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## NATO Military Committee takes the temperature of health crisis and commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq

By Dr. Ian Davis

*This briefing paper presents an overview of the NATO Military Committee meeting that took place on 14 May 2020. The discussions were carried out in private and there were no official documents or summaries of the outcomes. The analysis in this briefing is limited to information that NATO published on the event and what is publicly known from other sources.*

The NATO [Military Committee](#), the alliance's highest military authority, held its first virtual meeting in Chiefs of Defence Session via secure teleconference on 14 May 2020. Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, Chairman of the Military Committee, presided over the sessions supported by General Tod Wolters (Supreme Allied Commander Europe, SACEUR) and General André Lanata (Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, SACT). Air Chief Marshal Peach said the unprecedented virtual meeting demonstrates "that despite the challenging times that we are all currently facing, the core mission of NATO continues unchanged: to deliver credible and effective deterrence and defence".

For the first time in the history of the NATO Military Committee, the 30 Chiefs of Defence, including from the most recent NATO member, North Macedonia, held a virtual meeting to discuss the alliance's ongoing operations, missions and activities, namely its ongoing training missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the NATO Military Strategy. They also discussed the current global COVID-19 crisis, its impact on allied activities and NATO's support to the response efforts.

The meeting started with some [opening remarks](#) by Air Chief Marshal Peach. NATO is not a primary first responder to the pandemic, but it is doing its part, Peach said. "Allies are standing together and acting together in solidarity. Allied national armed forces are supporting national civilian efforts and are playing a key role in slowing the pandemic". The first session was a joint meeting between the Chiefs of Defence and the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg. According to a short [summary](#) of this meeting, the Secretary General provided details of the political outcomes from last month's [Foreign and Defence](#) Ministerial meetings. The NATO Chiefs of Defence then discussed the requirements to implement those decisions. There is no public record of those discussions other than what is set out in Air Chief Marshal Peach's closing remarks and virtual [press conference](#) and in a short NATO [news release](#).

### Afghanistan

Earlier this year, following progress in the intra-Afghan negotiations, NATO agreed to reduce its presence in Afghanistan within NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to 12,000 troops (down from about 16,000). With the support of the Afghan government, the RSM continues to train, assist and advise the Afghan security forces. However, the [February peace deal](#) is close to breaking point, with another recent surge in the violence. Air Chief Marshal Peach condemned the recent [attacks in Kabul and Nangarhar](#): "Afghanistan has been brought, tragically, into focus this week and

the security situation in the country remains fragile. Although, we have seen, with guarded optimism some encouraging signs in the intra-afghan negotiations that could lead to a political solution for the people of Afghanistan”.

Following the attacks, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani [ordered](#) an offensive against the Taliban, although the United States [blamed](#) Islamic State militants—not the Taliban—for the attack on a maternity ward in Kabul. The United States and NATO are calling on the Afghans to continue peace negotiations with the Taliban, but hopes for the peace process appear to be receding as both the government and Taliban increase military operations.

In a sign of the difficulties, since February NATO has [refused](#) to make the number of attacks by the Taliban publicly available, even to the US Government's internal watchdog for Afghan reconstruction, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). Data on enemy attacks "was one of the last remaining metrics SIGAR was able to use to report publicly on the security situation in Afghanistan", the watchdog said. The RSM said it was not releasing the number because attacks by the Taliban "are now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the US and the Taliban", according to the SIGAR [report](#) to Congress.

## Iraq

The NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) was established in Baghdad in October 2018 after three years of war against the Islamic State. It is a non-combat ‘train-and-advise’ mission to help Iraqi security structures and institutions fend off future insurgencies. In January, NATO suspended training of Iraqi forces to ensure the safety of several hundred mission members amid fears for regional stability after a US air strike in Baghdad on 3 January [killed](#) Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani. The US military airstrike was ordered by President Donald Trump without consulting the US Congress or, it would seem, NATO allies.

Following President Trump’s calls for allies to get more involved in the Middle East, NATO defence ministers in February agreed to [“enhance”](#) the NMI. Although the parameters of NATO’s new role had still to be defined, the NATO Secretary General indicated that it might include taking on some of the tasks being performed by US forces in support of Iraqi military units focused on preventing a resurgence of the Islamic State. However, tit-for-tat [military exchanges](#) between US forces (using airstrikes) and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia (using rockets) continued in March amidst a continuing deterioration of security. Iraq’s president, Berham Salih, [described](#) the US airstrikes as a “violation of national sovereignty”.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic NATO suspended all its training activities, and most NATO countries [withdrew their troops](#) and redeployed them to Kuwait while waiting for the end of the health crisis. Given the unpredictable duration of the outbreak and the continuing insecurity in Iraq, it is unclear when NATO will resume the mission, and if its expansion would still follow, although Air Chief Marshal Peach suggested that it would.

"In Iraq, the situation remains unstable", Peach said. "The fight against [Islamic State] is not over. Coalition forces are working hard to safeguard the progress and gains achieved". He added, “When the conditions permit, and working with the government of Iraq, we will resume our training efforts as well as increase our activities on the ground as we take responsibility for some of the training activities of the Global Coalition”. However, NATO assistance to the Middle East continues to lack a clear sense of purpose and NATO member states risk being drawn into the simmering US-Iran conflict.

## NATO’s Military Strategy

According to the NATO [news release](#), since approving the new NATO Military Strategy in May 2019, the “NATO Military Authorities have been working to refine and operationalize the Alliance’s military goals, intended approaches,

and resource requirements through the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) and the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC). The Chiefs of Defence further refined the DDA which will be presented to Defence Ministers for their consideration at their meeting in June. The Allied Chiefs then reviewed the latest draft of the NWCC which provides the necessary recommendations to ensure NATO exploits opportunities and innovative approaches, including the use of emerging and disruptive technologies, to maintain its military advantage”.

The NATO Military Strategy, and the DDA and NWCC concepts, remain classified and there are no plans to publish them. Apart from adding to the ever-lengthening NATO obscurantist lexicon these two concepts are clearly designed to enable the alliance to maintain a military edge against adversaries, potential or real. NATO’s Allied Command Transformation (ACT, essentially the alliance’s Warfare Development Command) [describes](#) the NWCC as its top priority for 2020: “It is an overarching capstone concept that will guide the Alliance’s future warfare development and the Warfare Development Agenda informed by a 20-year horizon warfighting perspective”.

While specific 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](#) 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 documents are 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.

Withholding information about NATO’s new Military Strategy from parliaments and citizens is patronising and counterproductive. Is it too much to ask that the Defence Ministers publish these documents after their June meeting? Given their importance and likely shaping by US military interests they need to be subjected to close scrutiny. Parliaments in member states should have a role in examining them, including determination of objectives, negotiating positions, the parameters within which the national delegations operate and the final decision as to whether to agree to the strategy. This should not be the exclusive reserve of defence ministries and their ministers.

## COVID-19

The final session of the day was dedicated to NATO’s response to COVID-19. The Chairman of the EU Military Committee General Claudio Graziano briefed the NATO Chiefs of Defence on the EU’s support and relief efforts. Subsequently, the NATO Chiefs of Defence discussed existing alliance measures and support mechanisms as well as the medium-term effects of the pandemic. Air Chief Marshal Peach summarised NATO’s contribution as including more than 150 missions to support and transport medical personnel, supplies and treatment capabilities, facilitating the construction of more than 50 field hospitals and alternate care facilities, numerous international aero-medical evacuations with critical care teams, and the repatriation of more than 3,500 allied citizens from around the world. “We concluded the meeting after an in-depth discussion about the effects of this pandemic and a discussion on resilience and the importance to capture lessons that can be implemented to better prepare for any future health crisis”, Peach said.

For an analysis of NATO’s COVID-19 response, see *NATO Watch Briefings* No. [72](#) and [73](#).