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Foreign Ministers renew support for Ukraine and discuss preparations for Vilnius Summit

A review of the informal meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Oslo, Norway, 31 May-1 June 2023

Key activities and decisions taken by the NATO Foreign Ministers:

- ⇒ It was an informal meeting of ministers and so no decisions were taken. Many of the discussions mirrored those at the [April Foreign Ministers meeting](#).
- ⇒ The ministers reconfirmed strong support for Ukraine but the path towards membership remains vague with divisions remaining among member states. The ministers discussed upgrading the existing NATO-Ukraine Commission to a new NATO-Ukraine Council.
- ⇒ Other discussions again centred on deepening cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea and the perceived need to increase military spending. At the Vilnius Summit, a new military investment pledge is likely to be approved, with 2% “as a floor not a ceiling”.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

This “informal” NATO Foreign Ministerial meeting discussed two main issues: (1) how to step up and sustain support for Ukraine, and especially how to address Ukraine's membership aspirations; and (2) preparations for the upcoming Vilnius Summit in July.

The first day (31 May) consisted of largely ceremonial events in the late afternoon and early evening, including a reception for ministers at the Royal Palace, a service to remember the victims of terrorism and extremism, and a social dinner hosted by the Norwegian Foreign Minister. The next day (1 June) began with a [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, and this was followed by [joint statements](#) by the NATO Secretary General and US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken. The ministers met in a single session that lasted two-and-a-half hours and aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, this was a closed meeting. The ministerial meeting ended 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

The Foreign Ministers once again discussed NATO's ongoing support for Ukraine. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) he expects the Vilnius Summit in July to "agree a long-term plan, a multiyear commitment to support Ukraine" in its "transition from old type soviet era doctrines, ammunition, standards, equipment to modern NATO equipment and standards". This would be in addition to the bilateral military aid that NATO member states have committed for many years.

A new NATO-Ukraine Council?

The only new development seemingly discussed by the ministers at this meeting, however, was a proposal to upgrade the existing [NATO-Ukraine Commission](#) to a new NATO-Ukraine Council—presumably akin to the [NATO-Russia Council](#) (NRC), which was established in 2002. The NRC was envisaged as a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision making and joint action, and where individual NATO member states and Russia could work as equal partners on a wide spectrum of security issues of common interest.

In April 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, all practical cooperation between NATO and Russia was suspended. However, channels of communication continued to be kept open in the NRC at the ambassadorial level and above, to allow the exchange of views, especially on the crisis in Ukraine. Since 2014, the NRC has met 11 times, with the most recent meeting taking place in January 2022. There have been no meetings of the NC since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The NATO Secretary General [described](#) the proposed NATO-Ukraine Council as a "significant step", that would allow Ukraine to sit "at the table as equals and discuss key issues for our security".

The door remains open to NATO membership, but.....

On Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations, however, opinion within the alliance remains divided. Stoltenberg [repeated](#) the mantra that "NATO's door remains open" and that "Russia does not have a veto". He also glossed over the divisions by repeating that "all allies agree that Ukraine will become a member of NATO", but that "the most important thing now is to ensure that Ukraine prevails as a sovereign and independent state".

Divisions remain over the speed of Ukraine's accession, with some NATO member states fearing that a hasty move could bring the alliance closer to direct confrontation with Russia. But the NATO Secretary General expressed confidence that consensus would be found on the way forward and [stressed](#) "we are making concrete steps" and Ukraine "is much closer to NATO now, then just a few years ago". Nonetheless, Ukraine's application is likely to take years and certainly won't happen while Russia is occupying parts of its territory.

Due to a lack of consensus within NATO, no date for membership for Ukraine has been set. After Russia claimed to have annexed more Ukrainian land on 30 September 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky symbolically reapplied for an accelerated NATO membership. But given the ongoing lack of consensus on the issue, NATO continues to kick the issue into the long grass by simply reconfirming the alliance's open-door policy.

Kyiv's NATO campaign was on full display both before and during the informal NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in Oslo. At the annual [GLOBSEC forum](#) in Bratislava (29-31 May), attended by senior politicians and officials from across Europe, Olha Stefanishyna, Ukraine's deputy prime minister for European integration, [said](#): "Vilnius should give a clear signal that politically, Ukraine is invited to join NATO". And on the 1 June, at a [meeting](#) of European leaders in Moldova, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky once again pressed his case for Ukraine to be part of NATO. He said he would seek a clear invitation

from NATO for Ukraine to join at the Vilnius Summit and urged the alliance to provide security guarantees if membership was not possible for now. France and Germany both reportedly [expressed](#) support for the concept of security guarantees. French President Emmanuel Macron said Ukraine needed to be given clear and strong security guarantees at the summit.

And in an [interview](#) published in the Wall Street Journal on 3 June President Zelenskyy doubled down on his push to join NATO saying that “If we are not acknowledged and given a signal in Vilnius, I believe there is no point for Ukraine to be at this summit”. He added, “how many [Ukrainian] lives is one sentence at the Vilnius summit worth?”. However, a concrete political gesture during the Vilnius Summit that puts Kyiv on a clear path to membership continues to seem unlikely. Given the lack of consensus within NATO on this issue, serious discussion of membership will continue to be deferred until after the end of the war with Russia.

The Vilnius Summit

According to the Secretary General’s briefings and press conference, four other issues (in addition to Ukraine) that will be on the agenda in Vilnius came up for discussion: changes to deterrence and defence; the need to increase military spending; enhancing cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific region; and Sweden’s accession to NATO.

Changes to deterrence and defence posture

Important new decisions on deterrence and defence are expected at the Vilnius Summit. These will build on the enormous adaptation that has taken place in NATO since 2014, with according to Jens Stoltenberg, the “biggest reinforcement of our collective defence in a generation”. Although this issue was alluded to in the NATO news release it is unclear as to whether the Foreign Ministers even discussed it. This is a concern since at the Vilnius Summit NATO’s political leaders will be asked to approve [thousands of pages of secret military](#)

[plans](#) that will detail for the first time since the Cold War how the alliance would respond to a Russian attack. Most of these plans were drawn up behind closed doors by the permanent [Military Representatives](#) at NATO headquarters in Brussels and other NATO and national defence officials, without any prior scrutiny by parliamentary bodies and independent experts.

Increasing military spending

Nonetheless, the ministers reportedly discussed how to invest more in their militaries, presumably to implement these plans. Very little detail of those discussions was made public, but the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that he expected that at the Vilnius Summit, member states would agree “that 2% of GDP for defence is not a ceiling, something we strive towards, but it will be a floor, a minimum for what is needed to meet obligations as a NATO ally”.

This raises the question as to how much military spending is sufficient? Military spending by NATO members [totalled \\$1232 billion](#) in 2022, which was 0.9 per cent higher than in 2021. NATO collectively accounted for 67% of global military expenditure.

Justifying greater military spending when government budgets have already been ravaged—by the Covid-19 pandemic and a growing global economic recession, in part due to the war in Ukraine—is going to be a hard sell. This is especially the case as the burden may well fall on those least able to carry it (i.e., the evidence [suggests](#) that high military spending exacerbates existing inequalities within societies). Moreover, while some European NATO member states probably do not need to spend more, the United States certainly needs to spend less on the military. The [pandemic of Pentagon spending](#) is set to continue with a 3% percent increase in the coming year, in line with the White House’s \$886 billion military spending proposal.

Strengthening partnership with Indo Pacific partners

For the second time in NATO's history, all four leaders of the alliance's Asia Pacific partners—Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea—are slated to attend the Vilnius Summit. Deepening partnerships with those four countries has been a constant theme in recent ministerial meetings, largely as part of a growing [confrontational approach to NATO-China relations](#). It is unlikely that the discussions at this informal meeting added anything new to the debate.

Sweden's future membership

The NATO Secretary General [reiterated](#) the importance of making progress on the accession of Sweden: "it is in the interest of the whole of NATO to have Sweden as a full member", he said. While acknowledging that Türkiye has some "legitimate security concerns, because no other ally has suffered more terrorist attacks than Türkiye", Stoltenberg also said that "Sweden has demonstrated that it is delivering on the trilateral memorandum that was signed at the Madrid Summit". Similarly, Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom told reporters in Oslo "We have fulfilled all our commitments". However, Türkiye's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu [said](#) Sweden is yet to do so in relation to its anti-terrorism commitments.

To break this impasse, the NATO Secretary General met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 4 June. However, it was unclear whether any progress was made, since at a news conference after the closed-door meeting at Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul, Stoltenberg effectively [repeated](#) what he had said in Oslo: "Türkiye has legitimate security concerns. No other NATO ally has faced more terrorist attacks, but Sweden has taken significant concrete steps to meet Türkiye's concerns".

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