



Briefing Paper No.119

22 October 2024

Contact:
 Dr. Ian Davis
 Email: idavis@natowatch.org
www.natowatch.org

NATO Defence Ministers seek common munitions standards, more joint procurement and further support for Ukraine

**A review of the meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence
 Brussels, 17-18 October 2024**

Key decisions and outcomes:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sought support for his 'victory plan' for ending the war with Russia, but a key part of it, an invitation to join NATO remains elusive.
- At a separate meeting with EU leaders, Zelensky had seemed to warn that his country may pursue nuclear weapons if it is not granted membership in NATO, but he denied this was the case.
- A new NATO command to coordinate security assistance and training for Ukraine, which is being set up in Wiesbaden, Germany, is expected to become fully operational in the "coming months".
- NATO allies committed 20.9 billion euros in military assistance to Ukraine during the first half of 2024 (as part of the financial pledge during the Washington Summit to deliver 40 billion euros in 2024).
- Discussions between NATO Defence Ministers and counterparts from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and the EU focussed on support for Ukraine; joint efforts to boost cyber defences, military production and innovation; counter disinformation; and harnessing new technologies, including artificial intelligence. However, no new initiatives were announced.
- Defence Ministers agreed a new NATO initiative on standardisation, and five new multinational cooperation initiatives to enhance deterrence and defence:
 - 13 member states agreed a new initiative to accelerate the delivery of new generation Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) - such as NATO's Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS)
 - 15 member states agreed a new project to increase the interchangeability and interoperability of key allied artillery munitions.
 - 18 member states joined the Distributed Synthetic Training Environment project, which establishes a network of advanced and immersive multinational training opportunities for militaries.
 - 13 member states launched the Northlink initiative to explore the development of a secure, resilient and reliable multinational Arctic satellite communications capability.
 - 14 member states agreed to launch the Starlift initiative to investigate ways to strengthen NATO's access to and use of space
- Further steps were also taken to advance work on two existing projects: the Next Generation Rotorcraft Capability and NATO's cross-border airspace cooperation.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

This fourth meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in 2024 (the previous three took place in [February](#), [April](#) and [June](#)), and the first since the [Washington Summit](#) in July, focused on four core issues:

- supporting Ukraine;
- strengthening deterrence and defence;
- the status of NATO's current operations and missions in Iraq and Kosovo; and
- deepening NATO's global partnerships.

It was new Secretary General Mark Rutte's first ministerial meeting as the head of NATO and the first time that defence ministers of NATO's four Indo-Pacific partners—Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea—joined a North Atlantic Council (NAC) session with their 32 NATO counterparts (although their leaders and foreign ministers had previously done so in other formats). The EU's special representative also attended the same session.

On the 16 October the NATO Secretary General gave a [pre-ministerial press conference](#) outlining the issues to be discussed at the meeting. At the start of the ministerial meeting on 17 October, he gave a [doorstep statement](#) reiterating many of the same points. This was followed by bilateral meetings between the NATO Secretary General and the defence ministers of New Zealand, Australia and Japan, as well as a meeting of the force contributing members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. All were closed meetings with no minutes or publicly available read outs of the discussions, although there were some [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General to the Global Coalition meeting.

The main event later in the day was a meeting of the NAC in defence ministers' session in an expanded format with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and the EU. Again, aside from some [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, this was a closed meeting. The Secretary General also met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to discuss ongoing support for Ukraine and this was followed by a [joint press conference](#) by the two

leaders. The first day ended with a working dinner by the NATO-Ukraine Council attended by President Zelensky.

The next day started with a second meeting of the NAC in defence ministers' session, and again, aside from some very brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, 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 an attempt to fill the information gaps.

I. Support for Ukraine

Backstory

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in a major escalation of the armed conflict that began in 2014. The current battlefield situation remains difficult for Ukraine. Russian forces have made slow but steady advances in eastern Ukraine, including [taking](#) the town of Vuhledar that Ukrainian forces fought to defend for two years, while the outcome of Ukraine's invasion of Russia's Kursk region remains [unclear](#).

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, [cluster munitions](#) and combat aircraft. About €203 billion in military and nonmilitary aid has been allocated to Ukraine by Europe (€118.2) and the United States (€84.7), according to the [Ukraine Support Tracker](#) database.

While the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (Ramstein) meetings have resulted in significant battlefield support for Ukraine, they have been ad-hoc and unpredictable. At the Washington Summit in July NATO agreed to take up some of the slack by coordinating the security assistance and training process, partly by using NATO's command structure and

drawing on funds from its common budget. Hungary remains an outlier on this agreement and in June [agreed an opt out](#) in exchange for not blocking NATO efforts.

In terms of Ukraine's future NATO membership, there continues to be little or no movement. 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. At the 2023 summit in [Vilnius](#), the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine was dropped and a new NATO-Ukraine Council was established for crisis consultations and decision-making, giving Ukraine slightly more leverage in the NATO bureaucracy.

At the Washington Summit, the latest package of measures for Ukraine contained five elements—a NATO command; more funding; more military support; more security agreements; and more interoperability—that together would “constitute a bridge to NATO membership”. NATO leaders also [pledged](#) to support Ukraine on an “irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership”. However, as expected, they once again left open when exactly that membership would come.

In the weeks prior to the NATO ministerial meeting President Zelensky visited the United States and several European capitals to get their endorsement for his so-called ‘[victory plan](#)’, but the flurry of trips elicited [muted public declarations of support](#) and made little apparent progress. Details of the victory plan for ending the war with Russia have been kept secret, but he did [share elements](#) of it with his parliament on the 16 October. The plan includes NATO membership, requests to use weapons from allied countries to conduct strikes inside Russia and for Ukraine’s neighbours to conduct joint air defence operations to protect Ukraine’s skies.

Another blow to President Zelensky was the cancellation of the Ramstein meeting with US President Joe Biden and other leaders (due to take place in advance of the NATO ministerial

meeting) due to Hurricane Milton hitting Florida. The Ramstein meeting was seen as the last chance for Ukraine to push for its key goals before the US election on 5 November.

What was agreed by the Defence Ministers?

There was only limited good news for Ukraine, and the usual platitudes were rolled out about future NATO membership. The current vague policy of supporting Ukraine for “as long as it takes” while leaving the endgame unclear continues to fuel unrealistic expectations in both Kyiv and Moscow.

President Zelensky sought support for his victory plan, but key parts of it—an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO and permission to use Western-supplied longer-range missiles to strike military targets deep inside Russia—remain elusive and divisive within NATO, and no new commitments were forthcoming.

“Our soldiers hold their front lines with weapons” from NATO countries, Zelensky [said](#), standing alongside the NATO Secretary General at NATO headquarters. “And it would be wrong, of course, to leave Ukraine politically outside the alliance when, in practice, Ukraine is already part of NATO”, he added.

While reiterating that the process of making Ukraine a future NATO member was “irreversible”, the NATO Secretary General said the victory plan included other elements and that he was discussing the full plan with member states. “Ukraine will be member of NATO, there is no doubt about it, and until that happens we will make sure that Ukraine has everything it needs to prevail,” he said.

The United States and Germany, the two largest donors of military aid to Kyiv, remain opposed to imminent NATO membership, fearing it would put the alliance on a collision course with nuclear-armed Russia. US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith [told](#) reporters ahead of the NATO meeting that the alliance was “not at the point right now where the alliance is talking about issuing an invitation in the short term”. Many other NATO

member states view the demand for an immediate invitation as unrealistic. The Baltic states have voiced some of the strongest support for a NATO invitation to Ukraine. Lithuanian Defence Minister Laurynas Kasciunas [said](#) it should happen now. But even with an invitation Ukraine could still be a long way from actually joining NATO, with drawn-out accession talks expected.

The NATO Secretary General also noted that work is well underway to set up NATO's new command to coordinate security assistance and training for Ukraine, and to deliver on the pledge of 40 billion euros in military aid. He [announced](#) that "NATO Allies provided 20.9 billion euros in military assistance to Ukraine during the first half of 2024 and Allies are on track to meet their commitments for the rest of the year", adding that "the message is clear: NATO is delivering for Ukraine, and we will continue to do so".

Meanwhile, Russia [said](#) the Ukraine 'victory plan' would push NATO towards direct conflict with Moscow.

More military support

Further military assistance to Ukraine was pledged by several NATO member states and partners in the run-up to the ministerial meeting and the NATO Secretary General name-checked two of the "big ones" in his doorstep statement: a [US pledge](#) of almost half a billion dollars in air defence and other aid, and the [supply of 49 tanks](#) by Australia.

Nuclear weapons or NATO membership?

Prior to attending the NATO ministerial meeting, President Zelensky also outlined his victory plan to the EU's 27 leaders at a Brussels summit. Speaking to reporters, afterwards, Zelensky [described](#) how he gave former US President Donald Trump a detailed account of the 1994 Budapest memorandum signed by Russia, the US and the UK, under which Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan agreed to give up their nuclear arsenals, inherited from the Soviet Union, in exchange for guarantees their sovereignty would be respected. He also said Ukraine faced a choice between resuming nuclear weapons and NATO membership,

adding: "We are not choosing nuclear weapons, we are choosing NATO, and I think that Donald Trump heard me."

However, during his joint Press conference with the NATO Secretary General, when asked by a journalist how long it would take for Ukraine to build a nuclear bomb, President Zelensky seemed to row back from such a stark choice. "We never spoke about that we are preparing to create nuclear weapon or something like this", he [said](#), adding "I don't have alternative except NATO. That was my signal, but we don't do nuclear weapons".

Is NATO losing a munitions race?

Russia is estimated to be producing around 3 million munitions per year, while NATO collectively is producing less than 2 million annually, NATO officials were [cited](#) by CNN as saying. That is an increase from only tens of thousands of rounds per year a few years ago, but still falls short of what Ukraine needs. Moreover, Russia can sustain its high level of munitions production for several years, the senior NATO official said, because it is producing very low-tech weaponry, has moved its economy to a war footing and is getting significant help from China, Iran and North Korea.

North Korea has provided Moscow with 11,000 containers of ammunition consisting of around 2 million artillery rounds since last year, according to the unnamed senior NATO official. Iran, meanwhile, has sent three shipments of ballistic missiles to Russia, and China continues to be a "critical enabler" of Russia's war effort, the NATO official [said](#). During the meeting with NATO's Indo-Pacific partners (see below), the Defence Ministers discussed defence supply chains to try to identify and source raw materials needed for increased weapons production.

North Korean troops to Russia?

According to South Korea's national intelligence service, North Korea has also [sent 1,500 soldiers](#) to Russia for training and deployment to Ukraine. When asked to comment on this the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that "at this moment, our official position

is that we cannot confirm reports that North Koreans are actively now as soldiers engaged in the war effort. But this, of course, might change”.

II. Strengthening NATO’s long-term deterrence and defence

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 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 Baltics.

Further strengthening of conventional deterrence on NATO’s eastward flank was undertaken in Vilnius with the agreement of a new “family” of regional defence plans containing thousands of pages of secret military strategies that detail for the first time since the Cold War how the alliance would respond to a Russian or a terrorist attack. Most of these plans were drawn up behind closed doors by the permanent [Military Representatives](#) at NATO headquarters in Brussels and other NATO and national defence officials, without any prior scrutiny by parliamentary bodies and independent experts. (On criticism of the opaqueness of this process, see [here](#)).

There are three regional plans: The High North and the Atlantic (led by Joint Force Command Norfolk, United States); Central (covering the Baltic to the Alps, and commanded from Brunssum, 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 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, which remain classified.

Finally, the Washington Summit reemphasized much of what had previously been agreed, including the need for “the necessary forces, capabilities, resources and infrastructure for our new defence plans, to be prepared for

high-intensity and multi-domain collective defence". In addition, a new [NATO Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge](#) was made to strengthen transatlantic defence industrial cooperation and boost production, and a series of multinational technology and cooperative initiatives were [launched](#).

What was agreed by the Defence Ministers?

The Ministers agreed a fresh push for common munitions standards and more joint procurement to drive down costs and improve ease of use among member states. "Standards are critical to our ability to fight together and more robust standards will help reduce defence costs", the NATO Secretary General [said](#), adding "As part of this initiative, we will be speeding up the development of NATO standards, enhancing their implementation rate, and expanding their scope to include new innovative military capabilities". [Battle-decisive ammunition](#) will be the priority.

The issue of standardisation has been on NATO's agenda since its founding 75 years ago but has taken on greater urgency since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. According to an [article](#) by *Defense Post*, Ukrainian soldiers were unable to use Dutch-supplied 155mm shells in German-supplied field guns taking that sized ammunition (a situation that has since been resolved). According to an unnamed NATO official cited in the article, there are almost 200 allied working groups on standards. Further, according to [Reuters](#):

"Although there is a NATO standard for artillery ammunition, its implementation is voluntary and a lack of adherence has fragmented the market and hampered the flow of supplies as 14 NATO nations have reserved the right to deviate. Different 155mm rounds can still be used in all howitzers but operators need to enter the specification of the shells when loading them into the weapon or risk missing targets by as much as 50 or 60 metres (160 to 196 ft), according to artillery experts.

But the firing tables - documents meant to provide the technical specifications - were neglected over a long period. NATO says it is now close to fixing that problem.

"Those firing tables have been allowed to lie fallow for quite a long time. We are close to having them completed for the first time since the Cold War," the official said, calling it an important step forward to more interoperability between allies."

The NATO Secretary General has also been tasked with drafting proposals to modernise the entire NATO standardisation process by the next Defence Ministers meeting in February 2025. The alliance has around 2,000 standards, some of which are procedure-based and relatively easy to implement (such as how to drive a tank without the risk of accidents), while others are equipment-based and can be more challenging as they require coordination with industry.

Five new multinational cooperation initiatives

NATO also [launched five new initiatives](#) designed to address "some of the most critical areas for allied deterrence and defence". Known as 'High Visibility Projects', they involve a total of 26 member states in 'various coalitions of the willing' for specific capabilities designed to enhance interoperability among NATO forces.

- **RPAS project:** 13 member states (Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Türkiye and UK) are part of a project that aims to accelerate the delivery of new generation Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS), such as NATO's [Alliance Ground Surveillance](#).
- **Munitions standards:** 15 member states (Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Türkiye, UK and USA) will contribute to a project that seeks to increase the interchangeability and interoperability of key NATO artillery munitions. Initially, the project will contribute to harmonizing national fire testing and certification mechanisms. It will also help keep relevant standards up-to-date and support their adoption.
- **Distributed Synthetic Training Environment project:** 18 member states (Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia,

France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, UK and USA) joined the project, which aims to respond to the growing demand for virtual training at the multinational level. It establishes a network of advanced and immersive multinational training opportunities for militaries.

- **NORTHLINK project:** 13 member states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and USA) joined the project, which will explore the development of a multinational Arctic satellite communications capability, based on existing commercial satellites, since NATO does not operate any of its own (although a dedicated NATO space command centre was opened at Germany's Ramstein air base in 2019). Russia has increased its Arctic operations of late with [warnings](#) of jamming attacks on satellites in the area.
- **STARLIFT initiative:** 14 member states (Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, UK and USA) will investigate ways to strengthen NATO's access to and use of space to deal with a range of challenges coming from operating from space. STARLIFT may help allies to launch assets on short notice, manoeuvre a pre-positioned spare spacecraft or buy data from commercial partners during crisis or conflict.

Further steps were also taken to advance work on two projects already underway: the **Next Generation Rotorcraft Capability (NGRC)** and **NATO's cross-border airspace cooperation**. Launched in 2020 and managed by the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA), the NGRC initiative aims to replace medium multi-role capabilities ending their life cycle in 2035 and beyond. Five of the participating member states (France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and UK) committed to identify a single preferred solution for the replacement of these capabilities by the end of 2027.

NATO's cross-border airspace initiative also grew to 20 member countries with the addition of Denmark, Germany, Iceland and Portugal. First launched in October 2023, the project aims to foster civil-military cooperation on the use of airspace for NATO training and exercises, and other air activities in several regions of Europe.

New NATO secure data sharing initiative

NATO also [launched](#) a new initiative to foster secure data sharing "at speed and scale to further enhance situational awareness and data-driven decision-making". The Alliance Data Sharing Ecosystem for defence and security "will support the implementation of NATO's digital transformation and its efforts in rapidly adopting dual-use technologies. It will leverage existing capabilities across the NATO Enterprise, Allied government agencies, industry and academia, and other key stakeholders". A pilot phase will run until the end of 2025, and initially focus on public and unclassified data to support four priority areas: the security of critical undersea infrastructure; geospatial awareness; information environment assessment, and maritime situational awareness.

Steadfast Noon

In his closing press conference, the NATO Secretary General noted that NATO's annual nuclear exercise 'Steadfast Noon' had begun, "with more than 60 aircraft taking part in training flights". He described these as "routine, recurrent exercises, far from Russia's borders that do not involve live weapons", adding that the "fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression". (For a more critical analysis of the exercise and NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements see [here](#) and [here](#).)

III. Operations and missions: Iraq and Kosovo

The Defence Ministers also reviewed NATO's operations in the Western Balkans and Iraq, but very few details were given as to what was discussed.

Kosovo and the Western Balkans

The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that the situation in the Western Balkans remains “concerning” with “secessionist threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a fragile security situation in Kosovo, and little progress made in the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina dialogue”. Rutte also alleged that Russia is seeking to undermine democracies in the region with “cyber and hybrid threats, including disinformation, using internal vulnerabilities to sow divisions”. In contrast, the NATO KFOR mission was described as maintaining a “safe and secure environment for all people in Kosovo and freedom of movement”.

Iraq and the Middle East

In the Middle East, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) the NATO Mission Iraq “continues to be an important contributor to stability”, and that NATO is deepening its political dialogue with Iraq to “ensure the Iraqi security forces are able to fight terrorist groups and provide a safe environment for Iraq’s economy and society to prosper” and because “we have a shared interest in stable, secure and prosperous Middle East”.

At the Defeat ISIS Defence Ministerial, he [warned](#) of a persistent terrorist threat and continuing violent attacks by ISIS affiliates and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq, as well as across the Sahel, Eastern Africa and Europe. He described NATO’s Mission Iraq as the “cornerstone” of NATO’s engagement in the region, and also cited the positive benefits arising from NATO defence capacity building packages in Jordan, Mauritania and Tunisia, “each with a strong counter-terrorism dimension”. The NATO Secretary General also stressed that NATO is “committed to stepping up its efforts to counter global terrorism in line with the goals and aspirations of this coalition”.

IV. Global partnerships, China and the Indo-Pacific

Backstory

NATO has increasingly turned its attention to the Indo-Pacific in recent years, particularly as China has emerged as an important partner for Moscow. The question of what role NATO should play in the growing US-China competition remains an open one. The United States wants to forge closer linkages between its European and Asian alliance networks, while some European members states remain uneasy about linking the two strategic theatres.

The first minor reference to China in a NATO [statement](#) was at the London summit in 2019, but transatlantic concerns have accelerated since then. 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. At the Vilnius and Washington summits a wide range of concerns about China’s behaviour were highlighted in the communiqués.

What was agreed by the Defence Ministers?

In his [opening remarks](#) prior to the NAC session, the NATO Secretary General said that China and other authoritarian regimes were continuing to “fuel Russia’s war of aggression and challenge Euro-Atlantic security”. “The war in Ukraine has shown that instability in Europe can have far reaching consequences across the world, and that countries thousands of miles away – as far away as Iran, China and even North Korea – can become security spoilers in our own backyard. Our world is closely linked – and so is our security,” he said. To justify NATO’s engagement in the region, he then asserted that it is essential for like-minded partners around the world continue to stand together in support of the “rules based international order”.

According to the NATO Secretary, the discussion focused on Ukraine, as well as “how what is happening in Europe is impacting on Indo Pacific and the security situation in the Indo Pacific impacting, of course, on the Euro Atlantic, so also on NATO”. In seeking to deepen the relationships in the region, one area of focus, as noted above, was industrial production. According to the NATO [news release](#) ministers discussed “joint efforts to boost cyber defences, defence production and innovation; counter disinformation; and harness new technologies, including artificial intelligence”.

Conclusions

The development of security ties between NATO and Washington’s Indo-Pacific allies continues to gain momentum as they seek to counter security threats posed by the perceived revisionist ambitions of authoritarian Russia, China and North Korea. However, NATO’s drift into the Indo-Pacific is likely to heighten tensions in an already tense regional environment. As the Quincy Institute has [argued](#) both regions should prioritize conflict resolution and management without needlessly interlinking the two.

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 existential threats, such as 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.

Finally, it is also worth noting the contrasting language used to justify engagement in the Indo-Pacific with the language used to justify non-engagement in the wider Middle East crisis. When the Secretary General was [asked](#) by a journalist to comment on the crisis, including the extensive military actions being carried out by Israel (a key NATO partner), the language of shared security concerns, potential conflict spillover and international law were replaced by something much more

restrained and modest: “As my predecessor said, we cannot solve everything in the world. And this is, of course, a highly worrying situation, which is now taking place in Gaza in Israel and Lebanon. Obviously, we talk about it amongst ourselves, but it is not an issue on the agenda, because in the end, NATO is a transatlantic partnership”, Rutte said.

Israel’s war with Hamas and Hezbollah clearly brings consequences for NATO. First, it will likely increase terrorist threats to NATO member states, especially those that are providing bilateral political and practical assistance to Israel. Second, while NATO’s role will currently be limited to intelligence cooperation and detection of terrorist threats to member states, this role may increase in the event of further escalation, especially if that escalation involves Iran. Third, while NATO leaders have rightly condemned Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, its massive destruction of civilian areas and the atrocities committed by its troops, their failure to take a similarly clear-sighted view of Israel’s actions in Gaza and Lebanon leaves them open to the charge of double standards. It also makes their defence of an ‘international rules-based system’ ring hollow.

DONATE NOW PLEASE

NATO Watch is a small non-profit organisation that provides **independent oversight and analysis** of NATO. **If you share our vision for a transparent and accountable NATO** please donate whatever you can afford to help NATO Watch thrive. Click on the picture below to find out how you can make a donation.

