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### **The NATO Secretary General's annual report: PR gloss or a useful contribution to greater accountability?**

*This briefing examines the NATO Secretary General's Annual report published on 21 March 2023. It looks at the historical coverage of Afghanistan in earlier reports and considers whether the current coverage of NATO's support for Ukraine might contain equally dangerous omissions. It concludes by asking how the report might better contribute to increased transparency within the alliance.*

On 26 January 2012, then NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen [launched](#) the first ever '[Secretary General's Annual Report](#)' at a press conference in the NATO HQ in Brussels. At that time, NATO Watch gave it [qualified support](#), while raising a number of concerns about the usefulness and purpose of a reporting system in which the head of the organisation has free reign to choose the story to tell about itself. Over a decade later such reports have now become the norm, and the current NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg on 21 March released his 12th [Annual Report](#) covering the year 2022. And it is worth asking again, what is the purpose of such reporting?

According to the [NATO website](#), the Annual Report "reflects the evolving security environment" and covers NATO's "key decisions and activities in the previous year". It also includes the details of national defence expenditures for the member states, as well as the latest opinion polls conducted by NATO across the alliance. It is also said to be "part of NATO's commitment to transparency and accountability".

Unfortunately, instead of meeting an accountability requirement—to member parliaments and other stakeholders, including the general public—the reports are nothing more than public relations devices, contrived to illustrate NATO's wonderful achievements while remaining mute on negative features.

The Annual Reports have become much more detailed (at over 150 pages plus annexes in the latest version compared to under thirty pages for the first few iterations) and glossy, and cover everything NATO does, from general developments in capabilities and defence, to operations and missions, partnerships and organizational matters. The latest annual report covers NATO's work and self-identified achievements throughout the year, including the Madrid Summit, the decision to invite Sweden and Finland to become NATO members (even though Sweden's membership continues to be [held up](#) by Hungary and Turkey), the new Strategic Concept and NATO's unprecedented support for Ukraine.

The Annual Report also includes the details of estimated 2022 national defence expenditures for all 30 NATO allies. 2022 saw the eighth consecutive year of increases in military spending across European NATO member states and Canada. From 2021 to 2022, military spending increased by 2.2% in real terms. In total, over the last eight years, this increase added USD 350 billion for defence (pp. 50-53 in the report). The report also provides the results of NATO commissioned surveys across all 30 allies with the aim of understanding "citizens' perceptions of NATO and to monitor trends in comparison to 2021". It is hardly

surprising, given the war in Ukraine, that these surveys showed that overall support for NATO, the “transatlantic bond and collective defence” is stronger than ever (pp.130-133).

### **The skewed coverage of Afghanistan in earlier reports**

The annual reports often paint an overly optimistic view. The coverage of NATO’s operation in Afghanistan over the last decade is illustrative. In the [2012 Annual Report](#), for example, having asked whether the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) were able to maintain security once the transfer of responsibility from the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force was implemented, the report confidently asserted “developments over the past year show they can”. It then concludes that, “the ANSF are a credible and capable force, already demonstrating their ability to secure the country and population against the insurgency”. This confident assessment and the selective use of metrics to endorse it was not repeated in later Annual Reports, when more circumspect pronouncements became the norm as the picture darkened. The [2019 Annual Report](#), for example, proclaimed:

“In the midst of a volatile and complex security situation, Afghan security forces were able to protect cities, secure the presidential elections and control major roads, while increasing offensive operations against insurgents. The Afghan Special Security Forces and Afghan Air Force continued to demonstrate improvement, with the Special Security Forces increasing their ability to conduct independent offensive operations”.

The five paragraphs devoted to Afghanistan in the [2020 Annual Report](#) (published less than six months before the collapse of the ANSF), merely focused on the long-term financial support of the Afghan security forces and the pursuit of a political solution to the conflict. The [2021 Annual Report](#) summed up NATO’s 20-year military engagement in Afghanistan in a mere nine paragraphs, and concluded:

“After the end of its military mission, NATO launched a comprehensive assessment of its military and political engagement in Afghanistan. In December 2021, NATO Defence Ministers discussed in-depth the lessons learned from this engagement. The lessons NATO has learned from Afghanistan will shape the Alliance’s crisis management role in the future”.

But will they? NATO Foreign Ministers discussed the results of a “comprehensive political and military assessment” of the lessons learned from NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan in at their [Ministerial Meeting](#) in November-December 2021. None of the various internal and expert reviews that contributed to this assessment, nor the assessment itself were made public. NATO published a short 730-word [Factsheet](#) on the Afghanistan Lessons Learned Process containing a handful of broad conclusions and recommendations. This was a derisory response to a 20-year war that killed many thousands of Afghan civilians and NATO soldiers. NATO said it would continue to hold the Taliban regime accountable for what they have promised, but who is holding NATO accountable for its failed promises? Moreover, the current Annual Report makes no mention whatsoever of any lessons learnt in Afghanistan, and the country is almost entirely airbrushed from the report.

### **The same level of misplaced optimism towards Ukraine?**

Much of the latest annual report focuses on the war in Ukraine and the implications it has had on NATO. It notes that, last year, the 30 NATO allies spent roughly \$120 billion on military, humanitarian, and financial assistance to Ukraine (p.6). The United States was the largest single contributor, even though the European countries and Canada together provided over half of the overall assistance. In reflecting on Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the report notes that “President Putin’s war of aggression against Ukraine is the biggest security crisis in Europe since the Second World War. It is not only a direct threat to the existence of Ukraine

as a free and independent country, but to the entire rules-based international order". It adds that "Putin must not win. If he does, it will show that aggression works and that force is rewarded. This would be dangerous for our own security, and for the whole world" (p.6).

The report states that Russia "is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area", while noting that "NATO remains willing to keep open channels of communication with Moscow to manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation and increase transparency. NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia" (p.14). However, there is very little communication with Russia now, since the NATO-Russia Council, which is the formal avenue for talks between the NATO and Moscow, has not met since January 2022. And complicating matters further, Russia suspended its mission to NATO and ordered the closure of the NATO office in Moscow in 2021.

Decisions taken by NATO last year in response to the Russian invasion include the deployment of the NATO Response Force, consisting of 40,000 troops, in the eastern parts of the alliance for the very first time, and the agreement to establish four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia (discussed on p.16). The report also highlights the support that NATO (as opposed to bilateral assistance from member states) has provided to Ukraine through its strengthened Comprehensive Assistance Package, which includes "initiatives to boost NATO's long-term support to Ukraine and to provide the country with immediate, short-term, non-lethal military assistance" (p.18).

The Annual report also sets out the two main principles on which NATO's response to Russia's war against Ukraine has been based: "First, ensuring the security of all Allies and acting responsibly so as to avoid a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia. Second, supporting Ukraine's inherent right to defend itself, based on Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations and on the firm belief

that Ukraine's security and independence are key for Euro-Atlantic security" (p.15). NATO is right to continue balancing these two principles that have guided policy so far: on one hand, helping Ukraine counter Russia's assault; and on the other, averting a direct confrontation with Moscow. However, while the delivery of military aid has been critical in sustaining Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression, and may strengthen its hand at eventual peace negotiations, the increasing supply of more lethal arms is unlikely to either win the war or resolve its underlying causes. And seems to be increasing the likelihood of a [direct confrontation](#) with Russia. The Annual Report fails to address three key issues in relation to the war in Ukraine: the nature of the endgame; Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO; and the view from outside the transatlantic community.

First, the Annual Report offers no insights into the end game in Ukraine. The current policy seems to be a recipe for continuing the cycle of violence and destruction, with no consideration of the need for negotiations to find common ground and possible solutions. Critically, for a negotiated settlement to become a workable solution, there must first be recognition by political leaders that this is the preferred path. The Annual Report gives no indication that this is the case within NATO.

Second, another thorny issue that the Annual Report fails to consider is Ukraine's prospective NATO membership. Security assurances that minimize Russia's real or perceived vulnerability to NATO forces in the region would need to be part of a negotiation. Central to this issue is Ukraine's prospective NATO membership, which is a well-known red line for the Kremlin. In this matter the Annual Report is rather circumspect, simply noting that "Allies remain committed to supporting the eventual NATO membership" of Ukraine, in line with decisions taken at the 2008 Bucharest Summit and reaffirmed at the 2022 Madrid Summit (p.108). While NATO continues to maintain an open-door policy, the reality is that the door is closed to Ukraine, and unlikely to be opened while Ukraine remains at war. The push by eastern members of the alliance

to offer Ukraine something more at the upcoming NATO Summit in July is likely to cloud matters further. Ideas likely to be discussed include a more concrete partnership with NATO, post-war security guarantees, or a more detailed road map to eventual membership.

Third, while the report understandably perhaps puts the war centre-stage, it fails to understand why this is not the case outside of the transatlantic community, especially in the Global South. The war has revealed a sharp divergence between the way the West understands global politics and security issues, and the experiences of people in other parts of the world. Many understandably question Western outrage over Ukraine, given the atrocities from the [war on terror](#) and the failed interventions in [Iraq](#), [Libya](#) and [elsewhere](#). Moreover, the war needs to be placed within the broader global security and geopolitical challenges, including China-US relations, nuclear proliferation, and the impact of climate change. While the annual report has things to say about all of these issues, it does so through a particular virulent Western-centric lens.

## The purpose of an annual report

Annual reports are one of the key mechanisms used by government agencies, private companies and civil society groups alike to impart knowledge about their organisation in an informative, structured and cost-effective manner. Of course, the target audience, content and format often differs according to the type of entity under the spotlight, although the best annual reports usually provide detailed information about actual performance and forecasts of future needs and expectations.

How then does the Secretary General's 12th report stack up? Is it mainly PR gloss or a useful contribution to greater accountability? And who is it for? Clearly there a strong media focus, and this positive (some would say rose-tinted) account of NATO's principal achievements and challenges in 2022, is also directed at sceptics within member countries,

partner countries and other sceptics among international organizations and interested parties. The report is content rich and informative, well-written and deserves to be read more widely than it probably will be. Its main benefit is in summarising and piecing together individual disclosures and themes which otherwise might remain fragmented and dissonant. And as a regular exercise it ensures that the Secretary General and his team of advisers stand back at least once every year to review progress against stated objectives.

Annual reports should be seen as part of a larger accountability framework, co-existing with and complementary to other sources of information. Other sources of information come from pro-active public release, the internet and other open sources, including (in the case of government entities) responses to freedom of information requests. Yet despite improving certain aspects of its public diplomacy outreach, taking to social media like a duck to water, for example, NATO remains the only major intergovernmental body not to have even a basic information disclosure policy. An annual report, however edifying, does little to fill this crucial accountability vacuum, even if it does help increase understanding of the 'NATO brand' among some stakeholders.

One key omission from the annual report is the continuing absence of any proposals for public disclosure reform. Each year the Annual Report contains a few paragraphs on improving transparency. Usually these are to be found towards the end of the report (this year they were the final paragraphs, p.149). In addition to a short discussion about historical material that was released —the NATO Archive promotes transparency by enabling limited access to some NATO historical information, generally only documents that are 30 years or older (or 50 years for information related to nuclear planning and intelligence)—a number of other claims were made, with two in particular requiring clarification and context.

First, the report notes that the number of current documents made available to the public increased from 11 in 2021 to 41 in 2022,

which apparently reflects “NATO’s commitment to financial transparency and accountability”. However, this number of documents in an organization that produces thousands of documents each year is small gruel indeed.

Second, the report states that “the publicly disclosed reports by the International Board of Auditors for NATO covering the annual activities and financial statements of NATO bodies and agencies fulfil NATO’s responsibility to inform the public about its expenditures”. However, again this is only a partial picture. At the Wales Summit in 2014, following criticism from the official auditing body of the Dutch government, NATO leaders charged the organization with improving financial transparency and accountability and to report back progress at the next summit. But there has been little, if any, reporting back on financial transparency at subsequent NATO summits. The Warsaw Summit declaration (in 2016) effectively restated the earlier commitment, while the five subsequent summits (Brussels 2017, Brussels 2018, London 2019, Brussels 2021 and Madrid 2022) failed to provide any progress report in this area.

NATO’s Resource Policy and Planning Board, which is a subsidiary body of the North Atlantic Council, for the first time publicly released a five-page executive summary of its 2015 Annual Report and did so again for the 2017 Annual Report (but has not done so since). This report assesses the performance of military common funding within NATO and reviews the financial situation of the NATO Security Investment Programme and the civil and military budgets. Thus, while public disclosure of reports by the International Board of Auditors for NATO is welcome, it hardly represents fulfilment of NATO’s responsibility to inform the public about its expenditures.

In addition to essential public disclosure reform, a broader debate within NATO is needed as to the purpose of the annual report and what goes in it. More needs to be done to link forecast performance and actual performance. This requires NATO having a set of appropriate measures and robust systems to

collect the results, followed by independent (as well as in-house) analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of the information. It also requires greater public access to information. As we said 10 years ago, the Secretary General’s annual report is not an end in itself, but should be the starting point for reporting NATO’s performance story.

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