maja Kocijančič, the EU spokesperson for foreign affairs and security urged both sides to show restraint and “de-escalate the situation immediately”. NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu said: “NATO is closely monitoring developments in the Azov Sea and the Kerch strait, and we are in contact with the Ukrainian authorities. We call for restraint and de-escalation”.

### **The Backdrop:**

The Kerch Strait is a vital waterway that links the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea and separates Crimea from mainland Russia. Moscow [annexed Crimea](#) from Ukraine in 2014 and has worked steadily to bolster its zone of control around the peninsula, including building a [\\$3.69bn bridge](#) over the strait. Ukrainian merchant vessels travel through the strait to deliver goods to and from key ports, such as Mariupol, on the Azov side. Ukraine had recently increased the number of its naval vessels and border guard patrols in the Sea of Azov, in response to an increase in checks on commercial shipping by Russia.



(Left to right: Mike Pompeo (US Secretary of State); Chrystia Freeland (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Canada); Pavlo Klimkin (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ukraine); NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg – Meeting of the North Atlantic Council with Georgia and Ukraine, Brussels, 4 December 2018 – photo credit: NATO)

The primary conflict dynamic centres on two key issues: Russia’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula, widely regarded, especially among NATO states, as illegal, but justified by Moscow as a reasonable reaction to Ukraine’s [pro-western Euromaidan protests](#); and the subsequent low-intensity war in the [eastern Donbass region](#) of Ukraine bordering Russia, where Ukrainian troops have been fighting Russian-backed separatists. In total, more than 10,300 people have been killed in the conflict and 1.6 million displaced since 2014. Three

other factors are also contributing to the instability:

- the failure to find a solution to the conflict, in part because relations between Russia and the EU and NATO (both of which support Kiev) are also strained;
- political uncertainty within Ukraine in the lead-up to Presidential elections in March 2019; and
- a [split in the Eastern Orthodox church](#) resulting in the Ukrainian Orthodox church being granted independence from the Russian Orthodox church.

### **NATO’s support for Ukraine:**

Relations between NATO and Ukraine date back to the early 1990s and have since developed into one of the most substantial of NATO’s partnerships. Since 2014, in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, cooperation has been intensified. In the July 2018 [Brussels Summit Declaration](#), NATO reiterated its support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, strongly condemned Russia’s “illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea, which we do not and will not recognise”, urged “Russia to cease all political, financial, and military support to militant groups and stop intervening militarily in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and to withdraw troops, equipment, and mercenaries from the territory of Ukraine” (para 7).

In terms of Ukraine’s potential future NATO membership, the declaration reaffirmed decisions taken at the Bucharest Summit and subsequent Summits (para 67). But despite trumpeting the “success of wide-ranging reforms” and looking forward “to further progress in Ukraine’s efforts to overcome significant remaining challenges and ensure the full implementation and sustainability of ambitious but necessary reforms”, there was no indication as to when Ukraine might be invited to become a member of NATO.



Instead, the declaration focused on enhancing existing technical cooperation—including security sector reform through the Comprehensive Assistance Package, cooperation on Black Sea security and strengthening resilience against hybrid threats through the NATO-Ukraine Platform on Countering Hybrid Warfare—and potentially “enhanced opportunities within the Partnership Interoperability Initiative” (para 67).

#### ***Subsequent developments in the crisis:***

26 November:

- The Kerch Strait reopens to shipping.
- The UN Security Council convenes an emergency session to discuss the issue.
- The Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, declares martial law in Ukraine, supported by parliament. It will be imposed for a 30-day period starting Nov. 28 in 10 oblasts near Russia and the Russian-controlled Transnistria area of Moldova.
- The Ukrainian President discusses the crisis in a [phone call with the NATO Secretary General](#) Jens Stoltenberg, who expresses NATO’s full support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, including its full navigational rights in its territorial waters under international law. At the request of President Poroshenko, the NATO Secretary General agrees to convene an extraordinary meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission at Ambassadorial level in Brussels later that day to discuss the current situation. After the Commission meeting, Stoltenberg tells a [news conference](#), “We saw that Russia used military force against Ukraine in an open and direct way. All allies expressed full support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty,” he added. “There is no justification for the use of military force against Ukrainian ships and naval personnel so we call on Russia to release immediately the Ukrainian sailors and ships it seized yesterday”. During questions, Stoltenberg added, “We constantly assess what more we can do because Russia has to understand that its actions have consequences”, but did not specify what those consequences might be.

27 November:

- In a national tv address, President Poroshenko warns of the threat of ‘full-scale war’ with Russia.
- In a [statement](#), the North Atlantic Council calls for “calm and restraint”, and for Russia “to release the Ukrainian sailors and ships it seized, without delay”.

29 November:

- The Ukrainian president [urges NATO to deploy naval ships](#) to the Sea of Azov. A NATO spokeswoman says that the alliance already has a strong presence in the Black Sea region and has no plans to send warships into the Sea of Azov.
- Ukraine's Infrastructure Minister Volodymyr Omelyan claims that two Ukrainian ports on the Sea of Azov, Berdyansk and Mariupol, are being blockaded by Russia and that 35 vessels were prevented from carrying out normal operations there.
- US President Donald Trump [cancels a planned meeting](#) at the G20 Summit with Russian President Putin.

30 November:

- The G7 foreign ministers release a statement stating that Russia had “no justification” for its use of force.

1 December:

- Ukraine bans Russian men aged between 16 and 60 from entering the country to prevent Russia from forming ‘private’ armies on its territory. Russia transfers 21 of the captured Ukrainian sailors to Moscow and three more are moved to Moscow hospitals.

10 December

- The EU’s security commissioner, Julian King, [alleges](#) that Moscow launched a year-long disinformation campaign to soften up public opinion before the seizure of the three Ukrainian ships and their crews in the Sea of Azov.

13 December

- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko [meet](#) to discuss developments in and around the Sea of Azov and the NATO’s

support for Ukraine, which includes helping the country to improve its naval capabilities, logistics and cyber defence. NATO will also deliver secure communications equipment to Ukraine's military before the end of the year.

## The Western Balkans

NATO Foreign Ministers joined by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini discussed developments in the Western Balkans, including the situation in Kosovo, Macedonia's progress towards NATO membership and the next steps in developing the alliance's relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### **Kosovo**

Two decades after the withdrawal of Serbian forces, Kosovo's security is still guaranteed by 4,000 NATO troops, known as KFOR. Following the Foreign Ministers meeting, the Secretary General expressed concerns about plans to transform the lightly-armed emergency response force into Kosovo's own 5,000-strong professional military, calling the step "ill-timed" and a complicating factor in the EU-mediated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina.



(Left to right: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with Mike Pompeo (US Secretary of State) and NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller – Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 4 December 2018 – photo credit: NATO)

The next day, on 6 December, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg spoke on the phone with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Ramush Haradinaj of Kosovo. According to a NATO [statement](#), Stoltenberg called on them to "show calm and restraint, and avoid any provocative statements or actions". He also reminded them that dialogue remained "the only way to bring durable peace and stability to the region". Serbia, which does not recognise Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008,

has warned the formation of a Kosovo army could trigger an armed intervention.

Kosovo's parliament [voted](#) on 14 December to move forward with the formation of a regular army. After the vote, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said "I regret that the decision to initiate a change of the Kosovo Security Force mandate was made despite the concerns expressed by NATO". He warned that the Western military alliance would have to "re-examine the level of NATO's engagement with the Kosovo Security Force".

The United States, out of step with NATO, has endorsed the formation of an army. The US ambassador to Kosovo, Philip Kosnett, called it "Kosovo's sovereign right", but emphasised that the transition to a regular army would be a "gradual" process taking 10 years to complete.

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Bosnia and Herzegovina was given the green light by NATO Foreign Ministers to take a major step forward on its path toward joining NATO, despite Bosnian Serb objections. The Foreign Ministers formally invited Bosnia to submit its first annual programme of political, economic and defence reforms as part of NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP). The aim is to bring the country into line with NATO standards and does not necessarily mean that Bosnia will join the alliance anytime soon. The government in Sarajevo has still to accept NATO's invitation.

"We made our decision: if they are ready, we are ready" said NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg after the meeting.

The Muslim Bosniak member of the country's tripartite presidency, Sefik Dzaferovic, welcomed NATO's invitation and said it would give new impetus for the country to reach one of its "most important foreign policy goals". That view was shared by the Croat presidency member, Zeljko Komisic, but the pro-Russian

Serb presidency member Milorad Dodik remains an opponent of Bosnia's NATO membership and has repeatedly said that he will block all efforts to join the alliance.

### **Macedonia**

Accession talks for NATO membership have already begun and are expected to be concluded by January 2019. Secretary General Stoltenberg [said](#) "It is now for the authorities in Skopje to implement the name agreement. When that is complete, we will be able to sign the accession protocol". 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.

### **Afghanistan**

All nations contributing to the Resolute Support training mission in Afghanistan met to discuss developments. The foreign ministers reaffirmed in a [statement](#) their commitment to stay the course despite mounting Afghan casualties and the slow pace of peace efforts. "Over the past months, we have stepped up our support – with more forces and funding. Because the cost of leaving is bigger than the cost of staying", [said](#) the Secretary General.

The United States has been pushing to jump-start an Afghan peace process, but faces a Taliban that is at its strongest since being deposed by a US-led military coalition 17 years ago. Afghan President Ghani said in November that over 28,000 of his country's forces had been killed in the last four years. The Taliban's battlefield successes and territorial gains give it more leverage in talks, in which it seeks the withdrawal of US-led foreign forces from Afghanistan and the forging of an ultraconservative Islamic government.

In his final press conference, Stoltenberg sought to rationalise the increased levels of Taliban attacks by [saying](#) "You have to understand that, as we now try to move forward towards a real peace process, then we have seen from other conflicts that sometimes there is an uptake, an increase in violence because the different parties try in a way to

gain the best possible position at the negotiating table. So it may actually become worse before it becomes better in Afghanistan".

NATO wound down combat operations in 2014 and began training and advising Afghan security forces. US forces, which have been in Afghanistan in a counter-terrorism role since 2001, now number around 15,000, although towards the end of the year, in a surprise move, US President Trump [ordered the withdrawal](#) of 7,000 US troops. On the back of similar US troop reductions in Syria, this led to the resignation of US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

### **NATO and the Middle East**

The NATO Foreign Ministers held a separate session on challenges coming from the Middle East and North Africa. They discussed NATO's support to partners in the region, including Iraq where the alliance is training local forces. The new training mission in Iraq was officially launched at the July 2018 NATO Summit and is being led by Canada. There appeared to be nothing new on the table in relation to operations and partnerships in the South discussed during the meeting.

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