



NATO Foreign Ministers preach post-Trump unity: Rise of China and an 'assertive and aggressive' Russia top agenda

**A review of the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting,
23-24 March 2021**

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Key activities and decisions taken:

- ⇒ The ministers agreed a formal joint [statement](#) on the “enduring transatlantic bond”—a message that sought to turn the page on the divisions of the Trump era.
- ⇒ The United States continued to rebuild bridges with its NATO allies. “You have our unshakeable vow: America is fully committed to NATO”, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a [speech](#).
- ⇒ The US Secretary of State and NATO Secretary General continued to encourage the alliance to position itself in opposition to China.
- ⇒ NATO continued to argue that despite years of pressure and efforts to engage in a meaningful dialogue, Russia has increased its pattern of repressive behaviour at home and aggressive behaviour abroad.
- ⇒ As was the case at the Defence Ministers meeting in February 2021, the critical issue of the withdrawal of

US forces from Afghanistan, scheduled for completion by 1 May, was discussed but a decision was again deferred until the Biden administration completes its own review of the situation.

- ⇒ The ministers had a “very positive discussion” on the NATO 2030 initiative, but there appeared to be little that was new, with one exception: Ministers agreed a report aimed at increasing NATO’s ability to understand, adapt and mitigate the security impact of climate change. Inexplicably, the report remains classified.
- ⇒ NATO is aiming to create a ‘virus-free’ zone at its headquarters in Brussels to allow a Summit to take place in June.
- ⇒ Despite the transatlantic bonhomie, on the side lines tensions resurfaced re Turkey’s purchase of a Russian S-400 air defence system and US opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The NATO Foreign Ministers meeting was held in person at NATO headquarters for the first time since 2019. The meeting discussed four main issues:

- NATO's training mission in Afghanistan;
- Security across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), including the NATO mission in Iraq;
- The NATO 2030 initiative and the continued adaptation of the alliance; and
- Relations with Russia, with the participation of NATO partners Finland, Sweden and the EU Union High Representative.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 22 March. On the first day of the ministerial meeting (23 March) the new US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had a bilateral meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to “[underscore](#) the United States’ determination to strengthen and revitalize ties with NATO allies”. They also took part in a [conversation](#) moderated by the Director of Carnegie Europe, Rosa Balfour. The Secretary General emphasised that if we “stand together, we can deal with both the rise of China, and assertive and aggressive Russia”. This was followed by a closed meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) at which NATO’s approach to MENA and the situation in Afghanistan were discussed. After an official portrait, a second closed meeting of the NAC discussed the NATO 2030 initiative. The day ended with the issue of a [NATO Foreign Ministerial Statement](#) (see box) and a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

The second day of the ministerial began with a bilateral meeting with the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and this was followed by the third closed NAC meeting in Foreign Ministers session to discuss relations with Russia. This meeting included EU partners: the foreign ministers of Finland and Sweden, as well as the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission. The

day ended with a bilateral meeting with the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs (of which no details were released), and a final [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

For details on the December 2020 foreign ministers meeting read: [NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.80](#), 16 December 2020

For details of the February 2021 defence ministers meeting read: [NATO Watch Briefing no.81](#), 24 February 2021

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 Foreign Ministerial Statement

The ministers agreed a short (four paragraphs), formal joint [statement](#) aimed at turning a page on the Trump era. The statement said: “We are meeting in Brussels to reaffirm the enduring transatlantic bond between Europe and North America, with NATO at its heart”.

The statement noted that member states “are making good progress on fairer trans-Atlantic burden sharing; we welcome the efforts made by all Allies in Europe and North America that contribute to our indivisible security. We must and will do more”.

In the statement the ministers also vowed that NATO would continue to adapt in the face of “rising threats and systemic competition,” and underlined that “Russia’s aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security”.

US bridge building with NATO allies and shaping opposition to China

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States and NATO member countries share a common vision of democracy, freedom and a rules-based international order. “I’ve come here to express the United States’ steadfast commitment to that alliance, which

has been the cornerstone of peace, prosperity, stability for the transatlantic community, for more than 70 years”, [Blinken said](#). To reinforce this message on the side-lines of the NATO ministerial, Blinken had bilateral meetings with [NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg](#), [German Foreign Minister Maas](#), [Turkish Foreign Minister Cavuşoğlu](#) and [Italian Foreign Minister Di Maio](#), as well as trilateral meetings with [foreign ministers from the Baltics](#), [foreign ministers from Central Europe](#) (Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary), and a meeting with [E3 foreign ministers](#) (Germany, France and the UK).

Following the second day of meetings, Secretary Blinken held a [press conference](#) where he discussed issues ranging from burden sharing and Afghanistan to Nord Stream 2 and



Russia. He also delivered a [speech](#) from NATO HQ framing the administration’s approach to alliances and partnerships.

Blinken also encouraged NATO members to join the United States in viewing China as an economic and security threat. While saying that the United State would not force its allies into an “us-or-them choice”, he emphasised that “When one of us is coerced we should respond as allies and work together to reduce our vulnerability by insuring our economies are more integrated with each other”. Blinken cited China’s militarisation of the South China Sea, use of predatory economics, intellectual property theft and human rights abuses.

Similarly, in his closing [press conference](#), the NATO Secretary General focused on primarily

on Russia but echoed Blinken’s oppositional rhetoric regarding China. While saying “We don’t regard China as an adversary”, Stoltenberg nevertheless continued to advance reasons for agreeing with Washington: “The rise of China has direct consequences to our security.... So, one of the challenges we face as we now have this forward looking process with NATO 2030 is how to strengthen and how to work more closely together as allies, responding to the rise of China”. For [perspective](#), China has a total of 13 military bases worldwide, including the 9 on atolls in the South China Sea, while the United States has over 800 military bases around the world.

During his press conference at the end of the 1st day of the ministerial meeting, in answer to a question about partnerships, the NATO Secretary General again stressed the need to “stand up and defend” the rules-based order, which he claimed China was “undermining” by “trying to bully countries all over the world”. He cited Chinese behaviour towards Australia (after Australia had asked for an independent investigation into the origins of the coronavirus) and Norway (after the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to a Chinese dissident).

(View from the room, NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, 23 March 2021 – photo credit: NATO)

In his final press conference, asked to comment on recent EU, US, UK and Canadian sanctions against China, Stoltenberg began by asserting that “We don’t regard China as an adversary”, but then went on to describe China in adversarial terms: “But of course the rise of China has direct consequences to our security. They will soon have the biggest economy in the world, they already have the second largest defence budget, they are investing heavily in new modern military capabilities, including nuclear capabilities, they are modernizing their armed forces, and we also see that China is a country which used coercion against the neighbours in the region, we see their behaviour in the, in the South China Sea. And

perhaps most importantly, China is a country that doesn't share our values. We see that in the way they deal with democratic protests in Hong Kong, how they suppress minorities in their own country, the Uighurs, and also how they actually try to undermine the international rules-based order”.

NATO Watch comment: The emerging transatlantic threat perception of China need to be widely debated within member states. This threat perception has been elaborated on numerous occasions, including at this ministerial meeting, in the NATO expert group report, [NATO 2030: United for a New Era](#), in a classified report discussed by NATO Foreign Ministers in December 2020, and in the NATO Secretary General’s proposals outlined at the February 2021 NATO Defence Ministers meeting. The classified report discussed at the previous Foreign Ministers meeting 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 and by John Gittings in [Peace research perspectives on NATO 2030: A response to the official NATO Reflection Group](#)).

The NATO Mission in Afghanistan

At the end of 2020 President Trump decided to reduce US troop numbers from 4,500 to 2,500 as part of the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement (reached 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 agreement eventually led to the start of [intra-Afghan talks](#) in Doha in September 2020. However, those talks have stalled and [attacks](#) by the Taliban and other extremist groups have continued to take place.

The Biden administration is conducting “a rigorous interagency review of the situation” and so a decision on the future of the NATO Resolute Support Mission ([RSM](#)) was postponed pending the outcome of that review. Earlier in February, a ‘bipartisan’ [Afghanistan Study Group](#) established by Congress (but [dominated](#) by people with close financial ties to the US military industrial base) [recommended](#) that President Biden extend the 1 May deadline for withdrawing troops from the United States’ longest war.

Blinken confirmed that the situation was still under review, and that the United States would consult with NATO allies. Blinken told reporters (parroting an often-repeated line by the NATO Secretary General), “We went in together, we adjusted together, and when the time is right, we will leave together”.

Earlier in March, Blinken [proposed](#) a new interim power-sharing government between the Taliban and Afghan leaders. In an accompanying letter to the peace proposal, Blinken warned Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that a US departure could lead to “rapid territorial gains” by the Taliban. The Taliban has itself [warned](#) Washington that it plans to react if US troops do not leave the country by the 1 May deadline.

In his opening press conference, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) “There are no easy choices. And for now, all options remain open”.

He also reiterated that NATO strongly supported “efforts to infuse fresh energy into the peace process”, which required “all parties” to work to achieve progress, reduce the high levels of violence and to negotiate in good faith. He also emphasised that the ongoing peace talks were the best way to “preserve the gains made over the last two decades, and to ensure a stable Afghanistan that will not serve as a safe haven for terrorists”.

Asked about suggestions that the Afghanistan security forces were not ready to fully assume responsibility, the NATO Secretary General asserted that “they are capable, they are professional, and they are now actually responsible for the security in Afghanistan themselves. What we do is that we provide support, training, advice, assistance and also financial funding for the Afghan security forces”.

NATO currently has around 10,000 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.

Of course, the final decision will not be made by allies “together”: it will be a US decision. The NATO allies did not go into Afghanistan together – it was originally a US-led intervention and [the United States has dictated the pace and scope of all subsequent operations in Afghanistan](#). And clearly, it will be the United States that will decide if the mission in Afghanistan will continue beyond the 1 May.

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](#).

Security in the Middle East and North Africa, and the NATO Mission in Iraq

The ministers discussed NATO’s work with key partners—especially Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia—in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially in the context of the fight against international terrorism. However, there was very little detail on what was actually discussed.

Asked in the press conference about whether he could envisage a NATO mission in Libya, Mauritania or in the Sahel region, the Secretary General emphasised that “if there’s any lesson learned both from the Balkans in the 1990s or Afghanistan or Iraq and also from Libya, then it is that prevention is better than intervention to help countries to stabilise themselves, by providing training, capacity building is perhaps the best way NATO can help to stabilise our neighbourhood”.



(Official portrait of NATO Foreign Ministers, 23 March 2021 – photo credit: NATO)

Regarding Libya, the NATO Secretary General welcomed the formation of new interim government of national unity, but that any capacity building support to Libya was “for a later stage to be decided”.

Finally, the NATO Secretary General also confirmed that the alliance is in the process of enhancing its training mission in Iraq in close coordination with the Iraqi government. He emphasised that it “will be gradual and

incremental increase of the NATO presence there". In February, the Defence Ministers had agreed to scale up the NATO noncombat training and advisory mission in Iraq with thousands of new personnel. The NATO Secretary General confirmed then that the size of the mission would increase from 500 personnel to around 4,000.

The NATO 2030 initiative

According to the NATO Secretary General's [press conference](#), the ministers had "a very positive discussion on our [NATO 2030 initiative](#)", with "significant support for a bold and ambitious NATO 2030 agenda". Whether the discussions also garnered dissenting voices is not known.

The Secretary General emphasised that the discussions focused on strengthening NATO's role "as the primary transatlantic platform"; on addressing how to "boost our resilience by establishing minimum standards among allies for critical infrastructure such as telecommunications and energy supplies; on maintaining NATO's technological edge, and fostering "transatlantic cooperation on emerging and disruptive technologies"; on strengthening cooperation with like-minded partners around the world, including the EU, to protect the rules-based international order and tackle shared challenges; and on the security implications of climate change.

This process started at the NATO summit in London in December 2019) when leaders asked Stoltenberg to conduct a reflection process on how to strengthen the alliance. He appointed an expert group and their resulting report, [NATO 2030: United for a New Era](#), was published in December 2020 (see box) and discussed by the NATO foreign ministers the same month (see [NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.80](#)). During the NATO Defence Ministers meeting in February 2021, Stoltenberg further elaborated on these proposals (see [NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.81](#)). He has also consulted with national capitals, young leaders, and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, among others. Ultimately, this

process is expected to lead to the elaboration of a new [Strategic Concept](#).

While there appeared to be little that was new in the latest round of discussions with Foreign Ministers, the one exception was in relation to climate change. The Foreign Ministers agreed a report which, according to Stoltenberg, "will increase our ability to understand, adapt and mitigate the security impact of climate change". The report has not been made publicly available.

A critique of the NATO expert group report

Concerned that the approach set out in the NATO expert group report will help entrench a systemic three bloc rivalry between China, Russia and NATO-EU-US, NATO Watch asked a group of 10 peace researchers to assess it. Their analysis was published in February 2021: [Peace research perspectives on NATO 2030: A response to the official NATO Reflection Group](#). This report argues, among other things that: the NATO expert group's analysis of past events and future trends, especially in relation to Russia, arms control and violations of international law, are riddled with biases and omissions. Among the alternative proposals are strengthening dialogue and the search for common ground with China and Russia, de-collectivizing the nuclear sharing policy in NATO and withdrawing all remaining US tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.

Creating a virus-free NATO HQ

Around 20 Polish medical personnel have begun inoculating some of the estimated 4,000 people who work at NATO headquarters against COVID-19. When asked by a journalist to justify more than 3000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine being diverted from Poland for this purpose, or why these vaccines were not provided by countries that have already vaccinated larger parts of their population, like UK or the United States, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) it "demonstrates Poland's commitment to NATO. It is an expression of solidarity and resilience", but that it was ultimately a Polish decision.

The Russian threat and nuclear arms control

Together with partners Finland and Sweden, as well as the EU High Representative, the Foreign Ministers addressed NATO's relations with Russia. The NATO Secretary General gave further warnings of the dangers facing the alliance from Russia, which "undermines and destabilizes its neighbours, including Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. It supports the crackdown on Belarus and tries to interfere in the Western Balkans region. "We see that Russia continues to deploy new and destabilizing nuclear weapons".

He also stressed that the alliance remained committed to a dual-track approach to Russia: strong deterrence and defence, combined with openness to meaningful dialogue. Stoltenberg welcomed the recent decision to extend the New START Treaty, but stressed the need to further strengthen international arms control.

The relationship between NATO and Russia has been difficult for some time now—since the summer of 2019, for example, there have been no meetings of the NATO-Russia Council. Stoltenberg [stated](#) that this was because Russia "has not responded positively to our invitation" to convene the NRC. The Secretary General solely put the blame on Russian behaviour that "triggered the biggest adaptation of our alliance, since the end of the cold war".

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko responded by [saying](#) "it is very clear that NATO is following a path of confrontation with Russia. NATO is unable to get rid of the habit of using a 'threat from the East' in attempts to formulate its mission in the new

security situation" he said. He also [claimed](#) that Russia's proposals for a reciprocal moratorium on deploying intermediate-and shorter-range missiles in Europe to follow Moscow's example remain unanswered.

When the Secretary General was asked about the decision by the UK Government to increase its nuclear weapon stockpile cap by 40 per cent to 260 nuclear warheads (as set out in its [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#)), especially in light of his advocacy in support of international agreements on the limitation of nuclear warheads, he reiterated this tired refrain: "NATO's goal is a world without nuclear weapons. But as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance". He also then emphasised the challenge lay with Russia and China: "they are implementing substantial modernization of their nuclear arsenals, the nuclear weapon systems. With more and more advanced weapons with weapons with a longer range, but also for instance, in here in Europe we have seen the Russian deployment of intermediate range nuclear weapons that led to the demise of the INF Treaty".

For context, while Russian deployment of new weapons could be argued to have partly contributed to the demise of the INF Treaty, it was US withdrawal from the treaty that actually ended it. And the United States is planning to spend [up to \\$1.5 trillion](#) to overhaul its nuclear arsenal by rebuilding each leg of the [nuclear triad](#) and its accompanying infrastructure.

(NATO Secretary General's press conference after the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, 24 March 2021 – photo credit: NATO)

None of this context registers with the NATO Secretary General,



however, who accepts without question the UK narrative: “when I spoke to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday, and he briefed me on the Integrated Review. I also spoke a few days ago with Secretary Raab - the foreign minister and also with Ben Wallace - the defense minister. They had the same message that the adjustment of the UK policy on nuclear deterrence is a reflection of the increased substantial modernization of the Russian and Chinese capabilities”.

According to Stoltenberg, these are the “new realities” that have to be taken into account in arms control discussions. NATO, however, he said “has a strong and long-standing commitment to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, and we remain a unique platform for Europe and North America to consult on the future of arms control”.

Transatlantic tensions

Despite the harmonious words from the US delegation, tensions within NATO resurfaced during the ministerial meeting. In a sideline meeting with his Turkish counterpart, Blinken urged Ankara to drop its purchase of a Russian S-400 air defence system. Turkey said that the deal had already been completed.

Blinken also made clear US opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that would bring Russian gas directly to Germany and warned that companies involved in its construction could face US sanctions. "The pipeline divides Europe. It exposes Ukraine and central Europe to Russian manipulation and coercion. It goes against Europe's own stated energy security goals," Blinken [told](#) reporters.

Germany has been pushing for the pipeline's completion, despite sustained US opposition over more than a decade. Blinken also emphasized Washington's opposition to the pipeline in his meeting with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas.

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