



## As alliance military spending exceeds \$1 trillion, NATO defence ministers reach out into space, the final frontier, boldly going where no alliance has gone before.....

### A review of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, Brussels, 26-27 June 2019

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

#### Key activities and decisions taken:

- ⇒ Russia's 'violation' of the **INF Treaty** was discussed. While continuing to urge Russia to return to compliance, NATO is preparing a response should Russia fail to do so. Some options were outlined, but the exact nature of that response was not disclosed; deployment of new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe was ruled out, however.
- ⇒ A new overarching **space policy** was approved. Few details were provided and the document remains classified.
- ⇒ There appeared to be no discussion of NATO's **new Military Strategy** (also classified) that was approved by NATO's Chiefs of Defence in May (see *NATO Watch [Observatory No.50](#)*).
- ⇒ The US Defense Secretary briefed the meeting on the conflict with **Iran**. The Defence Ministers discussed the importance of keeping the strait of Hormuz open and the need to deescalate the situation, but made no commitment to act in the matter.
- ⇒ It was confirmed that by 2020, 30 combat ships, 30 land battalions and 30 air squadrons will be ready and available within 30 days under the **Readiness Initiative** (known as the 'Four Thirties'). Around three-quarters of the forces required have already been generated.
- ⇒ Full support was given to US efforts to achieve a political settlement in **Afghanistan** and financial support for the Afghan security forces was confirmed until the end of 2024.
- ⇒ After five consecutive years of real growth in **military spending**, European member states and Canada will, by the end of 2020, have added a cumulative total of well over one hundred billion dollars. Total NATO military spending will reach \$1.04 trillion this year.
- ⇒ Seven NATO member states (Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain) and one partner nation (Finland) agreed to cooperate to acquire **maritime munitions**, including surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles, torpedoes, and gun shells.
- ⇒ Two ongoing **multinational munition initiatives** each incorporated two additional participants: Croatia and the UK (land munitions); and Italy and Slovakia (air-to-ground precision guided munitions).

## Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The NATO defence ministers met in Brussels for a two-day meeting to discuss three main issues:

- progress in strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence posture, which included a meeting of the Nuclear Planning Group and discussions on (a) Russia's alleged violations of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, (b) proposals for NATO's first space policy, and (c) the security implications of new technologies;
- ongoing efforts to achieve fairer burden sharing within the alliance; and
- instability on NATO's southern borders, including NATO's missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and its contribution to the anti-Islamic State coalition.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 25 June. The first day of the ministerial meeting (26 June) began with a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General. Three bilateral meetings then took place between Stoltenberg and the Defence Ministers of Canada, Spain and Turkey. No details of those discussions were made public, although Turkey's [acquisition](#) of the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system from Russia would undoubtedly have been discussed with the Turkish Defence Minister. (On 12 July Turkey accepted delivery of the Russian missile system and the United States responded by [removing](#) Turkey from the F-35 joint strike fighter programme).

Next, in keeping with the unstated principle that the United States is 'first among equals' within the alliance, a handshake between the NATO Secretary General and the US Acting Secretary of Defence Mark Esper had its own [agenda item](#) and was televised. 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. (The public are allowed to witness handshakes but not

discussions about preparations for nuclear war).

In late afternoon, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) met in Defence Ministers format to discuss the INF Treaty and the political and military measures that NATO might take if Russia failed to comply with the alliance's demand to "uphold its international obligations". 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 and this was followed by a signature ceremony for a Memorandum of Understanding on Land Battle Decisive Munition/Precision Guided Munition by the Defence Ministers of Belgium, Italy, Slovakia, Croatia and the United Kingdom. The day ended with a working dinner for the Defence Ministers.

The second day of the ministerial began with another NAC meeting in Defence Ministers format to discuss progress on NATO's strengthened deterrence and defence, and burden sharing. This included discussion of NATO's "first-ever, overarching space policy". Again, outside of a few [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, that meeting was a closed session.

The NAC meeting was followed by an official portrait of the ministers and another signature ceremony: this one for a Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Battle Decisive Munition by the Defence Ministers of Belgium, France, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Finland.

A bilateral meeting between Stoltenberg and the Minister of Defence of Georgia (no details provided) was followed by a third NAC meeting with Resolute Support Operational Partner Nations and Potential Operational Partner Nations to discuss NATO's ongoing engagement in Afghanistan. Afghan Defence Minister Asadullah Khalid and representatives from the United Nations, European Union and World Bank also participated. However, outside of a few [opening remarks](#) by the NATO

Secretary General, that meeting was also a closed session.

(Meeting between NATO Secretary General and the US Acting Secretary of Defense, Brussels, 26 June 2019 – photo credit: NATO)



After the NAC meeting there was a final [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General. At the end of the final day, two further bilateral meetings took place between Stoltenberg and the Austrian Defence Minister and representatives of the United Arab Emirates. Again, no details of those discussions were made public.

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 no public disclosure of the scope and nature of the discussions in the NPG, other than an acknowledgement by the NATO Secretary General that it considered the INF Treaty, which was also the focus of discussions within the first meeting of the NAC.

The INF treaty banned all missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. 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—notably, Aegis Ashore radar and interceptor sites—deployed in Romania in 2016 and due to be added in Poland in 2020.

Russia has been refusing to destroy a medium-range [Novator 9M729 cruise missile](#) (SSC-8 under the NATO designation) that the US and NATO insists violates the INF Treaty. In October 2018 the United States signalled that it would be pulling out of the

agreement and two months later set an ultimatum for Russia demanding that it destroy the disputed missile. On 1 February, the United States [announced](#) that it was beginning the official procedure of leaving the treaty. The procedure takes six months, and so, on 2 August the treaty will end. In March, Russia also [suspended](#) its participation in the treaty “until the US ends its violations of the treaty or until it terminates”. (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, for NATO's position, see this June 2019 [Fact Sheet](#)).

The allegations (by both sides) are difficult to evaluate, not least because the inspection regime for verifying INF commitments [ceased in 2001](#). In particular, independently verified technical details about the Russian missile at the centre of the allegations remain thin on the ground. Nonetheless, based on intelligence from multiple allied agencies, NATO countries have forged a consensus that the new Russian nuclear-capable cruise missiles pose a threat.

The NATO Defence Ministers urged Russia to return to full and verifiable compliance, but [according to the NATO Secretary General](#), “we have seen no sign that Russia is willing to do so. On the contrary, it continues to produce and deploy the SSC-8 missiles”.

While NATO attributes Russia with bearing the full responsibility for the expected demise of the Treaty, it is the US withdrawal that will take effect on 2 August. NATO has therefore begun to prepare for a world without the INF Treaty and the Defence Ministers agreed that the alliance will make a “measured and defensive”

response should Russia fail to return to compliance. While the Ministers confirmed that they have no intention to deploy new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe—"We will not mirror what Russia does. We do not want a new arms race, [said](#) the NATO Secretary General"—potential NATO measures considered included: enhanced exercises, intelligence, surveillance reconnaissance, air and missile defences, and conventional capabilities.

The INF Treaty was further discussed at a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council on the 5 July, but no progress was made in resolving the dispute (See NATO Watch [News Brief](#)).

**NATO Watch Comment:** The demise of the INF Treaty will 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 still doesn't have to be like this. As Pierce Corden, a former official in the US State Department [writes](#) in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, for the United States and the Russian Federation to avoid withdrawal from the INF Treaty on 2 August, both parties must resolve claims that the other is in noncompliance. He suggests a path forward might begin with Presidents Trump and Putin suspending the 2 August withdrawal and pursuing discussions to agree to on-site inspections of both the 9M729 cruise missile and the Aegis Ashore installations. This might be followed by a joint US-Russian proposal for a new agreement involving China and potentially the other nuclear-armed states to put limits on their nuclear weapon systems. The objective would be a declared ceiling on the systems of each participating state.

## Space Policy

According to the [NATO Secretary General](#), "Space is essential to the alliance's defence and deterrence. From the ability to navigate and track forces, to satellite communications, and detecting missile launches". Thus, the NATO Defence Ministers agreed a new policy or "a common NATO framework" to "guide our approach to space, the opportunities and the

challenges". While the substance of the policy remains secret, the NATO Secretary General argued that it was "not about militarizing space", but rather NATO playing an important role "as a forum to share information, increase interoperability, and ensure that our missions and operations can call on the support they need".

According to reports by *Reuters* and the *Financial Times*, further details may emerge at the NATO Summit in London in December, including a possible declaration of space as an operational domain alongside land, air and sea. This would allow space to be used for military operations during times of war.

The timing of the new NATO space policy suggests that this is, at least in part, a reaction to US-led developments. In June 2018, President Trump announced that he had directed the Pentagon to establish a Space Force, describing it as a sixth branch of the US military. It would be the first time the Pentagon has stood up a new service since the Air Force received its independence after World War II. In August, Vice President Mike Pence outlined some of the concrete steps needed to create the US Space Force, which is expected to be vaguely modelled on the US Special Operations Command, bringing in personnel from all branches. There will also be a Space Development Agency to streamline hardware procurement and innovation.

While NATO owns ground-based infrastructure, it does not have its own space-based assets. Instead, it requires permission to access member states' satellites (which make up about 65 per cent of the global total of satellites) before they can be used. However, given that NATO and member states' capabilities—including GPS capabilities, intelligence and surveillance operations, missile defence, communications, space situational awareness and environmental monitoring—could be weakened or lost by an adversary compromising satellites NATO uses to conduct military operations, it is clearly prudent for the alliance to amend its policy and doctrine to include provisions on the use of space systems.



Indeed, this was recommended in a recent [report](#) by the UK think-tank Chatham House, which warned that that the space-based assets of NATO member states are vulnerable to cyberattacks. The

report argues that Russian and China space capabilities and their cyber technologies pose particular threats to NATO because both have their own satellite systems, rather than relying on the US-provided GPS or the EU's Galileo system. To protect alliance space-based assets from cyberattacks, the report said NATO should focus on minimizing risk through "preparedness, resilience, and continuity" to create a more pre-emptive cybersecurity strategy.

**NATO Watch Comment:** The extent to which NATO becomes an independent actor in space and the policy framework for addressing space challenges and cyber warfare are issues that should be more widely debated within member states' parliaments and by independent experts in the public domain. To this end, NATO should publish its new space policy.

Despite Stoltenberg's insistence, it may only be a matter of time before weaponized systems are deployed in orbit, with the United States taking the lead, and China, Russia and India almost certainly following. Another sensitive issue will be deciding if an attack on an allied satellite constitutes an assault on the alliance and whether it triggers NATO's Article 5 collective defence clause.

As the recent special edition of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* [asks](#), is space the next military frontier or an arms control opportunity? The focus of NATO military efforts in outer space should be on the latter, and to ensure that they are, greater transparency in the policy-making process is essential.



(Official portrait of NATO Ministers of Defence, Brussels, 26 June 2019 – photo credit: NATO)

## Readiness Initiative

NATO Defence Ministers confirmed that under the so-called Readiness

Initiative, by 2020 NATO member states will make available 30 combat ships, 30 land battalions and 30 air squadrons, to be ready within 30 days. The Secretary General announced that around three-quarters of those forces have already been generated.

## NATO's new Military Strategy

On the 22 May 2019, the NATO Chiefs of Defence signed-off on NATO's new Military Strategy. The document is classified and there are no plans to publish it. According to the brief [statement](#) released by NATO, the new Military Strategy "marks an important step in adapting the alliance for the increasingly complex security challenges that NATO faces". Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach (UK Air Force), Chairman of the NATO Military Committee—the senior military authority in the alliance—[said](#): "The Military Strategy provides overarching guidance, outlining how the alliance effectively deters and defends and helps shape our future plans".

Apparently, the new Military Strategy is due to be approved by the respective defence ministries of the member states in the coming weeks, but it is unclear as to whether it was discussed by the Defence Ministers during the meeting.

While details of the new Military Strategy are still unknown, it seems likely that the alliance is simply falling in line with recent updates to US military doctrine. Washington updated its [National Security Strategy](#) in 2017, [National Defence Strategy](#) (NDS) and [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR) in 2018, and [Missile Defense Review](#) in early 2019. All of these documents were published in full, with the exception of

the US NDS, for which only an unclassified summary was released. NATO's new strategy document is probably just a consolidation of US military doctrine plus some window dressing. However, since it is not publicly available it is impossible to assess (a) how closely it mirrors recent US changes in military doctrine, and (b) whether it diverges from the 2010 [Strategic Concept](#)—NATO's most recently agreed statement on core values, tasks and principles, the evolving security environment and strategic objectives for the next decade.

**NATO Watch comment:** Given the importance of NATO's new Military Strategy—and its likely shaping by US military interests—it ought to be subjected to close scrutiny. Oversight mechanisms help to ensure that the right questions are asked about strategy and the objectives of any military preparations before the price becomes too high, both in terms of costly and unnecessary military procurement and in destabilising international relations. While there may be a case for allowing government officials in defence ministries to discuss finer points in private, not least to enable consensus building around some of the more contentious issues, the lack of time set aside for substantive and prior parliamentary discussion of such a key document represents woefully inadequate oversight.

Parliaments should have a role in examining all decisions about the negotiation of treaties and multilateral accords, including determination of objectives, negotiating positions, the parameters within which the national delegation can operate and the final decision as to whether to sign and ratify. This should not be the exclusive reserve of defence ministries and their ministers. Without such certainty of process, NATO policy development lacks authority and credibility. At a minimum, a parliamentary mechanism or committee should exist in each member state to consider alliance policy documents, tabled treaties or international instruments.

## ***Security implications of new technologies***

The Defence Ministers also discussed the security implications of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing and next-generation communications with EU High Representative / Vice President Federica Mogherini and counterparts from Finland and Sweden. "These technologies raise challenges and opportunities for us all, and this could be a promising area for future NATO-EU cooperation," said the Secretary General.

## ***New multinational framework for acquiring maritime munitions***

Seven NATO member states (Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain) and one partner nation (Finland) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Multinational Cooperation for the provision of Maritime Battle Decisive Munitions (MBDM) during the meeting. The aim is to achieve economies of scale and lower unit prices, as well as common warehousing solutions. The agreement covers a broad range of munition types, including surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles, torpedoes and gun shells.

## ***NATO multinational munition projects attract new participants***

Four NATO member states joined other participants of two ongoing multinational munition projects (both under the leadership of Belgium) in land and air domains: Land Battle Decisive Munitions (LBDM) and Air-to-Ground Precision Guided Munition (A2G-PGM). They are intended to make munition acquisition and warehousing simpler and cheaper.

Croatia and the UK joined the LBDM project, which already had 16 NATO member states and three partner nations. The project involves aggregating demand in a bid to reduce acquisition cost and aims to enhance the ability of participating nations to share their individual munition stockpiles. Under the initiative, Denmark, France and the Netherlands received

the first shipment of anti-tank weapons in January.

Italy and Slovakia joined the A2G-PGM initiative, which has 11 NATO member states and one partner nation. Participating countries in the project received the first deliveries of munitions in August 2018.

## Burden-sharing within the alliance: moving in the right direction?

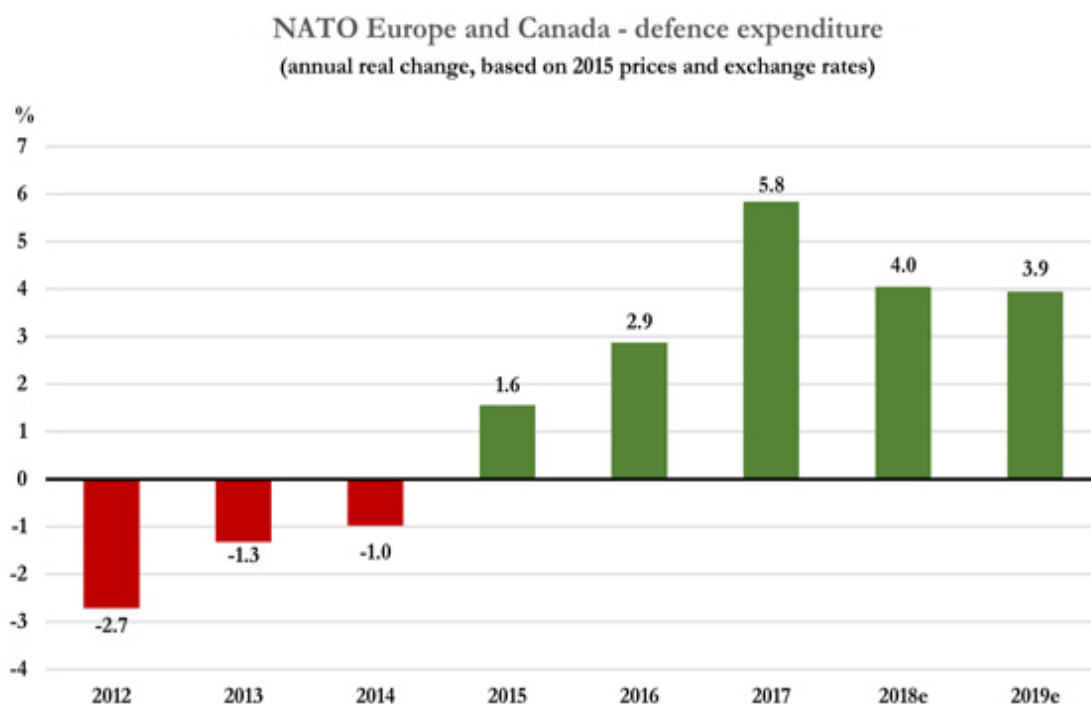
The issue of fair burden-sharing is one of the [longest running fault lines](#) within NATO. In 2014 member states agreed to move towards investing 2 per cent of GDP on defence by 2024. They also agreed to invest more in key military capabilities and equipment, and to contribute personnel to NATO missions 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 2018 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 reviewed the continued effort to bring national military spending to an agreed-upon target of 2 per cent of GDP.

The NATO Secretary General [confirmed](#) that military spending by European member states and Canada had real growth (3.9 per cent in 2019) for the fifth consecutive year. By the end of 2020, they will have added a cumulative total of well over one hundred billion US dollars. In 2019, 8 member states are expected to meet the 2 per cent target (up from 3 in 2014), and at least 16 are expected to meet the benchmark of at least 20 per cent of military spending devoted to major equipment.

Total NATO military spending will reach \$1.04 trillion in 2019. Over the last seven years -- 2012 to 2018 -- total spending amounted to around \$6.6 trillion. According to the annual NATO report on national defence expenditures, in 2019, the United States made the largest single-country expenditures—\$730 billion (although an independent [estimate](#) of the US national security budget suggest that the total is now a staggering \$1.25 trillion)—followed by the UK (\$60.4 billion), Germany (\$54.1 billion), France (\$50.7 billion) and Canada (\$21.9 billion).



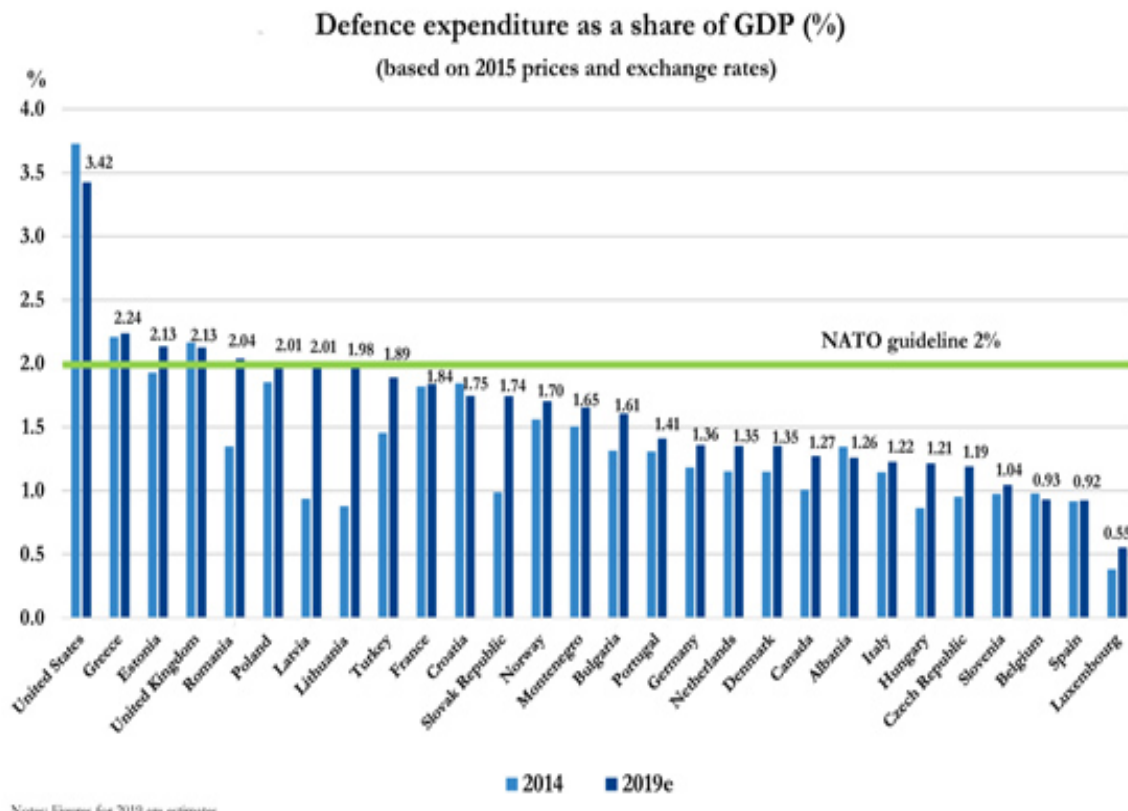
**NATO Watch comment:** The idea that the United States is protecting Europe at US taxpayers' expense is a misrepresentation of both the NATO budgeting process and the nature and scope of US defence spending. Large parts of the US military budget have nothing whatsoever to do with NATO or European security, but go towards a global military presence. Europe's militaries are (with a few exceptions) appropriately scaled for their actual needs, although some states probably do need to spend more intelligently (and some countries may need to increase or pool their defence spending). In contrast, the US also needs to spend much less and shift the focus to 'soft' security expenditure. The case for reducing and rebalancing US security resources is overwhelming but is often the 'elephant in the room' during transatlantic burden sharing discussions. The United States could generate a peace dividend of over \$160 billion by reducing its spending to the NATO 2 per cent of GDP commitment.

## Instability on NATO's southern borders: the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the fight against the Islamic State and the Iran crisis

### Afghanistan

NATO wound down combat operations in 2014 and began training and advising Afghan security forces (Resolute Support Mission). US forces, which have been in Afghanistan in a counter-terrorism role since 2001, numbered around 15,000 in late 2018, although towards the end of the year, US President Trump [ordered the withdrawal](#) of 7,000 US troops. The United States has also been promoting 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. The Taliban's battlefield successes and territorial gains give it more leverage in talks.

A report released in April by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said that both the US





military and NATO have stopped producing an assessment that was considered key for measuring progress against the insurgency in Afghanistan. The metric tracked district stability and was previously one of the “most widely cited Afghan security metrics”.

In May it was revealed that Germany, a leading donor and member of the NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan, has been talking with the Taliban and the Afghan Government in an effort to facilitate peace talks.

The Defence Ministers met with representatives from all nations contributing to NATO’s Resolute Support Mission and with participation from the United Nations, EU, World Bank, and Afghan Defence Minister Asadullah Khalid. The Ministers were briefed by the mission’s Commander, General Miller, and by NATO’s Senior Civilian Representative, Ambassador Kay. The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that the “training mission is helping the Afghan security forces create the conditions for peace”, and that all member states fully support the efforts of the US Special Representative, Ambassador Khalilzad, to achieve a political settlement. Financial support for the Afghan security forces was confirmed to the end of 2024, with a reiteration of the commitment “We will stay in Afghanistan for as long as necessary, to ensure the country never again becomes a safe haven for international terrorists”.

NATO’s effort continues to focus on training, advising and funding the Afghans to do the fighting. (Only US forces continue to have a combat role in Afghanistan). According to the NATO Secretary General, the Afghan forces “are now making progress, because they are well-trained, better equipped, better commanded, new commanders, younger commanders, better organised and better led and more enablers including, for instance, air forces”. reconciliation. While Stoltenberg [acknowledged](#) that “we have been there to protect our own interests, our own security”, he added, “but, of course, we also recognise the huge progress which has been made in Afghanistan when it comes to social, economic progress, not least human rights, freedom of

press and the rights of women. And for us, it’s important to try to preserve those gains. And that has to be one part of the peace deal”.

It was unclear whether the issue of rising civilian casualties was discussed. According to the [UN mission in Afghanistan](#), civilian casualties from airstrikes increased by over 60 per cent in 2018 compared to the previous year, with most caused by US airstrikes. And in the [first three months of 2019](#), NATO and pro-government security forces in Afghanistan killed more civilians than the Taliban and other terrorist groups. It is the first time that fatalities caused by security forces in Afghanistan exceeded those caused by the Taliban. At the same time, total casualty numbers fell compared with the previous year.

### ***The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS***

The NATO Defence Ministers hosted a meeting of the Coalition, which was established on the margins of the 2014 NATO Summit, but very few details were released about the discussions. In his closing press conference, the NATO Secretary General said that after helping to liberate the territory that the Islamic State controlled in Iraq and in Syria, the main focus is on preventing the group from re-emerging, mainly by training local forces (as is the case in Iraq).

### ***Iraq***

Canada has been leading the NATO training mission in Iraq since it was agreed in July 2018 and Canada’s defence minister announced that the country would extend its mission until November 2020. Canada has 850 military personnel in Iraq, including 250 as part of the NATO mission.

In a statement, Canada’s Defence Ministry said that its mission in Iraq is meant “to support stability and security in the Middle East” and “assist Iraq in strengthening its military schools and institutions and advancing Security Sector Reform”. The mission builds on past NATO efforts to train Iraqi forces as they work to prevent the re-emergence of the Islamic State and other terror groups.

## Iran

Although the issue of the heightened tensions between Iran and the United States and its Persian Gulf allies was not on the agenda of the Defence Ministers' meeting, the NATO Secretary General [acknowledged](#) that the issue was debated: "we discussed the situation in the Gulf, the importance of keeping the strait of Hormuz open", adding "all allies share concerns when it comes to Iran's destabilising activities in the region, their support for different terrorist groups, the missile programme of Iran, and also the announcement that they will now start to enrich uranium again".

The meeting was [briefed by Acting US Defense Secretary Mark Esper](#), and the NATO Secretary General concluded, "one important message is that the United States so clearly has stated that they don't want a war. They actually said very clearly that they're ready to talk with Iran without preconditions and it was a message from allies today that we support efforts to deescalate, to avoid any miscalculations, incidents, accidents and especially that they spiral out of control and create really dangerous, a really dangerous situation"

Tensions between Tehran and Washington have increased since May 2018, when the United States withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal (between Iran and the P5+1 group of world powers—the US, UK, France, China and Russia plus Germany—and the EU) and reinstated sanctions with the aim of forcing the country to renegotiate the accord. A week before the Defence Ministers meeting, President Trump approved military retaliation for the shooting down of a US surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz but revoked the order at the last minute. Iran says the aircraft violated its airspace; while the United States insists it was shot down over international waters. The United States has also accused Iran of being responsible for recent attacks on oil tankers in the region. Iran has rejected the accusation.

In advance of the meeting, Esper said he wanted allies to support "any range of activities" to help deter conflict with Iran. At

this stage, however, the commitment by NATO does not go beyond information sharing and given the divisions within the alliance over this issue it is unlikely that a formal role for NATO can be agreed. Instead, Esper's proposed maritime coalition to protect freedom of navigation through the strait of Hormuz will likely involve a 'coalition of the willing', with the usual suspects, [including the UK](#).

**NATO Watch comment:** The NATO Defence Ministers quite rightly focused on seeking to de-escalate the conflict between Washington and Tehran. If another made-in-America catastrophe in the Middle East is to be avoided (circa Iraq in 2003) all peaceful options need to be explored.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration's efforts to blame Iran for instability across the region was echoed in many of the NATO Secretary General's remarks. While Iran is not without blame, the increasingly tense situation in the Persian Gulf is a fairly direct result of the Trump administration's decision to exit the rigorously negotiated Iran nuclear deal. If Trump's hawks get their war, several NATO allies (and possibly even the alliance as a whole) risk being drawn into another unnecessary conflict by an 'ally' whose words and deeds are increasingly contrary to Europe's interests and values. The European NATO member states and Canada need to actively oppose the threat the Trump administration poses to Iranians and the wider region.

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