



NATO DEFENCE MINISTERS' MEETING

21-22 OCTOBER 2021

Policy Brief

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NATO DEFENCE MINISTERS' MEETING, 21-22 OCTOBER 2021:
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Agenda

- **Strengthened deterrence and defence**
- **Threats and challenges from Russia**
- **Keeping NATO's technological edge**
- **Afghanistan**
- **NATO-EU cooperation**
- **Women, peace and security**

Decisions

- Ministers endorsed **a new overarching plan to defend the Alliance in crisis and conflict**
- Ministers agreed NATO's **new capability targets**
- 17 Allied countries agreed to take the lead on **the development of NATO's first multinational Innovation Fund**
- Ministers agreed on **NATO's first Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategy**
- Ministers endorsed the **new NATO Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) for 2021-2025**
- Select Allies launched or expanded a number of **multinational capability projects** on Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) threats and Ground Based Air Defence (GBAD)

Background

- The meeting took place as Allies have started consultations on NATO's next Strategic Concept to be adopted at a Summit in Madrid in June 2022.
- This was Allied Ministers' first exchange as part of the lessons learned process on NATO's mission in Afghanistan launched in August.

Additional note

- The impact of China's rise was not formally on the ministerial agenda.

I. STRENGTHENING DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE

- A main priority for the meeting was to further strengthen Allied deterrence and defence. The NATO Secretary General noted these efforts highlighted “*the **fundamental shift within NATO, that we have seen over the last years**, where we step up when it comes to collective defence, protecting our territory*”, at the same time as Allies gradually scaled down the deployment of troops in missions beyond NATO territory. “*We have stepped up the readiness of forces, deployed combat troops in the eastern part of the Alliance, invested in new capabilities, and also modernised the whole NATO command structure*”, the Secretary General noted. “*Allies are investing more, Allies are providing more high-end capabilities, and not least we are also stepping up in new domains as cyber, hybrid and also space.*”

A. NEW CRISIS AND CONFLICT PLAN

- **Ministers endorsed a new overarching plan to defend the Alliance in crisis and conflict** to ensure that Allies continue to have the right forces at the right place, at the right time.

B. NEW CAPABILITY TARGETS

- **Ministers agreed on NATO’s capability targets**, which are a key part of the NATO four-year [defence planning process](#).
- These targets **ensure that NATO, as a totality, has the capabilities needed for credible deterrence and defence** across the full spectrum of defence. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg noted that “*Most Allies are dependent on other Allies for some capabilities, and by joining forces, by working together and agreeing the capability targets, we ensure that we have the capabilities together, as Allies.*”
- Reaching the new capability targets will ensure the Alliance will deliver **more, heavier and technologically advanced forces at higher readiness, with more high-end capabilities and able to fully exploit emerging and disruptive technologies.**

C. REVIEW OF NUCLEAR POLICY

- **Ministers also met in the [Nuclear Planning Group \(NPG\)](#), which reviews and sets NATO’s nuclear policy.** As part of these discussions, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III updated Allies about the ongoing US nuclear posture review.
- As NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg noted, “*NATO’s goal is a world without nuclear weapons. **But as long as other countries retain their nuclear weapons, we will remain a nuclear alliance.** Because we don’t believe that the world where Russia, China, and countries like North Korea have nuclear weapons, and we do not, is a safer world.*”
- Addressing the **importance of the nuclear sharing arrangements in NATO**, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg underlined that “*they are important for the whole Alliance and especially for the European Allies. Because that is the way to ensure that we all are part of NATO’s nuclear deterrence, that European Allies have a say, that they sit around the same table, and are able to also take responsibility, but also have a say, when it comes to how to develop NATO’s nuclear deterrence.*”

II. THREATS AND CHALLENGES FROM RUSSIA

A. THE GROWING RUSSIAN MISSILE THREAT

- **Ministers reviewed progress in the Allied response to the growing threat from Russia's nuclear-capable missile systems.** In 2018, NATO Allies determined Russia had developed and deployed missiles in breach of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. This ultimately led to the demise of the treaty. **Russia has continued to increase its arsenal of missiles and to develop hypersonic systems. All these missiles pose a real threat to Allied security.**
- Once again, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg made clear that *"We will not mirror Russia's destabilising behaviour. And we have no intention to deploy new land based nuclear missiles in Europe."* NATO is instead implementing **a balanced package of political and military response measures**, including **significant improvements to Allied air and missile defences; strengthening of conventional capabilities with fifth generation jets; adapting NATO exercises and intelligence; and improving the readiness and effectiveness of our nuclear deterrent.** Moreover, NATO efforts to promote arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation continue apace.

B. RUSSIAN CLOSURE OF ITS MISSION TO NATO AND OF THE NATO OFFICE IN MOSCOW

- In the week of meeting, **Russia announced the closure of its mission to NATO and of the NATO office in Moscow.** NATO regrets this decision, *"which does not promote dialogue and mutual understanding"*, noted NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg. The reason given by Russia for these closures was **NATO's decision, earlier in October, to expel eight members of the Russian mission to NATO, who were deemed to be intelligence operatives rather than diplomats, and limit the size of the mission to 10 diplomats.**
- **NATO's dual-track approach of credible deterrence and defence and of meaningful dialogue remains unaffected:** *"NATO's policy remains consistent, and we remain open to dialogue, including through the NATO Russia Council. At the same time, we will continue to assess how we can further strengthen our deterrence and defence. We will ensure we have the right plans, capabilities and forces in place to protect our nations"*, said NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, reiterating that NATO-Russia relations were at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War due to Russia's actions.
- **NATO's offer to meet in the NATO-Russia Council remains valid**, as Allies strongly believe that, especially when tensions are high, it is important to have dialogue. **Russia has yet to respond positively to this offer.**

III. KEEPING THE TECHNOLOGICAL EDGE

A. INNOVATION FUND

- Seventeen Allied countries¹ will take the lead on **the development of NATO's first multinational Innovation Fund**, which aims to **invest EUR 1 billion in dual-use technologies** of potential application to defence and security; to **facilitate closer and trusted cooperation with deep-tech innovators**; and to **develop a protected transatlantic innovation community.**

¹ Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom

- It complements **NATO's Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA)**, which was launched at the June NATO Summit and for which several Allies seek to contribute with headquarters, test centres and accelerator sites. **Both initiatives are expected to be fully in effect by NATO's Madrid Summit in 2022.**
- NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg underlined the importance of keeping NATO's technological edge: *"Future conflicts will be fought not just with bullets and bombs, but also with bytes and big data. We see authoritarian regimes racing to develop new technologies, from artificial intelligence to autonomous systems."*

B. NATO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE STRATEGY

- **Ministers agreed on NATO's first Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategy**, which sets **standards for responsible AI use**, in accordance with international law and NATO values; outlines how Allies will **accelerate and mainstream AI adoption** in capability development and delivery, enhancing interoperability; set out how Allies will **protect and monitor AI technology and the ability to innovate**; and **identify and safeguard against the threats** posed by the use of AI by adversaries.
- **Six principles of responsible use** are at the core of the strategy: **lawfulness; responsibility and accountability; explainability and traceability; reliability; governability; and bias mitigation.**
- AI is **one of the seven technological areas** which NATO Allies have prioritised.²
- In the context of the AI strategy, **ministers also agreed on NATO's first policy on data exploitation.**
- NATO has issued a [summary of the strategy](#).

IV. AFGHANISTAN

A. LESSONS LEARNED PROCESS

- At their extraordinary meeting on 20 August, NATO Foreign Ministers commissioned a thorough **lessons learned process** of the Alliance's 20-year engagement in Afghanistan. The Defence Ministers' meeting was the first opportunity for ministers to engage in that process. The NATO Secretary General noted *"a convergence of views among Allies"* both on the challenges and the problems, and on achievements.
- Warning against drawing *"the wrong conclusions"*, Jens Stoltenberg also stressed the importance of maintaining **Allied unity** going forward: *"The crisis in Afghanistan does not change the need for Europe and North America to stand together in NATO in the face of growing global challenges."*
- Looking back at the process which led to the decision to withdraw all NATO troops, the NATO Secretary General reiterates that multiple **consultations** did take place: *"We had, actually, three ministerial meetings and many ambassadorial meetings, many committee meetings at NATO, where we consulted on the way forward on Afghanistan, before we made a very difficult decision, namely to end our military mission there"*.
- He also reiterated that the choice was between leaving with the risk of the **Taliban returning** or staying with the risk of more violence, more fighting and probably more NATO troops. *"All Allies were aware that if we left there was a clear risk for Taliban returning to power in Kabul. What was not anticipated was the speed of the return of Taliban"*, he added.
- The NATO Secretary General shared **two initial strands of thought**:
 - *"Whether we should have stayed on this more narrow task of fighting terrorism, or whether it was right for the international community, and NATO to being part of that,*

² The others are quantum-enabled technologies; data and computing; autonomy; biotechnology and human enhancements; hypersonic technologies; and space.

- to engage in a more, a bigger ambitious nation building task*"; the NATO Secretary General stressed, however, that this shift in ambition had not been NATO's sole doing but had been the result of the broader international community's decisions;
- If the mission in Afghanistan highlighted *"the challenges and the risks to engage in big missions and operations outside NATO territory [...], the lesson cannot be that we will never engage"*, the NATO Secretary General added, pointing out that in some instances intervention was the right thing to do.

B. PRESERVING THE GAINS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

- Ministers exchanged views on how to **ensure Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists**:
- They agreed for the need to remain vigilant and monitor any attempts by international terrorist groups to regroup in Afghanistan.
- They agreed for Allies to continue to coordinate and stand together against terrorist threats.
- Allies have the capabilities to strike from over the horizon, against terrorist threats.
- Allies will hold the Taliban accountable for their pledges on terrorism.
- Allies will continue to participate in the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh. NATO hosted a meeting of the coalition on the margins of the Defence Ministers' meeting.

C. EVACUATION AND RESETTLEMENT EFFORTS

- Ministers addressed **ongoing efforts to resettle Afghan evacuees**. Two thousand of the more than 120,000 people evacuated from Afghanistan were Afghans who had worked for NATO and their families. This was the *"most urgent role NATO has"*, its *"most immediate task"*, the NATO Secretary General noted.

D. CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN, HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

- The NATO Secretary General noted that *"Allies are deeply concerned about the developments within Afghanistan, especially when it comes to the rights of women"* and they *"will hold the Taliban accountable for their pledges on terrorism, safe passage and human rights"*. He reiterated that *"the international community has economic and diplomatic leverage over the Taliban"*.

V. NATO-EU COOPERATION

- **Ministers met with close partners Finland, Sweden and the European Union to take stock of progress in NATO-EU cooperation.**
- Cooperation has reached [unprecedented levels in recent years](#). This reflects the fact, in NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg's words, that *"We share the same values, we share the same challenges, we share the same neighbourhood, and of course to a large extent we also share the same members. More than 90% of the people living in the European Union, they live in a NATO country."*
- **NATO and the EU seek to strengthen cooperation further.** Therefore, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, President of the European Council Charles Michel and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen **will adopt, by the end of 2021, a third joint declaration on NATO-EU relations** to enhance work in areas such as **military mobility, resilience, emerging and disruptive technologies as well as the security impact of climate change.**
- **NATO-EU efforts on defence and security must remain coherent**, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg stressed: *"I welcome the EU's increased efforts on defence. NATO has been calling on European Allies to invest more and provide more high-end capabilities for many years. But these efforts should not duplicate NATO. What is needed is more*

capabilities, not new structures. Our transatlantic alliance remains the bedrock for our security. And Europe and North America will continue to stand strong together in NATO, as we face a more competitive world.”

VI. WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

- **Ministers endorsed the new NATO [Action Plan](#) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) for 2021-2025**, which will further advance gender equality and integrate gender perspectives in across all NATO structures, policies, planning, training education, missions and operations.
- Areas of increased emphasis include **cooperation with partners, international organisations and civil society**; integrating gender perspectives in efforts on **innovation and new technologies, climate change and resilience; training and education** of NATO personnel, Allies and partners, notably in the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence.

VII. SELECT ISSUES ADDRESSED AT AND IN THE MARGINS OF THE MEETING

A. MULTINATIONAL PROJECTS LAUNCHED, REAFFIRMED OR BROADENED

1. Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) threats

- **Three multinational High Visibility Projects** were launched in the margins of the meeting.
 - **The CBRN Protection Equipment project** seeks a framework for the provision of individual protective equipment and collective protection systems, to enable the 10 participating Allies³ to equip their forces with state of the art, standardised protection gear in a cost-effective manner.
 - **The CBRN Detection and Identification project** seeks to develop and procure advanced CBRN detection and identification systems between the nine participating Allies.⁴
 - **The Network of CBRN Defence Facilities project** seeks a framework to share and make use of national CBRN defence facilities, like training sites and biological laboratories, among the participating Allies.⁵

2. Ground Based Air Defence

- Three multinational projects to develop, acquire and deliver **Ground Based Air Defence (GBAD) capabilities** were also broadened or launched.
 - **The Modular GBAD project** is an existing effort to acquire and field a **modular solution for very short range, short range and medium range GBAD**. Norway, Poland, Portugal and the United States joined Allies already participating.⁶
 - **The Rapidly Deployable Mobile C-RAM project** aims to develop and deliver a capability to **protect Allied forces from rockets, artillery and mortar threats**,

³ Albania, Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States

⁴ Albania, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States

⁵ Belgium, Greece, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States

⁶ Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, The Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom

including through innovative approaches, such as direct energy-based capabilities. Norway, Poland and the United States joined Allies already participating.⁷

- **The GBAD C2 Layer project** was launched as a new initiative by Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Spain, the UK and the US. It seeks to commonly **acquire and field a C2 capability for surface-based air and missile defence for the battalion and brigade level.**

B. TRANSATLANTIC BOND

- **Addressing the strength of the transatlantic bond**, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg said that Allies *“What we see now is the US administration which is strongly committed to rebuilding, strengthening alliances. And in particular strengthening the transatlantic bond between Europe and North America, and that was the clear message from President Biden at the NATO Summit in June [...]”* He went on to say that *“we have now unique historic opportunity that we all should seize and that is to strengthen the cooperation, there's the bond between North America and Europe, within NATO. And the good news is that we are doing more together. [...] And European Allies are also stepping up. European Allies have, over the last years, significantly increased defence spending. All Allies have increased defence spending since we made the pledge in 2014 at the NATO Summit, and more and more Allies also meet the 2% guideline, spending 2% of GDP on defence.”*
- In his press conference on Friday afternoon, US Secretary of Defence Austin underlined that *“NATO's strength doesn't come just from its military might, it comes from its unity and its sense of common purpose. So **let me underscore that America's commitment to Article 5 remains ironclad. As President Biden has said, we take it as a sacred obligation and we're committed to working with our allies to ensure that NATO is ready to face the future.**”*

C. CHINA

- China was **not a specific agenda item** for the meeting. However, NATO Secretary General made clear that efforts to strengthen defence of the Euro-Atlantic area readiness and sharpen the Alliance's technological edge took account of the challenges posed by China.
- Asked about reports in the press of a Chinese nuclear-capable hypersonic missile tested in August, the NATO Secretary General replied: *“I cannot comment on precise intelligence, but what I can say is that we have seen this **strong effort by China to strengthen their military capabilities, including nuclear capabilities and missile systems.** This is about new missiles, it's about long range missiles, it's about dual-capable missiles, and it's also about building a new silos for intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarines, air launch missiles, sea based and air launch missile including ground launched missiles. So in totality, this is a significant modernization of the Chinese armed forces, including a lot of very advanced weapon systems that can carry nuclear weapons.”*
- Asked about the risk of NATO being dragged into a conflict over **Taiwan**, the NATO Secretary General refused to speculate: *“I will not speculate about a hypothetical situation. I think what is important now is to reduce tensions in the area. And if I started to speculate, I think I actually will contribute to the opposite. So we should solve all disputes and differences and disagreements in the region by political and diplomatic means.”*

D. AUKUS SECURITY PACT

- Asked about the AUKUS security pact during the press conference, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg said that *“I understand that France is disappointed. At the same time, I think it's important to underline that this is not a deal directed against NATO or Europe. And **I'm confident that the Allies involved, they will find a way forward. And our**”*

⁷ Germany, Greece, Hungary, and the UK

responsibilities to prevent this issue, becoming a rift between NATO Allies, between North America and Europe.”

- **At the June NATO Summit, Allies agreed to respond to the challenges in the Asia-Pacific region by, inter alia, stepping up cooperation with NATO partners** in the region (Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea). The NATO Secretary General stressed that *“if anything, the challenges we see in the Asia Pacific, the rise of China, just makes it even more important that Europe and North America stand together in NATO”*.

E. ARTIFICIAL MIGRANT CRISIS FACING POLAND, LITHUANIA AND LATVIA

- In response to a question on the artificial migrant crisis facing Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg said that *“this flow of migrants is something which is orchestrated and used by Belarus, as a form of hybrid warfare. And therefore, I think it's important that we also have discussed and addressed this actually several times in NATO at the North Atlantic Council and most recently, we did that this week, again, expressing our solidarity, and also recognizing that this is something which is orchestrated by the regime in Minsk.”*
- NATO is **in very close contact with the affected countries**, and NATO Allies have **deployed experts to Lithuania** to help them cope with this challenge. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg also stressed, however: *“it is important that all those fleeing violence and persecution, should be treated with care and compassion.”*