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NATO Defence Ministers discuss further support for Ukraine and strengthening deterrence against Russia – nuclear exercises by Russia and NATO to go ahead

A review of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, 12-13 October 2022

Editorial comment: Blind man's bluff – with nuclear weapons

In September, President Putin delivered barely veiled nuclear threats against NATO, [saying](#): “I want to remind you that our country also has various means of destruction..... and when the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, to protect Russia and our people, we will certainly use all the means at our disposal”. Putin added: “It’s not a bluff”. A senior US administration official responded by [saying](#) “This is another episode in what has been a series of episodes over the course of this war where Putin is trying to rattle his sabre trying to scare us off. He has not succeeded before – he won’t succeed now, but that doesn’t mean that we’re blind to the dynamics that could relate to escalation”.

But the reality is that Russia, the United States and NATO *are* blind to the dynamics that could lead to nuclear war, or at least appear willing to take fearsome risks with possible cascade effects or miscalculations that could end in nuclear war. The premise of nuclear deterrence *theory* rests on certainties about nuclear signalling. But currently there is so much room for error or misunderstanding on both sides, as well as questions over the rationality of some of the decision-makers, that there must be doubt over whether deterrence will hold. The theory also provides a false sense of confidence—note the NATO Secretary General’s [claim](#) that NATO’s nuclear

deterrent has been effective “for decades”—and is leading to risk-taking that would be avoided without nuclear threats in place. President Macron’s [assurance](#) that French nuclear weapons would not be used in response (to a Russian nuclear attack on Ukraine) is an effort to turn down the heat. The [criticism](#) he has received from some [quarters](#) illustrates the fixation attached to nuclear ambiguity that is both irresponsible and inaccurate (nuclear weapon states all issue negative security assurances). Moreover, when nuclear deterrence theory fails—as it surely must at some point—such failure could result in unimaginable humanitarian and environmental consequences.

For all these reasons NATO should be looking to deescalate the situation and should have postponed its annual nuclear training exercise, Steadfast Noon, which starts on 17 October. Russia should also cancel its nuclear exercises and end its threats to use nuclear weapons. Both Russia and NATO should join the [majority](#) of the international community that is seeking to stigmatise nuclear threats and take real actions for nuclear disarmament. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons outlaws the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons and provides a framework for the nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear weapon programmes in a verifiable timeframe. And the best tools for achieving peace in Ukraine remain dialogue, diplomacy and negotiation.

Key activities and decisions taken by Defence Ministers:

- ⇒ France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain the UK and the USA, announced delivery of new air defences to Ukraine, while other NATO Member States committed more military aid. NATO agreed to provide Ukraine with hundreds of “drone jammers” for use against Russian and Iranian drones.
- ⇒ Addressing Russia’s recent nuclear threats, the NATO Secretary General said any use of nuclear weapons by Russia would have “severe consequences”, adding that the circumstances in which NATO might use nuclear weapons are “extremely remote”.
- ⇒ NATO agreed to hold its annual, “routine” nuclear preparedness exercise, ‘Steadfast Noon’, while Russia will also hold its own annual nuclear exercises.
- ⇒ It was agreed to increase stockpiles of munitions within Member States and to speed up the delivery of capabilities after months of allied arms shipments to Ukraine.
- ⇒ It was agreed to further enhance the resilience of critical undersea and energy infrastructure (following the recent sabotage on the Nord Stream pipelines). To this end, NATO has doubled its presence in the Baltic and North Seas to 30 ships, supported by maritime patrol aircraft and undersea capabilities.
- ⇒ Fourteen NATO Member States (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and the UK) and Finland agreed to launch a German-led ‘European Sky Shield Initiative’, which aims to create a common European air and missile defence system.
- ⇒ A Review Board was established to govern the responsible development and use of Artificial Intelligence and data across NATO. A [summary](#) of the decision, and a [summary](#) of NATO’s Autonomy Implementation Plan were published.
- ⇒ The Ministers also approved NATO’s first ‘Digital Transformation vision’.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The two-day NATO Defence Ministerial meeting in Brussels was the first since the NATO Madrid Summit in June 2022 and the first Ministerial that Finland and Sweden joined as Invitees. Three main issues were discussed:

- Support to Ukraine – this included a meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group;
- Progress on strengthening NATO’s defence and deterrence, against the backdrop of a significant escalation in the Russia-Ukraine war - this included (a) a meeting of the Nuclear Planning Group; (b) discussions on increasing the protection of critical infrastructure; and (c) discussions on increasing military production and strengthening the military base within Member States; and
- NATO’s missions and operations, including those in Kosovo and Iraq.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 11 October. The first day of the ministerial meeting (12 October) began with a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General, and this was followed by a closed meeting of the US-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group. Three bilateral meetings then took place between Stoltenberg and the Defence Ministers of Turkey, Greece and Ukraine. No details of those discussions were made public, although Turkey’s outstanding ratification of Finland and Sweden’s NATO membership application would undoubtedly have been discussed with the Turkish Defence Minister. (Of the 30 NATO member states only Hungary and Turkey have not yet approved Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO). The first day concluded with a working dinner of the NATO Ministers of Defence, which included ministers of Finland, Sweden and Ukraine. There was no official read out or statement on the discussions which [focused](#) on “how to ramp up support for Ukraine”.

The second day of the ministerial began with a [signing ceremony](#) for the 'European Sky Shield Initiative' by 14 NATO Member States and Finland. Next, in keeping with the unstated principle that the United States is 'first among equals' within the alliance, there were some [short remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General and the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, which had its own agenda item and was televised. This was followed by a meeting of the [Nuclear Planning Group](#) (NPG) in Defence Ministers session, and as is the convention for this Group, there was no information publicly available. (The public are allowed to witness handshakes between the NATO Secretary General and US Secretary of Defense) but not discussions about preparations for nuclear war).

In late morning, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) met in Defence Ministers format (with the addition of the Defence Ministers of Finland and Sweden) to discuss NATO's defence and deterrence and the implications of Russia's war in Ukraine. Outside of a few [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, that meeting was another closed session. After lunch and an official portrait of the ministers, a second NAC meeting took place, again with the ministers from Finland and Sweden. The day concluded with a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General, and a bilateral meeting between Stoltenberg and the Minister of Defence of Norway (no details provided) Secretary General, that meeting was also a closed session.

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.

Support for Ukraine

In his pre-ministerial press conference, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that Ukraine now "has the momentum and continues to make significant gains, while Russia is increasingly resorting to horrific and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and critical infrastructure". He

added that President Putin's "attempted annexations, partial mobilisation, and reckless nuclear rhetoric represent the most significant escalation since the start of the war".

While stressing that "NATO is not party to the conflict", Stoltenberg asserted that NATO's support "is playing a key role". He concluded by saying that NATO will stand with Ukraine "for as long as it takes" and called for President Putin to withdraw his forces from Ukraine.

In his final press conference, Stoltenberg also welcomed the [vote](#) in the United Nations General Assembly on 12 October that condemned Russia's attempted annexations of Ukrainian territory and called for their reversal. (35 nations abstained including China, India, South Africa and Pakistan). He [added](#) that it is "a clear and strong message that Russia is isolated, and the world stands with Ukraine, in defence of the rules-based international order".

Air defences are the priority

When asked to clarify the type of weapons that Ukraine needs, the NATO Secretary General [said](#), "Ukraine needs a wide range of different systems", including "a lot of lethal weapons, artillery, armoured vehicles, air defence systems and many other anti-tank weapons", but also "non-lethal support: fuel and winter clothing, and communications systems and a lot of different types of support". He added, that since the war is continuing, "logistics, resupplies of spare parts, ammunition, fuel to systems that are already delivered becomes more and more important". In his [doorstep statement](#) the next day, Stoltenberg said that the "top priority will be more air defence for Ukraine".

The vast majority of the recent airstrikes in Ukraine were conducted using cruise missiles launched from bombers flying far off in Russian airspace, John Kirby, spokesperson for the National Security Council, [told](#) reporters on 11 October. Ukrainian air defences were able to shoot down some of the incoming missiles, but Kirby noted that "there is no one silver bullet weapon system" to counter the threat.

The US and NATO allies have already provided some air defences to Ukraine, including shoulder-fired US Stinger anti-air missiles and an S-300 missile system from Slovakia. The United States has also contracted with Raytheon to build eight additional National Advanced Surface-to-Air-Missile Systems (NASAMS), but the systems will not be delivered for several years. Kyiv has also [reportedly](#) asked for the C-RAM and the Avenger, a vehicle-mounted mobile, short-range air defence system. One problem is that NATO Member States have limited numbers of air defence systems available for immediate donation. For example, Ukraine has asked for the US Patriot missile defence system, but Washington has repeatedly declined the request due to the relative scarcity of the system, among other reasons.

Nonetheless, in the run up to and during the ministerial meeting several new announcements were made from several NATO Member States to provide Ukraine with more advanced air defence systems. Germany [announced](#) that the first of four InfraRed Imaging System Tail (IRIS-T), a short to medium-range infrared homing air-to-air missile system, had reached Ukraine. German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht called it a "very important support for Ukraine in the fight against missile attacks".

The UK [pledged](#) to donate AMRAAM anti-aircraft missiles capable of shooting down cruise missiles, while the United States agreed to an "expedited" delivery of two more NASAMS. France [promised](#) radar and air defence systems in the coming weeks, [Spain](#) will provide four Hawk air defence launchers, while the Netherlands [send](#) more anti-aircraft missiles. [Canada](#) said it would provide more than C\$47 million in new military aid, including artillery rounds, satellite communications, winter clothing and drone cameras.

NATO is also providing fuel, winter clothing and medical supplies as part of its Comprehensive Assistance Package, and the NATO Secretary General [announced](#) that, under this package, it will shortly deliver counter-drone equipment to Ukraine: "hundreds of drone jammers,

which can help render ineffective Russian and [Iranian-made drones](#)", he said.

The Ukraine Defence Contact Group

On 12 October US Secretary of Defense Austin was joined by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley to conduct an in-person meeting of the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group at NATO. This was the sixth meeting of the Contact Group and the fourth in-person session since the international group was formed in April. They were joined by Ministers of Defence and Chiefs of Defence from nearly 50 nations from around the world to discuss Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, and the continued close coordination to provide military support to Ukraine.

Mounted rocket launchers such as the 18 CAESAR self-propelled howitzers it has received from France and the HIMARS from the United States have been key to Ukraine's recapture of territories from Russia. Ukraine's Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov updated the Contact Group on the latest developments on the ground and Ukraine's urgent needs for the winter. Stoltenberg welcomed "the recent announcements by Allies to provide more advanced air defence systems and other capabilities, and I look forward to further deliveries".

Defence and deterrence

At the [Madrid Summit](#) in June, NATO leaders decided on a fundamental shift in defence and deterrence to respond to what the alliance describes as "the new security reality". Some of the measures taken so far include a doubling of the number of NATO battlegroups in eastern Europe, with plans for them to be scaled up quickly to brigade size, and planned increases in NATO's high readiness forces. NATO's deterrence and defence includes conventional capabilities, cyber defence, missile defence and a nuclear dimension.

France [announced](#) on 11 October that it was upping its deterrence contribution on the alliance's eastern flank by adding 200 troops to the 500 it has already deployed to Romania,

where it leads a multinational battlegroup as well as armoured fighting vehicles, including tanks. In addition, Rafale fighter jets will be deployed to Lithuania to patrol, while a light infantry company is to be dispatched to Estonia.

The Nuclear Planning Group, nuclear exercises and nuclear 'deterrence'

The NATO Secretary General chaired a regular meeting of the [Nuclear Planning Group](#) (NPG) on 13 October. There was no public disclosure of the scope and nature of the discussions in the NPG, other than some remarks by Stoltenberg during his media appearances. In his pre-ministerial press conference, for example, he [said](#) the “fundamental purpose of NATO’s nuclear deterrence has always been to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression”. He added that next week, NATO will hold its annual nuclear exercise, Steadfast Noon (see box), to “keep our deterrent safe, secure and effective”.

NATO’s nuclear exercise ‘[Steadfast Noon](#)’ involves 14 countries and up to 60 aircraft of various types, including fourth and fifth generation combat aircraft, as well as surveillance and tanker aircraft. It runs from 17-30 October, and, as in previous years, US B-52 long-range bombers will take part, flying from Minot Air Base in North Dakota. Training flights will take place over Belgium, which is hosting the exercise, as well as over the North Sea and the UK. No live weapons are used.

Stoltenberg also referred to President Putin’s “veiled nuclear threats” as “dangerous and irresponsible”, adding “We are closely monitoring Russia’s nuclear forces”, while acknowledging that “We have not seen any changes in Russia’s posture”. When asked at the press briefing whether there had been any discussion amongst the ministers as to whether it was a good idea to practice nuclear drills given the heightened threats from Russia and the potential for miscalculation or misunderstanding, the NATO Secretary General [said](#), “We have been open about the

exercise and I think it would send a very wrong signal if we suddenly now cancelled a routine, long time planned exercise because of the war in Ukraine. That would be absolutely the wrong signal to send. And we need to understand that NATO’s firm, predictable behaviour, our military strength, is the best way to prevent escalation”.

Many of the questions in the final [press conference](#) were related to clarifying NATO’s response if Russia were to carry out a nuclear strike in Ukraine. First, the NATO Secretary General indicated that the circumstances in which NATO might have to use nuclear weapons are “extremely remote”, adding however that there would be “severe consequences” if Russia used such weapons. And in answer to a follow-up question he said “We will not go into exactly how we will respond, but this will fundamentally change the nature of the conflict. It means that a very important line has been crossed”.

NATO does not possess any weapons and relies on those held by its Member States. Most of the nuclear weapons nominally linked to the alliance remain under the control of three member countries — the US, the UK and France. In addition, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey host US nuclear weapons as part of NATO’s controversial nuclear [nuclear sharing](#) policy.

France insists on maintaining its nuclear independence and does not take part in NATO Nuclear Planning Group meetings. In an [interview](#) with France 2 television on 12 October, French President Emmanuel Macron suggested that France would not respond with a nuclear strike if Russia were to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. He also warned about the responsibilities of leaders when it comes to nuclear rhetoric and said he has spoken to Putin “several times”. “We have a (nuclear) doctrine, which is clear,” Macron said. “The dissuasion is working. But then, the less we talk about it, the less we brandish the threat, the more credible we are”.

Increasing military production

Much of the military support that NATO Member States have provided to Ukraine – the javelins, the air defence systems, ammunition – has been taken from existing stocks. To replenish those stocks, to both ensure the deterrence and defence of NATO, but also to have enough to continue “for the long haul to provide support to Ukraine”, the Defence Ministers agreed to increase national stockpiles of munitions and equipment, and to speed up delivery of new military capabilities.

The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that the NATO Defence Planning Process “will be used to provide industry with the long-term demand they need to boost production”. In answering a media question, Stoltenberg further outlined what this might mean for industry in practice: “They need to invest in new production capabilities, because they have been able to increase production partly by utilising existing production capacity more, but to really ramp up production, you need to make new investments. I also expect them to agree on how we can further strengthen our interoperability, ensuring that allies can work together and also jointly purchase ammunition capabilities”.

In addition to the NATO Defence Planning Process, NATO has a range of tools for engage with industry, including capability targets, and standardisation and interoperability goals— meaning ensuring the various kind of new equipment from the different allies can work together.

On 13 October, Defence Ministers from 14 NATO Member States (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and the UK) and Finland [signed](#) a Letter of Intent for the development of a “European Sky Shield Initiative”. Led by Germany, the initiative aims to create a European air and missile defence system through the common acquisition of air defence equipment and missiles by European nations. This will contribute to NATO’s Integrated Air and Missile Defence.

Increasing resilience and the protection of critical infrastructure

The Defence Ministers also addressed the protection of critical infrastructure within the transatlantic space. The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that, following the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines, the alliance had “further enhanced our vigilance across all domains”. This included, doubling NATO’s presence in the Baltic and North Seas “to over 30 ships, supported by maritime patrol aircraft and undersea capabilities”. These efforts are coordinated by NATO’s Maritime Command. Stoltenberg said that Member States were also “increasing security around key installations, and stepping up intelligence and intelligence sharing”. It is unclear what further steps were agreed by the Defence Ministers to strengthen resilience and protect critical infrastructure.

In terms of cyber security, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that “Senior resilience experts from all allies” will meet at NATO for the first time later this year, and “address this in detail”.

Artificial Intelligence and a vision for ‘Digital Transformation’

The NATO Defence Ministers agreed to establish a Review Board to govern the responsible development and use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data across the alliance. According to a NATO [news release](#), the Board’s first task will be to develop a “user-friendly Responsible AI certification standard, including quality controls and risk mitigation, that will help align new AI and data projects with [NATO’s Principles of Responsible Use](#) approved in October 2021”. A [Summary of the establishment of the Data and Artificial Intelligence Review Board](#) was published. The Board will also serve as a “unique platform to exchange best practices, guide innovators and operational end-users throughout the development phase, thereby contributing to building trust within the innovation community”. NATO is currently piloting AI in areas as diverse as cyber defence, climate change and imagery analysis.

In response to the 2022 Strategic Concept's call to expedite digital transformation, the Ministers also approved "NATO's first Digital Transformation vision". While a copy of this vision has not yet been made publicly available, according to the news release, "By 2030, NATO's Digital Transformation will enable the Alliance to conduct multi-domain operations, ensure interoperability across all domains, enhance situational awareness, and facilitate political consultation and data-driven decision-making". The Defence Ministers also endorsed priority areas for applying advanced data analysis, including "to enable multi-domain operations and enhance situational awareness, and the approval of NATO's first autonomy implementation plan". A [Summary of NATO's Autonomy Implementation Plan](#) was published.

AI, data exploitation and autonomy are among the nine technological areas of priority to NATO. These also include: quantum-enabled technologies, biotechnology and human enhancements, hypersonic technologies, novel material and manufacturing, energy and propulsion, and space.

NATO's missions and operations

The Defence Ministers also discussed NATO's missions and operations, "from the Western Balkans to Iraq". However, very little information was provided on the discussions. The NATO Secretary General [said](#) the EU High Representative Josep Borrell participated in the discussions and that it was important to "strengthen and deepen" [EU-NATO cooperation](#). A new [EU-NATO Joint Declaration](#) will be signed "in the near future". Asked about the situation in the Western Balkans, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that NATO's KFOR mission is "helping to secure stability, the free movement of all communities in Kosovo"..

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