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Contact: Dr. Ian Davis  
Email: [idavis@natowatch.org](mailto:idavis@natowatch.org)  
[www.natowatch.org](http://www.natowatch.org)

### **Extraordinary meeting of NATO Defence Ministers reviews alliance response to the COVID-19 crisis**

By Dr. Ian Davis

NATO Defence Ministers met yesterday (15 April 2020) by secure video conference to discuss the alliance's response to the COVID-19 crisis. The ministers were joined by partners Finland and Sweden, as well as EU High Representative Josep Borrell.

NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Wolters, was tasked by foreign ministers two weeks ago to coordinate military support and during yesterday's meeting he updated defence ministers on his efforts to ensure NATO uses its military resources most effectively. There was no publicly available statement outlining these new efforts, other than a short NATO [news release](#) that said that he is "matching requests for support with offers from allies and partners, and coordinating NATO's unique strategic airlift capability, which is delivering hundreds of tons of urgently needed equipment to where it is needed quickly and efficiently".

On NATO effort's so far to combat COVID-19 see NATO Watch [Briefing No.72](#)

After the online meeting of alliance Defence Ministers, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg held a virtual [press conference](#) in which he noted the key role being played by the military in each

member state in support of civilian efforts against the pandemic. "And using NATO mechanisms, allies have been helping each other to save lives," he added. "Military forces from across the alliance have flown more than 100 missions to transport medical personnel, supplies and treatment capabilities, facilitated the construction of 25 field hospitals, added more than 25,000 treatment beds and deployed over 4,000 military medical personnel in support of civilian efforts", Stoltenberg said. "Today, I encouraged all allies to make their capabilities available so General Wolters can coordinate further support".

He said the pandemic is in different stages of infection in different NATO nations, and this means that effectively coordinating resources makes a real difference. In an example of NATO allies working together, last week 250,000 items of personal protection equipment, including 50,000 N-95 face masks; 100,000 surgical masks; and 100,000 protective suits, were [delivered](#) from Turkey to the UK, facilitated by NATO's Rapid Air Mobility process.

The pandemic is not the only concern for the NATO leaders, as missions of deterrence and defence must continue, Stoltenberg said.

## Improving resilience

The Defence Ministers also looked at the potential long-term geopolitical implications of the coronavirus pandemic. While Stoltenberg said that is still early to draw conclusions from these discussions, the Defence Ministers did apparently agree on a set of recommendations to strengthen the alliance's resilience. Alliance members will update existing baseline requirements for [civil preparedness](#), based on the lessons from the crisis, although no further details were provided as to what this might involve.

Much of the detailed civil preparedness planning, structures and capabilities both at the national level and at NATO were substantially [reduced](#) after the end of the Cold War. However, seven baseline requirements for civil preparedness were agreed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit: continuity of government, energy, population movement, food and water resources, mass casualties, civil communications and transport systems. Some general guidance was also provided to enhance preparedness in the health sector, but there appears to be no publicly available documents setting out what this current guidance entails.

The baseline requirements were [reviewed](#) in 2018 and NATO was due to further assess them as part of a 2020 Report on the State of Civil Preparedness. NATO's primary body that addresses preparedness and resilience, the Civil Emergency Planning Committee, is said to be monitoring and assessing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and facilitating an exchange of information and best practices among allies on an ongoing basis.

**NATO Watch Comment:** It is essential that the assessments of the Civil Emergency Planning Committee and any eventual report on the state of civil preparedness are made publicly available to enable independent experts and parliamentarians within member states to discuss the findings.

The Defence Ministers also pledged to work even closer with international partners, Stoltenberg said. The main lesson so far is "a close link between the civilian efforts to fight the health crisis and the ability of the military to support those efforts," the Secretary General said. "That's exactly what we also have to look into how we can do even better when the next crisis hits us," he added. It is not clear whether these international partners include the World Health Organization (WHO), which is the main international organization focused on combating the coronavirus pandemic.

During the Q&A with journalists the Secretary General was asked if anyone at the meeting raised concerns about the US decision to suspend funding to the WHO. Several world leaders, including the EU High Representative, the German Foreign Minister and New Zealand's Prime Minister have [condemned](#) the decision. However, the Secretary General side-stepped the question:

*"NATO is not a member of that organisation. But NATO has used the guidelines from the WHO to implement preventive measures. In NATO, in NATO missions and operations here at the NATO headquarters, NATO command structure. And I believe in the importance of international cooperation and transparency. And, of course, since we are not a member, we will not assess how the*

*organisation is working. But we have used the guidelines provided by the WHO to implement preventive measures in NATO”.*

### **Countering disinformation**

The Defence Ministers also discussed the importance of countering increasing levels of disinformation and propaganda by state and non-state actors. "We are countering these false narratives with facts and with concrete actions", Stoltenberg said. "We are also working even closer with allies and the European Union to identify, monitor and expose disinformation, and to respond robustly". The UK Defence Minister [announced](#) that the British Army will be deploying two experts in countering disinformation to bolster this effort.

Roughly one in three people have seen false or misleading information on social media linked to the coronavirus, according to a new [survey](#) covering four NATO countries—Germany, Spain, the UK and the United States—as well as Argentina and South Korea, published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. The researchers also warned that the very high levels of trust in scientists, doctors, and other experts, and often high levels of trust in health authorities and in global health organisations like the WHO, are being put at risk by public attacks from high-level politicians on experts, health authorities and international organisations. President Trump has criticized the WHO for promoting what he alleges are China's public lies about their handling of the virus. He has also [attacked](#) US public health officials and journalists seeking to hold him to account.

The NATO Secretary General was careful to avoid naming names during his press conference, simply referring to “state and non-state actors” that were trying to take

advantage of the pandemic to spread false and harmful narratives. This is generally understood to include Chinese and Russian actors. Rather pointedly, however, he emphasised that “the best response to disinformation and propaganda is free and independent press, is the work of journalists, because when they check their facts, when they check their sources, when they ask the difficult questions, then disinformation and propaganda will never, never succeed”.

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres has also [warned](#) of a “dangerous epidemic of misinformation” during the pandemic. He called on social media companies to do more “to root out hate and harmful assertions about COVID-19” and for greater trust in institutions that are grounded in responsive, responsible, evidence-based governance and leadership. Is NATO such an organization? Undoubtedly much of it is: the alliance is staffed by many people with integrity and a strong moral compass, including the Secretary General. However, without greater transparency, especially within the closed inner workings of the alliance, questions will remain as to whether it is always a reliable and neutral source of information.

#### Further reading:

Ian Davis and Joe Malmkvist, [NATO's COVI-19 objectives: Improving aid assistance, continuing core security tasks and winning the propaganda war](#), *NATO Watch Briefing* No.72, 14 April 2020

Paul Globe, [Moscow Using Pandemic to Shore Up Alliance With Serbia Against NATO and China](#), *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No.50, 14 April 2020

Derek Chollet, Michael Baranowski and Steven Keil, [Where is NATO? And where is Trump?](#), *Defense One*, 13 April 2020

Dario Cristiani, [Russian Motives Behind Helping Italy's Coronavirus Response: A Multifaceted Approach](#), *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 47, 8 April 2020