



## Papering over the cracks in NATO's uncertain world

### A review of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, Brussels, 17-18 June 2020

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

#### Key activities and decisions taken:

- ⇒ A new operational plan was agreed, to be ready for any second wave of COVID-19. No details of the plan were provided and it is unclear if it will be published.
- ⇒ It was also agreed to create a stockpile of medical equipment and supplies, and a new fund to acquire those supplies.
- ⇒ Ministers agreed to update baseline requirements for national resilience to take account of cyber threats; the security of supply chains, and consequences of foreign ownership and control. Again, it is unclear whether or not these 'baseline requirements' will be publicly available.
- ⇒ A "balanced package of political and military elements" was agreed in response to Russia's "destabilizing and dangerous" behaviour.
- ⇒ Some parts of the package were outlined, including strengthened air and missile defence, advanced conventional capabilities, intelligence, exercises, and "steps to keep NATO's nuclear deterrent safe, secure and effective".
- ⇒ The exact nature of the nuclear-related steps was not disclosed; deployment of new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe continue to be ruled out.
- ⇒ The US Defense Secretary said that Washington would consult NATO allies on the next steps in plans to withdraw some US troops from Germany.
- ⇒ Ministers expressed concern about the consequences of the rise of China.
- ⇒ Ministers reiterated their strong commitment to Afghanistan's long-term security; to support the peace process NATO is "adjusting" its presence in Afghanistan (i.e. attempting an organized and managed exit).
- ⇒ In Iraq, NATO remains committed to enhancing its training mission and to increasing its presence when conditions allow.
- ⇒ Eleven NATO Defence Ministers (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Turkey) launched a multilateral initiative on pilot training.
- ⇒ Various intra-NATO divisions persist: Turkey continues to block a NATO defence plan for Poland and the Baltic states; while NATO is to investigate a recent incident between Turkish warships and a French naval vessel in the Mediterranean (the two NATO allies are on opposite sides in the Libyan civil war).

## Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The NATO Defence Ministers held a virtual two-day meeting to discuss four main issues:

- preparations for a possible second wave of COVID-19;
- updating national resilience guidelines;
- deterrence and defence, including the response to Russia's new nuclear-capable missiles and the rise of China; and
- NATO missions and operations, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Defence Ministers from Finland, Sweden and Australia joined the discussions, as well as EU High Representative/Vice President Borrell. It was the first time that [Australia](#) has been invited to attend a non-operational session of a NATO Defence Ministers' Meeting.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 16 June.

The first day of the ministerial meeting (17 June) began with 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. This was followed by a meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) via tele-conference to discuss NATO's deterrence and defence, as well as alliance missions and operations. Aside from some public [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General that meeting was a closed session. After the NAC meeting the day ended with another [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

The second day of the ministerial involved another closed NAC meeting in Defence Ministers format to discuss COVID-19 and resilience. After the NAC meeting there was a final [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

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.

## NATO's response to COVID-19

On NATO efforts to combat COVID-19 see NATO Watch Briefings [No.72](#) and [No. 73](#).

The NATO Secretary General stated that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, NATO and allied armed forces have "played a key role in supporting civilian efforts". This effort has included some 350 flights airlifting hundreds of tons of critical supplies around the world; setting up almost 100 field hospitals; and the deployment of more than half a million troops to support the civilian response. These military personnel have been involved in logistics, controlling borders, disinfecting public spaces and providing medical capabilities.

An emerging issue, and one that does not seem to have been addressed by the Defence Ministers, concerns the timing of when NATO first became aware of coronavirus. According to [reports](#), the US

intelligence community became aware of the emerging disease in Wuhan in the second week of November 2019 and drew up a classified document. US intelligence informed the Trump administration, which ignored it, but also apparently updated NATO allies and Israel with the classified document. As Professor Paul Rogers [asks](#), "If NATO was informed of the outbreak in November, as US and Israeli sources have indicated, did NATO act on it and, if so, how?". For appropriate lessons to be learned it is crucial that NATO answers these questions.

NATO is now preparing for any future health crisis, and to this end, the Defence Ministers agreed (a) a new operational plan, to be ready for any second wave of COVID-19; (b) to create

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a stockpile of medical equipment to provide immediate assistance to allies and partner countries; and (c) to set up a fund to acquire critical medical supplies. However, details remain sketchy and there was no indication as to whether the operational plan will be made public.

The NATO Secretary General stated that “many allies have offered to donate medical equipment to the stockpile and to contribute to the financing”, but provided no concrete examples of this “sign of allied unity and solidarity”. Asked by a journalist to clarify when the stockpile would be ready, what would be included in it, and to give an indication of how much money is planned for the fund he said:

“This is a flexible fund and a flexible stockpile, meaning that we have now agreed to establish the framework, the mechanisms, both for the fund and for the stockpile and allies already at this meeting today made specific announcements about funding and about in-kind contributions. But the size, it’s too early to say, because that depends fully on the total amount of commitments from different NATO allies”.

## Updating national resilience guidelines

The Defence Ministers agreed in April to update existing baseline requirements for [civil preparedness](#), based on the lessons from the crisis, although no further details were provided as to what this might involve. During this meeting they further discussed the NATO requirements for national resilience and agreed updated baseline requirements for national resilience to take greater account of cyber threats, the security of supply chains, and consequences of foreign ownership and control. It is unclear what this will actually mean in practice.

According to [remarks](#) by US Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper, it is about guarding against “predatory foreign direct investment”, and increasing resilience by “reducing dependence on Chinese or Russian suppliers

for medical equipment, telecommunications, and other necessities”.

Much of the detailed civil preparedness planning, structures and capabilities both at the national level and at NATO were substantially [reduced](#) after the end of the Cold War. However, seven baseline requirements for civil preparedness were agreed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit: continuity of government, energy, population movement, food and water resources, mass casualties, civil communications and transport systems. Some general guidance was also provided to enhance preparedness in the health sector, but there appears to be no publicly available documents setting out what this current guidance entails.

The baseline requirements were [reviewed](#) in 2018 and NATO was due to further assess them as part of a 2020 Report on the State of Civil Preparedness. NATO’s primary body that addresses preparedness and resilience, the Civil Emergency Planning Committee, is said to be monitoring and assessing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and facilitating an exchange of information and best practices among allies on an ongoing basis.

**NATO Watch Comment:** It is essential that the assessments of the Civil Emergency Planning Committee and any eventual report on the state of civil preparedness are made publicly available to enable independent experts and parliamentarians within member states to discuss the findings.

## Deterrence and defence; Russia and China; and US troop withdrawals from Germany

The Defence Ministers discussions of deterrence and defence took place in the context of three main problems: (a) Russia-NATO relations are at their lowest point since the Cold War, with Moscow still under US and multilateral sanctions for its annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine as well as

US withdrawals from landmark arms control treaties; (b) a looming new US-China Cold War with NATO being encouraged by Washington to take a more critical stance towards China; and (c) a surprise US announcement of troop withdrawals from Germany.

### ***The Nuclear Planning Group***

There was no public disclosure of the scope and nature of the discussions in the NPG, other than the claim by the NATO Secretary General that “NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements have served us well for decades. Allowing us to forge common ground on nuclear issues”. “Today we decided on additional steps to keep the NATO nuclear deterrent safe, secure and effective”, he added.

When pressed by a journalist to clarify the additional steps taken on nuclear deterrence, the Secretary General declined to do so, hiding behind secrecy protocols:

“some of these decisions are secret and I cannot go into all the details, but what I can say is that we have a balanced package and we agreed some more elements to that package today”.

The elements in the package that were disclosed (see below) were mainly about augmenting conventional air and missile defences and other broader measures (such as intelligence, reconnaissance and military exercises). It is unclear what, if any actual adjustments have been made to NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements, which the Secretary General described as “a system which has been tried and tested for years” and one that brings US and European allies together in a joint effort to provide “the ultimate security guarantee for Europe”.

**Further reading:** Ian Davis and Paul Ingram, [Dear NATO Secretary General: A post-pandemic world requires the elimination of nuclear weapons](#), NATO Watch Essay, June 2020

### ***Countering Russia’s ‘destabilizing and dangerous’ behaviour***

The ministers discussed the security implications of Russia’s “growing suite of nuclear capable missiles”. The NATO news release states that “Russia’s deployment of the SSC-8 missile system led to the demise of the INF Treaty last year” and since then, “Russia has continued to modernise its missile capabilities, including with hypersonic weapons”. In response, the ministers agreed a “substantial and balanced package of political and military measures”. These included strengthening NATO’s air and missile defences, with several member states announcing major investments in new capabilities such as patriots and SAMP/T. It also involves strengthening other advanced conventional capabilities, such

as with fifth generation combat aircraft, and adapting NATO’s military exercises and intelligence “to address new challenges”.

The Secretary General pledged not to “mirror Russia’s destabilizing behaviour. We have no intention to deploy new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe. And NATO remains strongly committed to effective arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, which make a key contribution to our security”.

He also said that NATO continued to call “for all actors, including Russia and China, to engage constructively”. Finally, he correctly pointed out that “a new arms race would benefit nobody. And make the world a more dangerous place”.

What then to make of all this?

First, given all these developments—the proliferation in Chinese, Russian and US missiles and associated nuclear weapons modernisation programmes, the new NATO measures, plus the collapse of international arms control agreements—it is clear that a new arms race is already under way. While this differs qualitatively and quantitatively from

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Second, it remains disingenuous and unhelpful for NATO to lay the blame for the demise of the INF Treaty (and likely demise of the Open Skies Treaty) solely at the feet of Russia. Even if it is accepted that the Russian deployment of the SSC-8 missile was a “a clear, blatant violation of the INF Treaty” (and this is disputed by Russia), it was the United States decisions to withdraw from the treaty that actually led to its demise. Of course, this deployment and the deployment of other Russian missile are a concern for the reasons that Stoltenberg described: the missiles are nuclear capable, very difficult to detect and able to reach European capitals within minutes. But from Moscow’s perspective this reliance on nuclear forces compensates for Russian conventional shortfalls.

The Secretary General also constantly presents Russian military developments through a dark prism, while ignoring those taking place within the United States. So, for example, while the SSC-8 missiles “lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons”, nothing is said about the US expansion of its own nuclear weapons, including the deployment of new [low-yield nuclear warheads](#) that also could lower the threshold for a nuclear conflict.

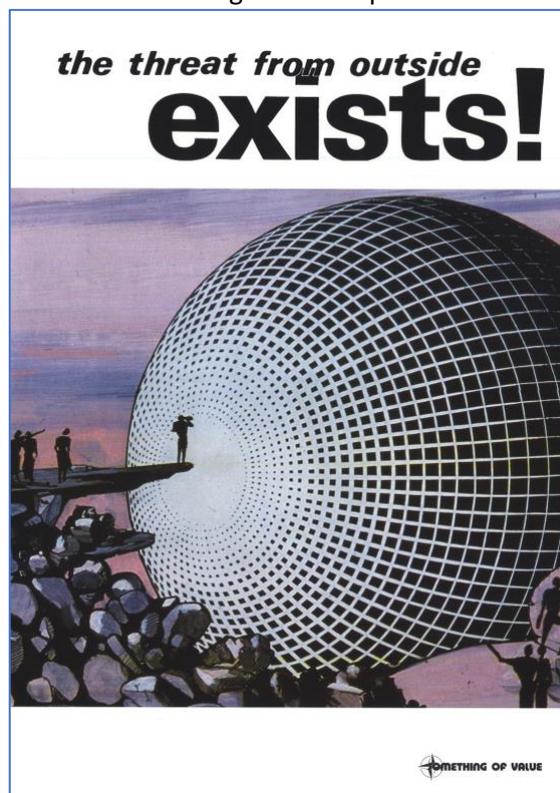
Similarly, the Secretary General states that “We have also seen a pattern over many years of irresponsible Russian nuclear rhetoric, aimed at intimidating and threatening NATO allies”. But what about the [nuclear rhetoric](#) of President Trump who has threatened both [North Korea](#) and Iran with nuclear annihilation.

Third, the Secretary General’s often repeated claim that NATO has a long history in supporting and playing a role in arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament is beginning to ring hollow. Yes, NATO significantly reduced the number of nuclear weapons in Europe by roughly 90 per cent, but that was nearly 20 years ago—and it was part of broader reductions in September 1991 of US tactical nuclear weapons worldwide and was reciprocated by Soviet withdrawals the following month.

While NATO is not in a position to sign or implement arms control agreements, it prides

itself on developing policies and negotiating positions, as well as facilitating implementation and compliance with the relevant treaties. In 2013, NATO created a new [Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Committee](#) and in 2017 an Arms Control, Disarmament, and WMD Non-Proliferation Centre to provide oversight and policy discussion in this area, but it is unclear what these bodies have hitherto accomplished.

From NATO’s security posters collection.



The risk of unintended escalation into a NATO-Russia conflict is serious enough to warrant new scrutiny into the ways in which the existing deterrence relationship can be made more stable in the short-term and transformed into a working partnership in the medium to longer term. For example, NATO could be a forum for discussing and agreeing on concrete limits to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in nuclear forces. [Recent advances in AI](#) could unlock new and varied possibilities in a wide array of nuclear weapons-related capabilities, ranging from early warning to command and control and weapon delivery.

## Concerns about the rise of China

The NATO Secretary General stated that allies “have also expressed concern about the consequences of the rise of China, especially when it comes to their heavy investments in new, modern military capabilities”.

The NATO Secretary General went on to point out that “China has the second largest defence budget in the world and is investing heavily in new long-range weapons systems and missile systems that can reach all NATO countries. They are modernising their maritime capabilities with a more global reach of their naval forces. Just over the last five years they’ve added 80 more ships and submarines to their navy. That equals the total amount of ships and submarines in the navy of the United Kingdom”.

“So, it illustrates some of the magnitude of the Chinese military build-up. And of course, this has consequences for NATO. And as we also have discussed, this is about China coming closer to us. It’s not about NATO moving into the South China Sea, but about the fact that China’s coming closer to us. We see them in the Arctic. We see them in Africa. We see them investing heavily in infrastructure in our own countries. And, of course, we see them also in cyberspace”.

On arms control, the NATO Secretary General said “it goes in a way without saying that when China now becomes a more powerful country with more global reach of their weapons systems, from the missile systems to their navies to their air forces. Then, of course, it is more important that they engage in arms control. And this is a message NATO allies convey individually to China. It was mentioned several times in the meeting today, the need for including China in arms control. And it’s expressed many times from me, the need that China should engage constructively in arms control, because as a global major military power, they also have global major responsibilities for engaging in arms control”.

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This pressure on China to engage in arms control reflects a predominantly US-led agenda. President Trump has been demanding that China join what has for decades been a bilateral US-Russian nuclear arms control dialogue, but the Chinese government has refused. In part this is because its stockpile, currently estimated at 320 warheads, is less than a twentieth the size of the US or Russian nuclear arsenals.

But it is highly misleading to suggest that China does not engage in arms control. China has had a no first use policy—a pledge not to use nuclear weapons as a means of warfare unless first attacked by an adversary using nuclear weapons—since 1964, while NATO has repeatedly rejected calls to adopt such a policy (as have all other nuclear-armed states except India). China is also a party to the major

international agreements regulating biological and chemical weapons, and has also joined or enacted control lists consistent with export control regimes concerning proliferation-sensitive goods and technology. Finally, China recently [decided to join](#) the UN-sponsored Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which seeks to regulate international trade in conventional military equipment. In July 2019 in contrast, the United

States officially informed the UN that it planned to withdraw from the ATT.

China’s growth in its military spending has closely matched the country’s economic growth. As the world’s second-largest military spender, it is [estimated](#) to have allocated \$261 billion to the military in 2019, as compared with \$732 billion by the United States. While China’s military expenditure has increased continuously since 1994 (for 25 consecutive years) and is 85 per cent higher than a decade ago, its military burden in 2019 remained at 1.9 per cent of GDP (i.e. below the NATO guideline that member states spend 2% of their GDP on defence).

While China’s political system allows only limited democratic activity and its violations of [human rights](#) and cases of [‘hostage diplomacy’](#)

are major concerns, as an international actor it is a relatively responsible nation. As the *Washington Post* columnist Fareed Zakaria [writes](#), “Beijing is now the second-largest funder of the United Nations and its peacekeeping work. It has deployed 2,500 peacekeepers, more than all the other permanent members of the Security Council combined. It has not gone to war since 1979. It has not used lethal military force abroad since 1988. Nor has it funded or supported proxies or armed insurgents anywhere in the world since the early 1980s. That record of non-intervention is unique among the world’s great powers”. In contrast, in the post-Cold War period, the United States has led or supported wars to determine the governance of at least a dozen countries.

From NATO’s security posters collection.

The talking up of the Russian and Chinese threat is in line with a rich tradition of [threat inflation](#) about Russia/Soviet Union, as captured by Andrew Cockburn’s, *The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine* (1982).

Understanding international security requires an insight into competing and contradictory narratives about threat perceptions:

narratives about heritages and identity, versions of good and evil, the past and the future. None of these narratives represent the outright and perpetual truth, but some encourage cooperation and security, while others foster only insecurity and disinformation. (For a discussion on the competing narratives between Russia and NATO see ‘Patriot Games: misinformation, exaggeration and military exercises’ in [NATO Watch Observatory No. 46](#), December 2017).

A quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War, a new mindset is needed on all sides, especially among Western nations. Rather than

always interpreting the actions of the Russian and Chinese governments in the worst possible light and seeking to hold Moscow and Beijing to higher standards than sometimes operate in the West, there needs to be more nuanced engagement. China, Russia and NATO need to be cooperating to address a range of 21st-century threats from radicalisation to cyber-attacks to climate change and pandemics.

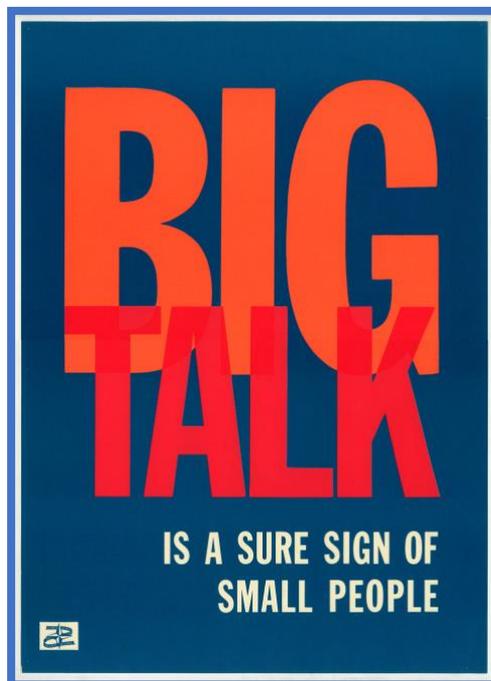
### ***Military spending versus health spending***

Asked why citizens would want to invest in these new deterrence measures in the midst of a huge recession and COVID-19, the Secretary

General sought to justify the spending on two grounds. First, that military capabilities are useful, not only in addressing security threats, but also in providing a surge capacity to support the civilian efforts dealing with a health crisis. Second, that other threats and challenges have not disappeared or diminished as a result of the pandemic. Hence: “We don’t have the luxury of either addressing health crises or addressing security crises. We need to be prepared for both. And that’s reason why NATO is

then updating and modernising and adapting our deterrence and defence, including by responding to the new Russian missiles”.

It has been [estimated](#) that reallocating around 10 per cent of world military spending would be enough to achieve major progress on some key Sustainable Development Goals, many of which are closely linked to actions required to address public health. Therefore, while it may indeed be possible for wealthy NATO member states to fund further defence increases and preparations for future pandemics, it is also realistic to imagine that defence spending in NATO could be frozen at current levels or even



cut in some countries, such as the United States, in order to fund measures to address public health risks.

### ***Intra-NATO divisions part I: Turkey blocking a defence plan for Poland and Baltic states***

Although a deal between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other NATO leaders was supposedly agreed at the London Summit in December 2019, Turkey continues to block a NATO defence plan for Poland and the Baltic states, according to several unnamed NATO diplomats. The defence plan, known as Eagle Defender, has allegedly been approved by Ankara, however, the Turkish President has not allowed NATO military chiefs to put it into action, the diplomats [told Reuters](#).

Ahead of the Summit in December, Erdogan had warned that Ankara would block defence plans for the Baltics, unless the alliance recognised the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) group as "terrorists". Ankara deems YPG, the backbone of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as a terrorist group linked to Kurdish separatist group, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) inside the country, and it has been angered by the support from some NATO allies to SDF militia in their fight against the Islamic State in northwestern Syria.

An unnamed French defence official said that "Turkey is refusing to accept these plans unless we recognise the PYD/PKK as a terrorist entity". "We say no. We need to show solidarity for eastern allies and it's not acceptable to block these plans", the defence official added.

### ***Intra-NATO divisions part II: US troop withdrawals from Germany***

Before the Defence Ministers meeting the NATO Secretary General said that no timeline or firm plan had been agreed for [President Trump's proposed withdrawal of 9,500 US troops from Germany](#), and he suggested that it could be softened if Berlin agreed to further increase its defence budget. He said it was "not

yet decided how and when this decision will be implemented" and he expected an "ongoing dialogue" on the issue would be at the heart of discussions during the meeting. The earlier White briefing that it planned to cut the number of US troops in Germany from around 34,500 to 25,000 had surprised NATO allies and did not appear to have been discussed with them in advance.

While there was no official announcement regarding the outcome of the discussions by the Defence Ministers, the NATO Secretary General's press conferences were dominated by this subject with numerous questions asked by journalists. In his opening press conference Stoltenberg said that he had discussed the issue with President Trump during a phone call and had stressed the importance of the US presence in Europe. When pressed by a journalist to comment on the disjointed nature of the announcement he said the proposal was not yet finalised. "And therefore, I think it is important that we now have a dialogue within NATO on this issue. It's a bilateral arrangement between the US and Germany. But, of course, it matters for the whole alliance".

In his second press conference (at the end of the first day of the meeting), Stoltenberg said that the US Defense Secretary Mark Esper gave a commitment that Washington would consult with allies on the next steps in the plans to cut US forces in Germany. Stoltenberg stressed again that the proposal was not yet finalised and that overall, the US presence in Europe has increased and not reduced in recent years. "But this has been adjusted and the character and the composition of forces have changed over the time. And we also see, for instance, the missile defence site in Romania and the new ships, based or deployed in the naval base in Rota. One of the countries where we have seen increased US presence is Poland. The US is now leading a combat-ready battlegroup deployed in Poland. And that's a multinational NATO battlegroup, with US troops and US forces, US capabilities, but also other Allies contributing to that", he said.

When asked about an upcoming meeting between the US and Polish Presidents in

Washington on 24 June, which is expected to finalise an agreement for extra US troops being sent to Poland, he said: “It’s not for me to comment on or to announce anything about meetings between heads of state and government in NATO-allied countries. I think I have to leave that to them to announce. But what I can say is that the US and Poland, also in consultation with NATO, with me, have decided to increase presence in Poland. And that’s a decision that was taken some time ago”.

### ***Intra-NATO divisions part III: Hungary continues to block the NATO-Ukraine Commission***

Despite being [recognised](#) on 12 June as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, Ukraine’s participation in ministerial meetings within the NATO-Ukraine Commission continues to be vetoed by Hungary. This is due to disagreement with the provisions of the September 2017 Law of Ukraine ‘On Education’, which defines the state language of Ukraine as the language of the educational process. Hungary believes that this law restricts the rights of national minorities and, in particular, the Hungarian community in Ukraine. Asked about this during his press conference, the NATO Secretary General confirmed that the issue is not yet resolved: “So that’s an issue we are still addressing and hope to find a way to solve”, he said.

### ***NATO members launch a pilot training network***

The Defence Ministers of 11 NATO member states—Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Montenegro, Greece, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Turkey—signed a letter of intent to establish the NATO Flight Training Europe (NFTE) initiative. The 11 nations will now explore the options in setting up a network of training facilities for fighter jet, helicopter and drone pilots. In a [statement](#), NATO said: “Several smaller European allies have annual pilot training requirements at a scale that does not justify the establishment or continuation of

national flight centres. The multinational NFTE initiative will address the requirements of these nations”. Additionally, the step is expected to reduce training costs as well as increase interoperability among participating forces.

## **Operations and missions**

The Defence Ministers discussed NATO’s missions and operations, including those in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

### ***The NATO Mission in Afghanistan***

In his opening press conference the NATO Secretary General highlighted that there had been “some progress” in Afghanistan, including the agreement between the United States and the Taliban, some important steps on prisoners’ release, and some reduction in violence and “no attacks against NATO and US forces”. He also added that “we are also seeing a clear commitment from the Taliban to break all ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups” (but in response to question qualified this by saying, “We need a stronger and more firm demonstration of that”). At the same time, he stressed that “the situation in Afghanistan remains fragile, difficult and there are many obstacles that we have to overcome before we have a lasting political solution”.

There is now “an ongoing conversation” in NATO on how best to support the peace efforts by “adjusting our presence”, the Secretary General said. The NATO mission, which is in the process of reducing troop numbers from about 16,000 troops to roughly 12,000 troops, is preparing to make further reductions “in a coordinated, planned and orderly way”. But that “depends on the peace process, because this is a direct result of the US-Taliban agreement and the efforts to have a real peace process in Afghanistan”, he added.

Asked about a potential unilateral US pull-out from Afghanistan (the US troop level is already down to 8,600 from around 12,000), the Secretary General again stressed that it would be a coordinated approach: “we made a decision earlier this year to move to what we

call Phase A-Light which is a reduced NATO presence in Afghanistan. But we maintained the bases, the regional presence of the NATO forces in Afghanistan, including with a German-led presence in Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, with many other allies. And also the Italian-led presence in Herat, in the west of Afghanistan. And we will now have a process in NATO where we will sit together, the US and all other allies and discuss different options, different possibilities for further reductions. But of course, that will be done in a coordinated way, in an orderly way, and it will depend on the developments in Afghanistan”.

However, an increase in attacks from the Taliban on Afghanistan’s security forces, which have just suffered their [worst weekly casualties](#) so far in the 19-year-old Afghan war—with 291 members of Afghan National and Defence Security Forces killed and 550 others wounded in multiple Taliban attacks—as well as a reluctance on the part of President Ashraf Ghani’s government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, as stipulated in the peace deal, has hindered the start of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

The investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC) of alleged war crimes and other abuses committed by US forces in Afghanistan further complicates matters. In retaliation, the United States has threatened economic and legal actions against the ICC, leading to [criticism](#) by two NATO allies. The Netherlands said it was “very disturbed” by the US measures, while France described them as “a grave attack on the court and a further undermining of multilateralism”.

**Further reading:**

Jonathan Schroden, [Will the United States Really Go to Zero Troops in Afghanistan?](#) Lawfare, 15 June 2020

Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures, [NATO Fact Sheet](#), June 2020

Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund, [NATO media backgrounder](#), June 2020

NATO-Afghanistan relations, [NATO media backgrounder](#), June 2020

**New research on civilian casualties from airstrikes in Afghanistan**

As the United States has increased its use of airstrikes in the war in Afghanistan, it has come with a heavy cost, as civilian casualties have reached record numbers. New research by the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, published in partnership with *Al Jazeera*, *The Intercept* and *Bellingcat*, reveals how the US military conducts its investigations when there are allegations of civilian casualties, and what justice looks like for civilians who lost loved ones to airstrikes.

Murtaza Hussain, [More than 70 children killed in just 10 airstrikes in Afghanistan, report finds](#), 3 June 2020

[Afghanistan: Civilian Loss in the US Air War](#), Civilian casualties investigated amid a surging air campaign as US prepares for possible withdrawal from Afghanistan., *Al Jazeera*, 3 June 2020

Bashar Deeb and Jess Purkiss, [An airstrike, a family destroyed and the months-long quest for answers](#), *Wired*, 3 June 2020

Jessica Purkiss, [The families paying the price for the war in Afghanistan](#), *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 3 June 2020

Jessica Purkiss and Bashar Deeb, [Finding the faces of Afghanistan's slaughtered civilians](#), *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 3 June 2020

**The NATO Mission in Iraq**

At the NATO Summit in Brussels in July 2018, the NATO Mission Iraq was launched following a request from the Iraqi government. The new, non-combat training and advisory mission was established in Baghdad in October 2018. At their meeting in February 2020, NATO Defence Ministers reaffirmed their support to Iraq and agreed to enhance NATO’s role. Due to the security situation and the COVID-19 health crisis in spring 2020, NATO Mission Iraq had to temporarily suspend some activities and relocate personnel outside Iraq. However, the mission is now rebuilding its capacity in Baghdad and planning for NATO’s future

engagement. The planning is conducted in close coordination and consultation with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS/Daesh and the Iraqi government. In his press conference the NATO Secretary General acknowledged an increase in Islamic State attacks in recent months, but stressed that the alliance remains committed to working with Iraq in the fight against international terrorism.

Detailed consultations about the NATO Mission are ongoing with the Iraqi government. These are likely to have been made more complicated by an escalation in Turkey's border conflict with Kurdish groups in northern Iraq. While the Defence Ministers were meeting Turkey [deployed](#) special forces in northern Iraq backed by air and artillery support.

**Further reading:** NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), [NATO Fact Sheet](#), June 2020

## Intra-NATO divisions part IV: The civil war in Libya

Libya has been in conflict since 2011, when a NATO-backed uprising deposed and killed Moammar Gadhafi. The country has since been split between rival administrations in the east and the west, each backed by armed groups and different foreign governments. The UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli led by Fayez Sarraj is supported by Turkey, which sent troops and mercenaries to protect the capital in January, as well as Italy and Qatar. The NATO Secretary General has also [indicated his support](#) for the GNA. In the eastern city of Tobruk, Libya's House of Representatives, with military forces under the command of Khalifa Hifter (who launched an offensive on Tripoli last year), is supported by Greece, France, Russia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and other key Arab countries.

During his press conference the NATO Secretary General said that the alliance would

investigate an incident between Turkish warships and a French naval vessel in the Mediterranean, as France accused Turkey of repeated violations of the UN arms embargo on Libya and branded Ankara an obstacle to securing a ceasefire there.

According to a French defence official [cited](#) by the Associated Press, the frigate Courbet was "lit up" three times by Turkish naval targeting radar when it tried to approach a Turkish civilian ship suspected of involvement in arms trafficking. The Courbet backed off after being targeted. Turkey has denied harassing the French vessel, which was part of NATO's naval operation in the Mediterranean, Sea Guardian, at the time of the 10 June incident. "We have made sure that NATO military authorities are investigating the incident to bring full clarity into what happened," Stoltenberg told

reporters after the Defence Ministers Meeting, where he said the issue was addressed by several participants.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg briefs the press ahead of the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers, 16



June 2020 – photo credit: NATO

In a statement prior to the meeting, the French Foreign Ministry said that "the main obstacle to the establishment of peace and stability in Libya today lies in the systematic violation of the UN arms embargo, in particular by Turkey, despite the commitments made in Berlin" talks earlier this year.

The European Union, which has its own naval effort in the Mediterranean, Operation Irini, is seeking closer cooperation with NATO to help enforce the UN embargo, but Turkey is likely to block any such arrangement. Asked about the potential for EU-NATO cooperation on this issue, Stoltenberg said "we are looking into possible support, possible cooperation, but no decision has been taken. There is dialogue, contacts, addressing that as we speak".