



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

NATO FOREIGN AND DEFENSE MINISTERS' MEETING,

14 APRIL 2021

Policy Brief

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NATO FOREIGN AND DEFENSE MINISTERS MEETING, 14 APRIL 2021:
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Agenda

- Security Situation in and around Ukraine
- NATO's Mission in Afghanistan

Decisions

- **Ministers adopted a Joint Declaration on Afghanistan (see annex). They decided to start withdrawing remaining troops by 1 May and complete the withdrawal within a few months.**

Additional notes

- The meeting, with the participation of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs and NATO Ministers of Defense, took place by videoconference, with the U.S. Secretary of State and the U.S. Secretary of Defense present in Brussels. The Secretary General held his concluding press conference together with both US Secretaries.
- This was the first visit by Lloyd Austin to NATO headquarters in Brussels since taking office as the US Secretary of Defense.
- The NATO-Ukraine Commission met at NATO Headquarters in Brussels on 13 April 2021 in the presence of Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to address the ongoing security situation in and around Ukraine.

I. SECURITY SITUATION IN AND AROUND UKRAINE

- NATO expressed deep concern over **Russia's military build-up in and around Ukraine**, the largest since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the ongoing **ceasefire violations** in eastern Ukraine by Russian proxies.
- Allies were unanimous in calling on Russia to immediately terminate the amassment of combat ready troops in and around Ukraine, urging Moscow to **respect its international commitments, stop provocations and de-escalate immediately**. Allies expressed regret at Moscow's refusal to provide actual explanations over its unusual military activities.
- Commending Ukraine for its restraint, Allies reaffirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's **sovereignty and territorial integrity**, reaffirming that the Alliance does not, and will not, recognise Russia's **illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea**. NATO will continue monitoring the situation closely.
- Allies pledged their continuous **significant and practical support for Ukraine**, including with training for the Ukrainian armed forces, aimed at helping Kiev strengthen its capabilities and be better equipped to **"provide for its own security."** Allies conduct joint exercises with Ukraine and have stepped up cooperation with more port visits in the Black Sea region.
- NATO Allies **stand by the decisions taken at the 2008 Bucharest Summit** [that Ukraine will become a member of NATO with the Membership Action Plan (MAP) as the next step on its way to membership] and welcome Ukraine's progress in delivering key reforms, encouraging the country to build on this progress. In that respect, the Alliance would **continue supporting Kyiv** with a number of **"wide-ranging reforms"** aimed at making it more resilient and advance its Euro-Atlantic path.

BACKGROUND

- The NATO-Ukraine Commission conducted a meeting at NATO Headquarters in Brussels on 13 April 2021 to address the ongoing security situation in and around Ukraine. The meeting was initiated by

Ukraine under Article 15 of the 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between Ukraine and NATO¹. Allies were briefed by Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, who proposed ten specific steps for NATO allies to "promptly and meaningfully support [Ukraine] in this situation."

DISCUSSION

- NATO Secretary General stressed that the Alliance would **"enhance ... cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia on Black Sea security"**, and we are working to make full use of Ukraine's status as an Enhanced Opportunity Partner." While the two parties were building on that basis, **"step by step" both when it came to political goals and practical activities and cooperation**, the Secretary General encouraged NATO allies to step up and do more.
- Ukraine's Foreign Minister Kuleba alluded to **a range of measures needed to effectively deter Russia**, ranging from sanctions or direct support in enhancing Ukraine's capabilities. Kuleba stressed that **"the price of prevention,"** although it may appear costly would ultimately **"be lower than the price of stopping the war and mitigating its consequences."**
- Asked as to whether Ukraine could become a full NATO member **not having control over its full territory**, the NATO Secretary General reiterated **Ukraine's sovereign right to decide its path**, underlining that it was up to the **30 NATO Allies, and to them alone, to decide when the standards had been met and Ukraine was ready for membership.**
- Responding to a question on support granted to Ukraine by the United States, Lloyd Austin explained it had included **non-lethal materials, weapons and training** in the past. He underscored the determination to maintain that support going forward, **"based on Ukraine's needs"** and that the United States was **"committed to assisting Ukraine with its self-defence needs"**. A range of options had been presented to President Biden.

II. NATO'S MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN

- Allies adopted a **Joint Declaration** on the future of the international troop presence in Afghanistan, **agreeing on an "orderly, coordinated and deliberate drawdown"** of the remaining forces from Afghanistan on the principle of **"in together, adjust together and out together."**
- The withdrawal would be conducted in full coordination among NATO Allies and partners, **in lockstep**, adhering to **a coordinated timeframe**. The drawdown would be **initiated before May 1 and completed "in a few months."**
- Any **Taliban attacks during the withdrawal would be met with a forceful response.**
- Allies call on the Afghan government and the Taliban to **adhere to their commitments to the peace process** initiated by the US-Taliban agreement and the US-Afghanistan Joint Declaration.
- While some **"unsolved challenges remained,"** the first and foremost objective of **preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorists** and a launching pad for attacks against Allies had been accomplished. No terrorist attack since 2001 had been conducted from Afghanistan.
- Important gains have been made, as the Afghan security forces, now providing security throughout the country, had been **"built from scratch."** **It is now up to the Afghan people to build sustainable peace.**
- Heralding the beginning of a **new chapter of relations with Afghanistan**, anchored in diplomacy, Allies reaffirm their commitment to **supporting, diplomatically, the Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process.**

¹ Article 15 states: *"NATO and Ukraine will develop a crisis consultative mechanism to consult together whenever Ukraine perceives a direct threat to its territorial integrity, political independence, or security."*

DISCUSSIONS

- The Secretary General explained the decision for the withdrawal was not an easy one and stressed that it entailed risks. The alternative would have been a “long-term, open-ended military commitment” in Afghanistan with more troops.
- Asked about the move away from a conditions-based approach, the Secretary General stressed that the **drawdown decision was part of an adjustment that had been ongoing for a while**.
- While it will continue to provide support to the diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, maintain its support to the Afghanistan security forces and counterterrorism focus, **the specific outlines and future role of NATO in Afghanistan** are on the table and **have not yet been decided**.
- NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg and US Secretary Blinken called on **other countries with a stake in Afghanistan’s future** to step up their efforts to promote lasting peace and stability.
- US Secretary of Defense Austin stressed that the Afghan security forces **are better and more capable of securing their borders and protecting their fellow citizens**. He reaffirmed the commitment to **continue funding key capabilities**, such as the Afghan Air Force and the Special Mission Wing, as well as to continue paying salaries for Afghan security forces.
- US Secretary Blinken reaffirmed **support for the rights of Afghan women and girls**, advocating for their meaningful participation in the ongoing negotiations, and their equal representation throughout society. The Secretary stressed that significant humanitarian assistance will be maintained to those in need.

BACKGROUND

- NATO’s mission in Afghanistan was the ultimate demonstration of Allied support, having **invoked Article 5** for the **first and only time** in the Alliance’s history, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Currently, **NATO’s Resolute Support mission is 10,000-strong with contributions from 35 allied and partner countries**.
- 1 May 2021 was the deadline set in the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement and the US-Afghanistan Joint Declaration for the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan. The agreement however also included a number of commitments for the Taliban to fulfill.
- US and NATO announcements regarding the troop drawdown were coordinated, with US President Joe Biden speaking to the American people at 20:30 (CET) and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, US Secretary of State Blinken and US Secretary of Defence Austin speaking to the press at 21:00 (CET). These announcements follow weeks of consultation.
- NATO is going to **continue supporting and working with the government of Afghanistan**, reaffirming its commitment to the Afghan people. To that end, the Secretary-General had conducted a **conversation with Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani**.
- Turkey will host the next round of intra-Afghan peace talks starting on 24 April.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

- US Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin confirmed the United States would maintain counterterrorism capabilities in the region, while stressing that the terrorist threat was now spread out over several other areas of the globe.
- In discussing the drawdown, Secretary Blinken stressed that the world has changed dramatically and underlined the need to adjust strategies to “the threats of 2021, not those of 2001.” The drawdown would allow attention to be shifted to the “challenges that now demand our focus and resource.”
- Secretary of Defense Austin stressed that “The president’s decision give us the opportunity to refocus, to deter and defeat future adversaries, in no small measure by revitalizing alliances and to meet the challenges that undermine rules-based order.” In that context, he singled out the People’s Republic of China as the “number one challenge” as Beijing sought to reshape the international order.

Annex 1: North Atlantic Council Ministerial Statement on Afghanistan, 14 April 2021

In 2001, Allies invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the only time in NATO's history and went to Afghanistan together with clear objectives: to confront al-Qaeda and those who attacked the United States on September 11, and to prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan as a safe haven to attack us. In the ensuing decades through the investment of blood and treasure, and in partnership with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its security forces, we have worked together to achieve these goals.

In light of this and recognising that there is no military solution to the challenges Afghanistan faces, Allies have determined that we will start the withdrawal of Resolute Support Mission forces by May 1. This drawdown will be orderly, coordinated, and deliberate. We plan to have the withdrawal of all US and Resolute Support Mission forces completed within a few months. Any Taliban attacks on Allied troops during this withdrawal will be met with a forceful response.

The conclusion of NATO's Resolute Support Mission takes place against the backdrop of renewed regional and international support for political progress toward peace. We will continue to support the ongoing Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process. We welcome the Istanbul Conference as an opportunity to move the peace process forward and to reinforce the progress made in Doha. We call on the Afghan government and the Taliban to adhere to their commitments to the peace process initiated by the US-Taliban agreement and the US-Afghanistan Joint Declaration.

NATO Allies and partners will continue to stand with Afghanistan, its people, and its institutions in promoting security and upholding the gains of the last 20 years. Withdrawing our troops does not mean ending our relationship with Afghanistan. Rather, this will be the start of a new chapter. A sustainable peace in Afghanistan will have at its foundation an enduring, comprehensive, and inclusive peace agreement that puts an end to violence, safeguards the human rights of all Afghans, particularly women, children, and minorities, upholds the rule of law, and ensures that Afghanistan never again serves as a safe haven for terrorists.

NATO assembled one of the largest coalitions in history to serve in Afghanistan. Our troops went into Afghanistan together, we have adjusted together, and now we are leaving together. We are grateful to all who served in and supported this mission, including Afghanistan's security forces. We honour the sacrifices of those who paid the ultimate price in service to it.

Resolute Support Mission partner nations associate themselves with this statement