



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

EXTRAORDINARY NATO DEFENCE MINISTERS' MEETING, 15 APRIL 2020

Policy Brief

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EXTRAORDINARY NATO DEFENCE MINISTERS' MEETING, 15 APRIL 2020:
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Only item on the agenda: **NATO's response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

NATO Defence Ministers agreed on:

- **update of baseline requirements for civil preparedness**
- **closer cooperation with international partners**

Discussion themes:

- **contribution of Allied armed forces**
- **maintaining deterrence and defence in times of pandemic**
- **countering disinformation**
- **lessons learned and medium and long-term implications**

Notable points:

- This was an **extraordinary meeting** of Defence Ministers called explicitly to review NATO's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and take next steps.
- This was the first Defence Ministers' meeting with **North Macedonia** as an Ally.
- NATO Ministers were joined by Defence Ministers from partners **Finland** and **Sweden** as well as **EU High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell Fontelles**.

I. NATO'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- Defence ministers a) **reviewed current actions** and b) **decided on next steps**.

DECISIONS

- Ministers agreed on a set of recommendations to **strengthen resilience** – a responsibility under Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty.
- NATO will:
 - **update baseline requirements for civil preparedness** (see below) and
 - **cooperate ever closer with international partners**.

THE SEVEN BASELINE REQUIREMENTS FOR CIVIL PREPAREDNESS

1. **Assured continuity of government and critical government services:** for instance the ability to make decisions, communicate them and enforce them in a crisis;
2. **Resilient energy supplies:** back-up plans and power grids, internally and across borders;
3. **Ability to deal effectively with uncontrolled movement of people,** and to de-conflict these movements from NATO's military deployments;
4. **Resilient food and water resources:** ensuring these supplies are safe from disruption or sabotage;
5. **Ability to deal with mass casualties:** ensuring that civilian health systems can cope and that sufficient medical supplies are stocked and secure;
6. **Resilient civil communications systems:** ensuring that telecommunications and cyber networks function even under crisis conditions, with sufficient back-up capacity.
(This requirement was updated in November 2019 by NATO Defence Ministers, who stressed the need for reliable communications systems including 5G, robust options to restore these systems, priority access to national authorities in times of crisis, and the thorough assessments of all risks to communications systems.); and
7. **Resilient transport systems:** ensuring that NATO forces can move across Alliance territory rapidly and that civilian services can rely on transportation networks, even in a crisis.

(agreed by Allied Heads of State and Government at the Warsaw Summit in 2016)

For more information on these, see NATO's dedicated webpage: [Resilience and Article 3](#)

DISCUSSION THEMES

Contribution of Allied armed forces in the fight against COVID-19

- Armed forces play a **key role in support of civilian efforts**.
- **Recent examples:**
 - 100+ missions to transport medical personnel, supplies, and treatment capabilities
 - assistance in the construction of 25 field hospitals
 - addition of 25,000+ treatment beds
 - deployment of 4,000+ military medical personnel
- Ministers made **additional offers** to support coordination efforts by General Tod D. Wolters, NATO SACEUR.
- For more information and concrete examples of bilateral and NATO assistance to Allies, see the NATO factsheet [NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Deterrence and defence

- NATO remains committed to ensuring that the COVID-19 crisis does not develop into a security crisis: Allied armed forces remain **ready, vigilant, and prepared** to respond any threat.
- NATO continues to implement **preventive measures** to minimise the risks to personnel and of spreading the virus.
- Other security challenges remain, for example:
 - **potential exploitation** of the current situation by state and non-state actors,
 - **fragile security situations** in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places, and
 - **Russian military activity** – which the NATO Secretary General noted was continuing apace.

Disinformation by state and non-state actors

- Ministers discussed the **countering of disinformation** during this health crisis.
- NATO and Allies continue to:
 - **counter false narratives** through facts and concrete actions and
 - increase cooperation with Allies and the European Union to **identify, monitor, and expose disinformation as well as respond robustly**.
- For more information, see the NATO Factsheet: [Russia's Top Five Myths about NATO & COVID-19](#)

Lessons learned and medium and long-term implications from the COVID-19 crisis

- Ministers had in-depth discussions, including on:
 - the **potentially significant geo-political effects** and
 - the potential for actors to **use the adverse economic situation to invest in critical industries and infrastructure** which could undermine Allied and NATO's security.
- They also discussed the issue of **airlift capacity** – which currently includes Allied and NATO capabilities as well as multinational contracts with commercial airlift providers. On this point, the Secretary General noted that the United States has made available US capabilities, including airlift capabilities, in Europe to support European NATO Allies during this crisis.
- It is too soon to draw definite **lessons learned** from the crisis.
- However, several aspects must be **in focus** for NATO and Allies in the medium and long term:
 - **societal resilience,**
 - **planning for future pandemics,**
 - **protection of critical industries and infrastructure, and**
 - **business continuity planning.**

- The NATO Secretary General summarised what he saw as NATO's role in such crises in those terms: *"I don't think that NATO should go into and be, what should I say, the first responder, or the main responder to a health crisis. What NATO should do and what NATO is doing is that we should support the civilian efforts to fight this health crisis."*

II. OTHER ISSUES

- Several other issues were brought up in the **NATO Secretary General's press conference**.

Burden sharing / Defence Investment Pledge

- Asked whether the pledge to spend 2% GDP on defence should be relaxed, the NATO Secretary General highlighted **the essential role of the armed forces in addressing security threats and in support of civilian authorities during the COVID-19 crisis**.

Afghanistan

- The Secretary General recalled that:
 - NATO has committed to reduce its force presence **from 16,000 to 12,000** while making clear that further reductions will be **conditions-based**;
 - NATO is calling on the Taliban to **respect the terms of the agreement** with the United States and **engage in intra-Afghan talks**;
 - NATO is calling on the Afghan authorities to help **resolve the current political crisis**;
 - To cope with the **COVID-19 crisis**, NATO is providing the Afghan forces with **medical equipment as well as training advice**.