



Briefing Paper No.103

25 February 2023

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Praise Ukraine and pass the ammunition:

NATO reviews arms stockpiles and agrees new secret political guidance for future military planning

Analysis of the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, 14-15 February 2023

Key activities and decisions taken by Defence Ministers:

- ⇒ NATO member states agreed to step up support for Ukraine, including through more heavy weapons and military training. The Ministers also agreed to step up support to “other partners at risk”, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Moldova.
- ⇒ New Political Guidance for Defence Planning was agreed. The guidance document was not made publicly available, despite setting out NATO’s overall aims and objectives that will largely determine capability requirements in the next four years.
- ⇒ Ministers addressed ways to boost industrial capacity and replenish stockpiles of armaments and munitions, and agreed to work “hand-in-hand” with the defence industry to increase industrial capacity. NATO capability targets for munition stockpiles are already under review.
- ⇒ The NATO Secretary General announced the establishment of a Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell at NATO Headquarters.
- ⇒ Ministers also discussed the importance of increasing military spending and building on the existing ‘defence investment pledge’ and future commitments beyond 2024.
- ⇒ Twenty-five member states, plus Finland and Sweden, agreed six new major commitments to jointly develop and procure systems securing NATO’s access to cutting edge technology (including Ground-based Air Defence, Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence, and Mobility/ Counter Mobility).
- ⇒ Sixteen member states, plus Finland and Sweden, launched the “largest space project in NATO’s history”: a new initiative called ‘Alliance Persistent Surveillance from Space’ - a virtual constellation of both national and commercial satellites providing data collection, sharing and analysis within NATO.
- ⇒ Denmark and Sweden joined the European Sky Shield Initiative, now a 17-member initiative to strengthen NATO's European Integrated Air and Missile Defence.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The two-day NATO Defence Ministerial meeting in Brussels discussed three main issues:

- Stepping up support to Ukraine – this included a meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group;
- Progress on strengthening NATO’s defence and deterrence, including discussions on increasing military production and the protection of critical undersea infrastructure; and
- NATO’s commitments to “other partners at risk”, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Moldova.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 13 February. The first day of the ministerial meeting (14 February) began with a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General, and this was followed by a closed 2-hour meeting of the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group. A bilateral meeting then took place between Stoltenberg and the Defence Minister of Ukraine. The first day concluded with a meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Defence Ministers format (with the addition of the Defence Ministers of Finland, Sweden and Ukraine, and the EU High Representative). Aside from some briefing [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General the meeting was closed.

The second day of the ministerial began with another meeting of the NAC in Defence Ministers format (with the addition of the Defence Ministers of Finland and Sweden). This was followed by a signing ceremony to develop NATO’s future capabilities. The day concluded with a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

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 Jens Stoltenberg noted the urgency of delivering key capabilities to Ukraine before Russia can seize the initiative on the battlefield. "We are in a race of logistics," he [said](#), stressing that "speed will save lives."

Stoltenberg [stressed](#) that “we see no sign whatsoever that President Putin is preparing for peace, or ready to negotiate something, which will respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. What we see is that President Putin and Russia still wants to control Ukraine. And therefore, the only way to ensure that Ukraine prevails as a sovereign nation is to continue to provide military support to Ukraine”.

The support to Ukraine has evolved as the war has evolved. In the beginning there was enormous focus on javelins, on anti-tank, light anti-tank weapons, and then the need switched to artillery, then air defences (see the October 2022 Defence Ministers Meeting) and most recently heavy weaponry, including main battle tanks. And the focus of much of the discussion going into the latest defence ministerial meeting was on the question of combat aircraft. However, while the question of supplying combat aircraft remains "under discussion", other issues, such as the more prosaic question of ammunition (see below), took precedence at the meeting.

The Ukraine Defence Contact Group

Ministers of Defence and Chiefs of Defence from nearly 50 nations from around the world gathered for the ninth meeting of the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group on 14 February at NATO headquarters. The international group was formed in April 2022 to coordinate military support to Ukraine.

Ukraine’s Defence Minister Oleksii Reznikov [said](#) his goals included protecting Ukraine’s skies, “strengthening the tank coalition”, securing sufficient ammunition, ensuring more training for the Ukrainian army and stable logistics, maintenance and repair of weapons.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his [video address](#) on 14 February “speed is of the essence. Speed in everything - adopting decisions, carrying out decisions, shipping supplies, training. Speed saves people's lives, speed brings back security”.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [said](#) he expected Ukrainian forces to conduct an offensive of their own in the spring, and Kyiv's allies were working to ensure they had the armour, firepower and the logistics to make it effective. "We believe that there'll be a window of opportunity for them to exercise initiative," Austin said. Stoltenberg welcomed the pledges of support made by NATO member states to Ukraine, including more heavy weapons and military training. He also thanked allies for their significant contributions to NATO's [Comprehensive Assistance Package](#), which is providing Ukraine with food, fuel, medical supplies counter-drone equipment and amphibious bridges.

Ukraine Defence Contact Group meeting, NATO HQ, 14 February 2023 – photo credit: NATO



Defence and deterrence

At the [Madrid Summit](#) in June 2022, 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.

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 supporting Ukraine, the Defence Ministers reportedly addressed ways to boost industrial capacity and replenish stockpiles of armaments and munitions. A similar commitment was made at the [previous Defence Ministers meeting](#) in October 2022.

Ukraine is [reportedly](#) firing up to 6,000-7,000 artillery shells a day, about a third of the number Russia is using. As a result of supplying Ukraine, Western inventories of ammunition have been reportedly drained, raising questions about the efficiency, speed and capacity of military supply chains. Even the biggest supplier of weapons to Ukraine and the world's top military exporter, the United States, is thought to be having trouble keeping up with the demand, with [reported](#) shortages of some high-end weapons systems and ammunition available to ship to Ukraine.

Stoltenberg [said](#) that the war in Ukraine is consuming an enormous amount of munitions, and depleting allied stockpiles, adding “The current rate of Ukraine's ammunition expenditure is many times higher than our current rate of production. This puts our defence industries under strain”. “The waiting time for large-calibre ammunition has increased from 12 to 28 months. Orders placed today would only be delivered two-and-a-half years later”, he said. “So we need to ramp up production, and invest in our production capacity”.

He also said that NATO had just completed an “extraordinary ‘out-of-cycle’ review” of its munitions stockpiles, and plans to increase future targets through the NATO Defence Planning Process (see below). Stoltenberg also suggested that industry could surge production in the short term by increasing shifts, working on weekends and utilizing spare capacity. He added that several member

states, including the United States and France, have already signed new multi-year contracts with the defence industry. Germany also announced on 15 February that it had agreed new deals with ammunition manufacturers for air defence systems it has delivered to Ukraine.

Back to Cold War levels of ammunition supplies?

During the Cold War, NATO member states were expected to have the conventional forces and stocks for territorial defence for a period of about three weeks in the event of a 'Warsaw Pact' attack. If those forces were overrun, it was anticipated that nuclear weapons would be used under a 'flexible response' doctrine. After the end of the Cold War in 1990, the apparent need for large stocks diminished with the much-reduced threat of a land war in Western Europe. Thus, at the outset of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, most European countries had low stocks of ammunition. And in the year that has followed there have been limits to production increases that can be done quickly by private companies. More significant increases in output will be expensive and take time to implement.

Increasing military spending

The Defence Ministers also discussed ways to maintain and increase military spending across the alliance and how to build on the defence investment pledge, and the future commitments beyond 2024. Stoltenberg [cited](#) "eight consecutive years of increases by European allies and Canada. And an additional \$350 billion extra spent so far". He also expected to see "further increases" this year and further announcement at the Summit in Vilnius on 11-12 July 2023.

At their Wales summit in 2014, NATO leaders agreed to move towards spending at least 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence within a decade. Now, the mood music within NATO—driven by security concerns about Russia, as well as longer-term pressure from the United States for European member states to spend more—suggests that this should become a minimum, rather than a

target. "It is obvious that we need to spend more," [said](#) Stoltenberg. "We should go from viewing 2% as a ceiling to seeing it as a floor. It should be obvious that 2% is a minimum".

Germany's Defence Minister Boris Pistorius [said](#) he was in favour of raising NATO's military spending target. In 2022, Germany's military spending was expected to reach almost 1.5%, while France was seen as coming close to meeting the 2%, according to NATO [estimates](#) published in June 2022. Meanwhile, US military spending is at least 3.5% of GDP.

New secret political guidance for NATO military planning

New Political Guidance for Defence Planning was agreed by the Defence Ministers. The guidance document was not made publicly available and presumably remains classified. According to the NATO website, [NATO's Defence Planning Process](#) (NDPP) involves five steps conducted over four years, of which 'political guidance' is the first (the others are: 'determine requirements', 'review results', 'apportion targets' and 'facilitate implementation'). The political guidance for defence planning document draws on higher strategic policy documents (such as the 2022 Strategic Concept) and provides more specific direction for the 14 NATO "planning domains". The political guidance includes a definition of the number, scale and nature of future NATO operations (commonly referred to as NATO's Level of Ambition), and also defines the qualitative capability requirements to support this ambition. Political guidance is normally reviewed every four years, by the [Defence Policy and Planning Committee](#) (DPPC).

The DPPC is one of NATO's extensive networks of committees. Accountability and transparency weaknesses exist at many levels of NATO but are especially pronounced at the committee level. The processes of developing the policies that NATO leaders endorse at summits or ministerial meetings—including the latest political planning guidance endorsed by Defence Ministers—largely fly under the public and parliamentary radar, and participation by nonofficial interested parties

is limited. (And note the male dominated participation, 30:1,- in the [photo](#) of an unnamed committee meeting on the NATO website). While the names of these committees may be known (if you know where to look), the names of their members usually are not made public. Nor are agendas, background papers, or draft documents. Committees generally work in private and do not provide minutes.

Speaking in generalities as to what this new planning guidance brings to the table, the NATO Secretary General said, "This reflects the reality that we live in a more dangerous world. With Russia's aggressive behaviour, the persistent threat of terrorism, and the challenges posed by China. It will drive the capability changes for the years to come. And ensure that our deterrence and defence remain strong and credible".

NATO Watch comment: The new Political Guidance for Defence Planning document needs to 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 NATO. Without proper scrutiny NATO member states risk being drawn into future operations or into developing capabilities that are inappropriate, too costly or destabilising.

In addition to the NDPP, NATO has a range of tools for engaging 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.

A new space project

Sixteen NATO member states (Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey, UK and USA), together with Finland and Sweden, launched a new initiative on 15 February that is expected to transform the way NATO gathers and uses data from space, significantly improve NATO's intelligence and surveillance, and provide

essential support to NATO's military missions and operations, and facilitate early warning of missile launches. The initiative, '[Alliance Persistent Surveillance from Space](#)' (APSS), will establish a virtual constellation – called 'Aquila' - of both national and commercial space assets (such as satellites). APSS constitutes an important element in the implementation of NATO's Overarching Space Policy adopted in 2019.

New technological commitments

At least six new major commitments to jointly develop and procure systems that aim to secure NATO's access to cutting edge technology were signed in the margins of the Defence Ministers meeting. These cover a range of areas, including Ground-based Air Defence, Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence, and Mobility/ Counter Mobility.

Three Mobility and Counter-Mobility projects were launched as part of this effort. There, the 12 participants (Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, UK and USA) agreed to work on acquiring a variety of tools to ensure NATO's ability to ensure mobility on all terrains, including [military bridging capabilities](#), solutions to connect existing bridging assets, [vehicles in support of military engineering work](#), as well as [counter-mobility assets](#).

In another initiative, the ten participating states (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom) took the next step towards developing a modular solution for Very Short, Short and Medium Range [Ground Based Air Defence \(GBAD\)](#), by launching the Modular GBAD Concept Stage valued at 20 million euros.

As part of another project, four participating nations will [connect](#) various Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear defence facilities within a single architecture with the aim of making CBRN defence capabilities more widely available across NATO.

Eight new participants have joined the [Multinational Ammunition Warehousing Initiative](#), which marks a fundamental change in the way member states manage the storage of munition stockpiles. The project is regarded as being critical for the repositioning of munitions in support of NATO's expanded multinational battlegroups on the eastern flank.

The initial Allied Future Surveillance Capability effort was also reportedly progressed (although no details were given as to the nature of that progress). The project aims to deliver a new solution by the time the current NATO E3 AWACS fleet retires in 2035.

Denmark and Sweden join European Sky Shield

Denmark and Sweden [joined](#) the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) coordinated by Germany, and launched at the previous Defence ministerial meeting in October 2022. This brings the number of participants to 17, including 15 NATO member states, as well as invitees Finland and Sweden. Among other things, the initiative aims to strengthen NATO's [Integrated Air and Missile Defence](#) by facilitating the multinational acquisition and integration of a broad range of air defence capabilities by European countries.

Protection of critical undersea infrastructure

NATO has been working on improving the protection of critical undersea infrastructure, including undersea cables and pipelines, for many years. According to the NATO Secretary General, NATO is now "taking it to the next level", and he [announced](#) the establishment of a Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell at NATO Headquarters. "It will facilitate engagement with industry and bring key military and civilian stakeholders together" he said. Further decisions to step up this effort will be taken at the Vilnius Summit in July, as well as through the NATO-EU task force on resilience and critical infrastructure.

The sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022 highlighted the vulnerability of undersea energy pipelines and communication cables. In response, NATO member states increased their military presence around key infrastructure, including with ships and patrol aircraft. In January 2023, NATO and the EU also set up a joint task force to protect critical infrastructure.

On 8 February, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh [published](#) an article claiming that a covert US military operation in June 2022 was responsible for the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines. The claim has been met with [scepticism](#) by other journalists and denials from US government officials. The claims appear to be largely based on an anonymous single source.

NATO's support to partner countries

The Defence Ministers also discussed how to improve practical support to partner countries Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Moldova that, [according](#) to the NATO Secretary General, "are vulnerable for Russian interventions". However, no information was provided on the discussions.

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