



## **Summit sets NATO on collision course with China; continues to press for high levels of military spending despite pandemic; and resumes hostility to nuclear ban treaty**

**An analysis of the NATO Summit  
Communiqué, Brussels, 14 June 2021**

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### **Key features of the NATO Summit and Communiqué:**

- Biden called US support for NATO a “sacred obligation”.
- The summit adopted three official texts: a [Brussels Summit Communiqué](#) (79 paragraphs), a [Strengthened Resilience Commitment](#) (11 paras) and a [NATO Climate Change and Action Plan](#) (10 paras).
- The NATO leaders affirmed an extraordinarily extensive global mission for NATO, as developed within the ‘NATO 2030 agenda’.
- Russia is perceived to be the key “threat”, while China presents growing “systemic challenges”.
- Further increases in military spending are being promoted to contain both China and Russia, and to meet other security challenges, despite economic shocks caused by the worst health pandemic in a century.
- NATO bid a symbolic farewell to Afghanistan after nearly 20 years inside the country, although funding and remote training of Afghan forces will continue.
- While committing not to deploy land-based nuclear missiles in Europe, NATO also continued to voice its opposition to the nuclear ban treaty.
- The mutual defence clause (Article 5) was expanded to include a collective response to attacks on space assets (in addition to traditional military and cyber attacks).
- The NATO leaders agreed to undertake an annual Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment, as well as climate adaptation, mitigation and outreach strategies. NATO’s first Climate Change and Security Progress Report will be delivered at the 2022 NATO Summit.
- To foster increased technological cooperation within NATO, a civil-military Defence Innovation Accelerator was launched, alongside a NATO Innovation Fund to support start-ups working on dual-use emerging and disruptive technologies.
- Work will now begin on a new Strategic Concept to replace the 2010 version.
- NATO’s next summit will be held in 2022 in Spain; and thereafter in Lithuania (date yet to be decided).

## INTRODUCTION

The NATO Brussels Summit took place on the 14 June 2021 at the NATO HQ. In an opening [press conference](#) on the 11 June, the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called the summit a “pivotal moment for our Alliance and for our collective security”. Only one session of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State took place, since most of the agenda and final [communiqué](#) were agreed in advance. (i.e. see the key summit outcomes listed in a [White House Fact Sheet](#) published on 13 June 2021, the day before the summit). According to a Summit [agenda](#) document published by NATO the key challenges that the summit sought to address included “Russia's pattern of aggressive behaviour; terrorism; cyberattacks and disruptive technologies; the rise of China; and the security implications of climate change”. The agenda document then set out nine areas for further policy development under the [NATO 2030 initiative](#) (a reflection process on the future of NATO that the NATO Secretary General has been leading since the NATO Leaders Meeting in London in December 2019):

- I. Deepen Political Consultation
- II. Strengthen Deterrence and Defence
- III. Enhance Resilience
- IV. Sharpen Technological Edge
- V. Support Rules-Based International Order
- VI. Boost Partner Training
- VII. Combat Climate Change
- VIII. The Next Strategic Concept
- IX. Invest in the Alliance

(The [White House Fact Sheet](#) lists 10 areas, but these mostly mirror the NATO agenda document). NATO’s much heralded return to post-Trump ‘unity’ was reflected in agreement being reached on a [detailed 79 paragraph summit communiqué](#). This briefing analyses the main elements of the communiqué under the above nine headings.

Overall, the mood music around the summit was very different from the 2017 NATO summit when President Trump [refused to announce support for NATO’s Article 5](#), a central tenet of collective defence. In contrast, at this summit President Biden [declared](#) that the alliance is “critically important for US interests” and called Article 5 a “sacred obligation”, adding, “I just want all of Europe to know that the United States is there”.

## I. DEEPENING POLITICAL CONSULTATION

### **Backstory:**

In the wake of the diplomatic pandemonium of the Trump years and other intra-alliance divisions (from Macron’s allegations that NATO was ‘[brain dead](#)’ to the need to establish a [de-confliction mechanism](#) to keep Greece and Turkey apart), a renewed political commitment to consulting more within the alliance to reinforce unity was seen as a crucial component of the NATO 2030 process. The NATO 2030 Expert Group, for example, [called](#) for transatlantic consultation “to be strengthened in a systematic, credible, and powerful manner”.

### **Analysis:**

The communiqué pledges to “strengthen and broaden our consultations” and reaffirms “the Alliance’s shared democratic principles as well as our commitment to the spirit and the letter of the North Atlantic Treaty. We commit to reinforcing consultations when the security or stability of an Ally is threatened or when our fundamental values and principles are at risk” (para 6a).

However, the communiqué is extremely thin on specifics for achieving this pledge. All NATO decisions are made by consensus, after discussion and consultation among member countries. There has certainly been increased political consultations within the alliance in recent years, partly as a result of the broadening of NATO’s remit and agenda. However, the communiqué gives no indication as to how the pledges of strengthened and broadened consultations will be met. It is unclear, for example, whether any new mechanisms of consultation, processes of decision-making and political tools for responding to current and emerging threats are under consideration. Moreover, there is no indication that NATO is prepared to address the long-standing [democratic deficit](#) within the alliance, as well as the [democratic backsliding](#) among several member states. NATO should be adopting an information openness policy consistent with the access to information laws already in place in the alliance’s 30 member states, including guidelines for proactive publication of core information, a mechanism by which the public can file requests for information, and an independent review body for hearing appeals

against refusals or failures to make information public within a short timeframe.

## II. STRENGTHENING DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE

### **Backstory:**

To fulfil NATO's three core tasks of collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security, the alliance employs a mix of conventional military capabilities, cyber defences, missile defences and a nuclear dimension. At successive summits since 2014, NATO leaders have agreed a range of measures to enhance their deterrence and defence posture, including the establishment of an enhanced Forward Presence in Poland and the three Baltic states. They have further recognised that credible deterrence requires these relatively small multinational forces to be underpinned by a robust reinforcement strategy. The summit was expected to agree further enhancements to NATO's ability to "deter and defend against any potential adversary".

### **Analysis:**

How the alliance is adapting to the changing security environment is a traditional discussion point on summit agendas, and this one was no different. The communiqué states: "We commit to the full and speedy implementation of ongoing work to further strengthen our deterrence and defence posture, and we pledge to continue to improve the readiness of our forces and to strengthen and modernise the NATO Force Structure to meet current and future defence needs" (para.6b). Of course, a key question is deterrence and defence against whom or what? The communiqué sets out arguments that NATO faces threats and/or challenges from both states—Russia (paras 3, 9-15, 26, 44, 46 and 50), China (paras 3 and 55-56), Syria (paras 49 and 52-53), North Korea (para 51), Iran (para 52), Belarus (para 54)—and non-state actors, the latter (sometimes in collaboration with one or more of the aforementioned states) manifesting themselves through international terrorism (paras 17-18), hybrid threats (para 31) and cyber threats (para 32).

### *The Russian threat*

The communiqué, mirroring language from earlier summit declarations, describes Russia's "aggressive actions" as constituting a threat to Euroatlantic security (para. 3). It then goes on to criticize in some detail (over seven consecutive paragraphs) the build-up in Russian weaponry, its "widespread disinformation campaigns", "malicious cyber activities", the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, and other aggressive acts, before concluding that Moscow has "intensified its hybrid actions against NATO Allies and partners, including through proxies" (para. 12). In his [press conference](#) on 14 June, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the NATO-Russia relationship, "is at its lowest point since the Cold War, and Moscow's aggressive actions are a threat to our security".

The NATO Secretary General also confirmed that the alliance remains committed to the so-called dual-track approach of defence and dialogue; while Stoltenberg reiterated that NATO remains "ready to talk" the summit communiqué adds the rider that this will only happen when Russia's "actions make that possible" (para 15). Since the illegal annexation of Crimea, NATO has suspended all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia, while leaving some channels open for dialogue on the situation in Ukraine and other matters.

Threat- perceptions of Russia are not held equally by all 30 member states. Former Soviet countries in the Baltics and Poland, Romania and Bulgaria are most concerned by Russia. But others, such as the Netherlands, the UK and Germany, have also sharpened their views in recent years, partly over the near-fatal poisoning of Alexey Navalny last August, among other issues. Prior to the summit there was speculation that the United States might commit more troops and equipment to Europe, but the communiqué does not specify any new arrangements. It does state, however, that "Until Russia demonstrates compliance with international law and its international obligations and responsibilities, there can be no return to 'business as usual'. We will continue to respond to the deteriorating security environment by enhancing our deterrence and defence posture" (para. 9).

In the bilateral meeting between the US and Russian presidents in Geneva on 16 June, two days after the NATO summit, it was [agreed](#) that US and Russian ambassadors would return to each other's capitals, and officials from both countries would begin renewed dialogue in the coming months. It was also significant that a [joint statement](#) by Biden and Putin after the meeting reaffirmed the historic declaration by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought". (For transcripts of the two leaders' press conferences after the summit, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

### *The rise of China*

The first minor reference to China in a NATO [statement](#) was at the London summit in 2019, but transatlantic concerns have accelerated since then, driven largely by current US administration perceptions that democracies are in an existential confrontation with autocracies (see section V. below). While the summit communiqué stopped short of labeling China a threat, it did state that Beijing presents "systemic challenges" (para. 55), citing China's increasingly assertive actions in building a nuclear arsenal, space and cyber warfare capabilities, as well as joining Russia in military training exercises. In a gesture toward diplomacy and engagement, the communiqué also states that the alliance will maintain "a constructive dialogue with China where possible", including on the issue of climate change, and calls for China to become more transparent about its military and especially its "nuclear capabilities and doctrine" (para 56).

Details on a specific NATO policy towards China in the communiqué were sparse (China is mentioned in only three paragraphs), but will likely be more prominent in the new Strategic Concept to be approved in 2022. The increased emphasis on the rise of China (also to be found in the [Group of 7 Summit declaration](#) a day earlier) is in part the realization of President Biden's [strategy](#) to build a coalition of like-minded nations to confront China over its activities. The Pentagon has been publishing [annual reports](#) on China's growing military capabilities since 2000 and the latest version asserts that in some areas, China has already surpassed the US military. For the United States, China in the longer term poses a greater

strategic threat than Russia. Much of Europe, however, seems to be seeking an alternative approach and many European NATO allies already have strong economic ties with Beijing that influence their foreign policy. The leaders of France, Germany and the UK all struck a note of caution in their post-summit comments about China. "NATO is an organization that concerns the North Atlantic", President Emmanuel Macron was [reported](#) as saying, and "China has little to do with the North Atlantic". Prime Minister Johnson [said](#), "I don't think anybody around the table wants to descend into a new Cold War with China", while Chancellor Angela Merkel [said](#): "If you look at the cyberthreats and the hybrid threats, if you look at the cooperation between Russia and China, you cannot simply ignore China." But she also said: "One must not overrate it, either — we need to find the right balance".

However, there is clearly a growing transatlantic convergence in attitudes towards China. France and Germany, for example, concerned by the economic threat from China, pushed the European Commission to describe China as a ["systemic rival"](#) in an April 2019 strategy paper.

Chinese officials argue that their country remains committed to peaceful development and international cooperation through the United Nations and blame the United States and others for trying to thwart its inevitable rise as a global power. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, Zhao Lijian, [accused](#) NATO of hypocrisy, noting that the alliance's collective military spending far outpaced China's. (China's military budget—the second largest in the world after the United States, although still less than a third of Washington's—is [set to increase by 6.8 percent in 2021](#)). He also criticized NATO members' role in wars from Iraq to Syria. "NATO's history is full of notorious misdeeds," he said. In a [separate statement](#), the Chinese Mission to the European Union called for NATO to "view China's development rationally, stop exaggerating various forms of 'China threat theory' and not to use China's legitimate interests and legal rights as excuses for manipulating group politics [while] artificially creating confrontations". The statement added "We will not pose a 'systemic challenge' to anyone, but if anyone wants to pose a 'systemic challenge' to us, we will not remain indifferent".

The main immediate policy implications of NATO's tilt towards China are likely to be: a strengthening of alliance partnerships in the region, namely with Japan, South Korea and Australia (with increased exchanges of information and more interoperability of the armed forces); and greater intelligence sharing within NATO about Chinese capabilities and to detect and defend against cyber intrusions.

While China poses virtually no direct military threat to Europe, US forces have a global reach and since 2015 so-called 'Freedom of Navigation Operations' by the US Navy in the South China Sea have been particularly contentious. Even as NATO leaders were meeting in Brussels, the US aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan and several other warships moved into the South China Sea, with the group's commander, Rear Adm. Will Pennington, [vowing](#) to protect "international law and rules-based order", wording that echoed NATO's communiqué. Meanwhile, China was conducting its own [show of force](#) close to Taiwan. France, Germany and the UK have also recently sent warships to the Indo-Pacific region.

**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 summit, recent ministerial meetings, 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 NATO reports on China 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.

### *Operations and missions: Farewell to Afghanistan*

The communiqué states that "NATO remains a leading and active contributor to international security through operations, missions, and activities" (para 20). Its three current active operations are in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo. The summit was the first following the decision to end the NATO mission in Afghanistan. After almost two decades of conflict in Afghanistan, US and NATO troops are set to withdraw their 9,600-strong mission by Biden's 11 September deadline (the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks). The communiqué, which devotes just two paragraphs (18-19) to its symbolic adieu to Afghanistan, attempts to spin a positive outcome: "We have denied terrorists a safe haven from which to plot attacks against us, helped Afghanistan to build its security institutions, and trained, advised, and assisted the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces; they are now taking on full responsibility for security in their country".

However, with instability on the rise, little meaningful democracy or security within Afghanistan, the costs of this 'forever war' have been staggering. The United States alone has [spent \\$2.26 trillion](#) on the war, US and coalition troop fatalities number almost 3600, while Afghan losses include more than 47,000 civilians, up to 69,000 members of the national armed forces and police, and over 51,000 opposition fighters. There has been no commitment by NATO to provide sanctuary for Afghans who worked alongside its forces, although a few individual member states (including [Germany](#) and the [UK](#)) have indicated that they are willing to do so.

The communiqué also refers to a "new chapter" as NATO seeks to ensure the stability of Afghanistan post-withdrawal. With a growing risk of the Taliban retaking control, NATO recommits to "continue to provide training and financial support to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces". NATO is weighing up whether to train Afghan special forces outside the country (possibly in [Qatar](#)), and US military officials have also discussed setting up bases in neighbouring countries so they can carry out '[over-the-horizon](#)' airstrikes if threats arise from al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

### *The new military strategy and military concepts*

Most of the communiqué language on strengthening deterrence and defence refers to progress on implementing previous decisions, including “taking forward a new military strategy through the implementation of two significant military concepts that will further strengthen our ability to deter and defend against any potential adversary and to maintain and develop our military advantage now and in the future. The deterrence and defence concept provides a single, coherent framework to contest and deter and defend against the Alliance’s main threats in a multi-domain environment, and will strengthen our preparedness to address challenges, particularly pervasive instability and strategic shocks. The [warfighting concept](#) provides a long-term vision for maintaining and developing NATO’s decisive military edge” (para 22).

There is also a commitment to “further strengthening and modernising the NATO Force Structure”, including organising and training the combat forces of the NATO Readiness Initiative (30 major naval combatants, 30 heavy or medium manoeuvre battalions, and 30 kinetic air squadrons) “as larger combat formations for reinforcement and high-intensity warfighting, or for rapid military crisis intervention” (para 23).

NATO’s new military strategy and the two military concepts ought to be subjected to close, independent scrutiny. Parliaments in member states should have a role in examining these documents; this should not be the exclusive reserve of defence ministries and their ministers. Without such certainty of process, NATO policy development lacks authority and credibility. At a minimum, a parliamentary mechanism or committee should exist in each member state to consider alliance policy and strategy documents.

### *Arms control and nuclear weapons*

The [communiqué](#) states that NATO remains “collectively determined to uphold and support existing disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation agreements and commitments” (para 45). But despite “a long track record of doing its part on disarmament and non-proliferation”, [according](#) to Adam Thomson, a former UK NATO ambassador and head of the

European Leadership Network, in recent years NATO has been “missing in action on arms control” treating the issue as an afterthought rather than a guiding principle. In addition, several NATO member states are clearly part of the proliferation problem (US [spending on nuclear weapons](#) is expected to climb by \$140 billion over the next ten years, while the UK has just [lifted the ceiling](#) on its nuclear weapons arsenal) and the communiqué is short on ideas for strengthening arms control—apart from looking to include China in future arms control arrangements, and the very welcome statement that “We have no intention to deploy land-based nuclear missiles in Europe” (para 26).

However, the communiqué rejects out of hand Russia’s proposal for a moratorium on the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe as being “inconsistent with Russia’s unilateral and ongoing deployment of such systems on the continent” (para 46), but makes no alternative arms-control overtures of its own. Indeed, some of the myopia on arms control in the communiqué is breathtaking, asserting for example, that “We continue actively to address the collapse of the INF Treaty due to Russian actions” (para 48), while ignoring that it was the United States that withdrew from the treaty in August 2019 after accusing Russia of violating it, a claim Moscow denied. Similarly, it charges Moscow with refusing “to fully comply with its obligations under the Treaty on Open Skies” (para 50), while again ignoring that it was US withdrawal from that treaty that may lead to its collapse. In a [statement](#) on 18 June (four days after the NATO summit) Russia also announced its withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty, a decision that will take effect on 18 December 2021; in a [statement](#) the same day, NATO called on Russia to “reconsider its decision”.

The communiqué also reiterates a longstanding commitment “to the full implementation of the NPT [1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons] in all its aspects” and support for “the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons” (para 47), while reasserting that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance” (para 40). If the “strongest and most successful alliance in history” (para 2) is unable to break this nuclear Catch 22 then the long-term prospects for the NPT are not promising. Moreover, while continuing to argue

that its nuclear arrangements are “fully consistent with the NPT” ([they are not](#)), the communiqué “reiterates our opposition” to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as being “inconsistent with the alliance’s nuclear deterrence policy, is at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture, risks undermining the NPT, and does not take into account the current security environment”. Apart from the fact that the TPNW is clearly inconsistent with NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture, the rest of the arguments are very [questionable](#).

Despite attempting to present a united front about its status as a “nuclear alliance” cracks are becoming visible, with growing support for the TPNW by constituencies [within the alliance](#) and growing pressure from former world leaders. In September 2020, for example, fifty-six former presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and defence ministers from 20 NATO member states, as well as Japan and South Korea, issued an [open letter](#) calling on current leaders to join the TPNW. The former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and two former NATO Secretaries General, Javier Solana and Willy Claes, were among the co-signers.

### *Cyber threats*

While NATO does not have its own cyber weapons, the alliance established an operations centre in August 2018 at Mons, Belgium. Several member states have since offered their cyber capabilities. The new NATO cyber operations centre (CYOC) is expected to be fully staffed by 2023 and able to mount its own cyberattacks. The communiqué describes cyber threats to the security of the alliance as “complex, destructive, coercive, and becoming ever more frequent” (para 32). In response, the leaders endorsed a new “Comprehensive Cyber Defence Policy”. The policy document remains classified, but the communiqué reaffirms “NATO’s defensive mandate” and “that a decision as to when a cyber attack would lead to the invocation of Article 5 would be taken by the North Atlantic Council on a case-by-case basis”. The possibility of military action against hackers is set out further in the paragraph: “Allies recognise that the impact of significant malicious cumulative cyber activities might, in certain circumstances, be considered as amounting to an armed attack”. And “If necessary, we will impose costs

on those who harm us. Our response need not be restricted to the cyber domain”.

Russia is again identified as the main source of cyber threats, because of the country’s “attempted interference in Allied elections and democratic processes; political and economic pressure and intimidation; widespread disinformation campaigns; malicious cyber activities; and turning a blind eye to cyber criminals operating from its territory, including those who target and disrupt critical infrastructure in NATO countries” (para 12). However, at least 12 NATO member states were recently identified in an [independent report](#) as using social media to spread computational propaganda and disinformation, while two (the UK and United States) were shown to have high ‘cyber troop’ (government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online) capacity.

### *Expansion of mutual defence to include attacks in space*

While NATO owns ground-based infrastructure, it does not have its own space-based assets. Instead, it requires permission to access member states’ satellites (which make up about 65 per cent of the global total of around 2,000 satellites) before they can be used. In December 2019, NATO leaders declared space to be the alliance’s “fifth domain” of operations, after land, sea, air and cyberspace. The communiqué expands the use of the mutual defence clause to include a collective response to attacks in space: “...attacks to, from, or within space” could be a challenge to NATO that threatens “national and Euro-Atlantic prosperity, security, and stability, and could be as harmful to modern societies as a conventional attack. Such attacks could lead to the invocation of Article 5. A decision as to when such attacks would lead to the invocation of Article 5 would be taken by the North Atlantic Council on a case-by-case basis,” (para 33).

Previously, Article 5 was only applied to more traditional military attacks on land, sea or in the air, and more recently in cyberspace. The extent to which NATO becomes an independent actor in space and the policy framework for addressing space challenges (and cyber warfare) are issues that should be more widely debated within member states’ parliaments and by independent experts in the public domain. To

this end, NATO should publish its space policy documents. It may only be a matter of time before weaponized systems are deployed in orbit, so to prevent this NATO should see space as an arms control opportunity. Again, greater transparency in NATO's policy-making process in the space domain is essential.

### III. ENHANCING RESILIENCE

#### **Backstory:**

NATO's broadened approach to security has included a stronger focus on resilience, including infrastructure, supply chains and communications. 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. None of the assessments or reports were made public. In April and June 2020 NATO Defence Ministers agreed to update the existing baseline requirements for civil preparedness, based on the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis, and 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, since few details were provided as to what this might involve.

Looking to the future, NATO has been seeking to adopt an even broader and more coordinated approach to resilience, with clearer and measurable objectives, allowing it to tailor resilience goals to national circumstances. This appears to [mirror work](#) being done at the Pentagon and US State Department over recent years to protect critical industries from Chinese investment.

#### **Analysis:**

The communiqué, while noting that resilience "remains a national responsibility", affirmed the adoption of "a more integrated and better coordinated approach" (para 6c and 30). The objective apparently involves alliance-wide procedures to guide nationally developed resilience plans, and to this end the summit also agreed on a separate '[Strengthened Resilience Commitment](#)' setting out further steps to be taken in the coming years. It is acknowledged that this will require "a broad approach" and "work across the whole of government, with the private and non-governmental sectors, with programmes and centres of expertise on resilience established by allies, and with our societies and populations, to strengthen the resilience of our nations and societies". There is also a commitment to "strengthen public communication as part of our overall approach", but with no mention of improving transparency or of making the process more inclusive, except for a pledge to integrate gender perspectives.

### IV. SHARPENING NATO'S TECHNOLOGICAL EDGE

#### **Backstory:**

Technological innovations constantly change the nature of peace, crisis and conflict. The United States and several key European NATO member states have traditionally placed great emphasis on retaining their technological edge (and often articulate this aim almost as an entitlement), but as this has become increasingly challenged by China and others, the debate around how NATO can stay ahead of the curve has sharpened. In recent years, NATO has identified seven key emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs): artificial intelligence, data and computing, autonomy, quantum-enabled technologies, biotechnology, hypersonic technology and space. These areas were further elaborated in a March 2020 [report](#) by the NATO Science and Technology Organization ([STO](#), a NATO subsidiary body and "the world's largest collaborative research forum in the field of defence and security"), which provided an assessment of the impact of EDT advances over the next 20 years. Among the report's conclusions was that disruptive effects would most likely occur through combinations of EDTs and the complex interactions between them.



NATO is working towards a strategy for both fostering these technologies—through stronger relationships with innovation hubs and specific funding mechanisms—and protecting EDT investments from outside influence. NATO is expected to eventually develop individual strategies for each of the seven science and technology areas, but in the short to medium term the priority is AI and data. As part of the NATO 2030 process, the Secretary General proposed a new transatlantic defence innovation accelerator to foster more transatlantic cooperation on critical technologies.

### **Analysis:**

The communiqué states that NATO is being “increasingly confronted “by the malicious use of ever-more sophisticated emerging and disruptive technologies” (para 3). To foster greater technological cooperation among NATO, it was agreed to “launch a civil-military Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic” (as previously proposed by the NATO Secretary General) and “to establish a NATO Innovation Fund” to support start-ups working on dual-use emerging and disruptive technologies (para 6d.). The communiqué also asserts that NATO is “determined to preserve our technological edge” and sets out some of the thinking for doing so (para 37 and 38). However, the communiqué only makes one specific reference to autonomous weapons technologies, stating that “through NATO-supported multinational cooperation projects, allies are committed to working together to develop or acquire”, among other capabilities, “autonomous systems” (para 36). These systems rely on artificial intelligence and are advancing rapidly; there is insufficient public debate or accountability. Oversight of increased autonomy in warfare is critically important because this deadly technology is likely to proliferate rapidly. Leading this arms race are the United States, China, Russia, South Korea, Israel and a few EU/NATO member states. NATO policy in this area is beginning to emerge, largely driven by the United States (which announced [two key AI strategy documents](#) in 2019). In January 2021, the US Congress [backed](#) the creation of a national AI strategy as part of the country’s annual defence authorization bill.

For nearly a decade, a coalition of non-governmental organisations has pushed for a treaty banning lethal autonomous weapons systems, or ‘killer robots’, saying human control is necessary to judge the proportionality of attacks and to assign blame for war crimes. At least 30 countries including Brazil and Pakistan (but no NATO member states) want a ban, according to the [coalition’s website](#), and a UN body has held meetings on the systems since at least 2014. Exactly where the alliance falls on the spectrum between permitting AI-powered military technology in some applications and regulating or banning it in others is expected to be part of the Strategic Concept debate. It is imperative that this debate is open and transparent. The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has called on states to prohibit weapons systems that could, by themselves, target and attack human beings, [calling them](#) “morally repugnant and politically unacceptable”. With NATO leadership such weapons could be banned by a treaty similar to the initiatives that successfully prohibited antipersonnel landmines in 1997 and cluster munitions in 2008. Preserving meaningful human control over the use of force is an ethical imperative and a legal necessity.

## **V. SUPPORTING THE RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

### **Backstory:**

Upholding the ‘rules-based international order’ has become the new in-vogue term, especially following the election of President Biden. NATO has also been quick to point out on numerous occasions that countries like Russia and China do not share the alliance’s values and are at the forefront of a pushback against that order.

### **Analysis:**

The communiqué reaffirms that NATO is “committed to the rules-based international order” (para 2) and it was agreed that NATO should play a greater role in preserving and shaping it (para 6e). This includes as part of NATO 2030, taking decisions to deepen NATO’s relationships with like-minded countries and international organisations near and far, including in the Asia-Pacific. However, the United States and several other NATO member states remain vulnerable to accusations of the selective application of international norms and

rules that they expect others to follow. For example, the US-UK decision to invade Iraq in 2003 under a contested UN authorization; the failure to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the use of torture under previous US administrations, the continued use of presidential authority under ‘war on terrorism’ directives to carry out lethal drone strikes in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, and the exposure by Edward Snowden of the way US intelligence services used the dominance of US technology companies over the internet to carry out espionage—all continue to cast a long shadow over NATO claims to be the principal defender of a rules-based international system. Of course, this does not mean that such a system is not worth defending – it is. But it also suggests that the rules need to be applied consistently and extensively across the alliance, and where appropriate, revised in cooperation with other like-minded states to ensure that they remain relevant.

#### *No Open Door for Georgia and Ukraine*

NATO summits routinely reaffirm the alliance’s Open Door Policy and this communiqué did so again, emphasising the right of all states to seek their own security arrangements, and only NATO (and no third party) having a say in the membership process (para. 66). With regard to possible membership for Ukraine and Georgia, however, a group of mainly West European NATO countries have, since 2008, blocked even the path towards a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Aspirant countries are required to go through the MAP process, but the MAP process for both Georgia and Ukraine continues to be blocked for lack of consensus.

Usually there are sessions of the NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia commissions on the sidelines of summits, but none took place this year—probably because these would have created complications for the separate Biden-Putin Summit. The United States had clearly [signalled](#) in advance of the NATO summit that this time it would not support a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia. The communiqué used identical language for both countries (carried forward from earlier summits): “We reiterate the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that [Georgia/Ukraine] will become a member of the Alliance with the MAP as an integral part of the process; we reaffirm all elements of that

decision... We stand firm in our support for [Georgia’s/Ukraine’s] right to decide its own future and foreign policy course free from outside interference”. Furthermore, the two countries “should make full use” of the Georgia-NATO Commission/Ukraine-NATO Commission, and their respective Annual National Plans, which contain all the tools (instruments) to advance their membership aspirations (paras. 68 and 69).

## **VI. BOOSTING PARTNER TRAINING**

### ***Backstory:***

NATO has increasingly recognised (mainly from the lessons of interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq) that strengthening partners and training local forces is a more sustainable and cost-effective way to address insecurity, build stability and fight terrorism.

### ***Analysis:***

The summit agreed to “substantially strengthen NATO’s ability to provide training and capacity building support to partners, recognising that conflict, other security developments and pervasive instability in NATO’s neighbourhood directly impact Allied security” (para 6f). This included providing training and financial support to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (para.19); and training support in Iraq (para. 20); Georgia (para. 68); Ukraine (para. 69); Colombia (para. 73); Jordan and Kuwait (para. 74) and Mauritania (para. 75). NATO is looking to strengthen security and defence assistance and build partner capacity in areas like counterterrorism, stabilisation, counter-hybrid activities, crisis management, peacekeeping and defence reform.

## **VII COMBATting CLIMATE CHANGE**

### ***Backstory:***

NATO has recognized the adverse effects of climate change on international security. NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept, for example, said that environmental and climate change will shape the future security environment and have significant implications for the alliance’s planning and operations. Similarly, the Wales Summit Declaration in 2014 identified [climate change, water scarcity and increasing energy needs](#) as future disruptors of security. There is a growing willingness in NATO to discuss and

explore responses to climate-related dangers, and in March, the alliance agreed a new Climate Change and Security Agenda.

**Analysis:**

According to the summit communiqué, NATO aims to “become the leading international organisation when it comes to understanding and adapting to the impact of climate change on security” and pledges to “significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from military activities” (paragraph 6g). The NATO Secretary General is tasked with formulating “a realistic, ambitious and concrete target for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by the NATO political and military structures and facilities and assess the feasibility of reaching net zero emissions by 2050”. (The NATO Secretary General previewed this target in a speech in [September 2020](#)).

The NATO leaders also endorsed a separate [Action Plan](#) to implement the NATO Agenda on Climate Change and Security, which includes four key commitments: an annual Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment; an adaptation strategy; a mitigation strategy; and an outreach strategy. To track the progress made, re-assess the level of ambition, and inform the way ahead, the first Climate Change and Security Progress Report will be delivered at the 2022 NATO Summit.

While all these are worthy aims, they are likely to be undermined by the twin pressures of raising military spending (see section IX. below) to hit NATO targets and the increases in military exercises as part of efforts to contain China and Russia. Moreover, the [poor quality of emissions reporting](#) in this sector means that no one actually knows whether military carbon emissions are falling or not. A key step is thus for member states to calculate the specific carbon footprints of their militaries and then report these figures. More difficult will be persuading all member states to carry out similar climate and carbon reduction actions when climate policies are not equally prioritised across the alliance.

While the NATO Action Plan does encourage cooperation on climate change mitigation and adaptation, the focus up until now has primarily been on the resulting security risks and the promotion of energy saving in member states’

armed forces. This ‘greening of the military’ agenda not only results in such absurdities as adding [solar panels to battle tanks](#), it shifts responsibility away from NATO member states to do more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for which they are collectively responsible.

## VIII. THE NEXT STRATEGIC CONCEPT

**Backstory:**

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. At the summit, NATO leaders were expected to formally ask the Secretary General to steer the process for NATO's next Strategic Concept.

**Analysis:**

The summit duly tasked the Secretary General “to lead the process to develop the next Strategic Concept”, which will “be negotiated and agreed by the Council in Permanent Session and endorsed by NATO Leaders at the next Summit” (para 6h). The new draft will undoubtedly build on (or even mirror) many of the ideas, policies and language within this summit communiqué, and in particular, will address China in a significant way for the first time (the current strategic concept does not mention China at all).

## IX. INVESTING IN THE ALLIANCE

**Backstory:**

The burden-sharing debate has dominated successive NATO summits (see, for, example the discussion in NATO Watch Observatory No. [48](#)). The reluctance of many European member states to spend more on defence has been a major grievance of most US presidents, but especially former President Donald Trump.

The NATO Defence Ministers meeting in February reviewed progress and it was revealed that 2021 will be the seventh consecutive year of increased military spending, and that since 2014, European allies and Canada have contributed a cumulative extra \$190 billion. Nine NATO member states (out of 30) are expected to spend 2% of GDP on defence (the NATO target), while 24 are expected to spend at least 20% of investment in military equipment.

The NATO Secretary General has been promoting continued investment in collective defence (not least to pay for the ambitious NATO 2030 agenda), while also seeking to change who pays for key missions. One way to achieve the latter would be to increase NATO's relatively small [common budget](#)—roughly \$2.5 billion a year or 0.3% of total allied military spending; with much of it currently taken up in administrative and infrastructure costs, like running the Brussels headquarters—and use those funds to support missions, such as air policing in the Baltics or multinational battle group deployments along NATO's eastern flank. Currently, the nation that deploys troops on such missions pays the bill. Countries like Canada, that do not meet the 2% spending commitment but participate in several NATO missions, would likely [benefit](#) from such a change in the funding arrangements.

#### **Analysis:**

The communiqué reiterated NATO's commitment to the 2014 Defence Investment Pledge, "in its entirety" (para 6b and 35), but "specific requirements for additional funding up to 2030 and the resource implications across the NATO Military Budget, the NATO Security Investment Programme and the Civil Budget", as well as identifying "potential efficiency measures" were pushed down the road to be agreed at the 2022 NATO summit (para 7).

The kicking of the common funding reforms can down the road will allow more time to create consensus for the Secretary General's (or other) proposals. France, for example, was reportedly unhappy about the proposal to increase common funding.

This latest iteration of the burden-sharing debate is designed to appease Washington. President Biden is expected to be just as demanding about military spending as his predecessor. However, there are two fundamental flaws in this 'fairer-burden' sharing discussion. First, justifying greater military spending when government budgets have already been ravaged by restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic is going to be a hard sell, especially as the burden may well fall on those least able to carry it (i.e., the evidence [suggests](#) that high military spending exacerbates existing inequalities within societies). Second, and the ongoing elephant in

the room, while most European member states probably do not need to spend more, the United States certainly needs to spend less on the military. A cut of 10% in the [pandemic of Pentagon spending](#), for example, would release more than \$70 billion for other more pressing needs.

## **X. CONCLUSIONS**

In the past 18 months the world has changed in a way that nobody anticipated, and we remain constrained by an unprecedented and ongoing global public health emergency on a scale not seen for a century. There were ample prior warnings of the risks of a new global pandemic: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-Cov-1) during 2002-04, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-Cov) since 2012 and ongoing, and the World Health Organization has been listing coronaviruses among the leading viral threats for many years. However, the level of preparedness as well as the actual public health strategies adopted in many countries appear to have been inadequate or deeply flawed.

More broadly, the virus has revealed fundamental flaws in the strategies many states employ to provide security for their people. In the 'new normal' it might have been expected that the NATO Summit would have looked beyond old security concepts in favour of human-centric and cooperative approaches to address public health threats. However, the summit communiqué indicates that there has been no attempt to address the imbalances in strategic thinking and allocation of resources—the annual budget for the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention is less than \$7 billion, while the US defence budget is over \$700 billion. To the contrary, the NATO summit largely called for a continuation of more of the same. Arguably, above all else, new efforts are needed to reduce the chances of nuclear war and achieve nuclear disarmament, address climate change and strengthen defences against future pandemics. Based on the summit communiqué, NATO is not up to these tasks, and is instead doubling down on the militarist approaches to security and conflict that have not worked.