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Summit prepares ground for a more militarized Europe, future Ukrainian membership and expansion into the Indo-Pacific

Analysis of the NATO Vilnius Summit, 11-12 July 2023

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Key decisions:

- The summit adopted an **official text**: the 90-paragraph [Vilnius Summit Communiqué](#).
- A package of measures was agreed “**to bring Ukraine closer to NATO**”, including (a) a multiyear programme of assistance to ensure full interoperability between the Ukrainian armed forces and NATO; (b) creation of a NATO-Ukraine Council; and (c) reaffirmation that Ukraine will become a member of NATO “when allies agree and conditions are met”. However, it was agreed to remove the requirement for a Membership Action Plan.
- President Zelensky joined the summit for the **inaugural meeting of the new NATO-Ukraine Council**. After initially expressing disappointment with the Summit outcome, Zelensky said what Ukraine got from the summit was “unambiguous clarity that Ukraine will be in NATO”.
- The G7 (and not NATO) launched a framework for bilateral negotiations to provide long-term **security assistance commitments** to Ukraine.
- The most comprehensive **regional defence plans** since the end of the Cold War were approved to counter the two main “threats”: Russia and terrorism. The plans cover the Atlantic and European Arctic; the Baltic region and central Europe; and the Mediterranean and Black Sea. They have not been made public or independently assessed.
- To execute the new defence plans, NATO is putting 300,000 **troops on higher readiness**, including substantial air and naval combat power.
- **Sweden** agreed a new bilateral Security Compact with Türkiye that assuaged Ankara’s previous objections, and the Nordic country will become NATO’s 32nd member state after the Accession Protocol is ratified by the Turkish and Hungarian parliaments.
- NATO will establish its first **Special Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism** and will update its Policy Guidelines and Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism. A comprehensive review of the situation in NATO’s southern neighbourhood (the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions) has been instigated for presentation at the next NATO Summit in 2024.
- A new **Defence Production Action Plan** was agreed “to accelerate joint procurement, boost interoperability, and generate investment and production capacity”.
- A new **defence investment pledge** was agreed to spend a minimum of 2% of GDP annually (i.e., the pledge has gone from being a ‘ceiling’ to a ‘floor’). Military spending across European allies and Canada in 2023 is already anticipated to

increase by 8.3%, the ninth consecutive year of increases.

- A new set of **Alliance Resilience Objectives** were agreed. Although allies are meant to “use these objectives to guide the development of their national goals and implementation plans”, and to promote “societal resilience”, the objectives have not yet been made public.
- To address the threat to **critical undersea infrastructure**, it was agreed to establish a Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure and to set up a network of relevant actors to improve information sharing and exchange best practice.
- NATO’s approach to cyber issues was enhanced by the endorsement a new concept to enhance the contribution of **cyber defence** to NATO’s overall deterrence and defence posture, and a commitment to new national goals to further strengthen national cyber defences. Neither the concept nor the goals were made public. A new Virtual Cyber Incident Support Capability (VCISC) was launched “to support national mitigation efforts in response to significant malicious cyber activities”. The first NATO Cyber Defence Conference will be held in Berlin in November 2023.
- Three major reports were released with the aim of contributing to increased understanding of the impact of **climate change** on NATO’s strategic environment.
- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania signed a Declaration of Cooperation on **cross-border airspace**.
- A commitment was made to deepen cooperation with **Indo-Pacific partners** Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea that participated in a NATO Summit for the second time. No new measures were announced.
- The **next NATO Summit** will be held in Washington, D.C. in 2024 (for NATO’s 75th anniversary), followed by a meeting in the Netherlands in 2025.

Introduction: the agenda

The NATO Vilnius Summit took place on the 11-12 July 2023. It was the fourth NATO summit since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the first held virtually on 25 February 2022, just one day after the attack, followed by meetings in Brussels and Madrid. [Security measures](#) in Vilnius, Lithuania (only 32 km from the border with Belarus and 151 km from Russia), were higher than for earlier summits, including about 1,000 allied troops and three German Patriot air defence units deployed to protect the venue.

This was to have been Jens Stoltenberg's last summit as Secretary General, but NATO member states [agreed](#) on 4 July to extend his mandate by a further year, until 1 October 2024. (That decision was endorsed by NATO Heads of State during the Vilnius Summit). In a [pre-Summit press conference](#) on 7 July, Stoltenberg said, "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues to rage on. For 500 days, Moscow has brought death and destruction to the heart of Europe, seeking to destroy Ukraine and divide NATO". The Secretary General indicated that Ukraine’s future would be front and centre in the discussions: "At the summit, we will make Ukraine even ... stronger and set out a vision for its future", Stoltenberg said.

On the eve of the summit the NATO Secretary General held a [joint press conference](#) with the President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda. Later in the day, following a meeting with the President of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Stoltenberg held another [press conference](#) to announce that the obstacles to completing Sweden's accession to NATO had been removed (see section III. below).

On the 11-12 July, running parallel to the Summit, a [NATO Public Forum](#) was held. The Forum was co-organised by NATO, the Eastern Europe Studies Centre, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Munich Security Conference and the Atlantic Council. It consisted of a series of panel discussions, debates, and interactions sessions on various topics from the NATO Summit agenda.

Day 1 of the Summit

After making some [opening remarks](#) at the Public Forum, Stoltenberg welcomed the Prime Minister of New Zealand, [Chris Hipkins](#), and the President of South Korea, [Yoon Suk Yeol](#). The Summit began in earnest with the NATO Secretary General delivering a [doorstep statement](#) where he reiterated that the Summit would make “important decisions” and send “a clear message to Ukraine that we stand by Ukraine for as long as it takes”. This was followed by the scheduled arrivals and doorstep announcements of leaders, although only the arrivals of the Prime Minister of Australia, [Anthony Albanese](#), and the US President, [Joe Biden](#), were afforded coverage in the official Summit programme.

After an official photo of the NATO Secretary General and the Heads of State and Government (only five of whom are women), the first session of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) at the level of Heads of State and Government took place (with the inclusion of Sweden). Aside from some [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, the NAC meeting took place behind closed doors. The NAC meeting focused on increasing practical and political support to Ukraine, further strengthening deterrence and defence, including new plans and forces for the defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, and a more ambitious defence investment pledge. The [Vilnius Summit Communiqué](#) was published at the close of the NAC session, and the NATO Secretary General held a [press conference](#) in which he outlined what had been agreed.

In the early evening there were two further NAC meetings: one at Foreign Ministers level (with Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, and the EU’s Deputy Secretary General for Common Security and Defence Policy) and the other at Defence Ministers level (with Sweden). Both sessions were closed with no readouts of what was discussed. The day concluded with two social dinners: at the level of Heads of State and Government, hosted by the President of the Republic of Lithuania (but [reportedly](#) skipped by US President Biden due to his need for rest),

and the other at the level of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Defence.

Day 2 of the Summit

The second day of the Summit began with a ‘[high-level women’s breakfast](#)’ with the participation of NATO female Foreign and Defence Ministers and other invited guests. [Opening remarks](#) were provided by Irene Fellin, the NATO Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security. Following the arrival of national leaders, the NATO Secretary General joined the Prime Minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, to make some [opening remarks](#). A group photo was then taken with Heads of State and Government of the Indo-Pacific Nations. A final meeting of the NAC took place at the level of Heads of State and Government, with Sweden, Indo-Pacific Partners (Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea) and the EU. Aside from some very brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, this was another closed meeting.

After the NAC meeting, the NATO Secretary General held a bilateral meeting and [joint press conference](#) with President Zelensky. This was followed by the inaugural meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council, at which the [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General were the only part of the meeting that was open to the media. The penultimate event was a [signing ceremony](#) of the Operational Memorandum of Understanding of the NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence. The Summit concluded with a final [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

The following more detailed analysis of key aspects of the Summit draws on a combination of the above links, a Summit [agenda](#) document published by NATO, wider press reporting of the Summit and NATO Watch insights in attempt to fill the information gaps. The remainder of this briefing discusses key developments at the Summit under the following seven headings:

- I. Ukraine membership and security assurances

II. Strengthening NATO's long-term deterrence and defence:

- the new regional defence plans
- nuclear weapons and arms control
- enhancing resilience

III. Sweden's accession

IV. The challenge of China and NATO's expansion into the Indo-Pacific

V. Military investments and burden-sharing

VI. Combating climate change

VII. Combatting terrorism in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel

I. Ukraine membership and security assurances

Backstory

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in a major escalation of the armed conflict that began in 2014. Ukraine has now mounted a counteroffensive, but progress is slow and attritional. NATO member states are fully committed as co-belligerents in the war, having provided significant quantities of weapons to Ukraine, including main battle tanks, missiles, ammunition and most recently and controversially, [cluster munitions](#). At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest the alliance stated that Ukraine (and Georgia) would become members but avoided any specific timetable or pathway. Ukraine formally requested an accelerated procedure for NATO membership in September 2022. Hence, the focus at this Summit was on how to define NATO's future relationship with Ukraine.

President Zelensky had repeatedly called for Kyiv to receive an invitation into the alliance at Vilnius, and his chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, [said](#) on 21 June that Ukraine expected to be invited to join NATO with an "open date" at the summit. Ukraine was wary of any less-binding security "assurances", given Russia's invasion had already circumvented the [Budapest Memorandum](#) (under which international powers committed to keeping the country safe in exchange for Kyiv giving up its Soviet-era nuclear weapons). Despite support for membership among some, mainly eastern members of the alliance (and many

transatlantic [foreign policy experts](#)), NATO remains divided on the issue. And it was clearly [signposted](#) in advance of the Summit that NATO leaders would not issue a formal invitation for Ukraine to join the alliance. Instead, the discussion was expected to focus on how to move Ukraine 'closer to NATO'.

President Zelensky [secured](#) Türkiye's crucial backing during his meeting with President Recep Erdoğan in Istanbul on 7 July, but the United States and Germany remained more [cautious](#). President Joe Biden [said](#) on 17 June that the United States did not support a fast-tracked process for Ukraine and reiterated on 9 July that Ukraine is "[not ready](#)" for NATO membership. Instead, consensus seemed to be [building](#) around a [UK compromise proposal](#) to allow Kyiv to skip the Membership Action Plan (MAP) that sets out political, economic and military targets candidates have to meet and that other eastern European nations (but not Finland and Sweden) had to pass before joining NATO.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

NATO leaders agreed once again to eventually extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the alliance, but failed to provide a timeline for when that would happen. In the [Summit communiqué](#), the NATO leaders declared: "We reaffirm the commitment we made at the 2008 Summit in Bucharest that Ukraine will become a member of NATO, and today we recognise that Ukraine's path to full Euro-Atlantic integration has moved beyond the need for the Membership Action Plan". This changes Ukraine's membership path from a two-step process to a one-step process. "Allies will continue to support and review Ukraine's progress on interoperability as well as additional democratic and security sector reforms that are required" the communiqué added.

The new package also involved two other elements to bring Ukraine closer to NATO. First, a new multi-year assistance programme for Ukraine to enable the transition from Soviet-era to NATO standards, training and doctrines, and to help rebuild Ukraine's security and defence sector. Second, a new

NATO-Ukraine Council was established for crisis consultations and decision-making (and the inaugural meeting of the Council took place on 12 July with President Zelensky). According to [Stoltenberg](#) the Council “is a much stronger, much more important political entity” that differs from the previous Commission because “it is a body that can make decisions and we meet as equals” at various levels of government. In addition, several NATO member states announced new military assistance for Ukraine. France and Germany [agreed](#) to send long-range missiles, as well as armoured vehicles and ammunition. And a group of 11 member states [pledged](#) to begin training Ukrainian pilots to fly US F-16 combat aircraft.

Overall, the NATO Secretary General [described](#) it as “a strong package” and “a clear path” towards NATO membership. However, the compromise initially elicited a disappointed response from President Zelensky, who [tweeted](#) that he had come to Lithuania hoping the alliance would be an organization that “does not hesitate, does not waste time and does not look back at any aggressor ... is that too much to expect?”. Earlier in the day, as news of the compromise language began to emerge, he [tweeted](#) that “it’s unprecedented and absurd when [a] time frame is not set neither for the invitation nor for Ukraine’s membership”. “Vague wording about ‘conditions’ is added even for inviting Ukraine. It seems there is no readiness neither to invite Ukraine to NATO nor to make it a member of the Alliance”, the president wrote.

The next day, however, prior to the first meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council, Zelensky adopted more [conciliatory](#) language: “We understand that someone is afraid of talking about our membership now, because nobody is willing to have a world war, which is logical and understandable. I want everyone to understand that we are civilized and adequate people. Ukraine is fighting and it truly understands that Ukraine cannot be a member nation to NATO as long as the war continues in our territory”.

In part this was due to the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK. and the USA) on the sidelines of the Summit, issuing a [joint declaration](#) pledging long-term security assistance for Ukraine. (It may have also been partly due to some [criticism](#), in particular from the UK Defence Minister [Ben Wallace](#) and US national security adviser Jake Sullivan, that Ukraine should [show more gratitude](#) for the help it has received from the West).

“Today we are launching negotiations with Ukraine to formalize ... our enduring support to Ukraine as it defends its sovereignty and territorial integrity, rebuilds its economy, protects its citizens, and pursues integration into the Euro-Atlantic community”, the declaration said. The G7 commitments are intended “to help Ukraine build a strong, capable defence” President Biden [said](#). In short, the declaration lays the groundwork for individual G7 nations to negotiate their own arrangements with Ukraine for military and financial support, while keeping such commitments separate from NATO. Zelensky [tweeted](#) his approval: “While we are on our way to NATO membership, Ukraine needs effective security guarantees on the way to the Alliance. We now have an appropriate package of guarantees, and I ask you to support and join it”. And the Ukrainian president struck a positive note in his regular [remarks](#) on 13 July, saying: “For the first time since independence, we have formed a security foundation for Ukraine on its way to NATO”.

Analysis

As expected, there was no consensus for giving a country in the middle of a war Article 5 guarantees (making an attack on any NATO member an attack on all). Instead, the issue was fudged once again with the promise to Ukraine of accelerated membership once things look better.

The creation of a NATO-Ukraine Council, and the removal of the MAP from Ukraine’s NATO accession are undoubtedly concrete steps that give Ukraine slightly more leverage in the NATO bureaucracy. And although the communiqué’s convoluted wording and the Ukrainian President’s initial public expression

of frustration and disappointment, highlighted the tension in NATO-Ukraine relations, the announcement of the G7 security assistance on the final day of the Summit salvaged the appearance of unity within the alliance. The G7 commitment is a halfway house measure designed to tide Ukraine over until it can join NATO. Whether involving the G7 nations in a permanent flow of arms to Ukraine will be enough to both convince President Putin to end the current war and deter any future aggression against Ukraine remains an open question.

Two things seem clear, however. First, the arrangements will entrench Ukraine as a Western-armed vanguard of NATO's forward posture in Europe and lead to further expansion (and profits) for European and US military companies. Second, as Anatol Lieven [argues](#), the repeated, commitment to future NATO membership "makes it far more difficult for the West or Ukraine to pursue one path to a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine War, namely a Ukrainian treaty of neutrality with strong security guarantees" — something that President Zelensky [proposed](#) as part of a peace settlement in March 2022.

Unsurprisingly, Russia criticised the NATO and G7 commitments. Russian spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) it was "potentially very dangerous" for the West to give Ukraine security guarantees, while the Russian Foreign Ministry [said](#) the Summit showed that NATO was reverting to "Cold War schemes" and added that it would respond "in a timely and appropriate manner, using all means and methods at our disposal".

II. Strengthening NATO's long-term deterrence and defence: (a) the new regional defence plans

Backstory

To fulfil NATO's three core tasks (deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security, as set out in the [2022 Strategic Concept](#)), the alliance

employs a mix of mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities, complemented by space and cyber capabilities. At successive summits since 2014, NATO leaders have agreed a range of measures to enhance their deterrence and defence posture, including the establishment of an [enhanced Forward Presence](#). This Forward Presence was initially based on four multinational battlegroups in Poland and the Baltic states, and then, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was agreed to expand it to include four more in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. NATO also previously recognised that credible deterrence required these relatively small multinational forces to be underpinned by a robust reinforcement strategy.

The 2022 Madrid Summit [further strengthened](#) conventional deterrence on NATO's eastern front in four ways: (a) a massive increase in the NATO Response Force (NRF) from 40,000 to 300,000 troops with the expectation that the NRF would be placed on high readiness during 2023; (b) more pre-assigned forces, with the eight battlegroups in the eastern part of the alliance (the Forward Presence) increased up to brigade levels—about 3,000 to 5,000 troops in addition to local forces—with foreign forces pre-assigned to specific locations, but not permanently deployed; (c) more pre-positioned heavy weapons, logistics and command-and control assets; and (d) an increase in the US long-term military presence in Europe. Since February 2022, the United States had already deployed or extended over 20,000 additional forces to Europe in response to the Ukraine crisis, adding additional air, land, maritime, cyber, and space capabilities, bringing its total commitment to more than 100,000 service personnel across Europe. At the Madrid Summit President Biden [announced](#) additional long-term commitments to Europe, including a permanent US 5th Army Corps headquarters in Poland—the first permanent US forces on NATO's eastern flank—and an enhanced rotational force presence in Poland, Romania and the Baltic region.

On the 8 July Poland began [moving](#) more than 1,000 troops and almost 200 units of equipment to the east of the country amid rising concern that the presence of Wagner fighters in Belarus could lead to increased tension on its border.

Further strengthening of conventional deterrence on NATO's eastward flank was expected in Vilnius, as well as agreement of a new "family" of regional defence plans. 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. At the May [meeting](#) of NATO's most senior generals, the [Chiefs of Defence](#), in a format known as the [NATO Military Committee](#), some initial outlines of the plans were made public for the first time. (On criticism of the opaqueness of this process, see [here](#)). Türkiye [reportedly](#) blocked earlier approval of the plans over the wording of geographical locations such as Cyprus.

NATO officials [briefed the media](#) on 3 July about the new defence plans. Work on the plans started in 2018, based on the assumption that Russia and terror groups were the two main threats. In 2019, a new NATO military strategy was agreed, and then in 2020, the deterrence and defence of the Euro Atlantic area (DDA) concept was agreed to deter and defend against those two threats. Then in 2021, the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept, was agreed, which looks at technological and demographic changes, and how to meet those threats in the future. The regional plans involve more detailed planning on what is required to be ready to deter and defend against those threats.

There are three regional plans: The High North and the Atlantic (led by Joint Force Command Norfolk, in the United States); Central (covering the Baltic to the Alps, and commanded from Brunssum in the Netherlands); and South-East (covering the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and commanded from Naples). Each plan

reportedly sets out in more detail what is required given the geography of those regions to deter and defend against the threats. From those plans, force requirements are then drawn up setting out the capabilities required in all domains—space, cyber, land, maritime, and air—to execute those tasks. It is expected to take several years to execute the plans. All these military plans and concepts remain classified.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

As expected, NATO's political leaders approved the three regional plans, containing thousands of pages of secret military strategies that will detail for the first time since the Cold War how the alliance would respond to a Russian or a terrorist attack. The summit communique (para 5) also reiterated that Russia "is the most significant and direct threat" and that terrorism "in all its forms and manifestations, is the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens". It also commits to strengthening NATO's collective defence "against all threats, from all directions", with "significant measures" to further enhance NATO's deterrence and defence posture in all domains" (para 34). The key to achieving this will be "a new generation of regional defence plans, building on our existing strategic and domain-specific plans", with a commitment "to fully resource and regularly exercise these plans to be prepared for high-intensity and multi-domain collective defence".

The communique also states that the new NATO Force Model agreed at the Madrid Summit, is already "delivering a larger pool of dedicated combat-capable forces, including forces at high readiness, improving our military responsiveness, and harnessing regional expertise and geographic proximity". Added to this, NATO is also establishing "a new multinational and multi-domain Allied Reaction Force, which will provide more options to respond swiftly to threats and crises in all directions". NATO's command and control infrastructure will also be strengthened.

In terms of NATO's Eastern Flank, the communique reaffirmed the decisions at the

Madrid Summit, including the scaling up of existing battlegroups to brigade-size units “where and when required, underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements, prepositioned equipment, and enhanced command and control”. It also confirmed that the eight multinational battlegroups are now in place and committed to demonstrating the ability to scale up NATO’s military presence “through robust live exercises across the Eastern Flank of the Alliance”.

Analysis

The headline was the political green light given to move forward with the three regional defence plans. Although these documents remain classified, we are meant to be reassured by the fact that they were previously approved by the Chiefs of Defence and were then endorsed by political leaders at the Summit. These plans will have a significant impact on future investments and developments of national armed forces. Hence, political support for them ought to be broader than rubber stamping by Heads of State in Vilnius. While it will take several years for the plans to be fully implemented, they set NATO and member states on a path from which it will be difficult to deviate. They need to be open and visible, with the reasons for likely outcomes clearly outlined. Otherwise, how can we be confident of moving in the right direction, especially given all the costs and risks of accelerating militarization?

The Central plan covering the Baltic region and central Europe is clearly the most significant given the ongoing war in Ukraine and the threat perceptions of NATO’s eastern members. During the Cold War, Germany used to be NATO’s eastern flank. Three decades later, the eastern flank is the Baltics, Poland and Slovakia. As at November 2022, the total [number of troops](#) for the eight battle groups along the eastern flank was just over 10,000. The Summit reaffirmed plans to scale up to brigade level (about 4,000 to 5,000 troops) in each of those eight countries, with clearly defined tasks and pre-positioned equipment. NATO also aims to have up to 300,000 troops ready to move to its eastern flank within 30

days, although this seemingly remains [largely aspirational](#).

In addition, NATO has steadily increased its control of the Baltic Sea, and with Finland and Sweden in NATO, Russia will be left with limited access to its crucial maritime gateway for the Russian fleet with bases near St. Petersburg and in the heavily militarized Kaliningrad exclave.

Much expert opinion (see, for example, Wess Mitchell in [Foreign Affairs](#)) argues that NATO, and particularly Western European allies, are not doing enough to protect the eastern territories that came into NATO nearly two decades ago. Overall, however, the ongoing changes to the Forward Presence posture appear to be a proportionate and measured confidence-building approach that meets the security concerns of member states on the eastern flank without further escalating the conflict with Russia. It will mean more troops along the Russian border in the Baltic States and Poland, more equipment, weapons and ammunition sent to the region, and the setting up a system of rapid reinforcements.

Moreover, the Russian threat also needs to be kept in perspective. NATO is much stronger than Russia on all important military, political and [economic](#) indicators, with the exception of nuclear weapons where there is rough parity. In terms of military bases abroad, for example, Russia [operates](#) about 20 significant military facilities overseas, while the United States alone has at least [750 bases](#) in about 80 countries. During a 4 July [hearing](#) in the UK Parliament, British Chief of the Defence Staff Admiral Tony Radakin said that Russia had lost nearly half its combat capability in Ukraine, adding "Last year it fired 10 million artillery shells but at best can produce 1 million shells a year. It has lost 2,500 tanks and at best can produce 200 tanks a year".

(b) Nuclear weapons and arms control

Backstory

The nuclear component of NATO's deterrence strategy is mainly provided by US nuclear weapons, backed up by the 'independent' nuclear forces of the UK and France. In addition, NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies on US nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe, under so-called [nuclear sharing arrangements](#).

In the run up to the Vilnius Summit, three factors increased the salience of the nuclear issue. First, the steadily growing risk of a direct military confrontation between Russia and the United States/NATO included [concerns](#) of escalation to the use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. (Although US officials have frequently said that there was no indication that Russia planned to use nuclear weapons to attack Ukraine). Second, in February Russia suspended participation in the [New Start treaty](#), the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia. Third, Russia has [begun](#) to station tactical nuclear weapons in neighbouring Belarus, seemingly mirroring NATO's own nuclear weapons sharing arrangements. In response, Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki [stated](#) that Poland wanted to join Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Türkiye in hosting US nuclear weapons.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

The communique condemned "Russia's announced intention to deploy nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable systems on Belarusian territory", as well as "Russia's irresponsible nuclear rhetoric and coercive nuclear signalling" (para 16). But while NATO stated it would continue to "monitor all of these developments and adapt its posture as necessary" (para 17), there were no explicit changes to the alliance's nuclear posture.

The communique also reiterated the usual justifications for NATO's own nuclear capability ("to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression"), that the circumstances in which NATO might have to

use nuclear weapons "are extremely remote", and that it was seeking "to create the security environment for a world without nuclear weapons" (para 43).

In terms of arms control and disarmament, the communique repeats the often-made claim that "NATO has a long track record of doing its part on disarmament and non-proliferation", citing the reductions in the number of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe after the end of the Cold War (para 50). But despite remaining "collectively determined to uphold and support existing disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation agreements and commitments", no new NATO-led initiatives have been forthcoming in decades. Instead, it is "Russia's violations and selective implementation of its arms control obligations and commitments" that are blamed for the deterioration of the broader security landscape (paras 51-52). In addition, NATO reiterates its opposition to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which it (incorrectly) claims "is at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture, risks undermining the NPT, and does not take into account the current security environment" (para 53).

Analysis

The Russia-Belarus nuclear sharing agreement has brought a new and possibly precarious development in the deteriorating security situation in Europe. It is positive, therefore, that NATO resisted calls for (or was unable to reach consensus on) a change in its nuclear posture. Deployment of US nuclear weapons to Poland, for example, would be deeply destabilising.

However, much else in the communique is the usual myopic NATO approach to weapons of mass destruction: it is other actors—Russia (paras 16-17 and 51), China (para 55), Iran (para 56) and North Korea (para 57)—that are criticised for investing in nuclear and missile capabilities, with little transparency or regard for international norms and commitments. Of course, there is no mention of the nuclear weapon modernisation programmes of the United States, UK and France—the assumption

being that these are [responsible nuclear-armed states](#). However, US [spending on nuclear weapons](#) is expected to climb by \$140 billion over the next ten years (to a total of \$634 in total over the 2021-2030 period), while in 2021 the UK [lifted the ceiling](#) on its nuclear weapons arsenal.

Moreover, the situation in Ukraine has exposed the system of [nuclear deterrence as highly unjust and precarious](#). In other words, all nuclear armed states (including those within NATO) pose a threat to peace and security. And as most of the world's states have concluded, the goal of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament is a safer and more secure path to take.

But when it comes to a central element of the means to create such an environment—nuclear arms control—NATO continues to be [‘missing in action’](#). The alliance continues to treat nuclear arms control as an afterthought rather than a guiding principle, and the Summit was bereft of new ideas for strengthening it. With global stockpiles of nuclear weapons [increasing](#) for the first time since the end of the Cold War, and the risk of such weapons being used the greatest it has been in decades, NATO appears to be part of the problem.

(c) Enhancing resilience

Backstory

A key theme in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept is the need to enhance 'resilience' against military and non-military threats and challenges to security, as a national responsibility and a collective commitment rooted in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty. To these ends member states have agreed to establish, assess, review and monitor collective resilience objectives to guide nationally developed resilience goals and implementation plans. A NATO Resilience Committee has been assessing the state of resilience every two years since 2018.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

The summit communique reaffirmed that "national and collective resilience are an essential basis for credible deterrence and

defence" (para 61) and noted that new "2023 Alliance Resilience Objectives" had been agreed, building on the 2021 [Strengthened Resilience Commitment](#). The Resilience Objectives are expected to strengthen NATO and allied preparedness against strategic shocks and disruptions, as well as boost national and collective ability "to ensure continuity of government and of essential services to our populations, and enable civil support to military operations, in peace, crisis and conflict". The objectives are intended to guide the development of national goals and implementation plans. Finally, the communique also commits NATO to work towards "identifying and mitigating strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies, including with respect to our critical infrastructure, supply chains and health systems", working with partners, such as the EU.

Analysis

Security and resilience objectives within NATO are becoming increasingly complex and dynamic. A range of actors and issues constantly test national and collective resilience, seeking to exploit the openness, interdependence and connectivity of transatlantic societies and economies. There is some voluntarily sharing of data on national policies and plans, but it remains difficult (even for insiders within NATO) to generate a comprehensive picture of the fragmented and uneven resilience building efforts, policies, investments and activities across the alliance. The latest Resilience Objectives need to be published by NATO to enable an informed and wider debate on the priorities for moving forward with this important policy strand.

Given that effective communication is [essential](#) to building resilience, then more must be done to create awareness and understanding of NATO plans among the public. Not only would this increase trust in national and NATO responses, but greater open access to such plans would also serve as a deterrent to those that threaten us. Had Moscow understood more clearly the ability of Ukraine to resist the Russian military invasion, for example, it may have been deterred from launching it in the first place.

III. Sweden's accession

Backstory

Sweden's historic move to join NATO following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been blocked by Türkiye and Hungary. At the 2022 Madrid Summit, Sweden (and Finland) signed a 10-point [Trilateral Memorandum](#) outlining a path for accession through progress on Türkiye's security concerns. After Finland officially became a member state on 4 April 2023, the United States and other NATO member states started to exert [pressure](#) on Türkiye (and Hungary) to accelerate approval for Sweden prior to the Vilnius summit.

On 6 July Jens Stoltenberg hosted a "constructive" meeting of senior officials from Türkiye, Sweden and Finland, and on 9 July President Biden spoke by phone with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and "conveyed his desire to welcome Sweden into NATO as soon as possible", the White House said. President Biden was [reportedly](#) trying to complete a four-nation deal that would lead to Türkiye allowing Sweden into NATO in return for the [sale of US F-16 combat aircraft](#) to Ankara, on the condition they would not be used to threaten Greece. But Erdoğan threw another obstacle in the way of Biden's plan by announcing he wanted Türkiye's stalled application to join the EU to be included in the package.

Stoltenberg then met with President Erdoğan and Swedish Prime Minister Kristersson in Vilnius on 10 July—and that is when the breakthrough was made.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

During their meeting on the 10 July, on the eve of the Summit, the three leaders—Stoltenberg, Erdoğan and Kristersson—reached a new understanding, as set out in a [press statement](#) following the meeting. The statement underlined that Stockholm had changed laws, expanded counterterrorism cooperation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and restarted arms exports to Türkiye. It also said that Ankara and Stockholm agreed to create a "new bilateral Security Compact" and that Sweden will present a "roadmap as the basis of

its continued fight against terrorism in all its forms". Sweden and Türkiye also agreed to step up economic cooperation, through the Türkiye-Sweden Joint Economic and Trade Committee (JETCO), and "Sweden will actively support efforts to reinvigorate Türkiye's EU accession process, including modernisation of the EU-Türkiye Customs Union and visa liberalisation," the statement said. Finally, Stoltenberg also agreed to create a new post of "Special Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism" at NATO. In turn, Türkiye agreed to "transmit the Accession Protocol for Sweden to the Grand National Assembly, and work closely with the Assembly to ensure ratification".

Stoltenberg [declared](#) that the Summit was already "historic before it has started because we have now in place, Swedish membership". He also [described](#) the function of the Special Coordinator for terrorism as coordinating NATO's various counterterrorism efforts and work strands across the alliance (see section VII below).

Analysis

Although a precise date by when the Turkish parliament must approve Sweden's NATO membership was not agreed, it is now almost certain to occur before the end of the year. In his first post-Summit public comments on the issue on 12 July, President Erdoğan [said](#) that the final decision rested with the Turkish parliament and that Sweden needed to take more steps to win parliamentary support, without giving specifics. He also said parliament would not take up the matter until October. But it seems very unlikely that further conditions will be set by Türkiye. And with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán promising that his country would not be the last holdout against Sweden's membership, an enlargement of NATO to 32 member states now appears to be a formality. The inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO represents a major geopolitical shift in Europe.

In terms of [Turkish interests](#), Erdoğan appears to have made progress in three areas: a tougher restrictions on Turkish Kurds in Sweden; lifting of the de facto US Congress

veto on the US sale of F-16s; and some minor concessions towards EU membership.

IV. The challenge of China and NATO's expansion into the Indo-Pacific

Backstory

The first minor reference to China in a NATO [statement](#) was at the London summit in 2019, but transatlantic concerns have accelerated since then, driven largely by US perceptions that democracies are in an existential confrontation with autocracies. NATO's recent emphasis on China is in part the realization of President Biden's [strategy](#) to build a coalition of like-minded nations to confront China over its activities. The Pentagon has been publishing [annual reports](#) on China's growing military capabilities since 2000, and sees it in the longer term as posing a greater strategic threat than Russia. China's military budget—the second largest in the world after the United States, although still less than 35% of Washington's—has grown for 28 consecutive years, and reached an [estimated \\$292 billion](#) in 2022 (an increase of 4.2 per cent compared with 2021).

While some European NATO states, principally France and Germany, continue to object to describing China as a 'threat' due to strong economic ties with Beijing, there is clearly a growing transatlantic convergence in attitudes towards China. In June, for example, on the eve of a visit to Washington, Germany's defence minister [dutifully](#) announced his understanding of "European responsibility for the Indo-Pacific" and the importance of "the rules-based international order" in the South China Sea.

NATO's tilt towards China was also reflected in the attendance of partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea at the Summit. [Discussions](#) are ongoing with Japan about opening a NATO office—the first of its kind in Asia—to enable Indo-Pacific discussions with NATO's regional security partners. Going forward NATO was expected to increase exchanges of information with these partners

and encourage more interoperability with their armed forces.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

Despite concern over the growing military threat from China, the country is not identified in the Summit communiqué as an adversary. However, it is notable that a wide range of concerns about China's behaviour were highlighted, including the country's nuclear build-up, its coercion, hybrid and cyber operations and for using "political, economic, and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power", as well as the use of "economic leverage to create strategic dependencies" and efforts to control key technologies (para 23).

The communiqué also calls out the "deepening strategic partnership" between China and Russia (para 25) and calls on China "to play a constructive role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, to condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, to abstain from supporting Russia's war effort in any way, to cease amplifying Russia's false narrative blaming Ukraine and NATO for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and to adhere to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. We particularly call on the PRC to act responsibly and refrain from providing any lethal aid to Russia". At the same time, the communiqué makes clear that NATO is open to engagement with China.

Finally, the communiqué stresses that "the Indo-Pacific is important for NATO", and welcomes the contribution of partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea to security in the Euro-Atlantic (para 85). It also commits to a further strengthening of "dialogue and cooperation to tackle our shared security challenges, including on cyber defence, technology and hybrid, underpinned by our shared commitment to upholding international law and the rules-based international order".

Analysis

The NAC meeting with the leaders of the four Indo-Pacific Partners—Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—repeated a format

first used in Madrid in 2022. But apart from some general commitments to work more closely with them on issues such as cybersecurity, maritime security and new technologies, very little of substance emerged. While there is a growing concern within NATO about China, there remain divisions as to whether the alliance is the appropriate forum to address them. One clear result of this internal tension is the delay in NATO opening an office in Tokyo, with France in particular, opposed to the idea.

Nonetheless, the Summit communique reiterated recent pronouncements that on the one hand, China is not an adversary and NATO should continue to engage with Beijing, while on the other, stressing that China's increasing assertiveness affects NATO security. However, while the communique and the NATO Secretary General's remarks had very little to say about the former, as noted above, a lot was said about the latter. In addition, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that "China is increasingly challenging the rules-based international order, refusing to condemn Russia's war against Ukraine, threatening Taiwan and carrying out a substantial military build-up". He also claimed that "China's nuclear modernisation is unprecedented in speed and scale" and was being "carried out with no transparency".

However, many of these statements about China, could equally be applied to the United States, which at various times since the Cold War has [sought to remake the world by force](#) and created vast humanitarian crises through its military interventions. There is rightly widespread and justified disquiet at China's behaviour in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and concern at the possible consequences of the self-assertive nationalism increasingly displayed since Xi Jinping came to power. However, the sweeping hostility to China shown in the Summit communique seems like a disproportionate response to those concerns. Not surprisingly, Chinese officials heavily [criticised](#) the NATO Summit. Wang Wenbin, a spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said at a routine press conference on 12 July that "We urge NATO to

stop groundless accusations and provocative remarks against China", and that it should "give up the wrong approach of seeking absolute security, stop messing up Europe and stop trying to destabilize the Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world".

There is a real danger of NATO's approach entrenching a systemic three bloc rivalry between China, Russia and NATO-EU-US, with all the attendant risks – from nuclear war to missed opportunities to address the existential threat of climate change and future pandemics. To avoid NATO being drawn into a great power competition, further public and parliamentary scrutiny of the motivations, advantages and shortcomings of this strategy is needed.

V. Military investments and burden-sharing

Backstory

The burden-sharing debate has dominated many previous NATO summits. The reluctance of many European member states to spend more on defence has been a major grievance of most US presidents. NATO leaders pledged in 2014 to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

Before the Summit, NATO released [expenditure data](#) showing that military spending among its 31 members was expected to increase by 8.3% in real terms in 2023, the highest growth rate in nine successive years of growth. Eleven countries are projected to exceed the 2% of GDP target, led by Poland on 3.9% and the US on 3.49% with the UK tenth on 2.07%. France is expected to spend 1.9% and Germany 1.57%. In his [press conference](#), the NATO Secretary General said that, since 2014, European allies and Canada had spent an extra \$450 billion on defence. He also noted that in 2014, only three allies spent 2% of GDP on defence. "This year, 11 allies [will] reach — or exceed — the target", he said. "We expect this number will rise substantially next year".

The Summit communique commits the member states to invest “at least” 2% of GDP annually on defence, adding, “we affirm that in many cases, expenditure beyond 2% of GDP will be needed in order to remedy existing shortfalls and meet the requirements across all domains arising from a more contested security order” (para 27). The communique also commits member states to invest “at least” 20% of defence budgets on major equipment, including related Research and Development (para 28).

Analysis

This tweaking of the language of the 2014 investment pledge aims to make NATO's current military spending target of 2% of GDP a *minimum requirement* rather than a goal to aim for. However, there are two fundamental flaws in this approach. First, justifying greater military spending when government budgets have already been ravaged—by restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and because of 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). Second, and the ongoing elephant in the room, while some European member states probably do need to spend more, the United States certainly needs to spend less on the military. A cut of 10% in the [pandemic of Pentagon spending](#), for example, would release more than \$80 billion for other more pressing needs.

VI. Combatting climate change

Backstory

NATO has recognized climate change as a risk multiplier that heightens other security threats and emphasized the need to green NATO militaries to maintain their technological edge. In June 2021, the alliance agreed a new [Climate Change and Security Action Plan](#), which included four key commitments: an annual Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment; an adaptation strategy; a mitigation

strategy; and an outreach strategy. At the 2022 Madrid Summit NATO leaders agreed a new methodology to map military greenhouse gas emissions and concrete targets to cut NATO emissions. The aim is cut emissions by NATO bodies and commands by at least 45% by 2030, and to move towards Net Zero by 2050. A NATO [Centre of Excellence for Climate Change and Security](#) is due to open in Montreal later in 2023.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

The Summit communique essentially reiterates previous language that “Climate change is a defining challenge with a profound impact on allied security facing present and future generations”, and a commitment to “integrate climate change considerations into all of NATO’s core tasks”, as well as contributing to the mitigation of climate change, by “significantly cutting greenhouse gas emissions by the NATO political and military structures and facilities” and by “improving energy efficiency, transitioning to clean energy sources, and leveraging innovative next-generation clean technologies, while ensuring military effectiveness and a credible deterrence and defence posture” (para 69).

In addition, NATO released three major reports to increase understanding of the impact of climate change on NATO’s strategic environment, missions and operations:

- NATO’s 2023 [Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment](#), which demonstrates how extreme weather conditions create operational stress and shorten the life cycles of military equipment, generating additional maintenance and replacement costs. The assessment focuses on four geographical regions (Europe, North America, the Middle East and North Africa/the Sahel, and the High North), and four of NATO’s operational domains. It uses three specific case studies to underpin its recommendations on adapting to a climate changed future operating environment: the impact of extreme heat on NATO Mission Iraq; the effects of rising sea levels and storms on Norfolk Naval Station in the US;

and those of flooding on the Naval Air Station in Sigonella, Italy.

- The [Compendium of Best Practice](#) provides concrete examples of efforts to adapt to climate change through the introduction of relevant policies and procedures into national armed forces while reducing their environmental footprint.
- The [Greenhouse Gas Emissions Mapping and Analytical Methodology](#) provides guidelines and tools to calculate emissions from NATO's civilian and military facilities.

Analysis

Detailed scrutiny of the three reports published in Vilnius is beyond the scope of this briefing. In general, NATO's work on climate change is to be commended, even though it seems likely to be undermined by the twin pressures of raising military spending (see above) and the increases in military exercises as part of efforts to contain China and Russia. Moreover, the poor quality of emissions [reporting](#) in this sector means that no one actually knows whether military carbon emissions are falling or not. According to a [2022 estimate](#), militaries account for about 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions. NATO has [reportedly](#) created a methodology for its members states to report their military emissions, but neither the methodology nor any of the resulting data has been made public (and it is not mentioned in NATO's [2023 Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment](#)).

A key step is thus for member states to calculate the specific carbon footprints of their militaries and then report these figures. More difficult will be persuading all member states to carry out similar climate and carbon reduction actions when climate policies are not equally prioritised across the alliance.

While NATO is encouraging cooperation on climate change mitigation and adaptation, the focus up until now has primarily been on the resulting security risks and the promotion of energy saving in member states' armed forces. This 'greening of the military' agenda shifts responsibility away from NATO member states

to do more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for which they are collectively responsible.

VII. Combatting terrorism in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel

Backstory

While Russia's war against Ukraine dominated the lead up to the Summit, other member states—principally France, Italy, Spain and the UK—have been pushing NATO to address challenges on Europe's southern flank, especially the rise of instability in Africa. Italy currently hosts [NATO's Joint Force Command base in Naples](#), which in 2017 opened a south hub focusing on terrorism, radicalization, migration and other issues emanating from North Africa and the Middle East. The 2022 Strategic Concept identified "conflict, fragility and instability" in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel as one of the main threats to the security of NATO member states.

These concerns have taken on an added dimension with both Russia and China extending their influence in the region. The Wagner Group has been active in central and North Africa and the Middle East. In Mali, for example, [Wagner soldiers](#) are filling a void created by the exit of former colonial power France. Similarly, the United States has been [warning](#) that China is trying to build a military naval base on Africa's Atlantic coast, although currently Beijing only operates one acknowledged foreign military base, located in Djibouti in East Africa.

What was agreed in Vilnius?

The Summit communique tasked the NAC to "update NATO's Policy Guidelines and Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism, and reassess, in consultation with our regional partners, the areas where NATO can provide civil-military assistance to partners in this field" (para 21). In NATO's southern neighbourhood, where "Russia is fuelling tensions and instability", the NAC is tasked with launching "a comprehensive and deep reflection on existing

and emerging threats and challenges, and opportunities for engagements with our partner nations, international organisations, and other relevant actors in the region, to be presented by our next Summit in 2024” (para 22).

Analysis

This topic raises multiple, complex and overlapping security issues, and a detailed analyses of these is beyond the scope of this briefing. However, several broad points can be made. First, Africa is increasingly being treated as an arena for geopolitical and commercial competition by countries from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North America. It is often unclear whether former colonial European powers are any less exploitative than some of the newer entrants to the region.

Second, most Western forces deployed in Africa are there to train and build capacity in local, national or subregional forces, largely with the aim of countering transnational jihadist groups. But their record to date is [mixed](#) at best. The dominant military counterterrorism approach has often [failed](#) to address the influence of foreign jihadist movements or deeper community grievances. Abuses by security force and a perceived lack of access to justice and protection has also driven recruitment into extremist organizations and other armed groups.

Third, it remains unclear what NATO will bring to the table. France, after a long tradition of maintaining a significant military footprint in sub-Saharan Africa, is [significantly reducing](#) its military presence. Meanwhile, independent [estimates](#) suggest at least 6,500 US military personnel are deployed across 13 countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region. Moreover, the United States [deploys](#) small teams of Special Operations forces as part of an obscure and secretive funding authority that allows the US to conduct counterterrorism operations “[by, with, and through](#)” foreign and irregular partner forces around the world. Hence, it is hard to imagine any national combat forces in Africa coming under NATO command—especially given the legacy of the 2011 [Libyan intervention](#). Instead, further capacity building

support programmes for new and existing partners seem more likely, as well as further logistics and airlift support to the African Union.

Fourth, if NATO is to become directly involved in military training and capacity-building in Africa, the right lessons need to be applied from earlier missions, especially those in Afghanistan. But none of the various internal and expert reviews that made up the lessons learned process in Afghanistan have been made public. The main findings were published in a 730-word NATO [Factsheet](#) in December 2021, but the conclusions and recommendations were barely detailed enough to fit on the back of a proverbial envelope. (For further analysis see [here](#)).

Finally, before enhancing its levels of engagement in Africa, it is vital NATO improves the transparency of its operational metrics, and that parliamentary oversight in member states is significantly strengthened. Key policy documents—NATO’s Counter-Terrorism Policy Guidelines and a comprehensive action plan that defines and determines NATO’s role in the international community’s fight against terrorism—remain classified. These need to be in the public domain and widely debated.

Conclusions

Most of the media and expert commentary on the outcomes of the summit has focused on (and generally [criticised](#)) the decision not to give Kyiv a date for joining the alliance. Important as this decision was, it obscures a raft of other proposal and plans that were announced and that have not been given anywhere near enough scrutiny.

Concerns remain that member countries’ parliamentarians and publics are being kept in the dark about the content of the new regional military plans: one of the most opaque but consequential processes within NATO. Proper parliamentary scrutiny is needed to ensure that the decision-making processes are clear, that the people taking decisions are held accountable for those decisions and to ensure that there are opportunities for national

parliaments to influence and improve the plans. However, none of the 31 NATO member states carries out systematic parliamentary scrutiny of NATO proposals before they are endorsed at summits, and post-parliamentary review of NATO decisions is sporadic and ineffective. Legislators know little about what goes on in NATO intergovernmental working groups, and their limited knowledge makes it hard if not impossible for them to scrutinize their government's involvement in NATO effectively or hold anyone to account for decisions taken within the alliance.

This long-standing [democratic deficit](#) within the alliance needs to be addressed. NATO should be adopting an information openness policy consistent with the access to information laws already in place in the alliance's 31 member states, including guidelines for proactive publication of core information, a mechanism by which the public can file requests for information, and an independent review body for hearing appeals against refusals or failures to make information public within a short timeframe. However, the issue of improving transparency and accountability in NATO was once again overlooked at the Vilnius Summit.

The failure to unearth a [successor](#) to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg illustrates the ways in which the war in Ukraine has concealed NATO's internal divisions and structural challenges. Despite the organisation's prominence and centrality to the war and to European security, many of the alliance's important decisions were effectively deferred until after the war. However, with the 2024 US presidential election also looming on the horizon, and the possibility of Donald Trump's return to the White House, all the current talk of upholding the 'rules-based international order' may end up in the wastebasket.

Moreover, NATO's claims to be the principal defender of a rules-based international system were already rather debateable. (The case for the prosecution includes: the US-UK decision to invade Iraq in 2003 under a contested UN authorization; the failure to close the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, the use of

torture under previous US administrations, the continued use of presidential authority under 'war on terrorism' directives to carry out lethal drone strikes in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, and the exposure by Edward Snowden of the way US intelligence services used the dominance of US technology companies over the internet to carry out espionage). Of course, this does not mean that such a system is not worth defending – it is. But it also suggests that the rules need to be applied consistently and extensively across the alliance, and where appropriate, revised in cooperation with other like-minded states to ensure that they remain relevant.

Unfortunately, the Vilnius Summit continues NATO on the path set out in Madrid and is likely to lead to a further deterioration in relations between the world's 'great' powers. It is a path that seeks to protect the interests of some of the most militarised states in the world rather than one that protects humanity. At a time when humanity and the planet face an array of profound and pressing common challenges, it is hard to escape the conclusion that international cooperation to address those challenges likely became even harder as a result of the Vilnius Summit.

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