



Foreign and Defence Ministers meet virtually ahead of NATO Summit:

Afghanistan withdrawal, military spending, Russia and China likely to top agenda

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

NATO Foreign and Defence ministers met via separate secure teleconferences on 1 June 2021. They focused on the NATO 2030 initiative, which is at the heart of the upcoming Summit of NATO leaders on 14 June in Brussels. They also discussed topical issues, including the way forward for NATO's engagement in Afghanistan, and developments in Belarus and Ukraine.

"This is a pivotal moment for our alliance, and our collective security," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said at a virtual [press conference](#) on 31 May. "In a more competitive and unpredictable world, we need transatlantic unity; Europe and North America standing strong together in NATO; so the goal of our NATO 2030 initiative is to prepare our alliance for the future. Over the past months, allies have been consulting closely and constructively; we still have some work to do, but we all agree that we must take ambitious and forward-looking decisions to show transatlantic unity not just in words, but in deeds". The June Summit is also expected to initiate work on NATO's next Strategic Concept.

Foreign Ministers discussion

The NATO Foreign Ministers meeting took place first. "Ministers addressed a range of issues including Afghanistan, Belarus, Russia and China; and overall, the need for NATO to adapt to a new era of growing global competition," [said](#) Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. In an effort to sharpen NATO's technological edge and prevent "technological gaps" within the alliance, the Secretary General said that allies are "considering to establish a defence innovation accelerator – a new centre to foster greater cooperation among allies on technology, underpinned with extra funding from nations that decide to participate". In his final [press conference](#) he provided some more detail on the rationale for such an innovation accelerator, citing in particular China's heavy investment in so-called disruptive technologies, including artificial intelligence. (On NATO and the future of AI, see NATO Watch [Observatory No.56](#)).

NATO 2030 is also being branded as a way of enhancing the alliance's role in "preserving the rules-based international order", which Stoltenberg said "is

challenged by authoritarian regimes, like Russia and China". This includes strengthening existing partnerships and building new ones, including in the Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reportedly underscored the importance of alliance partnerships and named Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea as countries which NATO should enhance ties with, [according](#) to the US State Department. The US administration of President Joe Biden has been rallying allies and like-minded countries to come together to face what it views as challenges to democracies and the international rules they have created from autocracies such as China and Russia. The [stark contradictions](#) at the root of the US-China conflict, however, make several European allies uneasy and there are fears that it could lead to a new Cold War with China.

As regards relations with Moscow, Stoltenberg said that NATO would continue to seek dialogue while also exercising troops for deterrence purposes. Echoing this view, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas [told reporters](#) before the meeting "Our message remains clear: We are prepared for dialogue, and we have made proposals, but the key to a better relationship lies clearly with Moscow". Russia has [said](#) that it would deploy around 20 new military formations and units close to NATO's borders by the end of the year, due to increased NATO military activity on its western flank. NATO claims to have stepped up its exercises in response to Russia's interference in Ukraine and an



increased Russian military presence in the Baltic Sea, Kaliningrad and the Black Sea. NATO's Russia policy follows a two-track approach of deterrence and dialogue, though the alliance suspended all practical cooperation with Moscow in April 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.

The Foreign Ministers also discussed developments in Belarus. "We have strongly condemned the serious violation of Belarus of the norms of international civil aviation, and the fundamental right of the freedom to the speech, and I welcome sanctions by NATO allies, and the European Union," Stoltenberg said. "This shows the importance of like-minded countries standing together," he added.

Defence Ministers discussion

The NATO Defence Ministers also addressed the NATO 2030 agenda, Afghanistan, and plans to reinforce allied unity, including with a strengthened commitment to collective defence. "This means rapid and full implementation of our military adaptation and continued improvements to our readiness, our capabilities and our defence investments", said NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in a post-meeting [press conference](#).

(Opening remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 1 June – photo credit: NATO)

On Afghanistan, the Secretary General stressed that NATO would continue to provide advice and capacity-building support to the Afghan security institutions and

funding for the Afghan security forces. “We are also looking at how we can provide military education and training outside Afghanistan, focused on Special Operations Forces, and we are looking at how to fund the provision of services enabling allies and the international community to stay in Kabul, including support for the airport,” he noted. However, the reality is that the Taliban’s influence and areas of control inside Afghanistan are [growing](#) as US and NATO troops withdraw.

The NATO Defence Ministers also [endorsed](#) a new policy on preventing and responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV). The new policy outlines specific actions that NATO will take to both prevent and respond to CRSV in all NATO operations, missions, and Council-mandated activities. The NATO Policy on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence is available [here](#).

The Summit agenda: a continued emphasis on increased military spending

The previous December 2019 NATO Leaders Meeting in London took place during the onset of the Covid-19 crisis which led to the worst pandemic in a hundred years. The pandemic continues to cause major humanitarian disasters in different parts of the world. There has also been a leadership change in the biggest member of NATO, with Joe Biden inaugurated as the president of the United States. This change in leadership will bring significant deviations to the table for the summit, both in substance and tone. Unlike former President Trump, who had extremely unfavourable views of NATO, Biden has made strengthening alliances, including NATO, one of his primary objectives as president. However, his withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, undertaken without much consultation with NATO allies, served as a reminder that

although the US tone may have changed, perceived US national interests will continue to drive NATO policy decisions.

The NATO summit meeting on 14 June will be short: it is likely that there will be just one 2.5-hour session of the North Atlantic Council after an opening ceremony, which would leave about five minutes for each leader to speak. The leaders will agree on a communiqué now being negotiated, discuss the Afghanistan withdrawal and the NATO 2030 initiative on how to remodel NATO’s 2010 [strategic concept](#) to meet new challenges in cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, disinformation, “emerging disruptive technologies” and numerous other issues. In 2010, when the strategic concept was last revised, NATO anticipated that Russia could be a partner and China was hardly cited. Today, Russia is regarded as the main strategic threat and China a growing strategic rival.

On the 4 June, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg previewed the forthcoming Summit in an online [keynote address](#). He reiterated a number of key decision areas for the Summit, including strengthening NATO as a forum for political consultations; reinforcing collective defence through increased readiness, modernized capabilities, and more investment; and developing alliance-wide resilience objectives to make societies less vulnerable to attack and coercion. “To do all of this we need to invest more,” said Mr Stoltenberg, welcoming seven years of consecutive defence spending increases by European allies and Canada. He added: “we should not only invest more, we should also invest better. That is why we should increase NATO’s common-funded budget”. He explained that this would “help fund more joint training and exercises, stronger cyber defences, cutting-edge capabilities, and more capacity-building for our partners,” calling joint investment a “force multiplier”

and a “strong message of unity and resolve”.

The call for increased common funding is not supported by all member states. France, for example, while advocating increased defence spending, has expressed doubts about the NATO Secretary General’s [proposal](#) to increase NATO’s common funding. “All this money is money that won’t go toward increasing national budgets and a European defence effort that benefits NATO,” French Defence Minister Florence Parly [said](#) in a recent interview “And to do what? No one is able to tell you. We have to double the budget and then we’ll think about what to do with the money?” France has been pushing for ‘European strategic autonomy’ to boost NATO’s European pillar, but some [allies fear](#) it risks fragmenting finite European defence resources and drawing political energy from NATO.

Moreover, the elephant in the NATO Summit room will be the efficacy of continuing to increase military spending while more pressing global threats (the current and future pandemics and climate change) require very different spending priorities and cooperation with major powers, such as Russia and China.

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