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Contact: Dr. Ian Davis
Email: idavis@natowatch.org
www.natowatch.org

NATO foreign ministers speak tough on Ukraine, while burying the lessons from Afghanistan

An analysis of the NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting,
Riga, Latvia, 30 November – 1 December 2021

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Key activities and decisions taken:

- ⇒ Ministers expressed concerns that Russia is on the verge of invading Ukraine. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned that aggression against Ukraine “would come at a high price and have serious political and economic consequences for Russia”.
- ⇒ Ministers discussed the results of a “comprehensive political and military assessment” of the lessons learned from NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan. None of the various internal and expert reviews that contributed to this assessment, nor the assessment itself have been made public. NATO published a short 730-word [Factsheet](#) on the Afghanistan Lessons Learned Process containing a handful of broad conclusions and recommendations. ***This is a derisory response to a 20-year war that killed many thousands of Afghan civilians and NATO soldiers. NATO says it will continue to hold the Taliban regime accountable for what they have promised, but who is holding NATO accountable for its failed promises?***
- ⇒ Ministers also discussed the situation in Belarus, the Western Balkans, arms control and the nuclear ban treaty, and NATO’s next Strategic Concept. No new significant developments were disclosed in any of these issues.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting took place on the 30 November-1 December 2021 in Riga, Latvia. The meeting focused on six main issues:

- The situation in and around Ukraine;
- The situation on the border with Belarus;
- NATO’s role in arms control;
- NATO’s next Strategic Concept;
- The lessons learned in Afghanistan; and
- The situation in the Western Balkans.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 26 November 2021. At the start of the first day of the ministerial meeting (30 November) the NATO Secretary General held a bilateral meeting with the Latvian Foreign Minister, but no official read out of what was discussed. This was followed by a keynote [speech](#) by the NATO Secretary General, ‘NATO’s outlook towards 2030 and beyond’, at an [event](#) organized by the Latvian Institute of International Affairs in co-operation with the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the NATO Public Diplomacy Division. The NATO Secretary General then held a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister of Latvia, and again there was no official read out of the discussion.

After lunch, the NATO Secretary General gave a [doorstep statement](#) setting out the agenda to be discussed. This was followed by a bilateral meeting with the US Secretary of State (see [here](#) for a short transcript of their opening remarks),

and an [official photo](#) of the participants at the ministerial meeting.

Then there was a closed session of the North Atlantic Council (NAC - meeting at the level of foreign ministers), which discussed Ukraine, Belarus and arms control issues. After a [press conference](#) by the Secretary General, the day ended with a working dinner for the ministers.

The second day of the ministerial began with a closed session of the NAC with the Foreign Ministers of Georgia and Ukraine, and this was followed by a bilateral meeting between the NATO Secretary General and the German Foreign Minister. Then followed two further closed meetings of the NAC in Foreign Ministers session. The first discussed Afghanistan, while the second took place with EU partners (the foreign ministers of Finland and Sweden, as well as the EU High Representative) and discussed the Western Balkans. The day ended with a [closing press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

For details of the October 2021 defence ministers meeting read: [NATO Watch Briefing no.87](#), 1 November 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.

The situation in Ukraine

Back story

Ukraine has become the main [flashpoint](#) between Russia and the West as relations have soured to their worst level in the three decades since the Cold War ended. In 2014, Russia invaded, occupied and illegally annexed Crimea. Russia also provides military support to armed separatists in the Donbas in eastern Ukraine, while individual NATO member states—including the United States—provide military aid to the Ukrainian Government, and NATO itself provides military training and advice as part of a long-standing partnership programme with the country. The conflict in Donbas has led to more than 14,000 people being killed since 2014.

Ukraine is considered a [close partner](#) of NATO but is not yet a member, although it has aspired to join since applying to begin a NATO Membership Action Plan in 2008. However, there is little chance that Ukraine will join NATO in the foreseeable future, because there is no consensus in the alliance about the degree of confrontation with Russia that its members are prepared to risk. Nonetheless, Moscow sees potential Ukrainian membership as the latest chapter in NATO's historical expansion to Russia's borders.

Since 2017, NATO has deployed four international battalion groups to Poland and to the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in order to deter Russia from launching an attack on a NATO member state. As a non-member state, no such security guarantees extend to Ukraine.

International tensions have been rising in recent weeks over Ukraine and the Black Sea region. Ukraine and Western states accuse Russia of building up nearly 100,000 troops, as well as tanks, artillery and short-range ballistic missiles near Ukraine, sparking fears of a possible attack. Other than some [satellite photos](#) little other information has been made public to back up the intelligence allegations of an increased threat. US media has reported that intelligence officials fear a Russian invasion of Ukraine could begin in early 2022. Russia denies any such plan and accuses Ukraine of building up its own forces in preparation for an attempt to retake the Donbas region, an allegation Ukraine has denied. A [similar crisis](#) played out over a Russian troop buildup in April this year, but US and Ukrainian officials have warned that the threat of a Russian offensive this winter is more likely because of a failing ceasefire agreement in the Donbas and a worsening political climate.

What did the NATO foreign ministers decide?

Ahead of the NATO meeting the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken [said](#) that the west was on alert over Russia's "increasingly bellicose rhetoric" and "unusual" troop movements. "Any escalatory actions by Russia would be a great concern to the United States ... and any renewed aggression would trigger serious consequences". These consequences would be largely economic and diplomatic.

After the NAC meeting, the NATO Secretary General [called](#) on Russia “to be transparent, de-escalate and reduce tensions”. He added that “Any future Russian aggression against Ukraine would come at a high price and have serious political and economic consequences for Russia”. Then, during a [keynote interview](#) at the Reuters NEXT Global Conference, he reiterated that Russia will face serious consequences if it once again invades the country. On Russia’s assertion that it is only responding to Ukraine’s provocations, he said, “The whole idea that Ukraine represents a threat to Russia is absolutely wrong. Ukraine has been attacked by Russia. Russia is occupying parts of Ukraine. Crimea is part of the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine”. “On top of that, we know that Russia is responsible for aggressive hybrid attacks [and] cyber attacks against Ukraine”, Stoltenberg said.

In response to a question as to whether there would be a military response by NATO, the Secretary General didn’t explicitly rule it out, but his comments suggested that it would be very unlikely. “The main purpose is to deter Russia from conducting aggressive military actions against Ukraine”, he [said](#), adding “..... we share information, we share intelligence, and we monitor very closely what is going on,.... and then, we provide support to Ukraine.... because to strengthen the armed forces of Ukraine is a way to help them to conduct their sovereign right for self-defence”. He then stressed that there were important differences between supporting a partner like Ukraine and the collective defence clause that applies to NATO member states.

Britain’s foreign secretary, Liz Truss—seeking to channel her inner Iron Lady by [posing](#) in a tank—warned Russia against making a “strategic mistake” by invading Ukraine, and [urged](#) NATO allies to block the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to prevent Europe becoming reliant on it for energy. The UK along with Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states have questioned the wisdom of the pipeline, which will take gas from Russia to Europe through the Baltic Sea, bypassing Ukraine and depriving Kyiv of energy transit fees.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has [called](#) for specific legal agreements that would rule out any further NATO expansion eastwards towards Russia’s borders, saying the West has not lived up to its previous verbal assurances. Putin has also

[said](#) that deployment of weapons or troops in Ukraine by NATO would cross a “red line” for Russia and trigger a strong response, including a potential deployment of Russian missiles targeting Europe.

President Biden [responded](#) by saying that he would not accept “red lines” set by Moscow, and that he would send [reinforcements to NATO’s eastern flank](#) in response to a Russian invasion of Ukraine. A video call between Putin and Biden to try to ease tensions is expected later today.

Outlook

As the NATO Secretary General acknowledged the situation in and around Ukraine remains fluid and unpredictable. There is no certainty about Russia’s intentions, and there is heightened rhetoric and disinformation from all sides. A full-scale attack by Russia seems improbable and Russia’s political aim is most likely to neutralise Ukraine and turn it into a buffer state. It would be optimal, from its point of view, to have Donbas recognised as autonomous with a leadership elected that is sympathetic to Moscow. On this basis, as Anatol Lieven of the Quincy Institute has [argued](#), it still ought to be possible to find a reasonable compromise in accordance with the 2015 Minsk II protocol: full autonomy for the Donbas within Ukraine, under Ukrainian sovereignty but without Ukrainian troops, and guaranteed by a UN peacekeeping force.

Lessons (not) learned in Afghanistan

The Foreign Ministers held an “in depth” discussion on Afghanistan, and the lessons learned from NATO’s engagement there over almost two decades. In his [press conference](#), the NATO Secretary General set out a handful of broad conclusions and recommendations from that lessons learned process, and these were included in a 730-word [Factsheet](#) published by NATO:

- ⇒ NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan demonstrated immense capacity and military capabilities, and in an increasingly complex security environment, crisis management should remain a core task for NATO;
- ⇒ The international community’s level of ambition in Afghanistan extended far beyond degrading terrorist safe havens, and that in future, NATO should continuously assess

strategic interests, set achievable goals, and remain aware of the dangers of mission expansion;

- ⇒ NATO should consider how to maintain the level of military interoperability and political dialogue gained by working with Operational Partners in Afghanistan;
- ⇒ NATO should consider the political and cultural norms of host nations, as well as their ability to absorb capacity-building and training;
- ⇒ Reporting from the field during the ISAF and Resolute Support eras was frequently delayed and encumbered by procedures, thus making it difficult for Allies to effectively evaluate and provide relevant direction for the mission;
- ⇒ Allies would have benefitted for more meaningful discussions on the negotiations of the US-Taliban agreement; and
- ⇒ NATO should consider how to strengthen its capabilities to conduct short-notice, large-scale evacuation operations in the future.

The Factsheet also gave details about how the “comprehensive” Afghanistan lessons learned process was conducted. Launched in September, it included both “operational-military and political reviews”, each covering the full timeline of NATO’s involvement. In addition to the military lessons learned process “using established processes for NATO missions”, the International Staff led a “comprehensive review together with NATO Allies and Resolute Support Mission Operational Partners. This included the participation of 19 experts providing historical, political, operational, and cultural perspectives on NATO’s involvement”. NATO also held seven meetings of the Deputy Permanent Representative Committee, with sessions dedicated to discussions of key events and drivers in NATO’s engagement, as well as key takeaways. The Chair of that committee produced a report summarizing these discussions, which was reviewed by the Foreign Ministers. The Factsheet also stresses that the Chair’s report “does not reflect a consensus view of NATO Allies and Partners, but is an attempt to capture the broad conclusions and recommendations as discussed among Allies and experts during this process”. Those key conclusions and recommendations are outlined above.

During questions to the NATO Secretary General, Lorne Cook of Associated Press [asked](#) the following question: “Would you agree that taxpayers, and voters, and Afghans themselves should actually see what lessons you’ve learnt? There must be more to it than what you’ve said today. Can you guarantee that this report is not going to be watered down, or it’s going to disappear, like some of the field commanders’ reports did on Afghanistan?”.

The Secretary General responded by reiterating that NATO had conducted “an honest and thorough” lessons learned process, and he committed to publishing the main conclusions and findings. However, it seems likely that the Secretary General was referring to the Factsheet rather than a commitment to publish the Chair’s report or any of the other various internal and expert reviews that contributed to that report. (A written request to NATO for clarity on this point had not been answered at the time of writing).

In answer to another question about the killings of former Afghan national security forces by the Taliban—according to [Human Rights Watch](#) 47 ex-soldiers and police have been killed or forcibly disappeared in recent months—the Secretary General said “NATO will continue to hold the Taliban regime accountable for what they have promised, including on human rights, on safe passage”. He also reiterated that NATO was “ready to strike from distance, over the horizon, if needed”.

None of the detailed lessons learnt reports have been made public, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that that this whole process was designed to bury the Afghanistan experience as quickly as possible and move on. In short, this is a derisory response to a 20-year war that killed many thousands of Afghan civilians and NATO soldiers. NATO says it will continue to hold the Taliban regime accountable for what they have promised, but who is holding NATO accountable for its failed promises?

The situation in Belarus

The Foreign Ministers also addressed the situation in Belarus. The NATO Secretary General [described](#) the Lukashenko regime’s use of vulnerable people to put pressure on Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania as “cynical and inhumane”. In addition to standing in “full solidarity with the

allies affected”, NATO is also cooperating closely with the European Union to counter this “hybrid campaign”. Of course, given the current spat between France and the UK over the [deaths](#) of migrants in the English Channel, as well as the EU’s long-standing commitment to a [Fortress Europe](#) to deter refugees, it is hard for European NATO members to take the moral high-ground on this issue.

The NATO Secretary General also called on Lukashenko to stop cracking down on peaceful protests in Belarus and release all political prisoners and to allow the people of Belarus to decide their own future.

Arms control and the nuclear ban treaty

The Foreign Ministers also discussed arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. It is unclear what, or if anything new, was discussed, although the NATO Secretary General [described](#) the issue as a “priority” for NATO.

He also reiterated the same careworn phrases— “all NATO allies support a world without nuclear weapons”; significant reductions have been made in our nuclear arsenals, while consistently promoting key arms control agreements—while pointing to “worrying trends” in Russia and China and the emergence of technologies that “are fundamentally changing the nature of conflict”. Without giving any examples, the NATO Secretary General also stated that NATO allies “are determined to lead a renewed effort to strengthen arms control”.

During the Q&A session of his [press conference](#) (Day 1), the Secretary General was asked about the Norwegian and incoming German Governments [intention](#) to join the first nuclear ban treaty conference (for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, TPNW) as observers. Up until now, NATO, under US leadership, has been extremely [hostile](#) to the treaty.

The Secretary General responded by welcoming the new government’s decision to continue to be part of NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements, as well as the acknowledged need to invest in equipment for the German armed forces. On the TPNW he reiterated that “all Allies agree that we should not sign-up to the Treaty, we should not be part of the Treaty, because we believe in

balanced, verifiable arms control..... the path to get to a world without nuclear weapons is balanced, verifiable arms control, not unilateral arms controlbut as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will retain a nuclear deterrent”.

He also welcomed the new government’s commitment to consult with allies on this issue, “because we need to speak with one voice on all issues related to nuclear issues, because this is important for the whole alliance”. However, the NATO Secretary General’s confidence that Germany will continue to host US nuclear weapons for the duration of the term of the new government may be displaced. Some commentators have [argued](#) that the language in the coalition statement is deliberately ambiguous (as a result of disagreement among the parties) in order to keep the door open to the future withdrawal of US nuclear weapons.

NATO’s next Strategic Concept

During a working dinner the Foreign Ministers also discussed NATO’s next Strategic Concept, which will be adopted at the Madrid Summit in June 2022. Details of the nature and scope of the discussions were not released, but the direction of travel is well-signposted from earlier meetings and through existing discussions in the [NATO 2030 process](#).

At the Riga Public Diplomacy Conference on 30 November 2021, Jens Stoltenberg [shared](#) his ideas on the Concept. He outlined five elements that he expects to be at the heart of the next Strategic Concept:

- protecting our values;
- reinforcing our military power;
- strengthening our societies;
- taking a global outlook; and
- building NATO as the institutional link between Europe and North America.

Developments in the Western Balkans

In the final session, the Foreign Ministers were joined by partners Finland, Sweden, and by EU High Representative Borrell to discuss stability and security in the Western Balkans. Tensions have recently risen in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as a result of “more aggressive rhetoric, stalled reforms and foreign actors working to undermine progress”, [according](#) to the Secretary General.