



NATO seeks more resilient member states but continues to ignore the fundamentals of strong societies: openness and transparency

A review of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, Brussels, 22-23 October 2020

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Key activities and decisions taken:

- ⇒ Ministers agreed to create a NATO Space Centre at Allied Air Command in Ramstein, Germany.
- ⇒ In reaction to Russia's "growing arsenal of nuclear-capable missiles", ministers reviewed progress towards a "comprehensive response package of political and military measures" agreed previously in June 2020.
- ⇒ NATO's "nuclear deterrent" is being kept "safe, secure and effective", including through an "annual nuclear deterrence exercise".
- ⇒ Ministers received a "comprehensive report" on the status of critical infrastructure within the alliance, including ports and airports, supplies of fuel, food and medical equipment and telecommunications. The report was not made public, but identifies vulnerabilities, e.g. those arising from foreign ownership and the threat to undersea cables.
- ⇒ It was agreed to strengthen the alliance's resilience pledge when NATO leaders meet in 2021. That NATO Summit will also consider the outcome of the 2030 reflection process and the NATO Secretary General's proposals for a new Strategic Concept.
- ⇒ 2020 will be the sixth consecutive year of increased military spending by European NATO members and Canada (with an annual increase of 4.3% in real terms). Despite the pandemic ministers expect this upward trend to continue.
- ⇒ There was a "productive exchange of views" on the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece and Turkey agreed to cancel rival military exercises, but conflicting media reports later suggested that some Turkish naval exercises would continue.
- ⇒ Intra-NATO divisions also persist re the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey's Russian missile system.
- ⇒ Ministers reiterated their strong commitment to Afghanistan's long-term security and support for the peace process.
- ⇒ Ministers agreed to expand NATO's training mission in Iraq, to help the Iraqi government fight international terrorism.
- ⇒ Four NATO states (Germany, Greece, Hungary and the UK) launched a multilateral initiative on rockets, artillery and mortar threats; Ten NATO states (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the UK) launched a multinational initiative to develop ground-based air defence capabilities.
- ⇒ A NATO Policy on Battlefield Evidence from operational theatres was agreed to aid efforts against terrorism.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

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

- strengthening deterrence and defence in all domains, including the response to Russia's new nuclear-capable missiles and the rise of China;
- boosting resilience in member states;
- progress on fairer burden-sharing; and
- NATO missions and operations, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A [pre-ministerial press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 21 October.

The first day of the ministerial meeting (22 October) began with a closed meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) via tele-conference to discuss NATO's deterrence and defence. After the NAC meeting the day ended with an online [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

The second day of the ministerial involved another closed NAC meeting in Defence Ministers format to discuss NATO missions and operations. It also marked the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. 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.

For details on the June 2020 defence ministers meeting read: Papering over the cracks in NATO's uncertain world A review of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, Brussels, 17-18 June 2020, [NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.78](#), 24 June 2020

Deterrence and defence: a new NATO Space Centre; the Russian missile threat and nuclear arms control; and two new multinational weapon acquisition projects

The Defence Ministers discussions of deterrence and defence took place in the context of two main challenges: (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; and (b) a looming new US-China Cold War with NATO being encouraged by Washington to take a more critical stance towards China.

A new NATO Space Centre

The headline announcement at the meeting was the plan to build a new space centre at the US Air Force base in Ramstein, Germany. The new space base will join with the NATO Allied Air Command ([AIRCOM](#)) in Ramstein and will "help to coordinate Allied space activities; support NATO missions and operations from space, including with communications and satellite imagery; and protect Allied space systems by sharing information about potential threats".

The base at Ramstein currently serves as headquarters for the United States Air Forces in Europe – Air Forces Africa (USAFE-AFAFRICA) and also for NATO AIRCOM. It has been used by the US Air Force since 1953 and by NATO since 1974.

The development of a NATO Space Centre move comes nearly one year after the US military established the Space Force as a separate military branch. NATO [formally adopted space](#) as a new operational domain in 2019 alongside air, land, sea and cyberspace. Around 2,400 satellites orbit the Earth, with about 60% belonging to the 30 NATO member states or companies located there.



Meeting of the North Atlantic Council via tele-conference – Meetings of NATO Ministers of Defence; view of the room, 22 October 2020 – photo credit: NATO

The Secretary General highlighted that NATO is determined to keep its cutting edge in all domains: land, sea, air, cyber and space. “Space is essential for our ability to navigate, communicate, and detect missile launches. And fast, effective and secure satellite communications are vital for our troops”, he said. While highlighting that some nations—including Russia and China—are developing systems which could “blind, disable or shoot down satellites”, the Secretary General stressed that NATO’s aim “is not to militarise space”, but to increase the alliance’s “awareness of challenges in space, and our ability to deal with them”.

However, given that NATO missions and operations, including in Afghanistan, Kosovo and the [Enhanced Forward Presence](#) in eastern Europe, are highly dependent on space-based assets such as communications and satellite imagery, then these assets are clearly going to be targeted by any adversary, which also means they contribute to a de facto militarisation of space.

Still undecided, meanwhile, is the location of a NATO Centre of Excellence (CoE) devoted to military space where analysts would study concepts and develop doctrine. There are

currently 26 NATO-accredited CoEs that train and educate leaders and specialists from NATO member and partner countries on a range of topics from crisis management and disaster response to strategic communications. France and Germany have both lobbied to host such an organization devoted to space policy.

The Russian missile threat and nuclear arms control

The ministers discussed the alliance’s response to the Russian missile challenge, which NATO regards as “growing in scale and complexity”. At their earlier meeting in June the ministers agreed a “comprehensive and balanced response 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 systems. 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.

Although the meeting apparently assessed progress in this response package, the Secretary General’s latest press briefings gave no further details and simply reiterated many of the elements of the package that were

announced in June. He also restated that NATO remained “fully committed” to arms control and disarmament, despite confirming that “we are also keeping our nuclear deterrent safe, secure and effective, including through our annual nuclear deterrence exercise”. This exercise, known as "[Steadfast Noon](#)" brings together more than 50 aircraft from several allied air forces and is hosted by a different NATO country each year.

The Secretary General also welcomed “progress” in the talks between the United States and Russia to extend New START—the sole remaining bilateral nuclear arms control agreement between the two countries. New Start is due to expire by the end of February 2021 and the US and Russian statements emerging from the talks so far suggest that reaching an agreement is by no means certain. While the US wants to rework the deal to include China and cover new kinds of weapons, Russia is willing to extend the agreement for five years without any new conditions.

The NATO Secretary General stated that he would welcome an extension of New START, “because I believe that we should not end up in a situation where we have no agreement whatsoever governing, regulating the number of nuclear warheads in the world”. He added that an extension would also give more time to address other issues not covered by the New START agreement, including non-strategic weapons and the rise of China. “China is investing heavily in new nuclear capabilities, modernising their nuclear forces. And China is becoming more and more a global power. And with that global position also comes global responsibilities, including being part of future nuclear arms control agreements”, he said.

This pressure on China to engage in nuclear 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. However, 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).

NATO Watch comment: The Secretary General’s often repeated claim that NATO has a long history in supporting and playing a role in arms control and disarmament is beginning to ring hollow. 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 of US tactical nuclear weapons worldwide that were reciprocated by Soviet withdrawals. If NATO is truly “fully committed” to nuclear arms control and disarmament it should be supporting the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which [reached the 50-state threshold](#) required for entry into force on 24 October. In 90 days, the TPNW will take effect as international law and prohibit participating parties from developing, possessing, testing, using, or threatening to use nuclear weapons, allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory, or assisting others to engage in such activities.

Recently, 56 former presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and defence ministers from 20 NATO member states and Japan and South Korea, as well as the former UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon and two former NATO Secretary General’s, Javier Solana and Willy Claes, signed an [open letter](#) supporting the TPNW. Why is it that senior European politicians and NATO officials only see the light in their retirement?

NATO partners agree to develop mutual air defence and C-RAM systems

Ministers agreed two new multinational weapon acquisition projects. Ministers from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and

the UK [signed a letter of intent](#) to implement a [Ground-Based Air Defence](#) (GBAD) system to defend against a range of air and missile threats. The system will include very short-range missiles, including Stinger, Mistral and anti-aircraft artillery, and short-range and medium-range missiles, including the HAWK and Network Centric Short-to-Medium Range GBAD System. The agreement will allow each participating country to create their own tailored GBAD force package. Additionally, Defence Ministers from Germany, Greece, Hungary and the UK [agreed](#) to initiate a project to address growing challenges in the sphere of Rapidly Deployable Mobile Counter Rockets, Artillery and Mortar, known as [C-RAM](#).

National Resilience

The NATO Secretary General also emphasized the interconnection existing between strong militaries and resilient societies. To this end, the Defence Ministers agreed in April 2020 to update existing baseline requirements for [civil preparedness](#), based on the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis, although no further details were provided as to what this might involve. At their June 2020 meeting they further discussed the NATO requirements for national resilience and agreed updated baseline requirements to take greater account of cyber threats, the security of supply chains and consequences of foreign ownership and control. It was unclear what this actually meant in practice.

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.

NATO's primary body that addresses preparedness and resilience is the Civil Emergency Planning Committee. 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. It was presumably this report that the NATO Secretary General was referring to when he said ministers received a "comprehensive report on the state of our critical infrastructure, including ports and airports, supplies of fuel, food and medical equipment, and telecommunications, including 5G".

The Secretary General also said that while progress had been made there were still vulnerabilities, such as "foreign control of the critical infrastructure upon which our societies and our militaries rely". He added that "countries like China are investing aggressively in ports and airports, and our telecommunication networks remain vulnerable to attacks from the outside, and compromise from the inside". In order to continue to build up resilience in member states the ministers agreed to "strengthen our resilience pledge when NATO leaders meet next year".

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

Undersea network security

One specific vulnerability mentioned in the Secretary General's press conference was in relation to undersea communications cable networks that transmit both civilian and military data. Since 97% of communications between the US and Europe flows through these cables, the consequences would be significant if they were destroyed or tapped. "I think it is important to address this because it is important to understand that most of these cables are privately owned and it's publicly known where they are", Stoltenberg said, adding that this also "makes them potentially vulnerable".

Military officials have in recent years noted [increased Russian undersea activity](#) and raised the possibility that Moscow could seek to damage cable networks during a potential conflict. The ministers received a confidential report on better protection of submarine cables in the Atlantic. To minimise the risk NATO has put new tools in place to protect undersea infrastructure and monitor potential threats. These measures include more naval exercises and patrols at sea. “We have also established a new NATO Atlantic Command in Norfolk, and one of the new tasks of this new North Atlantic command is also to look into how to protect, how to monitor threats against undersea infrastructure,” Stoltenberg said.

NATO’s response to COVID-19

At the June 2020 Defence Ministerial 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. An updated [Fact Sheet](#) dated October 2020 gives a brief appraisal of these preparations and the support provided since June. A stockpile of medical equipment and supplies has been established and throughout October and November 2020 Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are expected to receive dozens of ventilators and a total of around 1.5 EUR million in medical supplies from the stockpile. During the Defence Ministers meeting it was also [agreed](#) to provide 60 ventilators to the Czech Republic as well as some medical personnel.

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

Fairer burden-sharing?

The Defence Ministers also assessed progress towards fairer burden sharing across the alliance (a [perennial debate](#) within the alliance). This assessment coincided with the publication of NATO’s latest [defence expenditure data](#). The NATO Secretary General announced that 2020 will be the sixth

consecutive year of increased defence spending by European allies and Canada, with an increase this year of 4.3% in real terms.

When asked if COVID-19 could have an impact on the increase in defence spending, the NATO Secretary General said that based on national spending plans he expected the upward trend to continue. He justified this expenditure in the midst of a huge recession and COVID-19 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.

NATO Watch comment: 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

In addition to divisions within NATO over burden sharing, three issues involving Turkey also divided ministers during their meeting: (a) the situation in the eastern Mediterranean; (b) Turkey’s testing of its Russian-made S-400 air defence system; and (c) the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Growing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

Large reserves of natural gas are believed to be located in the eastern Mediterranean, which Turkey is exploring in maritime areas claimed by Cyprus or Greece. Tensions have been

running high over Turkey's drilling activities, which Greece and Cyprus say violate their sovereignty, and both sides have [deployed warships](#) in a show of force, raising fears of conflict erupting by accident. The EU has repeatedly urged Turkey to stop its exploration activities and threatened to apply sanctions on Ankara if it does not de-escalate tensions and remove its warships from Greece's waters.

Both Greece and Turkey have been NATO members since 1952. Membership was meant to stop them fighting each other and to ensure neither fell under Soviet influence. Jamie Shea, former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges at NATO, said in a [comment piece](#) that NATO has a long history of handling Greek-Turkish disputes in the Aegean, whether over territorial claims, airspace infringements, naval exercises, and recently the monitoring of illegal migration from Turkey to Greece.

On 1 October 2020 a NATO-mediated [de-confliction mechanism](#) was agreed between Greece and Turkey to avoid accidental military clashes in the Eastern Mediterranean. This included a hotline between Greece and Turkey using secure NATO communication systems. The situation in the Eastern Mediterranean was also discussed during the defence ministerial meeting, and according to the NATO Secretary General it generated a "productive exchange of views". There was broad support for the deconfliction mechanism for dialogue, for reducing tensions and for exploring how to further strengthen the de-confliction mechanism. "We all agree that tensions should be solved on the basis of international law and allied solidarity", the Secretary General said, adding "we all recognize the importance of avoiding words and actions which can escalate tensions". While the military de-confliction mechanism will not solve the underlying disputes, it is hoped that it will provide the space for political discussions, which are being facilitated by Germany.

The NATO Secretary General in his press conference on the 23 October also confirmed that both Greece and Turkey agreed to cancel military exercises which were planned for their

national holidays. Earlier in October, Turkey's foreign ministry accused Greece of planning military manoeuvres in the Aegean Sea to coincide with Turkey's 29 October national day celebrations. Turkey retaliated by declaring exercises on 28 October, which is a Greek national holiday. However, it is unclear whether these exercises will be cancelled in practice. According to the online news website, [Ahval](#), on 23 October Turkey announced new naval exercises in the eastern Mediterranean for 27-28 October.

Turkey's S-400 missile system

Turkey's \$2.5 billion purchase of a Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system in 2019 has been another recent issue of contention within NATO. The system cannot be incorporated into NATO's integrated air and missile defence system, and there are concerns that the missiles could be used to gather sensitive intelligence via systems linked to the F-35 combat aircraft, which is the alliance's main next-generation warplane. As a result, the United States blocked Turkey from co-production of the F-35 programme and is expected to apply sanctions once the missiles are activated. Turkey was making components for the F-35 and had planned to purchase 100 of the aircraft.

With trials of the system taking place last week in the northern Turkish province of Sinop, just across the Black Sea from Russian territory, the row was reignited at the Defence Ministers meeting. The NATO Secretary General expressed concern about the consequences of the Turkish decision to acquire the missile system, stating "I have expressed those concerns several times, including in meetings in Ankara". He has also supported efforts to try to find alternatives, such as the US Patriot system—earlier talks on a potential Patriot deal failed over Turkey's insistence on technology transfer rights—or the French-Italian SAMP/T system. In a *Bloomberg* interview, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said that the S-400 would not be integrated into NATO's command-and-control infrastructure but would instead be "used as a standalone system similar to the use of

Russian-made S-300 weapons that exist within NATO". (A coded reference to Greece's possession of the S-300 weapon system).

The armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh

In late September, Azerbaijan and Armenian forces [resumed fighting](#) in a major eruption of their decades-old conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed region that is ethnically Armenian but located inside Azerbaijan. In a joint statement the leaders of France, Russia and the United States [called](#) for a ceasefire, as did the NATO Secretary General in a [separate](#) statement. French President Emmanuel Macron said the latest fighting was initiated by Azerbaijan, while Turkey, a staunch ally of Azerbaijan, has [vowed to support](#) Azeri fighters.

A day before the Defence Ministers meeting, the NATO Secretary General met President Armen Sarkissian of Armenia at NATO Headquarters. They [discussed](#), amongst other things, the crisis in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. Afterwards the NATO Secretary General stressed that the alliance is not involved in the conflict and that both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been valued NATO partners for more than 25 years. He also called on both sides to show restraint, observe the ceasefire and to de-escalate.

When asked about this meeting at the defence ministerial press conference, the NATO Secretary General reiterated his call for Azerbaijan and Armenia "to de-escalate, to end the fighting, to cease hostilities and to respect and implement a ceasefire". He also welcomed the meeting in the United States between the two countries' foreign ministers. As regards Turkey's role in the conflict, he said that he expected Ankara "to use its considerable influence in the region to calm tensions".

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 February 2020 the Taliban and the United States reached an agreement that led to the start of intra-Afghan talks in Doha. The Defence Ministers reaffirmed their support for the Afghan peace process and speaking after the meeting the NATO Secretary General said that "The Taliban must reduce the unacceptable levels of violence. To pave the way to a ceasefire they must break all ties with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, so that Afghanistan never again serves as a platform for terrorist attacks on our countries".

On 19 October 2020 NATO allies and partners [renewed](#) their commitment to provide [financial support](#) to the Afghan security forces until the end of 2024. NATO still has around 12,000 troops in Afghanistan, which remains the alliance's biggest mission. As part of the peace process, NATO has adjusted its presence, but continues to state that any further adjustments remain "conditions-based".

When asked during the press conference to comment on President Trump's [promise](#) to pull US troops out of Afghanistan by Christmas, the NATO Secretary General reiterated the common commitment made by all allies to assess and make decisions together: "We decided to go into Afghanistan together; we will make decisions about future adjustments together; and we will leave together, when the time is right".

He also acknowledged, "it is clear that we will face a dilemma in the coming months, because we can either decide to leave Afghanistan and then risk to see that the gains we have made will be lost and that Afghanistan again, can become a safe haven for international terrorists. Or we can decide to stay, but then, of course, risk to continue a long-term commitment in Afghanistan and also continue to face intensified fighting with Taliban. So, this is a dilemma we will face as an alliance. We will discuss and assess the situation together and then make our decisions".

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 that the security situation in Iraq remains challenging, but that the alliance had "tasked our military commanders to expand our mission in Iraq". He also confirmed that the mission was almost at full capacity again with some of the trainers and personnel having moved back into Iraq. The size of the [current mission](#) is roughly 500 personnel, but the Secretary General said that it was too early to say anything exact about the size of the enhanced mission, "but it will be significantly larger than the current mission". Detailed planning for the mission has started and a new operational plan is expected to be agreed at the NATO defence ministerial meeting in February 2021.

NATO Policy on Battlefield Evidence

The NATO Defence Ministers also welcomed the adoption of the 'NATO Battlefield Evidence Policy' and 'NATO Practical Framework for Technical Exploitation'. According a [NATO news release](#) these policy documents, which have not been made public, encourage NATO troops to use information that is gathered during NATO-led missions and operations to support law enforcement purposes and legal proceedings as evidence drawn from the battlefield. This is expected to be particularly

important in the context of bringing "foreign terrorist fighters to justice".

On the horizon: The NATO Reflection Group and a New Strategic Concept

NATO's current [Strategic Concept](#)—an official document that outlines NATO's enduring purpose and nature, and its fundamental security tasks—was agreed in 2010. It defined NATO's core tasks as collective defence, cooperative security and crisis management. During his press conference the NATO Secretary General acknowledged that given the fundamental changes in the security environment in the last 10 years "that the time has come to modernise, to adapt, to revise NATO's Strategic Concept". He expected that the issue of a new Strategic Concept would be part of the [NATO 2030](#) reflection process that he initiated in June 2020 and which is supported by the Expert Group that will deliver its report before the NATO Foreign Ministerial meeting in December 2020. After that, the NATO Secretary General will put forward proposals for heads of state and government when they meet in 2021. This will either be a Leaders Meeting or a summit, but no decision has been taken exactly on when and where it will take place.

There has been some [speculation](#) of a summit in March 2021 in Brussels to welcome a new US president if Democrat candidate Joe Biden wins, or a gathering in early summer if Donald Trump is re-elected. A summit in the spring would be an early chance to repair transatlantic ties if Biden were to be voted into the White House on 3 November after a difficult four years under Trump. A March summit "would give Biden a platform to bring Europe and North America back together and also give NATO a chance to put the Trump era behind it," an unnamed diplomat is quoted as saying. Any summit plans would have to consider coronavirus pandemic restrictions that have complicated in-person gatherings of government leaders.