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Finland joins NATO as Foreign Ministers renew pressure on China

A review of the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting, Brussels, 4-5 April 2023

Key activities and decisions taken by the NATO Foreign Ministers:

- ⇒ Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto took up Finland's seat among NATO allies for the first time on 4 April – the alliance's seventy-fourth anniversary. NATO's frontier with Russia has grown more than 800 miles with the addition of its 31st member, Finland.
- ⇒ NATO Foreign Ministers reconfirmed strong support for Ukraine and agreed to start work on a multi-year support programme. But despite repeatedly stating its desire to be a part of NATO, the path towards membership remains vague (15 years after NATO first agreed to accept Ukraine and Georgia as members of the alliance).
- ⇒ Deepening cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea is anticipated in areas such as cyber defence, new technologies and countering disinformation.
- ⇒ It was deemed important to continue to increase military spending. At the Vilnius Summit, a new military investment pledge is likely to be approved, with 2% "as a floor not a ceiling".
- ⇒ The long-term challenges posed by China were discussed, but seemingly no new policy commitments were made.

Summary of the Ministerial Meeting

The two-day NATO Foreign Ministerial meeting in Brussels accepted the formal accession of Finland to the alliance. In addition, four other main issues were discussed:

- Continuing support to Ukraine;
- The global consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine and the growing influence of Russia and China;
- Threats and challenges in the South, including instability, terrorism and the growing influence of Iran; and
- Investing more in defence.

A pre-ministerial [press conference](#) was held by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the 3 April, and this was followed by a bilateral meeting with the Spanish Foreign Minister. No details of that discussion were made public.

The ministerial meeting began (4 April) with a general [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General, and this was followed by two joint statements involving the NATO Secretary General: one with the [Ukraine Foreign Minister](#), Dmytro Kuleba, and the other with the [US Secretary of State](#), Antony Blinken. Most of the afternoon was taken up with the formalities of Finland's accession to NATO. First, there was live press coverage of Finland [depositing](#) its instrument of accession to NATO. This was followed by a bilateral

meeting between the NATO Secretary General and the President, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister of Finland. Next, the President of Finland and the NATO Secretary General held a brief [press conference](#) and then, finally, a live [ceremony](#) marked the accession of Finland to NATO.

After the ceremony there was a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, which also included Sweden. Aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, this was a closed session. The first day of the ministerial meeting ended with a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General, followed by a [joint statement](#) with the Japanese Foreign Minister, Yoshimasa Hayashi.

The second day of the ministerial started with a bilateral meeting between Stoltenberg and the German Foreign Minister, and this was followed by a two-hour meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Foreign Ministers format (with the addition of the Foreign Minister of Sweden). Again, aside from some public [opening remarks](#) by the Secretary General, that meeting was another closed session. After an official photo of the foreign ministers, the NATO Secretary General made a brief [statement](#) welcoming the representatives of Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea to participate in second meeting of the NAC in 'Foreign Ministers session with Partners'. There followed another bilateral meeting between the Secretary General and the Swedish Foreign Minister, before the meeting concluded with a final [press conference](#) by Stoltenberg.

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.

Ceremony marking the accession of Finland to NATO, NATO HQ Brussels, 4 April 2023 – photo credit: NATO



Finland officially becomes a NATO member

Finland officially became the 31st member state of NATO during the ministerial meeting, dramatically widening Russia's frontier with NATO. The Kremlin [described](#) the accession as an "assault on our security" and warned about "countermeasures". Overall, however, Russia has so far reacted quite calmly to Finland's accession, not least because the country was always effectively part of the West. It has no Russian minority, and Russia has no territorial claims against Finland. Moscow's attitude might change if the United States were to deploy troops there – and there are currently no plans to do so.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year prompted Finland—which has a 1,300-kilometer border with Russia—and its neighbour Sweden to drop decades of military non-alignment. During the ministerial meeting on the 4 April (74 years after the Washington Treaty founding NATO was signed), Turkey, which was the last NATO member state to ratify Finland's accession papers, deposited them with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken—the US is the custodian of NATO's founding treaty. In turn, Finland deposited its own accession documents, making it a full member of the alliance. A flag raising ceremony then followed outside the NATO headquarters. in Brussels.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) "President Putin wanted to slam NATO's door shut. Today we show the world that he failed, that aggression and intimidation do not work". Stoltenberg added that "Finland now has the strongest friends and allies in the world" adding that "at times like these, friends and allies are more important than ever".

Turkey and Hungary, for different reasons of their own, initially held up Finland's effort to join, and they

continue to block Sweden's progress. Nonetheless, achieving ratification in well under a year still makes Finland's membership process the fastest in the alliance's recent history.

What does Finland bring to NATO?

According to the NATO Secretary General, Finland will [bring to the alliance](#) “substantial military forces well trained, well equipped with also large reservist army” that is also investing in more than 60 new advanced F 35 combat aircraft. In addition to having trained and built a large army over many years and maintained a high level of readiness, the Secretary General also praised Finland as having “extremely high level of resilience”. Stoltenberg also acknowledged that the long border between Russia and Finland will result in NATO's land border with Russia more than doubling.

Finland's accession to NATO also creates greater alignment between NATO and the European Union, including in their coordination of policies in response to the war in Ukraine. Indeed, now only five EU member states are not NATO members: Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, Malta and Sweden.

Finally, Finland's shift is illustrative of Europe's new security architecture, in which the geopolitical space for “grey zone” countries such as Austria, Malta, Ireland, Serbia, and Switzerland is shrinking.

And Sweden's future membership....

The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that he was “absolutely confident” that Sweden will become a member and that it was “a priority for NATO” to ensure that it happens as soon as possible. He also emphasised that Sweden was not alone and already “very much inside NATO, integrating into military civilian structures”. When pressed by a journalist about Turkey's ongoing concerns about Sweden, the Secretary General sided with the Nordic country: “my position is that Sweden has delivered on the commitments they made when they signed the trilateral memorandum of understanding, together with Finland, Sweden and Turkey at the NATO summit in Madrid last year”.

However, he also acknowledged that differences between Ankara and NATO on this issue remained to be addressed.

Support for Ukraine

At the NATO-Ukraine Commission meeting on 4 April, the Foreign Ministers reaffirmed their strong support for Ukraine. According to the NATO Secretary General, member states and partners have [delivered](#) nearly 150 billion euros of support to Ukraine, including 65 billion euros of military aid. As agreed at the 2022 Madrid Summit, this includes non-lethal support (such as fuel, medical supplies, mobile satellite systems and pontoon bridges) through NATO's Ukraine fund. Those countries that were cited by the NATO Secretary General as having made “substantial contributions” were Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK, and partners Australia and Japan.

The Foreign Ministers discussed how to step up NATO support, and to this end, they agreed to start work on developing a multi-year programme for Ukraine to help “ensure Ukraine's deterrence and defence, make the transition from Soviet-era equipment and doctrines to NATO standards, and increase interoperability with NATO”. It is unclear how this commitment differs from earlier support programmes to Ukraine.

The NATO Secretary General subsequently [told reporters](#) on 27 April that Ukraine has now received 98% of the promised combat vehicles as Kyiv prepares for an imminent counteroffensive. He said that member states had now transferred more than 1,550 armoured vehicles, 230 tanks, and large amounts of ammunition and other unspecified equipment to Ukraine.

The door remains open to NATO membership, but.....

Ukraine has long-aspired to join NATO but its application could take years and certainly won't happen while Russia is occupying parts of its territory. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said once again that the door remains open to prospective members in future. And he [encouraged](#) Ukraine “to

continue on the path of reforms, even in difficult times. We discussed the importance of anti-corruption measures, the rule of law, and the rights of minorities”.

He also reiterated that “a strong, independent Ukraine is vital for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area”, that “NATO will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes”, and that “Ukraine’s future is in the Euro-Atlantic family”. However, when asked by a journalist whether NATO will extend an invitation for Ukraine to join the alliance at the July summit in Vilnius, he stonewalled:

“NATO’s position on membership is unchanged. Ukraine will become a member of the alliance, this has been stated again, again at NATO Summits. At the same time, we all realize that for, to make any meaningful progress on this issue. The first step is to ensure that Ukraine prevails as a sovereign, independent nation...which is a precondition for any meaningful discussion about future membership”.

Due to a lack of consensus within NATO, no date for membership for Ukraine has been set. After Russia claimed to have annexed more Ukrainian land on 30 September 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky symbolically reapplied for an accelerated NATO membership. But given the ongoing lack of consensus on the issue, NATO continues to kick the issue into the long grass by simply reconfirming the alliance’s open-door policy. The reality is that NATO membership for Ukraine (and Georgia) remains a distant prospect, although a lot will depend on how the war ends.

Global consequences of the war in Ukraine: China and Russia’s alleged alignment

The Foreign Ministers with their Indo-Pacific partners and the EU also discussed what the NATO Secretary General described as “China’s growing alignment with Russia”. The Secretary General added that:

“China refuses to condemn Russia’s aggression. It echoes Russian propaganda. And it props up Russia’s economy. China and Russia are also stepping up their joint military activities in the Indo-Pacific region. Allies have been clear that any provision of lethal aid by China to Russia would be a historic mistake, with profound implications. At a time when Beijing and Moscow are pushing back against the rules-based international order, it is even more important that we continue to stand together”.

When asked by a journalist whether there was any evidence that China is supplying lethal aid to Russia, he replied: “So far, we have not been able to confirm any provision of lethal aid, but this is something we follow very closely”. He then doubled down on his condemnation of China:

“What we do know, is that China has not been able to condemn the brutal invasion of Ukraine. We also know that China and Russia are coming closer and closer. They signed - just weeks before the invasion - a partnership agreement where they state clearly that the partnership between Russia and China is without any limits, a partnership with no limits. And then we of course also know that China is propping up Russia’s economy”.

And when pressed further to say what the consequences would be if China were to supply lethal aid to Russia, the Secretary General fell back on generalities: “I will only limit myself to say that it has been made clear by several Allies, also the biggest Ally, that there will be severe consequences. And I think there’s no reason to go into details, but China knows that there’ll be severe consequences if they start to provide lethal aid to Russia”.

In answer to another question on China, Stoltenberg reiterated that “China is investing heavily in new, modern capabilities, including long-range nuclear missiles. They are cracking down on democratic rights in their own country, in Hong Kong, prosecuting minorities, using social media, the internet to have surveillance of the population in a way we haven’t seen at that scale any time before. The assertive behaviour in the South China Sea is a

challenge for the countries in the region, but also a challenge to international trade. Threats against Taiwan. And then of course, the fact that China is coming closer to us. We see them in cyberspace, we see them trying to control critical infrastructure, and also then, of course, that they are now working more and more closely with Russia". However, there was very little indication that the ministerial meeting reached any concrete conclusions or new approaches towards China.

Is NATO's concern with China justified?

Within the [Strategic Concept](#) at the Madrid Summit in June 2022, NATO sought to strike a balance between engagement with China and deterrence against what it sees as an authoritarian country with a growing military capability and a potential alignment with Russia. NATO's growing emphasis on China is in part the realization of President Biden's [strategy](#) to build a coalition of like-minded nations to confront China over its activities. The Pentagon has been publishing [annual reports](#) on China's growing military capabilities since 2000, and sees it in the longer term as posing a greater strategic threat than Russia. China's military budget—the second largest in the world after the United States, although still less than 35% of Washington's—has grown for 28 consecutive years, and reached an [estimated \\$292 billion](#) in 2022 (an increase of 63 per cent compared with 2013).

While some European NATO states, principally France and Germany, are reluctant to be too critical of China, due partly to strong economic ties with Beijing, there is clearly a growing transatlantic convergence in attitudes towards China. There is rightly widespread and justified disquiet at China's behaviour in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and concern at the possible consequences of the self-assertive nationalism increasingly displayed since Xi Jinping came to power. However, NATO's growing hostility to China is a disproportionate response to those concerns. It should also be remembered that it is in fact the United States (in addition to Russia in Ukraine)—not China—that has at various times since the Cold War sought to [remake the](#)

[world by force](#) and created vast humanitarian crises through its military interventions.

Moreover, very little credence is given to China's recent series of diplomatic efforts that include brokering the [restoration of ties](#) in March between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the reported willingness to facilitate [peace talks](#) between Israel and Palestine. And in February, Beijing produced a [position statement](#) on the war in Ukraine after talks between president Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin. It urged all parties to avoid nuclear escalation but critically did not suggest Russia withdraw its forces. While western leaders largely [dismissed the proposal](#), Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskiy cautiously welcomed the plan, but said it would only be acceptable if it led to Putin pulling his troops out from all occupied Ukrainian territory.

There is a real danger of NATO's approach entrenching a systemic three bloc rivalry between China, Russia and NATO-EU-US, with all the attendant risks – from nuclear war to missed opportunities to address the existential threat of climate change and future pandemics. To avoid NATO being drawn into a great power competition, further public and parliamentary scrutiny of the motivations, advantages and shortcomings of this strategy is needed.

Threats and challenges in the South

The ministers also discussed threats and challenges in NATO's southern neighbourhood, including those emanating from the Middle East and North Africa. In his pre-ministerial [remarks](#), the NATO Secretary General indicated that the discussion would focus on "threats and challenges in the South, including instability, terrorism and the growing influence of Iran, Russia and China". However, there was very little indication of what was discussed. Stoltenberg [referenced](#) the training mission in Iraq and continuing cooperation with Mauritania and Tunisia to help "build up their defence institutions and stabilise their countries". The issue of migration from the Mediterranean was also part of the discussion.

The Secretary General said that NATO is helping to support the efforts of individual allies and the EU, with a naval presence in the Aegean Sea to help implement the agreement between Turkey and the EU on illegal migration.

More military spending

Finally, the ministers also discussed how to invest more in their militaries. Very little detail of those discussions was made public, but the NATO Secretary General said that he expected that at the Summit in Vilnius in July this year, member states would agree to have “a more ambitious defence investment pledge where we regard 2% of GDP for defence not as ceiling but as a floor, a minimum that we need to spend more in a more dangerous world on our security”.

This raises the question as to how much military spending is sufficient? Military spending by NATO members [totalled \\$1232 billion](#) in 2022, which was 0.9 per cent higher than in 2021. NATO collectively accounted for 67% of global military expenditure.

Justifying greater military spending when government budgets have already been ravaged—by the Covid-19 pandemic and a growing global economic recession, in part due to the war in Ukraine—is going to be a hard sell. This is especially the case as the burden may well fall on those least able to carry it (i.e., the evidence [suggests](#) that high military spending exacerbates existing inequalities within societies). Moreover, while some European NATO member states probably do not need to spend more, the United States certainly needs to spend less on the military. A cut of 10% in the [pandemic of Pentagon spending](#), for example, would release more than \$80 billion for other more pressing needs.

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