

**Research Briefing**

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# Ukraine: China's pathway to peace?

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Fifteen months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the outcome of the conflict appears far from certain. Both sides continue to call for a decisive victory, suggesting there is currently little appetite for compromise or peace.

However, international attention is increasingly being given to the conditions that may be required to bring about a peace settlement. Several countries

have called for negotiations, and in February 2023 China tabled peace proposals.

Ukraine and its allies have largely rejected China's proposals, instead offering President Zelenskyy's own peace formula, which he proposed at the end of 2022, as the basis for any talks. Russia has, in turn, dismissed the Ukrainian peace formula and accused Ukraine of not being ready for dialogue.

This short briefing examines China's peace proposals and the international reaction to them.

# 1 China's peace plan

## 1.1 China's position on the conflict

China has sought to portray itself as neutral over the conflict in Ukraine, abstaining from three UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia's actions<sup>1</sup> and calling for restraint and dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

However, Western observers have described China's position on Ukraine as one of "pro-Russian neutrality".<sup>3</sup> While not supporting Russia's actions in Ukraine, China has not condemned them either.

Proclaiming a "no limits" partnership just weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine,<sup>4</sup> China has since provided political, diplomatic and economic support to Russia. This support has helped it to endure the consequences of the Ukraine conflict and particularly to soften the impact of Western-led sanctions on the Russian economy.<sup>5</sup>

At a summit in March 2023, President Putin and President Xi signed several trade and security cooperation agreements, committing to strengthening the two countries' "comprehensive partnership".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In [March 2022](#), [October 2022](#) and [February 2023](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Remarks by Chargé d'Affaires of China's Permanent Mission to the UN](#), 24 February 2023

<sup>3</sup> "Xi pursues policy of 'pro Russia neutrality' despite Ukraine war", The Financial Times, 27 February 2022 and ["Ukraine at one year: Has China supported Russia?"](#), The Stimson Center, 13 February 2023

<sup>4</sup> President of Russia, [Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China](#), 4 February 2022

<sup>5</sup> ["Ukraine war: What support is China giving Russia?"](#), BBC News, 20 March 2023

<sup>6</sup> President of Russia, [Russian-Chinese talks](#), 21 March 2023

## 1.2

# What does China's peace plan propose?

At the end of February 2023, and as part of attempts to position itself as a potential mediator in the conflict, the Chinese government presented [proposals for reaching a peace settlement in the Ukraine conflict](#).

The plan sets out 12 broad observations which reflect previous Chinese statements on the conflict:

1. Respect of UN principles, including the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries must be upheld.
2. The security of a country should not be pursued at the expense of others and the security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs. All parties should work towards a balanced and sustainable European security architecture in which the legitimate security interests and concerns of all countries should be taken seriously and addressed.<sup>7</sup>
3. All parties should cease hostilities, exercise restraint and resume dialogue to deescalate the situation and ultimately reach a comprehensive ceasefire.
4. Dialogue and negotiation are the only viable solution to the conflict and all efforts conducive to any peaceful settlement must be encouraged and supported. China will continue to play a constructive role in this regard.
5. All measures for easing the unfolding humanitarian crisis must be encouraged and supported. The safety of civilians must be effectively protected, and humanitarian corridors should be set up for the evacuation of civilians from conflict zones.
6. Parties to the conflict should abide by international humanitarian law, avoid attacking civilians and civilian facilities, protect the victims of conflict and respect the basic rights of prisoners of war.
7. The safety and security of peaceful nuclear facilities must be ensured.
8. Strategic risk should be reduced, and the threat or use of nuclear weapons should be opposed.
9. All parties need to implement the Black Sea Grain Initiative to facilitate grain exports and ease pressures on global food security.

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<sup>7</sup> Prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia argued for a redrawing of the European security architecture that emerged following the fall of the Soviet Union and security guarantees with respect to NATO membership. These issues are examined in Library briefings: [Ukraine: Russia's "red line"](#), February 2022 and [European security: the outcome of talks with Russia](#), January 2022

10. Unilateral sanctions must cease.
11. All parties should maintain the global economic system and oppose using it as a tool or weapon for political purposes.
12. Post conflict reconstruction should be supported, and China stands ready to provide assistance.

The plan does not, however, mention the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine or the return of Ukrainian territory considered to have been illegally annexed by Russia.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Response to China's peace proposals

The response to China's peace proposals has been mixed.

Critics of the plan have called the proposals “vague”, lacking in specific binding commitments and “clearly too abstract to be a road map to end the war”.<sup>9</sup> They argue that China's motivation, as with its previous [peace plan for Israel/Palestine in 2021](#), is based on its diplomatic rivalry with the United States and its desire to “bolster its image as a responsible world power in the eyes of developing countries”,<sup>10</sup> most notably those countries in [the global south](#).<sup>11</sup>

China's neutrality has also been questioned as the peace plan does not acknowledge Russia's invasion and violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, and echoes many of the arguments put forward by the Russian Government that the West is ultimately responsible for the conflict.<sup>12</sup> China's efforts to present itself as a mediator in the conflict, while at the same time providing diplomatic and economic support to Russia, has also been questioned.<sup>13</sup>

Other, predominantly neutral, countries have however welcomed China's efforts to promote peace. Among them is Brazil, whose President Lula da Silva

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<sup>8</sup> The annexation of four regions in Ukraine in early October 2022 is examined in Library briefing, [Implications of the Russian-backed referendums in Ukraine](#). The annexation of Crimea in 2014 is examined in [2014 Ukraine crisis](#) and [Ukraine: Towards a frozen conflict](#)

<sup>9</sup> See for example: “[Inside China's peace plan for Ukraine](#)”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 March 2023, “[China's peace plan for Ukraine isn't about peace](#)”, Foreign Policy, 4 April 2023 and “[What China's peace plan reveals about its stance on Russia's war with Ukraine](#)”, United States Institute for Peace, 2 March 2023

<sup>10</sup> “[Inside China's peace plan for Ukraine](#)”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 March 2023 and

<sup>11</sup> “[China's peace plan for Ukraine: Responsible leadership?](#)”, Centre for East European and International Studies, 22 March 2023

<sup>12</sup> “[China calls for Russia-Ukraine ceasefire as claims to neutrality questioned](#)”, CNN, 24 February 2023. Russia's claims are examined in Library briefing: [Ukraine: Russia's “red line”](#).

<sup>13</sup> “[China calls for Russia-Ukraine ceasefire as claims to neutrality questioned](#)”, CNN, 24 February 2023

has himself proposed the creation of a “G20 for peace”, a group of neutral countries that could play a mediating role in the conflict.<sup>14</sup>

India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said his government is prepared to contribute to any peace process,<sup>15</sup> while South Africa’s Minister for International Relations, Naledi Pandor, said China’s efforts in seeking a diplomatic solution to the conflict were to be welcomed by the international community.<sup>16</sup> Hungary, which is a member of NATO and the EU but has expressed a desire to remain neutral,<sup>17</sup> has said it supports China’s diplomatic efforts and believes the Chinese plan can be “the basis for discussions on how to achieve peace”.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.1

### Russia

Although not fully endorsing the peace plan, President Putin said at the Russia–China summit at the end of March 2023 that many of China’s proposals could be used as a basis for a peace settlement but only “when the West and Kiev are ready for it”.<sup>19</sup>

The Russian Government has previously said that it is open to negotiations but that for a peace settlement to be realised the Ukrainian Government must recognise the “new territorial realities”.<sup>20</sup> President Putin has stated on many occasions that the newly annexed regions of Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson) would be with Russia forever.<sup>21</sup>

On that basis the Kremlin has dismissed President Zelenskyy’s peace formula, which calls for the return of annexed territory and Russian reparations (see below), saying that “we will certainly not talk to anyone on such terms”.<sup>22</sup>

On 21 April 2023, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a press release in which it reiterated the status of Crimea as “an inalienable part of Russia” and said that the “rhetoric and criminal actions” of the Ukrainian government

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<sup>14</sup> [“Lula suggests group of nations to negotiate peace for Ukraine, Russia”](#), Agencia Brasil, 31 January 2023 and [“Lula da Silva: “Both sides want to win war, but a war doesn’t always need a winner””](#), El País (online), 27 April 2023

<sup>15</sup> [“India prepared to contribute to peace process”](#), India Today, 2 March 2023

<sup>16</sup> [“South African Foreign Minister hails China’s peace plan”](#), CGTN Africa, March 2023

<sup>17</sup> [“Orbán backs China’s Ukraine peace plan”](#), Politico, 27 February 2023. However, as an EU Member State, Hungary is obliged to support [EU sanctions against Russia](#) and [military assistance being provided through the European Peace Facility](#).

<sup>18</sup> [“Hungary sees China peace plan as basis for Ukrainian settlement, says top diplomat”](#), TASS Russian News Agency, 15 May 2023

<sup>19</sup> President of Russia, [Press statements by President of Russia and President of China](#), 21 March 2023

<sup>20</sup> [“Putin tells Ukraine he is ready for peace talks – but only if Kyiv accepts new territorial realities”](#), The Daily Mail, 5 January 2023

<sup>21</sup> President of Russia, [Signing of Treaties on accession](#), 30 September 2022

<sup>22</sup> [“Russia will not negotiate under terms of Zelenskyy’s peace formula, Lavrov says”](#), The Independent, 29 December 2022

confirmed the need to continue the “special military operation” until “the goals of de-Nazification and de-militarisation of Ukraine are achieved and the threats to Russia’s security emanating from its territory are completely eliminated”.<sup>23</sup> The press release did not reference a willingness to engage in peace talks or acknowledge the Chinese peace plan.

In April 2023, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, also said that any peace talks must consider the broader context of European security, which dominated diplomatic engagement prior to Russia’s invasion in February 2022. In a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in early April, Lavrov said Russia was “not refusing to talk” but that talks could only be based “on existing realities and the legitimate interests and concerns of the Russian Federation”. He went on to say:

We are willing to talk while primarily keeping in mind our own security and the rights of the people in Donbass and neighbouring territories who represent many centuries of Russian culture, language, and literature.<sup>24</sup>

In a speech to mark Victory Day on 9 May 2023, President Putin said that a “real war” was being waged against Russia, and he committed to defending the people of the Donbas and safeguarding Russia’s security, which he suggested was dependent on the “special military operation” in Ukraine.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2

## Ukraine

President Zelenskyy did not immediately oppose the Chinese peace proposals, but neither did he endorse them. He welcomed China’s efforts to promote peace but said that there could only be a “fair peace” that involved the withdrawal of all Russian troops from occupied Ukrainian territory.<sup>26</sup> In a speech on 28 March 2023, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba echoed those sentiments:

We notice that other nations are also putting forth their own initiatives. We appreciate their focus on a problem that jeopardizes global security. However, I would like to emphasize that the Ukrainian people will accept peace only if it guarantees the cessation of Russian aggression in full, the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, and the restoration of our state’s territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders.<sup>27</sup>

While the Ukrainian Government has said it is open to talks, it has also expressed scepticism over personal talks with President Putin, following [the](#)

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<sup>23</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Press release](#), 21 April 2023

<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Joint news conference](#), 7 April 2023

<sup>25</sup> President of Russia, [Victory parade on Red Square](#), 9 May 2023

<sup>26</sup> [“Zelenskyy open to China’s peace plan but rejects compromise with ‘sick’ Putin”](#), The Guardian, 25 February 2023

<sup>27</sup> US Department of State, [Remarks by Secretary Anthony J. Blinken](#), 28 March 2023

[issue of a warrant for his arrest by the International Criminal Court](#).<sup>28</sup>

President Zelenskyy had previously approved a resolution adopted by Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council in September 2022, which outlined "the impossibility of holding negotiations with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin".<sup>29</sup>

## President Zelenskyy's peace formula

The cessation of Russian aggression, the withdrawal of Russian forces from occupied territories, justice and reparations are the demands at the centre of a peace formula that President Zelenskyy presented at the end of 2022.

In a speech to the G20 in November 2022 he laid out [a ten-point plan for peace](#) and said that Ukraine "should not be offered to conclude compromises with its conscience, sovereignty, territory and independence".<sup>30</sup> His peace formula calls for:

- The restoration of nuclear safety and security, including the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the immediate transfer of its control to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Ukrainian personnel, and the reconnection of the station to the power grid.
- Ensuring food security, including an indefinite extension to [the Black Sea Grain Initiative](#).
- Energy security, including the introduction of price restrictions on Russian energy exports.
- The release and return of all prisoners and deportees including the thousands of children forcibly deported to Russia.
- Implementation of the UN Charter and the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, without any compromises.
- The cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of Russian forces from the whole of Ukraine and the restoration of Ukrainian control over its state borders.
- Justice and accountability, including the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Ukraine and reparations from Russia.

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<sup>28</sup> ["Ukraine sees no way to negotiate peace with Putin after war crimes warrant"](#), Politico, 22 March 2023

<sup>29</sup> ["Zelenskyy approves National Security Council decision on impossibility of negotiations with Putin"](#), Ukrainska Pravda, 4 October 2022

<sup>30</sup> President of Ukraine, [Speech](#), 15 November 2022

- Protection of the environment and increased efforts to address the environmental damage caused by the war.
- The prevention of escalation, including effective security assurances for Ukraine. The government has presented the [Kyiv Security Compact](#) (PDF), which Ukraine has called on the international community to endorse.
- Confirmation of the end of the war through the signing of a document by both parties to the conflict.<sup>31</sup>

Based on this plan, it is considered unlikely Ukraine will accept any sort of settlement that denies them their full independence and territorial integrity, including the return of Crimea.<sup>32</sup>

## Meeting with President Xi Jinping

On 26 April 2023, China's President Xi Jinping and President Zelenskyy spoke on the phone, the first communication between the two leaders since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

President Zelenskyy revealed that one of the main focuses of the conversation was on efforts to restore "a just and sustainable peace".<sup>33</sup> President Xi expressed China's commitment to facilitating talks and said that dialogue and negotiation were "the only viable way forward".<sup>34</sup> President Zelenskyy reiterated that "there can be no peace at the expense of territorial compromises" and that "the territorial integrity of Ukraine must be restored within the 1991 borders" (which includes Crimea).<sup>35</sup>

President Zelenskyy presented his peace formula to President Xi and both leaders agreed to continue discussions, including the visit of a Chinese delegation to Kyiv to discuss any political settlement of the conflict.<sup>36</sup>

Calls for victory were once again reiterated in various speeches by President Zelenskyy in early May 2023.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> President of Ukraine, [Speech](#), 15 November 2022

<sup>32</sup> "[Ukraine's resilience is about winning the war](#)", Carnegie Europe, 25 April 2023

<sup>33</sup> [President Zelenskyy official](#), Telegram, 26 April 2023

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Press release](#), 26 April 2023

<sup>35</sup> [President Zelenskyy official](#), Telegram, 26 April 2023

<sup>36</sup> President of Ukraine, [Speech](#), 26 April 2023 and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [Press release](#), 26 April 2023

<sup>37</sup> President of Ukraine, [President at the Infantry Day celebrations](#), 6 May 2023; [President following the meeting with the President of the European Commission in Kyiv](#), 9 May 2023 and [Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#), 10 May 2023



## 2.3

## United States

The US and other Western countries all acknowledge the diplomatic influence that China has with Russia.<sup>38</sup>

However, the US government has criticised the Chinese peace proposals for the fact they do not acknowledge Russia's aggression or violation of international law and do not call for the withdrawal of Russian forces.<sup>39</sup> The US argues that the proposals "effectively freeze Russia's territorial gains in Ukraine" and would allow Russia to "rest and refit its troops, and then relaunch the war at a time more advantageous to it".<sup>40</sup>

In a speech on 28 March, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken acknowledged "what may seem to be well intentioned efforts", but also warned that "what seems to be appealing on the surface... can also be a very cynical trap that we have to be very, very careful of".<sup>41</sup> The US government has questioned China's portrayal of itself as "an honest broker", pointing to the political, diplomatic and economic support that China has been providing to Russia and its role in disseminating the Russian narrative over the invasion.<sup>42</sup>

The US supports a "just and durable peace in Ukraine" and instead has expressed support for President Zelenskyy's ten-point peace formula that recognises and restores Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>43</sup>

In a speech to the UN Security Council on 24 February 2023, Secretary Blinken said:

the United States has long made clear – even before this war – that we're prepared to engage in any meaningful diplomatic effort to stop Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

But history teaches us that it's the nature of peace that matters [...]

President Zelenskyy has put forward a ten-point plan for a just and durable peace. President Putin, by contrast, has made clear that there is nothing to talk about until Ukraine accepts, and I quote, "the new territorial realities," [...]

In this war, there is an aggressor and there is a victim... If Russia stops fighting and leaves Ukraine, the war ends. If Ukraine stops fighting, Ukraine ends.

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<sup>38</sup> US Department of State, [Department Press briefing](#), 23 February 2023

<sup>39</sup> US Department of State, [Department Press briefing](#), 27 February 2023

<sup>40</sup> US Department of State, [Remarks by Secretary Anthony J. Blinken](#), 28 March 2023

<sup>41</sup> US Department of State, [Remarks by Secretary Anthony J. Blinken](#), 28 March 2023

<sup>42</sup> US Department of State, [Department Press Briefing](#), 27 February 2023

<sup>43</sup> US Department of State, [Remarks by Secretary Anthony J. Blinken](#), 28 March 2023

The fact remains: One man – Vladimir Putin – started this war; one man can end it.<sup>44</sup>

The US has also welcomed talks between President Zelenskyy and President Xi as “a good thing” but said it was too early to know whether it would lead to some sort of meaningful peace process.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.4

## UK government

At a meeting of the UN Security Council in February 2023, Foreign Secretary James Cleverley said that UK support for Ukraine “will never be time limited”. He added that the UK will continue to work to secure “a just and lasting peace” that restores Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty and defends the UN Charter.<sup>46</sup> The UK has expressed its support for President Zelenskyy’s peace formula.<sup>47</sup>

The Foreign Secretary was reported at the beginning of April 2023 to have said that while the UK supports certain elements within China’s peace proposals, the Government would like to see China “make good” its statements and work towards demanding that Russia also respects the principles that it lays down.<sup>48</sup>

In a conversation with the Atlantic Council on 9 May 2023, the Foreign Secretary said that the UK welcomed the “just and sustainable conclusion of this war”, regardless of where the impetus came from, and expressed hope that China’s intervention was meaningful and that they are committed to it.<sup>49</sup>

A spokesperson for the Prime Minister also recently said that “If China wants to play a genuine role in restoring sovereignty to Ukraine, then we [the UK] would obviously welcome that”.<sup>50</sup>

G7 nations, including the UK, reiterated their support for President Zelenskyy’s peace formula in a statement on 19 May 2023, saying:

We underline that a just peace cannot be realized without the complete and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops and military equipment, and this must be included in any call for peace.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> US Department of State, [Secretary Blinken’s remarks at the UN Security Council](#), 24 February 2023

<sup>45</sup> [“Ukraine’s Zelenskyy holds first war phone call with China’s Xi”](#), BBC News, 26 April 2023

<sup>46</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Speech](#), 24 February 2023

<sup>47</sup> [HL Deb 9 February 2023](#), c1426

<sup>48</sup> [“China has key role in finding path to peace in Ukraine, Macron says”](#), Politico, 5 April 2023

<sup>49</sup> [A conversation with UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverley](#), Atlantic Council, 9 May 2023

<sup>50</sup> [“China should encourage Russia to withdraw from Ukraine – Sunak”](#), The Jerusalem Post, 17 March 2023

<sup>51</sup> [G7 Leader’s statement on Ukraine](#) (PDF), 19 May 2023

## 2.5 UN Secretary General

After both Russia and Ukraine have declared outright victory as their goal in recent speeches, UN Secretary General António Guterres said in an interview with El País on 9 May 2023 that peace talks were not possible in the immediate term because “both parties are fully engaged in the war” and both “are convinced that they can win”.<sup>52</sup>

He went on to say that “the objective is to achieve — not immediately but later — a peace that is just, in accordance with international law and the United Nations Charter. But we are still a long way from that”.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.6 The EU and NATO

At a meeting of the UN General Assembly in February 2023, the EU High Representative Josep Borrell called for a “just peace, based on international law and respect for the UN Charter”. He said the Chinese peace plan lacked some important positions:

It is not really a peace plan and mostly reiterates well-known Chinese positions, some of which we share while important ones are missing. Of course, we will analyse it, but it is already clear that the key problem is that it does not really distinguish aggressor from the victim, putting the parties at an equal level.

He also expressed support for President Zelenskyy’s peace formula.<sup>54</sup>

At the end of a NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in early April 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated the Alliance’s support for Ukraine’s long-term security, saying:

This war is not only an attack on Ukraine, but on the international rules-based order that preserves peace and stability.

If President Putin wins in Ukraine, it will send a dangerous message to authoritarian leaders around the world that they can achieve their goals through brute force.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> [“António Guterres: Peace negotiations are not possible at this time”](#), El País (online), 9 May 2023

<sup>53</sup> [“António Guterres: Peace negotiations are not possible at this time”](#), El País (online), 9 May 2023

<sup>54</sup> EU External Action Service, [The world is demanding a just peace for Ukraine](#), 26 February 2023

<sup>55</sup> NATO, [Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg](#), 5 April 2023

He did not refer to the Chinese peace plan specifically, but he expressed concern over Chinese diplomatic and economic support for Russia and said that NATO was “monitoring very closely what China does”.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> NATO, [Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg](#), 5 April 2023

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