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# NATO Foreign Ministers agree measures to counter Russian 'sabotage', but little new on Ukraine and the Middle East

A review of the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs,  
Brussels, 3-4 December 2024

## Key takeaways:

- King Abdullah II of Jordan participated in a discussion on NATO's southern neighbourhood and how best to work together to address common challenges to security in the Middle East. However, there were no concrete outcomes.
- The NATO Secretary General said that member states were stepping-up with more military aid to Ukraine so that it can enter future talks "from a position of strength". However, there were no new announcements of supplies of critical ammunition and air defences to Ukraine, and President Zelensky's 'NATO membership for land' proposal for ending the war seemingly received little support—the NATO Secretary General called for "more military aid and less discussions on what a peace process could look like".
- The Foreign Ministers agreed a set of measures to counter Russia's "hostile" activities, including enhanced intelligence exchange, more exercises, better protection of critical infrastructure, improved cyber defence, and tougher action against Russia's 'shadow fleet' of oil exporting ships.

## Summary of the meeting

Meetings of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs generally take place twice a year to discuss current security issues. This third meeting of foreign ministers in 2024 (an '[informal meeting](#)' was added to the agenda in May) sought to lay the groundwork ahead of the next NATO Summit in the Hague in mid-2025. The US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, was attending his last high-level NATO meeting before Donald Trump takes over from Joe Biden as president. The agenda included three main items:

- *long-term support for Ukraine*, which included a working dinner of the NATO-Ukraine Council, for the first time with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, and also the new EU High Representative, Kaja Kallas;
- *the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and its impact on Euro-Atlantic security*, which included for the first time the participation of King Abdullah II of Jordan (following the decision at the July Summit in Washington DC that NATO would open a liaison office in Amman and enhance its cooperation with partner countries in the region); and
- *Russia's alleged hostile actions in NATO countries*.

The ministerial meeting began (3 December) with a [pre-ministerial press conference](#) by the

NATO Secretary General, and this was followed by two bilateral meetings between the Secretary General and the Foreign Ministers of Bulgaria and Bulgaria. No details of those discussions were made public. Next, a closed meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Foreign Ministers' Session with the King of Jordan took place, and the day ended with a NATO-Ukraine Council Working Dinner.

The second day (4 December) started with a [doorstep statement](#) and press conference by the NATO Secretary General, and this was followed by a bilateral meeting between the Secretary General and the Foreign Minister of Canada. Next, the second NAC meeting took place and aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General it was another closed meeting. The ministerial meeting ended at lunchtime with a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

According to the Canadian Foreign Minister's pre-ministerial [comments](#), the US, Canada and the five Nordic member states were due to hold an informal [Arctic security dialogue](#) in the margins of the ministerial meeting, but no further details are known at the time of writing.

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.

Family photo of the NATO Foreign Ministers, Brussels, 4 December 2024 – photo credit: NATO



## 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, 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. After years of insisting that Ukraine would cede no territory to Russia in a deal, President, Volodymyr Zelensky has recently [signalled](#) that Ukraine would be willing to do so in return for the free part of Ukraine to be placed under the “NATO umbrella” to end the fighting. He would then seek the return of Russian-occupied territory through diplomatic means.

In a [statement](#) on 3 December Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry cited the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that guaranteed the country’s peace and territorial sovereignty in exchange for giving up its nuclear arsenal. Russia violated that agreement with its incursion into Ukraine in 2014, which led to the full-scale invasion in 2022. The statement said, “With the bitter experience of the Budapest Memorandum behind us, we will not accept any alternatives, surrogates or substitutes for Ukraine’s full membership in NATO”.

The war has escalated in recent weeks, with Ukraine launching long-range US and British artillery into Russia for the first time, prompting Moscow to fire an [experimental ballistic missile](#) designed to carry nuclear

weapons at a weapons factory in eastern Ukraine.

### ***What was agreed by the Foreign Ministers?***

There appeared to be little that was new on the table. During the working dinner with Kaja Kallas of the European Union and the Foreign Minister of Ukraine Andrii Sybiha, the foreign ministers [discussed](#) Ukraine’s air defence requirements and “how to make sure that Ukraine will get to a position of strength so that then Ukraine can start talks about its future in the region”. Reports suggest [Estonia](#), [Germany](#), [Lithuania](#), [Norway](#), [Sweden](#) and the [United States](#) have provided hundreds of millions of dollars in ammunition, air defences and other arms in recent weeks, but it is unclear as to whether this will be sufficient to meet either of these two goals.

When asked by a journalist for specific details, the NATO Secretary General referred to the earlier provision of air defences while [noting](#), “we do not have a sort of overflow of supply of air defence systems, so that means that you always have to make sure that you prioritize”, adding “I’m confident that allies will follow up in a coming days and weeks in making sure that whatever they can supply to Ukraine will be supplied”.

The Secretary General also sidestepped President Zelensky’s call for the unoccupied areas of Ukraine to be taken under the NATO umbrella. In response to a question from a journalist on this issue, Mark Rutte, [said](#), “Ukraine doesn’t need more ideas on what a peace process could look like....Make sure that Ukraine has what it needs to get to a position of strength when those peace talks start... So I would say more military aid and less discussions on what a peace process could look like”. (He had adopted a similar tone in an [interview](#) with the *Financial Times*).

In his final [press conference](#), Rutte emphasised that “we must do more than just keep Ukraine in the fight. We must provide enough support to change the trajectory of this conflict once and for all”. Again, when asked by a journalist to provide concrete examples of assistance

that might change the trajectory of the war, the NATO Secretary General returned to platitudes about “changing the trajectory means that we want to bring Ukraine in a position of strength, so that one day, the Ukrainian government can enter into talks with the Russians on how to end this conflict”. However, this 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 having recognised the realities on the battlefield has articulated a proposal for ending the war on terms that seek to guarantee Ukraine’s sovereignty. But rather than discuss the merits of this proposal, NATO continues to make empty promises. [Earlier](#) it was about supporting Ukraine “for as long as necessary” and suggesting that the Russians “cannot wait us out”. Now the equally unrealistic message is about taking Ukraine to a “position of strength” and “changing the trajectory of the war”.

## II. Conflict in the Middle East and NATO’s ‘southern neighbourhood’ policy

There were few details about what was discussed in the session with King Abdullah II of Jordan. Mark Rutte [said](#) the discussion focused on “Iran’s destabilising role in its immediate neighbourhood, backing militant groups. And its support for Russia’s illegal war in Europe through the provision of deadly Shahed drones”. He added that the “increasing alignment of Russia, China, North Korea and Iran highlights the global nature of the threats we face”. The Secretary General also [said](#), “Foreign Ministers were able to ask questions. So this was a good debate, a good discussion, not aimed at concrete decisions, but really to learn from him, to get his insights”.

This snapshot of the discussion raises two red flags. First, although the evidence does suggest a growing, albeit complex, alignment between Russia, China, North Korea and Iran—it is particularly visible in their coordinated

responses to international sanctions and in their diplomatic, economic and military cooperation—the strength and nature of these relationships vary. It is more accurate to describe it as a loose network of cooperation driven by shared interests and a desire to counter US and Western influence, rather than a formal alliance. The future of this ‘coalition of authoritarian regimes’ will depend on a variety of factors, including the evolution of the geopolitical landscape, the domestic political situations in each country, and the nature of their interactions with the West.

Second, the emphasis on Iran’s destabilising actions in the Middle East is only part of the picture. When asked by a journalist if there were any clear or concrete measures discussed regarding Gaza, the ceasefire in Lebanon, and the developments in Syria, the NATO Secretary General sidestepped the issue by falling back on the [line](#) that “NATO is a transatlantic defence organization. That means that it doesn’t extend to the Middle East”. And while NATO is “very much following what’s happening there... and is active in some countries on their request to help them”, he only cited the [NATO mission in Iraq](#) and the close cooperation with Jordan.

He added that “we are all very worried, obviously, about the humanitarian situation in Gaza” and while applauding the ceasefire in Lebanon, warned that “Iran and its proxies have to live up to what they committed in this ceasefire”. There was no mention of the other party, Israel, also needing to honour its ceasefire commitments, or of its central role in the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which Amnesty International [said](#) on 5 December amounts to genocide (and builds on earlier evidence, including by a UN Special Committee to investigate Israeli practices that [reported](#) in November serious concerns of breaches of international humanitarian and human rights laws, including starvation as a weapon of war and ‘the possibility of genocide’).

NATO’s myopic focus on Iran and failure to mention Israel can partly be explained by Mark Rutte’s comment, “As my predecessor said, we cannot end every conflict or be active in every



theatre, but we are very much involved in a sense that, for example, we are helping out in a number of countries in developing their defence capabilities". One of those partner countries is Israel, which has been a member of NATO's [Mediterranean Dialogue](#) process since it was initiated in 1994, opened a [diplomatic mission](#) at its Brussels headquarters in 2016 and has developed [closer cooperation](#) with the alliance in recent years. Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, only one NATO member state, Turkey, has sought to apply pressure on Israel by [blocking further alliance cooperation](#) with Tel Aviv.

### III. Russian and Chinese 'hostile actions' in NATO countries

#### *Backstory*

In recent years there have been numerous allegations of Russia's use of hybrid and grey-zone attacks against European countries. These allegations have become [more common](#) in 2024. [Baltic](#) and [Nordic](#) countries, [Poland](#), [Czechia](#) and the [UK](#), in particular, have raised the alarm that acts of sabotage — and sometimes fatal attacks against individuals — allegedly sponsored by Russia are a growing threat to Europe and NATO.

The NAC issued two statements on the issue in May, the [first](#) in relation to Russian hybrid activities affecting Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the UK, and the second, a day later, in [support](#) of Germany and Czechia. In June, the leaders of the Bucharest Nine — the countries on NATO's eastern flank — expressed urgency in a [statement](#): "We are deeply concerned about Russia's recent malign hybrid activities on allied territory, which constitute a threat to allied security. These incidents are part of an intensifying campaign of activities which Russia continues to carry out across the Euro-Atlantic area, including sabotage, acts of violence, cyber and electronic interference, provocations related to allied borders, disinformation campaigns and other hybrid operations".

Russian attempts to target the [vulnerabilities of underwater infrastructure](#) including

windfarms, pipelines and power and data cables have been a particular concern, and the [first meeting](#) of NATO's new Critical Undersea Infrastructure Network took place in May. These concerns grew following the [severing of two submarine data cables](#) in the Baltic Sea, one connecting Germany to Finland and the other Sweden to Lithuania, in mid-November. A Chinese-flagged commercial vessel with a Russian captain, is suspected of causing the damage, raising concerns about potential cooperation between Russia and China on hybrid activities against NATO allies. Although it [remains possible](#) that the damage was caused accidentally, [Germany](#), [Sweden](#), and [Lithuania](#) were swift to pre-emptively treat them as a sabotage.

Soon after the two communication cables were severed, 30 NATO vessels and 4,000 military staff took to the Baltic Sea for one of northern Europe's largest naval exercises. The 12-day '[Freezing Winds](#)' exercise was part of NATO's push to step up protection of undersea infrastructure.

Moscow (and China) have not claimed responsibility for any of the hybrid attacks, and there are major challenges in assigning blame, as well as currently no consensus on appropriate responses to them. Many analysts [attribute](#) these hybrid operations as part of Russia's war effort to weaken NATO's resolve to support Ukraine and undermine unity within the West. Since 2016, NATO has [publicly stated](#) that hybrid actions against one or more member state could lead to a decision to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (the mutual defence clause), something that [appears](#) to be becoming more likely. For some governments, however, the focus has been on building resilience within the public and private sector.

#### ***What was agreed by the Foreign Ministers?***

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte [said](#) that "both Russia and China have tried to destabilise our countries and divide our societies with acts of sabotage, cyber-attacks, and energy blackmail" and that there has been

a “steep increase” in those attacks. However, when referring to the set of measures agreed he only referenced “Russia’s hostile and cyber activities”. It is unclear, therefore, whether the measures also apply to China.

These measures include “enhanced intelligence exchange, more exercises, better protection of critical infrastructure, improved cyber defence, and tougher action against Russia’s ‘shadow fleet’ of oil exporting ships”. He further stressed that NATO “will work closely together with the EU on these issues”. He also indicated that NATO would use the Hague Summit in July to “take stock” on the issue, “to make sure that we have the latest ideas on the table, what we can do more”.

The Secretary General also referred to a new case in [Finland](#), where a data cable running across the land border between Finland and Sweden was damaged, causing an internet outage. He said that information on that incident would be shared, and “as soon as we know who is behind it, of course, that will be then announced to the public wherever possible”. “But more importantly is that we have set up systems within NATO to make sure that we can protect those cable systems”, he added.

Quick detection and transparency on such events as they unfold will be a crucial first step in preparing decisive responses. NATO member states need to improve information sharing both internally within NATO and externally to the public to create a better foundation for demonstrating culpability and intent. Member states will also need to share best practices and open-source intelligence, and standardize response processes.

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