



Promoting a more
transparent and
accountable NATO

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NATO Watch Media Briefing

Border Wars: Preview of the NATO Defence Ministers' Meeting Brussels, 9-10 October 2012

Introduction

Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen previewed the upcoming NATO Defence Ministers meeting during his [monthly press briefing on 1 October](#), stating that the major items on the agenda will be the missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo and 'defence capabilities'. The latter may also include further discussions on the divisive issue of NATO's nuclear posture and future of tactical nuclear weapons.

Presumably, further discussion on the deteriorating situation in Syria will also be on the ministerial agenda following the [North Atlantic Council's \(NAC\) statement](#) on 3 October:

In view of the Syrian regime's recent aggressive acts at NATO's southeastern border, which are a flagrant breach of international law and a clear and present danger to the security of one of its Allies, the North Atlantic Council met today, within the framework of Article 4 of the Washington Treaty, and discussed the continuous shelling of locations in Turkey adjacent to the Turkish-Syrian border by the Syrian regime forces. ... The security of the Alliance is indivisible. We stand together with Turkey in the spirit of strong solidarity.

These four issues all involve complex cross-border disputes of one sort or another, which have put NATO in the spotlight – but whether the Defence Ministers can do much to illuminate them is another matter.

Afghanistan-Pakistan and blue-green divisions

The back story

At his monthly press briefing the Secretary General said that the commitment to the goal, the strategy and the timeline for the transition in Afghanistan remains unchanged and would be reaffirmed by the Defence Ministers. Admitting that “we are going through a challenging period, not least due to the occurrence of insider attacks”, the Secretary General nonetheless expected ministers to agree to the first phase of training, advice and assistance to the Afghan forces after the end of 2014 while approving the broad framework for the mission.

Asked to clarify how many countries have said that they are prepared to participate in the post-2014 training mission, how many personnel would be required and whether any decisions had been taken on a budget, Rasmussen said that six partners were on board, and that no decision had been taken on personnel and a budget would be prepared during the last phase of planning.

[Diplomats later told Reuters](#) that the six nations are Australia, New Zealand, Georgia, Ukraine, Sweden and Finland. It was unclear if they would contribute personnel or participate in some other way.

[In a Reuters interview on 27 September](#), the Secretary General said NATO's planning assumption was that the cost of maintaining Afghan security forces after 2014 would be around \$4 billion annually, of which non-US members of NATO and partner countries would contribute \$1.3 billion. When asked how much had been pledged, he replied: “We are not there yet but we have received announcements of quite substantial financial contributions already.”

[US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) gave a similarly reassuring message at the opening of the US-Afghan Bilateral Commission in Washington that “the transition is on track” despite “potential setbacks” over the past few months, and the “difficult days” that are likely to lie ahead.

But while the Secretary General and US Secretary of State continue to sound confident about the transition process and the growing ability of Afghan forces, dissenting voices seem to be on the increase. The latest, [former Australian Army chief Peter Leahy](#), says it appears NATO will pull out of Afghanistan even if local forces are not ready to take over responsibility for security, and warns this could damage the Alliance's reputation as a reliable partner for nations in trouble:

After more than a decade in Afghanistan and despite the best of intentions the coalition effort looks to be pretty well snookered. Rather than any predetermined end-state in Afghanistan, the withdrawal of coalition forces is timed to coincide with political events and worsening economic conditions in foreign capitals.

Leahy also says the increasing incidence of ‘green-on-blue’ attacks will make it harder to train local



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forces until they are deemed ready to take over. "There goes the exit strategy. Now it really looks like, 'Going, ready or not'", he said.

Another issue exacerbating the transition are the cross-border attacks on civilians, which have plagued the bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The [heads of the Afghan and Pakistani armies met earlier this week in Rawalpindi](#) to discuss the issue. The Afghan government blames Pakistani soldiers for firing at civilians across the border - which Pakistan denies - while Pakistan blames Afghan officials for failing to remove safe havens on their side of the border for militants who launch attacks on Pakistan.

Likely outcomes

The temptation to withdraw troops prematurely is likely to be resisted. However, as the [columnist Simon Jenkins says](#), Afghanistan policy appears to be all about engineering a future that preserves NATO dignity and saves its generals and politicians from humiliation. Hence, Defence Ministers will reaffirm that the Afghanistan transition is on track and announce the broad framework of the post-2014 'training and assistance' mission. Very few details will be made public – not least because of the continuing uncertainties and ever shrinking support for the mission among Western publics.

Syria-Turkey

The back story

With [Turkey's parliament authorising military operations against Syria](#) a dangerous new dimension has been added to Syria's civil war. Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Besir Atalay said parliament's authorisation was not a declaration of war on Syria but has "deterrent qualities". Cross-border tensions escalated on 3 October after a shell fired from inside Syria landed on a home in the Turkish village of Akcakale, killing five civilians and wounding at least 10 others, according to Turkish media. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, speaking at a press conference in Islamabad, said Syria had assured Russia that an incident like the shelling would not happen again.

The parliamentary authorisation opens the way for unilateral action by Turkey's armed forces inside Syria without the involvement of NATO. Turkey has used a similar provision to repeatedly attack suspected Kurdish rebel positions in northern Iraq. In an emergency session in Brussels, NATO demanded "the immediate cessation of such aggressive acts against an ally" and urged the Syrian regime to "put an end to flagrant violations of international law".

Many Turks are growing tired of the burden of engagement in the Syrian conflict, which includes the hosting of 90,000 Syrian refugees in camps along the border. In June, Turkey reinforced its border with anti-aircraft missiles and threatened to target any hostile Syrian military forces after Syria brought down a Turkish jet, killing the two pilots.

Likely outcomes

Options are few and the meeting is unlikely to yield any new results. Most ministers will be loath to be dragged into another regional conflict without adequate forethought and with unpredictable consequences. Some, of course, already represent countries that are actively funding and aiding the Syrian opposition. But collectively, NATO will continue to insist that any intervention would require the legitimacy conferred by a UN resolution or the involvement of a broad group of regional allies. Turkey will no doubt be given reassurances but also reminded of previous inconclusive ground missions against Kurdish guerrillas based in northern Iraq. At this stage, therefore, even a limited NATO-led no fly zone appears off the agenda, but all bets are off if the Assad regime resorts to chemical weapons.

Kosovo still dogged by *de facto* ethnic partition

The back story

The [Western-led body supervising Kosovo's first years of independence closed its doors](#) last month, leaving NATO peacekeepers and EU police to deal with an obdurate ethnic partition in the last country created from the former Yugoslavia. Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, a former guerrilla commander in Kosovo's 1998-99 war, hailed the step as an "act of trust". But the oversight continues via 6,000 NATO peacekeepers and over 1,000 EU police officers, prosecutors and judges tasked with tackling deep-rooted corruption and sporadic ethnic violence.

The Kosovo government has yet to extend its writ to a narrow piece of northern territory populated by minority Serbs and supported by Serbia. More than 90 countries, including the United States and all-but five of the EU member states, have recognised the landlocked country as a sovereign state, following a unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008.

Likely outcomes

The flickering ethnic tensions in the majority-Serb north remain a challenge and so the ministers will reaffirm their commitment to NATO's peacekeeping mission. However, NATO is largely a bit-part player

NATO is undertaking an expensive nuclear escalation by default



Why is it still not possible to download a copy of NATO's own budget?

since most of the [remaining political challenges](#) require Kosovo-Serbian reconciliation.

Defence capabilities: to include discussion of BAE-EADS merger and tactical nukes?

The back story

Rasmussen said at his monthly briefing that “we will make sure we keep up the momentum on [Smart Defence](#), finding more ways to become more efficient in the way we go about the business of security”. He gave some detail of the cooperative projects currently being undertaken, stating that about two thirds are driven by European allies, and a third being strictly European interests.

He welcomed the appointment of General Jean-Paul Paloméros as new Supreme [Allied Commander Transformation](#) and one of two special envoys for Smart Defence. The Secretary General also stressed the “need to determine how NATO, as an Alliance, can best support the development of vital capabilities”. In the Q&A Rasmussen was asked how NATO can best respond to declining defence budgets in Europe and it was put to him that each Member State might set aside a portion of its national R&D budget to collectively fund capability projects. Rasmussen thought that “it would be an excellent idea to focus on research and development” but it will be up to “national governments to decide how they conduct their budgetary procedures”. He acknowledged the risk of R&D budgets being squeezed under current budgetary pressures and expected this issue to be part of next week’s discussions.

Will participants at the ministerial take some time to consider the proposed EADS and BAE merger, as featured in a recent [NATO Watch editorial](#)? They may also wish to reflect on the questionable success story of the Eurofighter programme, which was analysed in a [NATO Watch Briefing Paper in April](#).

[Recent reports](#) also suggest that NATO is making a concerted effort to engage Russia on the thorny issue of tactical nuclear weapons with suggestions that specific proposals may be discussed during this meeting and the forthcoming Foreign Ministers meeting on 4-5 December. The Ministers should read '[Escalation by Default?: the Future of NATO Nuclear Weapons In Europe](#)' by Ted Seay, who until last year was arms control adviser to the US mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels.



Likely outcomes

Expect more rhetoric on Smart Defence, but little of substance or that is new. Also expect some warm words of welcome for the proposed EADS-BAE merger, although with [discussions between the various interested parties at a delicate stage](#), the Ministers will undoubtedly strike a cautious tone. On tactical nuclear weapons, they may discuss a draft set of transparency and confidence-building measures that NATO and Russia could agree to, although the draft is unlikely to be made public and the objective of removing what most observers refer to as relics of the Cold War continues to be some way off. Since most member states neither want nuclear weapon modernisation nor can afford to pay for it, at some future point NATO will have to return to this issue.

NATO Watch conclusion

The likelihood that this defence ministerial will fail to make any meaningful progress on these four key issues says much about the Alliance’s status in the contemporary world. NATO appears to have the power to change little, a real sign that the Alliance has only modest control over ‘history in the making’ in South Asia, the Middle East and even within the heart of Europe. It is also a reflection of a failure to adapt its decision-making. The framework of NATO’s security policies has changed fundamentally over the past 20 years, but the way in which those policies are arrived at has not. Fundamental questions about transparency and accountability will once again fail to be addressed at this ministerial. Who are the Defence Ministers accountable to? Why are their deliberations not available for wider consideration and debate? And in an age when NATO has its own facebook page, [why is it still not possible to download a copy of NATO’s own budget?](#)

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