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Foreign Ministers renew pledges to Ukraine, fail to condemn atrocities in Gaza and look towards Washington Summit in 2024

A review of the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs
Brussels, 28-29 November 2023

Key activities and decisions taken by the NATO Foreign Ministers:

- ⇒ The NATO Secretary General welcomed the extension of the pause in hostilities between Israel and Hamas, but failed to condemn Israel's actions in Gaza or call for a permanent ceasefire.
- ⇒ The Ministers reiterated their support for Ukraine's path to NATO membership (but the path is vague and divisions remain). Recent financial pledges from member states include a new training centre for Ukrainian pilots, and the provision of more air defences and ammunition.
- ⇒ The NATO-Ukraine Council met and issued a short [statement](#) reiterating existing commitments. The work programme for the Council in the next 12 months includes energy security, innovation and interoperability.
- ⇒ On the "challenges that China presents to Euro-Atlantic security", the NATO Secretary General once again stressed that "China is not our adversary" but said that we "must be clear-eyed about the impact of China's coercive policies on our security".
- ⇒ The Foreign Ministers approved NATO's first-ever quantum strategy, details of which remain classified.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

This NATO Foreign Ministerial meeting discussed six main issues: (1) the Israel-Hamas war; (2) the Russia-Ukraine war; (3) strategic competition with China; (4) tensions in the western Balkans; (5) Sweden's stalled membership application; and (6) technological innovation.

On the 27 November the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg held a [pre-ministerial press conference](#). The first day (28 November) began with a [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General, and this was followed by two bilateral meetings between the NATO Secretary General and the Foreign Ministers of Türkiye and Sweden. [Joint statements](#) were then made by the NATO Secretary General and US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken. The ministers met in two sessions of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General in the first of these, they were both closed meetings. Sandwiched between the two NAC meetings was a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General. The first day ended with a bilateral meeting between the NATO Secretary General and the UK Foreign Secretary, for which no details were released.

The second day began with [joint statements](#) by the NATO Secretary General and the Minister

of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, and this was followed by a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council in Foreign Ministers session. Aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General and a subsequent [statement](#), the session was closed to the public. The ministerial meeting ended with another [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.

1. The Israel-Hamas war

Speaking ahead of the Foreign Ministers meeting, the NATO Secretary General [welcomed](#) the extension of the pause in the hostilities in Gaza and said that this has allowed for much needed relief for the people in Gaza, the release of more hostages, and the delivery of more humanitarian aid. He also hoped that it would be possible to further extend the pause, but made no mention of a permanent ceasefire. In his remarks a day earlier, he [called](#) on Iran to “rein in its proxies” after a series of strikes against US forces in Iraq and Syria.

It is unclear what exactly the ministers discussed in relation to the Israel-Hamas war and the wider situation in the Middle East, given that concerns among several member states differ, markedly in the case of the United States and Turkey. The NATO Secretary General [emphasised](#) that the alliance “has never played an active role in the Israel/Palestine conflict”, but has “a presence” in the wider region, including a training mission in Iraq and defence capacity building efforts with several regional partners. The main area of unity appeared to be in preventing the conflict from escalating to a bigger regional conflict and sending out a warning to Iran.

In the Q&A session at the press conference on 28 November, the NATO Secretary General was [asked](#) whether NATO operated double

standards in criticising Russia’s violations of human rights in Ukraine, compared to those of NATO partner Israel in Gaza. The NATO Secretary General responded by calling for international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians to be respected in all conflicts: “and that has been the message, both on the conflict in Gaza, but also of course, when it comes to other conflicts we see around the world”. Nonetheless, Stoltenberg highlighted important differences between the situation in Gaza and the situation in Ukraine: “Ukraine never posed a threat to Russia. Ukraine never attacked Russia. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was an unprovoked invasion, full scale invasion of another country. So of course, Ukraine has the right to self defence against an unprovoked attack and to uphold territorial integrity, and also to support Ukraine’s right for self defence is something that all Allies agree on”.

In the Q&A session in the final press conference the next day, the Secretary General was [asked](#) his opinion as to whether Israel is breaching humanitarian law in its fight against Hamas. Stoltenberg sidestepped the question, as have many Western leaders, by speaking again in general terms of the need to respect international law and protect civilians.

2. Support for Ukraine

More pledges of support

The Foreign Ministers once again discussed NATO’s ongoing support for Ukraine. Amid growing questions over NATO unity— a White House proposal to send Ukraine about \$61.4 billion additional emergency aid is stuck in the Republican-led House of Representatives, while an EU plan to provide Kyiv with €50bn in budget support is also mired in internal wrangling—the Foreign Ministers pledged to sustain support for Ukraine and its bid to join the alliance. The NATO Secretary General [warned](#) that it would be “dangerous” to curtail support to the war and he predicted that US assistance would continue, not only to protect American security interests but also because it’s “what we have agreed”. “It’s our obligation to ensure that we provide Ukraine with the

weapons they need, because it will be a tragedy for Ukrainians if President Putin wins” Stoltenberg added. The US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken echoed these sentiments [saying](#), “We will be strongly reaffirming our support for Ukraine as it continues to face Russia’s war of aggression”.

Stoltenberg [welcomed](#) recent announcements by member states of additional support to Ukraine, including additional financial support from Germany (€8 billion) and the Netherlands (€2 billion), the opening of an F-16 training centre for Ukrainian pilots in Romania, and a coalition of 20 countries to coordinate efforts to provide more air defence to Ukraine. In terms of total aid to Ukraine, Europe has outspent the United States: the latter has given about \$77 billion to Ukraine compared with more than \$110 billion from the former.

More weapons required

Addressing Ukraine’s offensive, Stoltenberg [said](#) that Kyiv is “inflicting major losses on Russia,” has recaptured 50 per cent of the territory that Russia had seized, and that it has “prevailed as a sovereign independent nation”. “This is a big win for Ukraine”, the Secretary General said, adding that Russia is “weaker politically, economically and militarily” than before the war.

However, Ukraine urgently needs more ammunition and other weapons, with NATO supplies apparently [too low](#) to donate much more. Moscow, on the other hand, is said to be stockpiling missiles for a winter attack on Ukraine. “Russia has amassed a large missile stockpile ahead of winter, and we see new attempts to strike Ukraine’s power grid and energy infrastructure, trying to leave Ukraine in the dark and cold”, Stoltenberg [said](#) at the final press conference.

Russia is also reportedly receiving frequent shipments of munitions from [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#), including Iranian one-way attack drones and North Korean artillery shells and rockets. Russia [launched](#) its biggest drone attack of the

war on 25 November, targeting Kyiv’s energy infrastructure.

President Zelensky in his [address](#) on 28 November said his country’s air defences were successful in intercepting Russian missiles and drones in the latest wave of attacks, but said Kyiv still needed more help to get through the tough winter ahead. “There is a clear need to develop and reinforce our mobile firing groups, as well as to get all highly effective air defence systems [from western partners],” Zelensky said..

Meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council

Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba attended the first meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council (NUC) at foreign ministers’ level. The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that the NUC approved an “ambitious work programme for the next year” that includes energy security, innovation and interoperability, as well as discussing “the situation on the ground”. In a [statement](#) following the NUC meeting, NATO allies vowed to “remain steadfast in their commitment to further step up political and practical support to Ukraine” and said they “will continue their support for as long as it takes”.

“We are increasing our interoperability with NATO,” Kuleba [said](#), adding “We are pretty much becoming a de facto NATO army, in terms of our technical capacity, management approaches and principles of running an army”. According to the NUC statement, the alliance and Ukraine “are already working and taking decisions together, as equals, on a broad range of issues, including interoperability, energy security, innovation, cyber defence, and resilience. We will further develop these work strands”.

The reforms that Kyiv should embrace before it gains full membership were also discussed. The NATO Secretary [cited](#) Ukraine’s priority reforms as “the fight against corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and supporting human rights and minority rights”, but also said Ukraine would also need to modernize its military to NATO standards. “I’m actually impressed by Ukraine’s commitment to

implement reforms, to modernize their society in the midst of a full-scale war” Stoltenberg said. “It helps them to be a stronger country fighting Russia as an aggressor”.

Stoltenberg also claimed that “Ukraine is closer to NATO than ever before”, but when asked what Kyiv can expect in terms of progress towards membership at the Washington summit, he said: “It's too early to say....”, but that “all allies agree that in the midst of a war full membership is not possible. But of course, we will continue to look to address how we can move Ukraine and NATO even closer together as we prepare for the Washington Summit”.

The weaponization of migration

The ministers also discussed the growing crisis on the Russia-Finland border, following Moscow’s actions in recent weeks to facilitate the arrival of migrants at Finland's border. These tensions have [already prompted Finland to close its border](#). Norway, Estonia and other states have said they are considering doing the same. The NATO Secretary General [said](#) “this is yet another example of how Russia is using migration as a tool to try to put pressure on other countries in Europe”. But while “NATO stands in solidarity with our Ally Finland”, Stoltenberg added, that border control is a national responsibility in conjunction with EU agencies, and he was “absolutely confident” that Finland could deal with this and there had been no request for an increased NATO presence.

Russia “mortgaging its future to China”

The NATO Secretary General claimed that one of the consequences of the war in Ukraine is that Russia is mortgaging its future to China. When pressed by a journalist to provide some evidence for this claim, he replied: “We see the economic lines. We see how Russia becomes more and more dependent on China. For financing, for commodities, and also for key commodities for the defence industry. And also the fact that Russia has not [been] able to export energy in the same way they did before to Europe, which was the main and most important market, not least for natural gas. That makes them even more dependent on

China. So yes, year by year, Moscow is mortgaging their future to Beijing and this is one of the examples on how Russia is becoming more and more weak economically as a result of this war”.

3. Strategic competition with China

The ministers also addressed the “challenges China presents to Euro-Atlantic security”. The NATO Secretary General welcomed recent discussions between China and certain member states, underlining that “dialogue is important”. “China is not an adversary but Beijing’s actions challenge our security, and we must work together to respond”, he [said](#).

Highlighting that “the challenges we face are global”, Stoltenberg [stressed](#) the need to work more closely with partners, including in the Indo-Pacific, “to stand up for our values and interests”. However, it is unlikely that the discussions at this meeting added anything new to the debate.

4. Tensions in the Western Balkans

The Foreign Ministers also discussed the situation in the Western Balkans, and especially the recent violence in northern Kosovo and “divisive and secessionist rhetoric in Bosnia-Herzegovina”. The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that NATO was examining a more permanent increase of troop numbers in the region to keep the peace, in addition to the [1,000 extra troops](#) already deployed to Kosovo. “Stability depends on all sides choosing dialogue and diplomacy over conflict and chaos”, he added.

Stoltenberg further [elaborated](#): “The message is that Priština and Belgrade have to engage in good faith in the EU-facilitated dialogue. Kosovo is an example of how NATO and the European Union are working very closely together. The EU is in charge of the diplomatic efforts. We are present with thousands of troops on the ground”. He also supported the proposal for an association of Serb majority

municipalities as “a way forward to try to define the solution and to make progress within the EU-facilitated dialogue”.

5. Sweden’s NATO ratification

It had been hoped that Sweden's ratification would have been completed in time for an accession ceremony to take place on the sidelines of the Foreign Ministers meeting. But Türkiye and Hungary’s pledge to ratify Sweden as NATO’s 32nd member state remains unfulfilled. The parliaments of both countries have stalled in approving Sweden’s membership. Türkiye has previously raised concerns about Stockholm’s human rights protections of Kurdish P.K.K. militants, whom much of the West considers terrorists. And Hungary is largely waiting for Turkey to move on approving Sweden.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan [reportedly](#) told NATO counterparts that he was working hard on Sweden's NATO ratification which is currently being debated by the Turkish parliament. For ratification, the bill needs to be approved by the Turkish foreign affairs commission before being put to a full parliament vote. Erdogan would then sign it into law to conclude the process.

“The membership of Sweden is highly crucial for the entire alliance,” [said](#) Elina Valtonen, the Foreign Minister of Finland, which joined NATO as a full member in April 2023. The NATO Secretary General [called](#) on Türkiye and Hungary to complete the ratification process for Sweden’s membership of NATO as soon as possible, saying “the time has come”.

6. Technological innovation

The Secretary General announced that NATO Foreign Ministers had approved the alliance’s first-ever quantum strategy. “Quantum technologies can strengthen our cyber security and capabilities. But they can also be used to crack it, the NATO Secretary General [said](#), adding “Our new strategy will help us to seize the opportunities presented by quantum technologies, while preventing competitors

from using these technologies against us”. NATO’s quantum strategy remains classified, with few details publicly available.

Quantum technology is a class of technology that works by using the principles of quantum mechanics (the physics of sub-atomic particles). Quantum technologies are dual-use technologies, and as such are of interest to the military and security industries and governmental actors. Quantum technology promises improvements to a vast range of everyday systems, including more reliable navigation and timing systems, more secure communications and more powerful computing. Quantum sensors have the potential to revolutionize military operations by providing unprecedented levels of precision and accuracy. For example, quantum sensors could detect the specific location of an enemy missile launch or identify the signature of a nuclear weapon.

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