



NATO seeks a new political path but continues to march to old military tunes

A review of the NATO Foreign Ministers teleconference, 1-2 December 2020

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Key activities and decisions taken:

- ⇒ Ministers discussed the NATO 2030 initiative including a report by an expert group appointed by the Secretary General. Further consultations will take place to prepare recommendations for NATO leaders in 2021.
- ⇒ In response to Russia's "continued military build-up", ministers expressed support for preserving limitations on nuclear weapons and for developing a more comprehensive arms control regime, but without outlining any new thinking or proposals towards these ends.
- ⇒ With Asia-Pacific partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, as well as Finland, Sweden and the EU High Representative, the ministers discussed the shift in the global balance of power and the rise of China. Separately, NATO agreed a classified report on China.
- ⇒ Ministers discussed security in the Black Sea region with the foreign ministers of Georgia and Ukraine. NATO's practical support for both countries' reform programmes is being 'stepped up'. Ministers also discussed developments in Nagorno-Karabakh and Belarus.
- ⇒ Ministers discussed the continuing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the NATO-brokered de-confliction mechanism agreed previously between Greece and Turkey. Media reports suggest that there were some sharp exchanges between the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.
- ⇒ Ministers reiterated their commitment to the NATO training mission in Afghanistan and discussed the impact of the US decision to reduce its troop numbers to 2,500. NATO will continue to assess the situation and will have to decide whether to stay or leave in February 2021, when NATO defence ministers meet
- ⇒ NATO plans to hold a summit with President-elect Biden in 2021 (the exact date is not yet decided).

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

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

- The NATO 2030 initiative and the continued adaptation of the alliance;
- The Russian military threat, including the security situation in the Black Sea region and NATO's partnerships with Georgia and Ukraine;
- The rise of China, a discussion that included NATO's four Asia-Pacific partners (Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea), as well as Finland, Sweden and the EU Union High Representative; and
- NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

A [pre-ministerial press conference](#) was held by the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 30 November. The first day of the ministerial meeting (1 December) began with a closed meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) via teleconference—at which NATO 2030, Russia and the situation in Afghanistan were addressed—and ended with an online [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

The second day of the ministerial involved two more closed NAC meetings in Foreign Ministers format, the first with Asia-Pacific (Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand) and EU partners (Finland, Sweden and the EU High Representative) to discuss the rise of China, and the second with the Foreign Ministers from Georgia and Ukraine to discuss security in the Black Sea region. After the NAC meetings 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 October 2020 defence ministers meeting read: [NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.79](#), 26 October 2020

The NATO 2030 initiative and expert group report

Ministers were briefed by the two co-chairs—Thomas de Maizière, a member of the Bundestag and former German defence minister and A. Wess Mitchell, a former assistant secretary of state for European affairs in Trump's administration—of an expert group appointed by the Secretary General, as part of his [NATO 2030](#) initiative. Through this initiative the Secretary General is seeking to bolster NATO's political cohesion and ability to face new security challenges. NATO leaders agreed at their December 2019 summit in London that the Secretary General should head up a "reflection process" aimed at strengthening the alliance's political dimension.

Stoltenberg named a panel of 10 experts on 31 March 2020, and their resulting report, [NATO 2030: United for a New Era](#), was the focus of this ministerial session. The report was also publicly launched by the Secretary General at a separate event on 3 December. The expert group report is expected to help frame further consultations over the coming months "with allies, civil society, parliamentarians, young leaders and the private sector". Ultimately, these are expected to lead to Stoltenberg tabling a number of strategic level recommendations for consideration by the next NATO Summit in 2021, and then eventually the elaboration of a new [Strategic Concept](#), as recommended in the expert group report.

Among the report's other 138 recommendations are that NATO should continue the dual-track approach of deterrence and dialogue with a "persistently aggressive" Russia; devote "much more time, political resources, and action" to the security challenges posed by China; coordinate information-sharing and collaboration on emerging and disruptive technologies; more explicitly integrate the fight against terrorism into its core tasks; take a coordinated approach with the EU in addressing challenges to the South; reaffirm its support for arms control while maintaining an "effective nuclear deterrence"; build on efforts to include climate

change and other non-military threats such as pandemics in NATO planning on resilience and crisis management; reassert its core identity as an alliance rooted in the principles of democracy; strengthen transatlantic consultation mechanisms, including between the EU and NATO; outline a global blueprint for better utilising its partnerships to advance NATO strategic interests; strengthen measures to reach and implement decisions in a timely fashion; and take measures to strengthen NATO's political dimension.

NATO Watch is coordinating a detailed evaluation of the report by civil society representatives that will be published in February 2021 in advance of the next NATO ministerial meeting. An initial overall takeaway from the expert group report is that, if implemented, it risks helping to entrench a systemic three bloc rivalry between China, Russia and NATO-EU-US.

The extent to which the report garnered support and/or dissenting voices during the ministerial meeting is not known. During his press conference, the NATO Secretary General painted a rosy picture: "Their report shows that NATO is agile. It recognises that in recent years we have been able to adapt, both militarily and politically. The report also demonstrates that political consultation and decision-making work at NATO. So we build on solid foundations". During the Q&A, he added, "What is clear is that the report contains a lot of very relevant and good analysis. It states clearly that NATO is the most successful alliance in history and that this alliance is indispensable. And it also states that the reason why NATO has been able to achieve so much is that we have been able to change. And we need to continue to change".

The Secretary General also stressed that one of the aims of NATO 2030 is to give NATO a more global approach, "because more and more of the threats and challenges we face are global". To this end, he highlighted the "rise of China", which was also the subject of a separate ministerial session (see below). Following the public launch of the report it was the emphasis

on China that received the most media coverage (see, for example, [Deutsche Welle](#), [South China Morning Post](#) and [New York Times](#)). The most robust of the report's recommendations in relation to China suggests greater investment in NATO's "ability to monitor and defend against any Chinese activities that could impact collective defence, military readiness and/or resilience".

When asked about the NATO expert group report, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying rebutted the idea that China posed a threat to the alliance. "China has never practiced anything like 'coercive diplomacy' or 'intimidating diplomacy,'" Hua told reporters at a [daily press briefing](#) on 1 December. "We hope NATO will uphold a correct view on China, look at China's development and domestic and foreign policies in a rational manner, and do more things that are conducive to international and regional security and stability. China stands ready to conduct dialogue and cooperation with NATO on the basis of equality and mutual respect", Hua concluded.

The report also provides several key recommendations to address tensions between member states and to simplify decision-making. It cites "single-country blockages involving external bilateral disputes" as particularly problematic in preventing timely decisions. To correct this the report recommends: (a) strengthening the Secretary General's role to make decisions on more routine matters and to serve as a mediator in disputes between member states; (b) creating a more "structured mechanism to support the establishment of coalitions inside existing alliance structures"; (c) raising the threshold for a single country's ability to block NATO actions to the ministerial level and increasing the number of foreign and defence ministerial meetings so as to ensure that member state diplomats can more regularly evaluate the "political health and development" of the organization; and (d) implementing time-limited crisis decision-making (i.e. by seeking to achieve consensus within 24 hours during a crisis).

Responding to the Russian “military build-up”

The Foreign Ministers discussions took place in the context of Russia-NATO relations that 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.

The ministers discussed Russia’s “continued military build-up”, as well as arms control issues. In his press conference the NATO Secretary General described Russia as “violating and undermining treaties, and deploying new weapons”. In response, NATO is adapting its deterrence posture while continuing to pursue dialogue with Russia, the Secretary General added. The ministers expressed support for preserving limitations on nuclear weapons and welcomed the dialogue between the United States and Russia to find a way forward in extending the New START Treaty (that expires in February 2021 and is the sole remaining bilateral nuclear arms control agreement between the two countries). They also supported developing a more comprehensive arms control regime, but without giving any indications as to what this might entail.

The 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.

In recent months there have been a string of [close contacts](#) between Russian and US forces across the globe, but not all of them have been provoked by Russia. On 24 November 2020, for example, a US warship carried out a “freedom of navigation” operation in waters in the Sea of Japan (that Russia claims as part of its maritime border) and was [challenged](#) by a Russian warship. Also in November, US forces were [challenging](#) the Russians with a military exercise in the Black Sea.

Black Sea security and partnerships with Georgia and Ukraine

The ministers were joined by the Foreign Ministers of Georgia and Ukraine in a separate session to address the security situation in the Black Sea region and NATO’s ongoing support for these two partners.

Details of what was discussed in this session are particularly sketchy. Part of the discussion focused on strengthening NATO’s posture in the Black Sea. In his press conference the NATO Secretary General described it as a region of strategic importance for NATO and its allies, especially given that three member states (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) are littoral states. He stated that Russia was continuing to violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine, and continuing its military build-up in Crimea and in the wider region. In response NATO has increased its regional presence “on land, at sea and in the air” and is stepping up political and practical support to Georgia and Ukraine. This support includes more port visits, training and capacity-building both through NATO and bilaterally with member states.

Ministers restated their support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and Ukraine, and reiterated that both are valued partners making important contributions to NATO missions. The two countries’ reform programmes were also discussed, and an updated Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) was approved. Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani [confirmed](#) that three new programmes were added to the initial 14 [programmes of the SNGP](#).

Despite the warm words for Georgia and Ukraine, and the call in the NATO 2030 expert group report for the alliance to “expand and strengthen partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia”, the prospect of either country gaining membership in the near future remains remote. While sympathetic to the cause of both states, several NATO member states are concerned about admitting them to the

alliance while territorial conflicts with Russia remain unresolved (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the case of Georgia and in the Donbass in relation to Ukraine).

Hence, when asked by a journalist from Georgian TV when Georgia might expect to receive a Membership Action Plan—a NATO programme of advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join the alliance—the Secretary General refused to speculate about any dates but reiterated that the decision taken at the 2008 Bucharest Summit (that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance at some unspecified later date) “still stands”.

Belarus and Nagorno-Karabakh

The ministers also discussed developments in Belarus and Nagorno-Karabakh. The Secretary General said that both Minsk and Moscow must respect the right of the people of Belarus to determine their own future through an inclusive political dialogue. The Secretary General welcomed the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh and argued that a full resolution of the conflict must be found through political and diplomatic ways. However, he failed to acknowledge the part played by Russia in brokering a [ceasefire](#) in the conflict after six weeks of fighting between Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenians.

Concerns about the “rise of China”

In a separate session ministers addressed the shift in the global balance of power and the rise of China—also an essential part of the NATO 2030 project, as described above. They were joined by Asia-Pacific partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, as well as Finland, Sweden, and the EU High Representative.

The Secretary General in his press conference noted that China is “not an adversary to NATO” and that its rise presents both opportunities (for engagement on global issues, such as arms control and climate change) and challenges. These challenges included China having the

“second biggest defence budget in the world”, investing heavily in new capabilities and not sharing NATO’s values because it “undermines human rights, bullies other countries and is increasingly engaging in a systemic competition with us”. The Secretary General also highlighted the value of like-minded democracies working together to defend shared values, bolster resilience and uphold the international rules-based order.

Currently, attitudes and approaches towards China vary markedly within NATO, with the United States at the hawkish end of the spectrum and more pro-China governments in Turkey and Hungary at the other end. Several other member states, such as Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, tend to prioritize the benefits of trade and economic relations with China over the potential security risks.

Separately, NATO agreed a classified report on China. “It assesses China’s military development, its growing activity in our neighbourhood, and the implications for NATO resilience, including when it comes to emerging technologies and our critical infrastructure”, the NATO Secretary General said. He also indicated that the ministerial discussions focused on what more NATO could do with partners, including “sharing information and insights, promoting common approaches in areas such as cyberspace, and strengthening global rules and norms, for instance on arms control”.

The inclusion of China in future nuclear arms control agreements was an issue that the Secretary General also raised at the Defence Ministers meeting in October. This 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).

More broadly, the US administration backed by many US analysts in think tanks and academia is pressing hard to get allies and partners around the world onside in its strategic competition with China. This included the launch of the [US-EU dialogue on China](#) in October, as well as efforts within NATO to correct what Washington sees as a serious strategic underestimation of China within the alliance. A hint of this was given in the NATO Secretary General's pre-ministerial press conference when he described the rise of China in the following terms: "And sometimes when I go to the United States, I hear people being concerned about the size of China, the size of their economy, the size of their defence budget, the many advances they are making within different areas of technology". The US position in the discussions was also clarified in a [statement](#) by the US State Department: "Secretary Pompeo emphasized the threat the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses to allied security interests and encouraged increased cooperation to safeguard against the CCP's malign activities".

The United States first articulated a shift in outlook from counterterrorism to "great power competition" in its [2018 National Security Strategy](#), which cites the re-emergence of "revisionist powers", code for China and Russia. Since then, in relation to China, the Pentagon has been focusing on combatting China in the Pacific and adjacent seas. In support of such a policy, additional spending has already been [committed](#) to the construction of new major weapon systems, including surface ships and submarines.

While it is correct to highlight that China has the second largest defence budget in the world and is involved in a military build-up, the NATO Secretary General fails to acknowledge that this growth in military spending closely matches the country's economic growth. So, 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). In addition, while China is [estimated](#) to have allocated \$261 billion to the military in 2019, the United States allotted \$732 billion. And the Pentagon's annual budget has [increased](#) every year since 2016, with much of that increase directed to the procurement of advanced weaponry. In addition, the US Department of Energy budget has seen large increases for the acquisition of new nuclear weapons and the full-scale "[modernization](#)" of the US nuclear arsenal.

NATO Watch comment: The emerging transatlantic threat perception of China as set out in the expert group report and in a classified report discussed by NATO Foreign Ministers needs to be widely debated within member states. To this end, the classified report should be declassified and subjected to public and parliamentary scrutiny. After all, openness and transparency are meant to be integral features of the shared values within the alliance. Without proper scrutiny NATO member states risk being drawn into a great power competition without having reflected on the motivations, advantages and shortcomings of such a strategy.

While China may or may not "share our values" it is not alone in abusing UN-defined universal rights, including democratic rights. In recent years there has been a marked growth in authoritarianism and [autocracy is now the world's leading form of governance](#). Several NATO member states are part of this "third wave of autocratization", including Hungary, Poland, Turkey and the United States. The fundamental challenges posed by autocracies, including China, are multi-dimensional—technological, ideological, commercial and anti-democratic—and need to be approached through a more nuanced policy of dialogue and cooperation. (See, for example, [proposals](#) by Barnett Rubin for US-China cooperation in securing Afghanistan's future).

Continuing intra-NATO tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

The ministers discussed the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Despite NATO developing a military [de-confliction mechanism](#) between Greece and Turkey in October—including a hotline between the two NATO member states and the cancellation of specific military exercises—tensions in the region have continued.

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.

During his press conferences the Secretary General noted that he was looking at ways to further strengthen the de-confliction mechanism and to further reduce the risks for incidents and accidents. When asked for further details on what this might mean in practice he emphasised that these were “technical talks between our militaries” and that further measures would need to be done “in close consultation with Greece and Turkey”. However, he indicated that it might be possible to increase the number of military exercises that are cancelled and explore potential geographic limitations.

The hope is that these measures can help to pave the way for negotiations (being chaired by Germany) to address the underlying problems. However, according to [media reports](#) there were some quite sharp exchanges during the ministers videoconference, especially between the United States and Turkey. During his press conference the NATO Secretary General sidestepped a question about the clashes between outgoing US Secretary of State Mike

Pompeo and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. Apparently, Pompeo accused Turkey of fuelling tensions with fellow allies in the Mediterranean and of aiding Moscow by purchasing a Russian-made S-400 anti-aircraft system. The Turkish Foreign Minister apparently responded by accusing Pompeo of urging European allies to gang up on Turkey, of siding blindly with Greece in regional conflicts and of refusing to sell Ankara US-made Patriot anti-aircraft weapons. Other [reports](#) suggested that France and Luxembourg joined Pompeo in criticising Turkey.

Ten days after the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, the EU leaders agreed to apply some [limited sanctions](#) against Turkish officials for violating Greek waters, but deferred any further actions (including possible imposition of trade tariffs or an arms embargo) until their March 2021 summit and pending consultations with the incoming Biden administration. On the 14 December the Trump administration [imposed sanctions](#) on Turkey over its purchase of the Russian air defence system, setting the stage for further tensions between the two NATO allies.

The NATO Mission in Afghanistan

The NATO foreign ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the Resolute Support Mission ([RSM](#)) as well as their commitment to finance the Afghan forces through to 2024. RSM was [launched](#) shortly after the completion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2014 and was designed to provide follow-on noncombat support to train, advise and assist Afghan security forces and government institutions to take on primary responsibility for the country's national security.

The ministers also discussed the impact of the US decision to reduce its troop numbers to 2,500 on the objectives and capabilities of the RSM. It was concluded that the mission is able to function and carry out its tasks, but NATO will continue to assess the situation and members will have to make further decisions in February 2021, when NATO defence ministers will meet.

The Secretary General indicated that NATO faced a turning point early next year— whether to stay in Afghanistan and risk continued fighting and an even longer-term engagement, or leave and risk that the country becomes once again “a safe haven for international terrorists”. “Whatever we decide, we must do it in a coordinated and orderly way,” he stressed.

The case for withdrawal and ending the US/NATO involvement in Afghanistan is made forcefully [here](#). For an assessment of what has improved over the 20 years, as well as what is still going wrong, and the case for maintaining a credible NATO force, read [this](#).

In February 2020 the Taliban and the United States reached an agreement (without the involvement of other NATO allies or the Afghan government) that all foreign troops should leave Afghanistan by 1 May 2021 if security conditions on the ground permit. That eventually led to the start of [intra-Afghan talks](#) in Doha in September. However, [attacks](#) by the Taliban and other extremist groups have continued to take place.

At the beginning of December the Taliban and the Afghan Government agreed on rules for negotiations, marking the end of a months-long impasse, and a step that [NATO has welcomed](#). The hope is that this will lead to agreement on a political roadmap and a comprehensive ceasefire.

In the meantime, despite the drawdown in US forces, the Secretary General expressed confidence that the remaining US military contribution and other allied contributions would be sufficient to continue the mission (and cited the German-led base, presence in the north in Mazar-e-Sharif, and the Italian-led presence in the west in Herat.).

"We now see an historic opportunity for peace. It is fragile, but it must be seized", the NATO Secretary General said. "We see an unpredictable and difficult military and political situation. But at least there are now talks".

NATO now has around 11,000 troops in Afghanistan from multiple member states and partner nations, including the United States. The alliance relies heavily on the US armed forces for air support, transport, intelligence and logistics. US forces in Afghanistan have begun a planned drawdown of troops from 4,500 to 2,500 by 15 January under orders from President Donald Trump, but final decisions on the continuing presence there will be taken by the incoming Biden administration.

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