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NATO's military leadership planning to face 'any threat, from any direction' with enhanced gobbledygook

A review of the NATO Military Committee meeting, 18-19 January 2023

On 18 and 19 January 2023, the NATO Military Committee met in Chiefs of Defence format (including those from "invitees", Finland and Sweden) in Brussels to [discuss](#) the strengthening of NATO's Defence and Deterrence posture. Over the two days this involved nine specific sessions, none of which were open to the public or media, and the only details that were made publicly available were included in two NATO news briefs (available [here](#) and [here](#)), and the transcript of some brief [opening remarks](#) by the Chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer and NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană at the start of the sessions, as well as a closing [joint press conference](#) by Bauer, General Christopher Cavoli, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and General Philippe Lavigne, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT). The following analysis draws on a combination of these links and *NATO Watch* insights in attempt to fill the information gaps and to decipher the military gobbledygook.

The term gobbledygook was apparently first coined in 1944 by Texas lawyer Maury Maverick, who expressed disdain for the "gobbledygook language" of his colleagues. The word was inspired by the turkey, "always gobbledy gobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity". But for inflated, jargon-cluttered prose that fails to communicate clearly, the NATO Military Committee seemingly has no equal.

The Military Committee meets twice a year at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, at the level of Chiefs of Defence, to provide the North Atlantic Council with consensus-based military advice on how the alliance can best meet global security challenges. Once a year they meet in a member state. On a day-to-day basis, their work is carried out by the permanent Military Representatives at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

The sessions

Session with NATO Deputy Secretary General, Mircea Geoană: This first discussion focussed on how the generals are implementing the decisions about military posture that were taken by the political leadership during the NATO Summit in Madrid, and what still needs to be done in the run up to the next Summit in Vilnius. Geoană identified three areas of important work: investing more in defence, ramping up production of weapons and ammunition, and transforming NATO for the digital age.

Session 1 - Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT) Strategic Considerations: Two military concepts set the direction for NATO's ongoing adaptation: the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) focuses on force employment "to deter and defend today", while the NATO Warfighting [Capstone Concept](#) is meant to offer "a vision to guide the Alliance's long-term warfare development to remain militarily strong now and in the future".

The details of both documents remain classified.

The SACT, General Lavigne, briefed the Military Committee on the implementation of the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept and Warfare Development Agenda, and gave insights into “balancing capability and capacity”. He also shared his strategic observations from the war in Ukraine, which according to him does not call into question NATO’s two military concepts, but rather “shows that we are going in the right direction and prompt us to accelerate their implementation”. He then descended into classic gobbledygook, with language that is so long-winded and abstract that it is almost unintelligible:

“So first, related to the continuing process of Shaping and Contesting, this conflict demonstrates that the Military Instrument of Power is not exclusive. There are others levers at play - Economic, informational, cultural, etc... And the Ability to shape and contest below the threshold of war and during the fight, is key. We need to leverage the informational sphere, the cognitive dimension, Cyber, and Space. And to take into account non-state actors who play a significant role as we see in, for example, Space.

Group photo – NATO Chiefs of Defence meeting, Brussels, 18 January 2023 – photo credit: NATO

His second point focused on the importance of “hard power and logistics”, and then he was off again into a minefield of confusing jargon:

“When we reflect on our ability to generate effects, as Allies, to generate operational capacity to fulfil NATO Plans, we need to address the balance between the capability and capacity, the quantity and the quality. And this balance needs continuous attention in the light of current trajectories, in which quantity is decreasing and quality is increasing. Observations in Ukraine demonstrate the strong performance of smaller, higher quantity platforms making use of current technologies. But in the same time, we also observe the combination of high technology, Space, Hypersonic, and the Uberization of the battlefield. We need quality and quantity to keep the advantage. Of note, the conflict underlines also the Fundamental importance of non-material aspects. I mean Multi Domain Operations, Readiness, Modern Command and Control, Cognitive superiority, Situation awareness, persistent preparation, realistic training, Resilience, and of course Morale and Leadership. It’s Already addressed in the two concepts so now we have to implement them”. The NATO news brief, using plainer English, helpfully clarifies, that the Chiefs of Defence “discussed how multi-domain operations, interoperability and digital transformation help maintain a military edge over potential adversaries”.



Session 2 - Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) Strategic Considerations: The SACEUR, General Cavoli, provided the meeting with his strategic considerations on the Eastern flank and across the whole spectrum of NATO's 360-degree approach to security. He also set out how NATO will operationalise and implement its 'Deter and Defend' strategy that was approved in 2020. According to General Cavoli, the Madrid Summit provided "clear guidance and a mandate" to turn the DDA "into a set of fully executable plans. And this will mean changes to our current plans, structures, posture, and readiness levels". NATO is now in the process of "implementing and developing a family of plans that describe 'How' the Alliance operates in peace, crisis, and war to provide for collective defence". He added that, "National military plans will be interlinked again with Alliance plans and all thirty NATO Allies will have a harmonized planning blueprint that will incorporate National forces and capabilities into our deterrence posture for the entire European Area of Operations".

In the closing press conference, General Cavoli explained that "following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine" NATO "very quickly, fundamentally changed its posture". NATO's strategic plans were activated enabling the alliance to increase its military presence on the eastern and south-eastern borders. The number of battlegroups in the eastern part of the alliance has been doubled from four to eight, and "we have increased our ability to reinforce them up to brigade level, upon need". "Enhanced vigilance activities" have begun to be conducted in all domains – air, land, sea, space, and cyber. This strengthened posture represents "the most significant reinforcement of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War".

Overall, NATO's new strategy for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area has focused back on collective territorial defence (having, for many years previously, focused on crisis management and out of area operations).

Session 3 - Readiness and Sustainment: Risks and Mitigations: This session saw the Chiefs of Defence exchange views on "military stockpiles, pre-positioning of equipment and capability development based on collective defence requirements". Readiness and sustainment are "peacetime activities" shaping NATO's "effectiveness for Deterrence and Defence".

Session 4 – KFOR: The Chiefs of Defence met with their KFOR operational partners - Armenia, Austria, Finland, Ireland, Moldova, Sweden, Switzerland, and Ukraine – to discuss the past twelve months of the mission, the security situation on the ground as well as the challenging security environment. The Chiefs of Defence reaffirmed their commitment to [KFOR's mission](#): to promote a safe and stable environment and guarantee freedom of movement for the benefit of all communities in Kosovo. However, tensions in Kosovo have been growing in recent months. NATO's mission in Kosovo recently [declined](#) a Serbian Government request to send up to 1,000 police and army personnel to Kosovo following a spate of clashes between Serbs and Kosovo authorities. On 5 January, the NATO-led KFOR mission completed the removal of several vehicles blocking roads in northern Kosovo, through the deployment of engineer units to the areas of Duda's Rock and Srbovac arterial route. It followed the decision taken on 28 December 2022 to remove barricades set up in northern Kosovo in December. The [removal of barricades](#) followed intensive efforts by NATO allies and the EU defuse tensions, with key support from KFOR and the EU-led Rule of Law mission (EULEX). It is unclear what, if any, changes in the KFOR mission to address these tensions were discussed by the Chiefs of Defence.

Session 5 - NATO Mission Iraq: The discussion focused on NATO's non-combat and capacity building [Mission in Iraq](#), and included operational partners Sweden, Finland and Australia. Turning south, the Military Committee discussed the NATO non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission in Iraq with Operational Partners Australia, Finland, and Sweden. The discussion focused on the

mission's ongoing efforts to assist Iraq in promoting greater stability, building its security and defence institutions and fighting terrorism. However, again it is unclear the extent to which the mission is adapting to the deteriorating security situation in Iraq. The country is still living with the legacy of internal conflict after the US-led invasion of 2003, and the transnational jihadists of Islamic State after 2014. The multiple challenges further include sectarian violence and Kurdish separatism, and according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), conflict-related fatalities in Iraq increased from 2844 in 2021 to 4483 in 2022.

Session 6 - Ukraine: Military situation in and around Ukraine: The Military Representative of Ukraine, Major General Serhii Salkutsan detailed the Ukrainian strategic objectives and the support that is required to obtain those objectives. The Chiefs of Defence reaffirmed their "unrelenting support for as long as it takes".

Sessions 7-8 – Plenary: No details were forthcoming of the plenary discussions.

Conclusions

Apart from a brief [report](#) by Reuters, there was no significant media coverage of the Military Committee meeting. The lack of transparency, coupled with the wordy and generally unintelligible military jargon from some of the participating military leaders, makes the Military Committee one of the opaquest processes within NATO. The alliance's military conceptual decision-making needs to be open and visible, with the reasons for outcomes clearly outlined. This would enable greater accountability of the military decision-making within civilian parliaments of member states.

The lack of information on the impact of the NATO missions in Kosovo and Iraq is particularly worrying. Given the complex security situations in both countries, the level of disclosure is clearly inadequate. NATO should be required, at a minimum, to provide an annual report on the progress of its various missions, including overviews of recent developments and the risks and challenges

that they face. In addition, the missions should be required to provide regular open briefings, as is the case with the [UN Security Council missions](#) and [OSCE missions](#).

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