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NATO Foreign Ministers discuss further support for Ukraine with echoes of the long war in Afghanistan

**A review of the informal meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs
Prague, 30-31 May 2024**

Key takeaways from the meeting:

- NATO Foreign Ministers agreed that providing support to Ukraine should remain a top priority as preparations continue for the Washington Summit in July
- Final decisions will be taken at the summit, but “significant progress” was reportedly made in three areas: NATO taking a greater coordination role in providing equipment and training to Ukraine; the Secretary General’s proposed multi-year financial pledge for Ukraine; and Ukraine’s path to NATO membership.
- Some NATO member states have lifted the restrictions attached to the use of certain weapons they supplied to allow Ukraine to use them to strike targets inside Russia. However, opinion within NATO remains divided on this issue.
- Open-ended pledges by the NATO Secretary General to support to Ukraine “for as long as necessary” mirror similar pledges made during the 20-year Afghanistan war.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

This annual ‘informal’ meeting of foreign ministers, where they meet somewhere other than NATO headquarters in Brussels, is designed to allow ministers to speak more openly. In 2022 they met in Berlin, last year in Oslo, and in 2025 they will convene in Ankara. As expected, no formal decisions were taken, and instead views were exchanged at a dinner on 30 May and then at a working session the following day that lasted 3.5 hours.

The forthcoming summit in Washington, D.C., on July 9–11 was the main topic of discussion, with three areas in particular up for discussion: strengthening deterrence and defence, long-term support to Ukraine, and NATO’s global partnerships, especially NATO’s deepening partnerships in the [Indo-Pacific region](#). NATO prefers issues to be settled and agreed on, at least informally, before a summit to avoid any last-minute surprises for the heads of state when they meet.

On the 30 May the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Czech Prime Minister made [joint press statements](#). This was followed by a [keynote speech](#) by Stoltenberg at the Conference ‘75 Years of NATO: How to keep in on track?’, in which he argued that NATO enlargement “has been one of the really big successes of NATO” and one that “helped to transform Europe and the Czech Republic”,



Doorstep statement by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the informal meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers, Prague, 30 May 2024 – Credit: NATO

which is celebrating the 25th anniversary of joining NATO. The day ended with a working dinner for the ministers at Prague Castle.

The next day (31 May) began with a [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General, and this was followed by the informal ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC). Aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General and the Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský it 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.

1. Further support for Ukraine

NATO member states have provided huge support to Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Recently, for example, Belgium [announced](#) that the first batch of 30 F-16s combat aircraft would be delivered before the end of the year, while [Spain](#) and [Sweden](#) announced new packages of more than one billion euros each for air

defence, artillery and other military equipment for Ukraine. These came on top of the much-delayed US decision of [\\$61 billion](#) in military assistance to Ukraine. In his [speech](#) on 30 May Stoltenberg claimed that "NATO allies have provided 99% of the military support to Ukraine", including ammunition, artillery, air defence and battle tanks. He highlighted the Czech-led Ammunition Initiative, which is buying ammunition from the international market to deliver to Ukraine.

However, the NATO Secretary General also stressed that "the reality is that what we have done is not enough. And the reality is also that over the last months, we have seen serious delays in the provision of ammunition, military support and serious gaps, for instance, when it comes to air defence and ammunition". Hence NATO has been exploring ways to bolster support for Ukraine, with three ideas top of the agenda:

- undertaking a greater role in coordinating the provision of security assistance and training;
- a multi-year financial pledge (as proposed by the NATO Secretary General); and
- lifting restrictions on the use of some of the weapons provided.

Gaining the consent of Hungary for any of these measures is likely to be problematic. In April, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó [insisted](#) that "Hungary will reject any

proposal that would transform it into an offensive alliance as this would lead to the serious danger of escalation”, adding “This isn't Hungary's war and it isn't NATO's war either”. While final decisions will be made at the Summit in July, the current state of play with each of the three proposals, as well as the status of Ukraine’s NATO membership application, are discussed below.

Coordination of military support and training

For the past two years, the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, a gathering of about 50 nations coordinating weapon deliveries to Kyiv, has been led by the United States, with meetings mainly taking place at the US air base at Ramstein in western Germany. A proposal for NATO to take over the coordination of the Contact Group from the United States was discussed when the Foreign Ministers last [met in April](#). By taking a greater coordination role in providing equipment and training to Ukraine, Stoltenberg said that NATO would “provide more predictability for Kyiv and address both immediate and longer-term needs”.

It is unclear whether this will make much of a difference, however, and in particular, whether it will be more successful in persuading countries to send military equipment to Ukraine. In the case of air defences, for example, few countries have indicated that they are prepared to send them, in part because there is a shortage of suitable systems (see section 2 below).

In terms of training assistance, Germany, Poland and the UK have been training Ukrainian troops for the past two years on their own territory. One option would be for NATO to coordinate more or even put everything under NATO. The situation is even more sensitive when considering the option of deploying NATO or NATO member state military trainers on the ground in Ukraine (see [NATO Watch Briefing 114](#)). There were NATO trainers in Ukraine for several years before and even in the run-up to Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in February 2022. Some countries, notably Estonia and France, have not ruled out deploying noncombat troops to

western Ukraine as trainers, while some experts [suggest](#) deploying Western special forces in advisory and training roles, although neither option seems likely.

Stoltenberg's €100B multi-year plan for Ukraine

Deciding who pays for future military aid to Ukraine is likely to be controversial, especially given the reluctance of some members of the US Republican Party to approve more aid to Ukraine. Ahead of the July Summit, the NATO Secretary General is pushing the NATO member states to commit to giving Kyiv \$100 billion for the next five years. He made this [proposal in April](#), with the aim of taking the politics and uncertainty out of military aid to Ukraine (especially in the context of upcoming US presidential elections). However, details as to who would contribute what have still to be agreed.

“The plan is a bit confusing”, an Eastern European official [said](#) to AFP on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue. France has previously indicated that it prefers to make defence contributions to Ukraine through the EU rather than NATO, while German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is unwilling to spend more than has already been set aside under the country's *Zeitenwende* (“[turning point](#)”) pledges in February 2022.

In his [speech](#) on 30 May, the NATO Secretary General said that, “such a multi-year commitment will help the Ukrainians defend their country, but also sends a very important message to Moscow that we are there for the long haul. And that's important, to convince them that they cannot wait us out. We are there to stay”.

Lifting restrictions on weapons use

NATO only provides non-lethal support to Ukraine, like transport vehicles, fuel, combat rations, medical supplies and demining equipment. This is done through a [Comprehensive Assistance Package](#). However, many NATO member states provide arms and ammunition to Ukraine bilaterally or in groups. Some that do so impose restrictions on their

use. The United States, for example, placed limits on the use of US long-range weapons such as the army tactical missile system (ATACM). Earlier in the war, one of the main reasons was the fear that President Putin would order the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the battlefield in Ukraine.

While these caveats on arms supplies to Ukraine are essentially national decisions, there have been growing calls from Ukraine, some NATO member states, the [NATO Parliamentary Assembly](#), [retired generals](#) and from the NATO Secretary General to lift them. And indeed, some of these restrictions have now been eased or reduced.

In a marked policy shift, while the NATO ministerial meeting was taking place, both the United States and Germany quietly authorized the limited use of their respective weapons inside Russia. The US decision was [reported](#) on 30 May and applies only to ‘counter-fire purposes’— i.e., targets inside Russia near the border with the Kharkiv region, where an offensive launched by Moscow on 10 May has overrun some villages. Long-range attacks inside of Russia with US weapons continue to be prohibited. The main impact of this policy change is that it allows Ukraine to fire back at Russian batteries over the Russian border from the Kharkiv region and to target concentrations of Russian forces on the border in Russia’s Belgorod region. Ukraine is likely to continue to push for a further easing of the restrictions to attack targets deeper inside Russia with the aim of forcing Russia to divert anti-missile defences from the front lines towards the defence of Russian towns.

Similarly, in Berlin on 31 May the German Government [said](#) Ukraine could use weapons supplied by Berlin to defend itself against attacks launched from just inside Russia against the Kharkiv border region, in accordance with international law. During a visit to Kyiv on 3 May, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron [said](#) Ukraine could use weapons provided by London on targets inside of Russia, and that it was up to Kyiv to decide whether to do so.

Meanwhile, according to Reuters the [discussions in Prague](#) indicated ongoing divisions within NATO member states on this issue, with the Baltic states, [France](#), [Germany](#), the [Netherlands](#) and Poland, stressing Ukraine's right to self-defence without imposing geographical limits on the use of weapons. But other NATO member states, including Italy, being more reticent.

In his [doorstep statement](#) on 31 May, the NATO Secretary General urged member states to lift restrictions on the use of military support provided to Ukraine, allowing Kyiv to strike “legitimate military targets” inside of Russia. “Ukraine has the right for self-defence, we have the right to help Ukraine uphold the right for self-defence, and that does not make NATO allies a party to the conflict”, Stoltenberg said, adding “That was the case back in February 2022, that was the case last year, that remains the case”.

On the 28 May, Russian President Vladimir Putin [warned NATO members](#) against allowing Ukraine to fire their weapons into Russia and raised anew a risk of nuclear war. The Vatican’s top diplomat, Cardinal Piero Parolin, also [warned](#) that such moves would mark a serious escalation in the Ukraine war and represent a “disturbing” prospect.

However, the NATO Secretary General [dismissed](#) these warnings of a potential escalation. “This is nothing new. It has (...) been the case for a long time that every time NATO allies are providing support to Ukraine, President Putin is trying to threaten us to not do that”, he said, adding “And escalation – well, Russia has escalated by invading another country, and Russia has escalated just last week by opening a new front, where they are hitting Ukraine from inside Russia”.

Ukraine’s NATO membership application

In terms of Ukraine's future NATO membership, there continues to be little or no movement on this front. At the 2023 summit in Vilnius it was agreed to drop the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine—basically all the necessary political and military reforms that new members have to undertake before

joining. But since then, there has been no timeline for Ukraine's path to possible membership, which remains extremely unlikely as long as the war with Russia continues. It is hard to see therefore, what more NATO can offer, if anything, in Washington in July.

The official line is that Kyiv will become a member sometime in the undefined future, and that language is likely to be repeated at the Summit. In his [press conference](#) the NATO Secretary General said: "I hope that at the Summit in Washington we can take further stepsanything we do together with Ukraine will help them to come closer to membership. Allies agree that Ukraine should be a member, but the timing of the invitation depends on when there will be consensus and when the conditions are met".

Conclusion: Echoes of Afghanistan?

The latest proposed NATO support measures for Ukraine, by themselves seem unlikely to escalate the conflict. Since before the war began, President Putin has regularly issued threats over NATO's aid to Ukraine. NATO has tried to present a united front in its response to those threats, but individual member states remain divided on how best to respond: some argue that NATO should call Putin's bluff, while others—most notably President Biden—have usually argued that it is not worth the risk. To that end, a further easing of restrictions to allow Western weapons to be used deep inside Russia seems unlikely – for now.

What is more concerning, however, is the absence of any articulation of NATO's endgame for the war. As Mark Episkopos, Eurasia Research Fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, [argued](#) recently "Western planning continues to be strategically backwards—aiding Kiev has become an end in itself, divorced from a coherent strategy for bringing the war to a close".

Ukraine is seeking to expel all Russian forces from Ukraine's 1991 borders including Crimea, subject Russian officials to war crimes tribunals, extract reparations from Moscow,

Box: Selected quotes by NATO leaders on the Russia-Ukraine and Afghanistan wars

If you want this war to end, the sooner we can convince Moscow that they will not win on the battlefield, that they cannot wait us out, the sooner we can then be able to reach a peace agreement where Russia realises that that they cannot win the war, but have to sit down and negotiate an agreement where Ukraine prevails as a sovereign, independent nation.

NATO Secretary General, [Doorstep statement](#), Foreign Ministers meeting, Brussels, 3 April 2024

We all want to stop this war. But the paradox is that the better we prepare for the long haul, the sooner the war can end. Russia must understand that it cannot wait us out..... Allies have provided approximately 40 billion euros worth of military support to Ukraine each year. We must maintain at least this level of support each year, for as long as necessary.

NATO Secretary General, [Press conference](#), Prague, 31 May 2024

The Afghan Army will reach this year's target of 134,000 members three months ahead of schedule. Many of those forces are partnered with ours, including in the hotspots of Helmand and Kandahar. And we are stepping up our training effort every day. This success is what the Taliban don't want to see. They might think they can wait us out. But within a year or so, there will be over 300,000 Afghan soldiers and police trained and ready to defend their country. And they can't be waited out. Former, NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, [Press Briefing](#), 7 June 2010

The old Taliban saying that "you have the clocks, we have the time" no longer holds. And the Taliban can't just wait us out.

Former, NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, [Press Briefing](#), 4 July 2013

The strategy sent a clear message to the Taliban, they cannot wait us out. Many of the Taliban now see that they can't win on the ground militarily, that has everything to do with President Trump's strategy.

Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, [Kabul](#), 9 July 2018

and secure long-term security through NATO membership. This would require Russia's total and unconditional battlefield defeat—

something that becomes more unlikely day by day. Despite being the world's most sanctioned country, Russia's economy has continued to [grow](#) and there appears to be [no viable military path](#) to victory for Ukraine.

As Episkopos argues: "Western leaders are long overdue in articulating a coherent theory of victory—one that grapples with the trade-offs and limitations confronting Kiev and its backers rather than sweeping them aside in pursuit of maximalist battlefield objectives that are increasingly detached from realities on the ground. This does not mean resigning oneself to Ukraine's unconditional surrender. Yet it will require policymakers to acknowledge that there is no viable pathway to Russia's unconditional defeat and to shape their thinking around war termination accordingly. It is not too late to end the war on terms that guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty".

Without a meaningful and coherent endgame, NATO is reduced to making empty promises about supporting Ukraine "for as long as necessary" and suggesting that the Russians "cannot wait us out". This was exactly the type of language (see box) used year after year to justify NATO's longest, costliest and deadliest intervention in Afghanistan, which was eventually marked by a chaotic withdrawal in August 2021.

Essentially there are three options for NATO going forward in Ukraine. More of the same, with the gradual easing of caveats with all the ongoing risks of escalation and potential for even higher levels of human and environmental destruction, and no endgame in sight. Second, NATO could encourage Ukraine to pivot to an asymmetric, guerrilla-style approach, as advocated recently in [Foreign Affairs](#), although the authors acknowledged that it would amount to "a war of exhaustion" that would sacrifice territory "to preserve forces and to extend the time horizon of the conflict". The third option, which would also likely sacrifice territory involves a new diplomatic push to end the war. President Putin has indicated that he is open to discussing a ceasefire and a freezing of the battlefield along the current lines, according to

a [report](#) from Reuters on the 24 May. Although it remains unclear how seriously he may be willing to engage, renewed diplomacy may be the least bad option for Ukraine right now.

2. Strengthening deterrence and defence

In his [speech](#) on 30 May Jens Stoltenberg emphasised that NATO has been rebuilding collective defence since 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Donbass. He described it as "the biggest reinforcement to our collective defence in a generation", with higher readiness of combat ready troops in the eastern part of the alliance. After the full-scale invasion in February 2022, NATO doubled the number of battlegroups, scaled them up from battalion to brigade size and further increased readiness, including agreeing new regional defence plans (that remain classified) and undertaking larger military exercises. NATO's exercise [Steadfast Defender 2024](#)—its largest live exercise in decades—concluded on 31 May after four months of intensive training involving more than 90,000 troops from all 32 member states, as well as over 50 ships and 80 aircraft flying hundreds of sorties.

In order to make this "big transformation" NATO member states have had to increase military spending. The number of member states now meeting the commitment agreed at the NATO Summit in Wales in 2014 to spend 2% of GDP on defence has increased from 3 to 18 of the 32 allies. Stoltenberg expects this number to increase by the Summit in July. He claimed that new member state Sweden is already spending 2%, so the number has increased to 19 (although according to [SIPRI data](#), Sweden spent 1.5% of GDP on defence in 2023). The Secretary General also reiterated that 2% "is a minimum, for many allies there is a need to spend more than 2% to meet the capability targets we have agreed".

It is unclear what was discussed on this topic at the Foreign Ministerial Meeting, since it was barely mentioned in the press briefings. Two related issues have been in the news, however.

First, it was recently [reported](#) that six NATO countries (Finland, Norway, Poland and the three Baltic states) plan to create a 'drone wall' to defend borders with Russia after a series of so-called hybrid attacks — non-military measures that tend to have an element of deniability—and alleged [sabotage](#) operations across several NATO member states. Details of the timing, funding and how the drone wall would work were not provided. The Russia-Ukraine War has highlighted the importance of drones, with both sides using them in attacks. Several NATO countries have responded by setting up or intensifying their drone warfare units.

Second, as noted above, Russia's war against Ukraine has underscored the importance of air defence, but the Financial Times recently [reported](#) that NATO has just 5% of air defences needed to protect central and eastern Europe (NATO's so-called its eastern flank). The failure of European NATO states in recent months to provide additional air defence equipment to Ukraine has highlighted the continent's limited stocks of the expensive and slow-to-manufacture systems. It has also prompted a series of initiatives to try to find long-term solutions: Germany launched its [Sky Shield](#) initiative with more than a dozen other NATO countries to develop a shared air defence system using US and Israeli-developed technology. France has offered a [rival concept](#) backed by a smaller number of allies. Meanwhile, Poland and Greece have called on the European Commission to help develop and potentially assist in the financing of a [pan-European air defence system](#).

3. Strengthening partnerships (to restrain China)

The third priority issue for the Washington Summit is to explore ways to strengthen NATO's global partnerships, in particular with those in the Asia Pacific. In his [speech](#) on the 30 May, the NATO Secretary General linked the issue back to the war in Ukraine: "If we look at who are Russia's best friends in this war, it's Iran that is delivering drones and helping Russia with building a factory to produce even

more Iranian drones. It's North Korea, which is delivering big amounts, more than 1 million rounds of ammunition to Russia, and then it's China, propping up the Russian war economy, delivering a lot of dual use equipment, advanced electronics, microprocessors".

It is unclear how NATO will seek to strengthen the partnerships, and again no new details emerged from this Foreign Ministers meeting. What is known, is that the Heads of State and Government from Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea will attend the July Summit, the third one in a row that they will have attended.

It is also clear that transatlantic concerns about China are being driven largely by President Biden's [strategy](#) to build a coalition of like-minded nations to confront China over its activities. In the Vilnius Summit [communiqué](#) 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.

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