



Briefing Paper No.123

10 April 2025

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Silence of the NATO lambs:

NATO Secretary General continues to see the United States as a trustworthy ally, but dismisses Greenland, tariffs and other concerns

A review of the meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers,
Brussels, 3-4 April 2025

Key takeaways:

- The US Secretary of State Marco Rubio gave “a very clear message” about the US commitment to NATO, with an equally clear expectation that Europe and Canada must take more responsibility for shared security by further ramping up military spending
- As was the case for ministerial meetings and NATO summits during the first Trump presidency, there were few, if any, concrete outcomes, and the focus was on a series of closed consultations.
- The NATO Secretary General flattered both Rubio and Trump, publicly backing the United States as a trustworthy ally. However, he refused to give an opinion on a range of pressing concerns, including the US-led trade war, repression in Turkey, threats to Greenland, war crimes in Gaza and NATO member states withdrawing from the landmine treaty.
- The passive role of the NATO Secretary General needs to be rethought in the face of US aggression towards other member states.

I. Summary of the meeting

Meetings of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs generally take place twice a year to discuss current security issues. This first meeting of foreign ministers in 2025 sought to lay the groundwork ahead of the next NATO Summit in the Hague on 24-25 June 2025. The only other NATO gatherings before then are an informal foreign ministers' meeting in Turkey in mid-May and a defence ministers' session in early June. The meeting took place amid high anxiety over the Trump administration's approach to Europe, including the war in Ukraine, relations with Russia and a growing trade war with the continent and beyond.

Washington's unprovoked verbal attacks on NATO allies Canada and Denmark are additional points of tension. Trump says he wants to [claim](#) Canada as a 51st state, and appears determined to [acquire the island of Greenland](#), which is an autonomous territory of Denmark. President Trump has declined to rule out taking Greenland by force.

The new US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, was attending his first NATO meeting, and like the US Defence Secretary in [February](#), hammered home the message that European member states and Canada need to step up on military spending and burden sharing. The

focus of the agenda was a series of consultations among foreign ministers and their counterparts from some of the most important partner countries.

The ministerial meeting began (2 April) with a pre-ministerial [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General, in which he highlighted the priority was to build a “stronger, fairer and more lethal alliance”. The press conference was followed by a bilateral meeting between the Secretary General and the Foreign Minister of South Korea. No details of the discussion were made public.

The first day (3 April) started with a [doorstep statement](#) and press conference by the NATO Secretary General, followed by [joint remarks](#) with the US Secretary of State. Next, a formal working lunch of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Foreign Ministers’ session focused on defence investment and preparations for the Hague Summit, and then the NATO Secretary General hosted a bilateral meeting with the Foreign Minister of Japan. This was followed by a second meeting of the NAC in Foreign Ministers’ session with Indo-Pacific partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. Aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General this was another closed meeting. The NATO Secretary General had further private bilateral meetings with the foreign ministers of France and New Zealand, and also made some general [remarks](#) with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Andrii Sybiha. The day ended with a formal working dinner of the NATO-Ukraine Council in Foreign Ministers’ session.

The second day (4 April) started with a bilateral meeting between the NATO Secretary General and the new US Ambassador to NATO, Matthew Whitaker, who served as acting attorney general during President Trump’s first term. Whitaker was confirmed on 1 April by the US Senate in a 52-45 vote. Whitaker reiterated to senators in March that the US commitment to NATO is “[ironclad](#)” while also vowing to press NATO member states to commit to spending at least 5% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence.

The bilateral meeting was followed by a third meeting of the NAC in Foreign Ministers’ Session, this time with the EU High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas. The discussions [reportedly](#) focused on NATO-EU cooperation, building defence industrial capacity, the situation in the Western Balkans, and support for Ukraine. Again, however, aside from some briefing [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, this was another closed session. Then, a meeting between the United States, France, UK, Germany and Italy took place, followed by a bilateral meeting between the NATO Secretary General and the Foreign Minister of Croatia. The ministerial meeting ended at lunchtime 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. The next section discusses some of the key narratives and contradictions in the Rubio-Rutte ‘NATO unity’ approach. This is followed by a discussion of some of the issues that the NATO Secretary General refused to discuss that might have undermined the unity narrative. Finally, the need to rethink the role of the NATO Secretary is discussed.

II. Rubio and Rutte stress NATO unity despite tensions and trade war

In the questions following his [doorstep statement](#), the NATO Secretary General was asked about whether the United States is still a trustworthy ally, not least in the light of the [disrespectful comments](#) about European allies contained in the leaked Signal chat of the US administration. Rutte was unequivocal: “Absolutely they are. You’ve seen what President Trump himself said about Article Five, about NATO, his full commitment”.

For his part, US Secretary of State Rubio railed against “hysteria and hyperbole” in the media about President Trump’s intentions. “The United States is as active in NATO as it has ever

been” Rubio [told](#) reporters. “President Trump’s made clear he supports NATO,” Rubio said. “We’re going to remain in NATO.” “We want NATO to be stronger, we want NATO to be more visible and the only way NATO can get stronger, more visible is if our partners, the nation states that comprise this important alliance, have more capability,” he said.

In his closing [press conference](#) the NATO Secretary General claimed “we are united in our commitment to each other” based on “common values and shared history”. That NATO has a fixed and immutable set of values that are embraced with equal vigour by every member state is absurd at the best of times. At the worst of times, with a US president threatening the territory of two other member states and embarking on a trade war, it is mendacious and intellectually lazy.

The NATO Secretary General’s aim, of course, is to keep the United States engaged in Europe (see section IV below). Some share this aim, while others are becoming more sceptical. “We all understand and feel the profound change in the international relations and in this situation the Czech policy is to keep America as much as possible involved in European security,” Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský [told](#) Politico. “NATO presence is one of the unique tools to do so”, he added. However, the Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly [warned her European](#) counterparts that the relationship with the United States would “never be the same again”.

Similarly, the French foreign minister Jean-Noël Barrot, [urged](#) NATO to show “unfailing solidarity” with Ukraine and “all the countries in our alliance and their overseas territories”. But he added, however, that such solidarity is being “put to the test by the decisions taken and announced yesterday by President Trump, with the imposition of reciprocal tariffs, which will have negative consequences on both the American economy and the economies of all the Alliance’s members”.

In addition to tariffs, disagreements between member states are to be found in their approaches to military, spending the future of Ukraine and the threat of Russia.

Military spending

At the Hague Summit in June, NATO leaders are expected to raise the alliance’s military budget goal from at least 2% of GDP to more than 3%. During the foreign ministers meeting the NATO Secretary General [commended](#) “the biggest increase in defence spending on the European side of NATO since the end of the Cold War”.

Mark Rutte has regularly called for NATO member states to spend more of GDP on defence as quickly as possible, as part of the need to shift to a “[wartime mindset](#)”. This push is partly aimed at placating President Trump, but some European allies are reluctant to raise military spending too soon given they are struggling with low growth and increasing budget deficits.

The European Commission has also entered the fray with a [White Paper](#) for European Defence Readiness 2030 and discussions at the ministerial meeting also focused on NATO-EU cooperation to boost military spending and production. Kaja Kallas briefed the meeting on the White Paper, which includes a potential 150 billion Euro loan for EU member states to buy arms, but only from European countries. This may be an irritant to the United States, which expects its arms companies to profit from a surge in European arms procurement. In recent years, European allies [placed](#) around two-thirds of their military equipment orders with US military companies.

An even bigger irritant to the European side, of course, was the imposition of [US tariffs](#) on the rest of the world, including NATO allies, on 2 April. “Thanks for helping us hit 5 per cent targets by crashing the world economy,” a member of the French delegation [reportedly](#) told their US counterpart during the meeting. France has set itself an “objective of 3%-3.5%, and we are preparing to reach 3%-3.5%, which is about the level of American defence spending,” French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot [said](#). France was estimated to be spending 2.06% in 2024.

Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever also criticized the US demand to boost military

spending while launching a trade war and insulting European allies. “It becomes a little complicated to demand things from us after one launches a trade war, after we are humiliated and insulted all the time,” he [said](#). He also said that new funds should be spent on European rather than American equipment.

Other officials underlined that they were meeting Trump's demand to increase their military budgets. “At a time of significant security challenges, first things come first — we are of course prioritizing security and defence,” [said](#) Latvian Foreign Minister Baiba Braže, whose country aims to raise its military spending to 5% of GDP by 2028.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide [said](#) that a new spending target would be announced at the next summit in June, adding that “5% is of course much more than the US itself spends and it’s a very high ambition and we are not ready to commit to a number at this time. Just as it’s important to spend more, it’s also important to spend more smartly”.

What no one seems to be addressing, however, is that using an economic indicator as a key for decision making in security and defence [does not make sense](#). The existing 2% Defence Investment Pledge does not correlate with some of the most important outputs—namely, relative troop and equipment contributions to NATO operations or support for other key security aims. This means that those outside closed-door NATO meetings—such as the public but also most legislators—have little insight into whether allies are sharing responsibilities equitably.

Rutte [confirmed](#) that the NATO Defence Planning Process would help to define the capability gaps to get to the targets. And that “we will come to conclusions in May, June, and hopefully before the Summit in the Hague” as to “what we need to do more of”. But he added, what “the Canadians and the Europeans” will need to spend to get there “will be north of 3%”. However, because of the opaque [nature of the NATO Defence Planning Process](#) there will be little chance for detailed parliamentary scrutiny by the various individual national parliaments of these plans

prior to their endorsement by heads of state at the Hague Summit. Who will ensure that national commitments to NATO are consistent with the resources and political aims of the respective countries?

Support for Ukraine

The Foreign Ministers met in the NATO-Ukraine Council with Ukraine’s Foreign Minister, Andrii Sybiha, who gave an update on the situation on the ground. They also discussed the US-led peace talks, and the ongoing “political and practical support” that NATO is providing for Ukraine. In the first three months of 2025, more than 20 billion euros was pledged in security assistance for Ukraine.

Sybiha [said](#) that Ukraine had shown its readiness to achieve peace by accepting the US proposal for a full interim 30-day ceasefire without any conditions, whereas Russia continues to talk “about demands and conditions”. He added that the Ukrainian defence industry “will become the backbone of European defence” and that he would use his audience with the NATO Foreign Ministers to “discuss our urgent defence needs and security guarantees for Ukraine, as well as a credible deterrence package”.

While Ukraine's membership in NATO is now off the table, most European NATO member states are still keen to get assurances that US weapons will continue to be supplied to Ukraine and that NATO's training mission will continue to operate. With the United States no longer chairing the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which coordinates military support for Kyiv, the next meeting scheduled for 11 April is due to be [co-chaired](#) by the UK and Germany. Meanwhile, the UK and France are working on creating a ‘[Coalition of the Willing](#)’ to support a potential reassurance force in Ukraine should a permanent ceasefire take hold. However, troop numbers, participating countries, and the exact mandate remain sketchy.

President Trump has positioned the United States, for the first time, as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, but it remains unclear whether he will increase pressure on Putin if a deal does not materialise. Ukraine has

said no decisions on its future should be made without it, using the catchphrase "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine". Most of its European NATO allies uphold that policy, and so did the US under the Biden Administration. While it is unclear whether the new US administration shares this goal, Kaja Kallas [told](#) reporters that US Secretary of State Rubio had given such assurances during the meeting.

Likewise, the NATO Secretary General [congratulated](#) Trump for breaking the deadlock—a deadlock that NATO had previously been instrumental in maintaining—adding, "I'm really impressed how the Americans are conducting those talks, and also about the fact that they keep the Europeans and Ukraine very much updated of what they are doing and what is happening".

This is a generous interpretation of the US negotiating methods, and Rutte's own support for the peace process represents a major U-turn in NATO's policy. In December 2024 at the previous meeting of Foreign Ministers Rutte had [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". And in June 2024, he [said](#) it was about supporting Ukraine "for as long as necessary" and suggesting that the Russians "cannot wait us out".

The Russian and Chinese threat

According to the NATO Secretary General [there is](#) "one long-term and enduring, unpleasantly enduring threat, and that is Russia". However, with the Trump administration seeing things differently work on a new NATO strategy for Russia has stalled. Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly [told](#) reporters that "It is important that we all agree that Russia is a threat. If not, I don't know why we should always increase more and more defence spending".

The NATO position continues to be critical of Russia for not engaging credibly and honestly with the negotiation process to end the war in Ukraine and continues to see Moscow as a long-term security threat. Several NATO European states are even preparing for

possible war with Russia. Danish and German intelligence have [warned](#) that NATO should brace for a potential attack in as little as five years, Poland is [planning](#) to train every adult male for war, Norway and Sweden are [restoring old military bunkers](#), and Germany has [unlocked 500 billion Euros](#) for a historic boost to military spending.

Trump, and his team have suggested the exact opposite: that Russia, and Putin himself, are interested in peace, engaging genuinely in the negotiation process, and also that they do not see Russia as a long-term security threat, but rather potentially a partner.

When asked by a journalist to acknowledge this discrepancy, Rutte [suggested](#) that it was not "an entirely fair assessment of the position of the US administration", and reiterated that "for the whole of NATO, Russia is the long-term threat". Rutte also stressed that "this is not only a European conflict, but with China and North Korea and Iran being involved here, supporting Russia's war effort.... it is really a global issue". He then claimed that "there is an audience of one watching all of this. This is First Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping. And he wants to know at the end, who comes out on top? Is it the West, or is it Russia? And if it is Russia, it will give him thoughts about what he could do in his region, because he also has some territorial claims which he might want them to entertain".

Assessing these accusations against China goes beyond the scope of this briefing, but two things should be noted. First, conflating China's support for the Russian war effort with that of North Korea and Iran is disingenuous. North Korea has [supplied arms and troops](#), while Iran has [supplied ballistic missiles](#) and other weapons. China, on the other hand, has provided [broader economic support](#) to Russia, as have [many non-Western countries](#), including critical components for weapons. Second, the NATO Secretary General alludes to China's territorial claim on Taiwan and implies that a Russian 'victory' in Ukraine would embolden China to invade Taiwan. While there is clearly a [growing risk](#) of armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait, instead of joining the '[China](#)

[hawks](#)’ in inflating the threat, deploying zero-sum framing and worst-casing, the NATO Secretary General could be encouraging efforts to build a stable equilibrium with China.

III. Issues that Mark Rutte didn’t want to discuss

During the Q&A sessions with journalists the NATO Secretary General refused to give an opinion on a range of pressing concerns, including the US-led trade war (discussed above), repression in Turkey, threats to Greenland, war crimes in Gaza and NATO member states withdrawing from the landmine treaty.

Repression in Turkey

When asked whether the proposed informal foreign ministers meeting in Antalya, Turkey, should still go ahead in May, given the arrest of the leading opposition figure and hundreds of people protesting, Rutte simply [said](#), “it is important that it is informal, and Türkiye has offered to host it”. There was no comment at all on the repression of dissent going on inside Turkey. In 2017, in contrast, former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [expressed concerns](#) about Turkey's crackdown on dissent and the rule of law under President Erdoğan. While trying to maintain a diplomatic tone, Stoltenberg implicitly criticized Turkey's deviation from democratic norms.

Threats to Greenland

Greenland is a self-governing Danish territory, rich in natural resources, [including rare earth minerals](#). The large island sits northeast of Canada, located between the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans. There is a strong movement in Greenland for independence from Denmark, [but no support to join the US as a state](#).

The US Secretary of State met Danish Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen on the sidelines of the foreign ministers meeting, but Greenland was [reportedly](#) not on the agenda. The US State Department also made no mention of the issue in its [readout](#) of the engagement. Rasmussen later [said](#) his meeting with Rubio was "good" but that while

Greenland was not on the agenda "for many reasons," he had still taken the opportunity "to very strongly object to claims and presidential statements of a vision of acquiring Greenland", calling it "an attack on Danish sovereignty". "We have seen these statements from the president, and we can't accept that," Rasmussen added. "And I made it very, very clear".

Several journalists asked questions to the NATO Secretary General about the threat to Greenland and the fact that President Trump has not ruled out the use of force. Each time the NATO Secretary [tried to reframe it](#) as a wider Arctic security issue, with the real threat coming from China and Russia: “I think we should zoom out from Greenland, and we should look at the high north and the Arctic in general. Because there is an issue in the Arctic with Chinese using the new sea lanes coming up, Russia, rearming and arming parts of the Arctic. And that is why the seven Arctic countries within NATO, US and Canada, Denmark through Greenland, but also Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, are working together all seven, and NATO is involved, to make sure that we take the necessary next steps to defend this part of NATO territory”.

Another journalist [pressed](#) the NATO Secretary General on Greenland: “I hear your point on the necessity to have a larger presence in the Arctic, but we have a situation where one NATO ally is threatening another NATO ally with taking control of its territory. So why won't you go into that discussion? Isn't there a credibility problem here when we have this situation, we have these threats, and you won't distance yourself as Secretary General to these threats? Rutte’s response was to double down on what he sees as the main “issue at hand”: “the defence of the Arctic, and that is much broader than Greenland”. He also listed “some serious issues” to be addressed: “With the Chinese using the sea lanes, with the Russians rearming the region and I want us to concentrate on that issue”.

War crimes in Ukraine and Gaza

The NATO Secretary General began his [remarks](#) with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister by

mentioning the alleged war crimes committed by Russia in Bucha. But when asked to comment on the US withdrawal of personnel and funding to investigations into Russian war crimes, the NATO Secretary General refused to criticise the US decision. “I'm not going to comment on every policy decision within every ally every day. That's impossible for me”, adding that it was necessary to “bring those responsible to justice”.

Given his support for the pursuit of war criminals in the Russia-Ukraine war, another journalist asked if the Secretary General was concerned about the situation in Gaza. Rutte [emphasised](#) that NATO was following the situation “very closely, at the same time, this is a question which is really being addressed at the level of the individual allies, they are navigating the crisis. So there's no role for NATO here”. One role might have been to reinforce NATO's opposition to war crimes wherever they occur.

Amnesty International [said](#) in December 2024 that the humanitarian crisis in Gaza 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’).

On possible reason for the NATO Secretary General's reticence in criticising Israel may be its close partnership with the alliance. Israel 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.

Withdrawals from the landmine treaty

NATO members Poland Finland and all three Baltic states have recently [announced](#) their withdrawal from the Ottawa Treaty, which bans anti-personnel mines. Lithuania has also

withdrawn from the Convention on Cluster Munitions, of which those other states are not signatories. The countries have linked their decisions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the potential for future risks to their territorial integrity. When asked by a journalist from the Finnish national broadcaster YLE to comment on Finland's withdrawal decision, the NATO Secretary General [said](#) that “obviously is for individual allies to decide, also I should not comment. I took note of that”.

Again, this was a missed opportunity for the NATO Secretary General to stress that this return to inherently indiscriminate weapons further undermines the global consensus aimed at minimizing civilian harm during armed conflict (as the Norwegian Foreign Minister [argued](#)). It also undermines decades of progress on eliminating the production, transfer and use of inherently indiscriminate weapons.

IV. Rethinking the role of the NATO Secretary General

As noted above, when pressed by several journalists on the impact of tariffs on the ability of NATO member states to spend more on defence, Mark Rutte sidestepped the questions as being a separate matter. He also [noted](#) the “difference in remit, in scope of the jobs of a foreign minister and of my role”. He saw foreign ministers as focusing on the broader international relations, bilateral and multilateral, of their respective countries, and therefore quite rightly wanting to comment on the tariffs issue. In contrast, he described his own role as “deeply focusing on the defence of NATO territory, and that is why I'm not commenting on other things than directly related to the defence of NATO, the Euro-Atlantic, and of course, when it comes to the Indo-Pacific, pointing to the fact that these theatres get more intertwined and interconnected”.

Mark Rutte is undoubtedly in a difficult position. He clearly sees his task as keeping the United States firmly in NATO. Around 100,000 US troops are stationed in Europe along with the US Navy's 6th Fleet and nuclear warheads.

Although European governments are working on plans to take over more of the responsibility for defence of the continent, Rutte is trying to ensure that no security vacuum is created if US troops and equipment are withdrawn prematurely. Asked about this possibility, Rutte [said](#) that the issue was not new and that there were "no plans for them to all of a sudden draw down their presence here in Europe".

Historically, NATO Secretaries General have been very careful not to single out any individual ally—especially the United States—for direct public criticism. Their role is to act as a consensus-builder and spokesperson for NATO, which generally discourages them from publicly rebuking any single member. While Secretaries General sometimes convey concerns or signal disagreement about particular policies (including US policies), it is exceedingly rare to find an instance where a Secretary General has explicitly and pointedly criticized US actions in an official, on-the-record capacity.

While there may be disagreements or different perspectives among member states (including between the US and others), the Secretary General typically uses careful diplomatic language. He emphasizes shared values, the importance of unity, the need for consultation, and collective approaches, rather than engaging in public criticism. Disagreements and concerns are usually addressed through internal NATO mechanisms, such as discussions within the NAC or through bilateral diplomatic channels. And the Secretary General's role is often to help mediate or find common ground within these internal discussions.

While Secretaries General have certainly expressed concerns about US decisions (and about other allies' decisions, too), these moments are usually couched in diplomatic language designed to preserve NATO unity rather than to reprimand one specific member in public. Two past disagreements illustrate this point. First, when the United States and others decided to invade Iraq (2003) without full UN endorsement, some allies (particularly

France and Germany) were very publicly opposed. However, then-Secretary General George Robertson avoided directly condemning the United States. Instead, he stressed the need for unity and talked about NATO's role in training missions—without labelling Washington's actions as wrong. Second, as the United States moved to end its mission in Afghanistan (2021), Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg did note the need for consultation and unity among allies. That said, his public statements couched any dissatisfaction in calls for careful coordination, rather than in overt criticism of Washington's unilateral moves.

With President Trump, however, sooner or later, open confrontation within NATO seems inevitable. In the meantime, Rutte is trying to walk the tightrope to avoid alienating Washington. But that, too, has its risks, and it is not clear that Rutte's stance will be enough to satisfy Trump anyway, since he seeks unequivocal devotion rather than compromise. In other words, by failing to publicly admit and denounce the threat that Trump poses it is possible that Rutte will end up alienating almost everyone within the alliance. The immoral spectacle unfolding in the United States can surely not be ignored by the NATO Secretary General for much longer.

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