



# In Focus

## NATO Alliance: Recent Developments

### Background

The NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, has described the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as currently facing the greatest challenge to its security since the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 18,000 military personnel from member countries are engaged in NATO missions around the world, including in Afghanistan, Kosovo and the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> As well as maintaining its ongoing commitments to support peace in fragile states and combating terrorism, NATO has also in recent years increased its military presence in Eastern Europe. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO stated that it would pursue a policy of deterrence with Russia while at the same time seeking to maintain a dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

NATO has increased the number of troops available as part of its Readiness Action Plan.<sup>4</sup> This included the expansion of the NATO Response Force from 13,000 to around 40,000 personnel, and the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force of around 20,000, of which about 5,000 are ground troops, to act as a spearhead for the Response Force. NATO has also deployed on a rotational basis four multinational battalions to the Baltic States and Poland as part of its Enhanced Forward Presence Plan.<sup>5</sup> The alliance has increased the number of air policing missions in the Baltic region and began air surveillance missions over Romania and Poland in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the new deployment of military forces, NATO agreed at its 2016 Summit in Warsaw: measures intended to increase its ability to defend members from cyber-attack; the enhancing of NATO resilience to attack through increased civil preparedness; and a Joint Declaration with the European Union to expand cooperation. The [next NATO summit](#) will take place in Brussels on 25 May 2017.

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### Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries

Since its creation in 1949, with the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, NATO has expanded from its twelve founding members to include [a total of 28 countries](#). In 2016, five countries met the NATO guideline to spend above 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defence: the United States (3.61 percent); Greece (2.36 percent); Estonia (2.18 percent); the UK (2.17 percent); and Poland (2.01 percent).<sup>7</sup>

NATO's guideline is also that 20 percent of defence spending by member countries should go towards equipment. In 2016, this target was met by ten countries: Lithuania (27.65 percent); Luxemburg (27.24 percent); Poland (25.79 percent); Norway (25.08 percent); the United States (25.03 percent); France (24.48 percent); the UK (22.56 percent); Turkey (22.35 percent); Romania (20.40 percent) and Italy (20.24 percent).<sup>8</sup>

## NATO Preparedness against External Threats

Following the increase in tensions between Russia and NATO, concerns have been raised regarding the ability of NATO to respond adequately to a potential military attack by Russia. Researchers at the Rand Corporation argued in 2016 that, based on the then deployment of NATO forces, the alliance would not be able to respond effectively to an attack on one of the Baltic States by Russia.<sup>9</sup> Dr Jonathan Eyal, the Associate Director at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), argued in March 2017 that further reforms to the decision making process in NATO were needed, describing slow decision making as a weakness Russia could possibly exploit during a potential conflict.<sup>10</sup> Ewan Lawson, Senior Research Fellow at RUSI, and General Sir Richard Barrons, former Commander of the UK's Joint Forces Command, have also argued that Russia has targeted its investment to exploit weaknesses in the alliance, for example through investment in long-range air defence missile systems intended to counter NATO's advantage in combat airpower.<sup>11</sup>

Concerns have also been raised regarding the influence of Russia on other states, including those of the former Soviet Bloc, through non-conventional military means. American think tank, the Brookings Institute, has argued that NATO is ill-equipped to counter non-military attempts by Russia to destabilise neighbouring states.<sup>12</sup> John Lough, Associate Fellow at Chatham House, has argued that NATO members need to reinforce both their nuclear and conventional forces, while at the same time improving cyber defences and increasing the awareness among Western societies of what he described as "Russian disinformation".<sup>13</sup> In July 2016, the House of Commons Defence Committee stated its concern that the UK and NATO did not have a fully-developed strategy to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation effectively.<sup>14</sup> Ewan Lawson and General Sir Richard Barrons have also argued that NATO needs to do more to approach conflict in future in a way that keeps up with rapidly changing technology.<sup>15</sup> They have cited the potential damage that could be done through using information technology to obscure what might be happening on the ground during a conflict and the potential disruption to a country's infrastructure that could be achieved through a cyber-attack.

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## Relations between NATO Members

Under [Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty](#), NATO members are committed to the principle of collective defence, meaning that an attack on one member is treated as an attack on all NATO members. However, it has been argued that the strength of this commitment risks being undermined by fragmentation amongst NATO members.<sup>16</sup>

One potential fault line in the cohesion of the NATO alliance is whether sanctions against Russia should remain in place. While not imposed by NATO, their continuation depends on the agreement of NATO member countries, including the United States and NATO members who are in the European Union. In March 2017, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee warned that a united response to the annexation of Crimea could be undermined by a perception that sanctions were not having an effect on Russia's behaviour and the view that it might be better to do a deal with Russia without securing its withdrawal from Ukrainian territory.<sup>17</sup>

A further hazard increasing the risk of fragmentation is the development of diplomatic disputes between NATO members. Recently, the diplomatic dispute between Turkey and the Netherlands—which developed during the 2017 Dutch election and campaigning in the Turkish referendum on constitutional reforms—has led to the barring of Turkish ministers from campaigning in the Netherlands and Turkey barring the Dutch ambassador from Ankara.<sup>18</sup> The NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, has urged that the disagreement be resolved between the two countries, and that they should show "mutual respect" towards one another.<sup>19</sup>

Following the election of Donald Trump as President, the willingness of the United States to continue to engage with NATO has been questioned. After his election but prior to his inauguration, President Trump described the alliance as “obsolete”.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, President Trump has stated America’s support for NATO.<sup>21</sup> While previous United States presidents have sought to exert pressure on NATO allies to meet the 2 percent spending target, the Trump administration has gone further by linking this to the continued engagement of the United States in the alliance. The newly appointed United States Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, stated in a meeting of NATO counterparts in February 2017 that NATO members needed to show support for the alliance’s common defence if they did not want to see “America moderate its commitment” to NATO.<sup>22</sup>

Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, has argued that President Trump’s approach on the 2 percent target was right on the basis that the EU was more than capable of ensuring the defence of Europe, having a larger GDP and population than that of both the United States and Russia.<sup>23</sup> However, Dr Jonathan Eyal has argued that if it focused only on the 2 percent spending target, the United States Government risked an obsession with inputs rather than outputs.<sup>24</sup> He argued that the defence sectors in many European NATO states lacked the capacity to absorb a sudden increase in expenditure. The European Council on Foreign Relations has argued that some European NATO allies would be unable to absorb a sudden increase in funding, for example arguing that the existing German military would be unable to sustain an increase in defence spending by 2 percent.<sup>25</sup>

The European Council on Foreign Relations has also said that pressure by the United States for NATO allies to increase their defence spending might result in the emergence of greater military cooperation amongst European states as they seek to coordinate any increase in defence spending.<sup>26</sup> This increased cooperation would lead to a greater focus within the NATO alliance towards European defence priorities and away from overseas military intervention. In 2016, the House of Lords European Union External Affairs Committee stated that the United States had become more open to the EU as a security actor distinct from NATO.<sup>27</sup> However, the Committee also said that the EU faced challenges in developing its own military deterrent capability, due to a lack of efficient cooperation mechanisms between the EU and NATO and what the Committee characterised as the effective demilitarisation of some EU states.<sup>28</sup>

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## Further Information

- House of Commons Library, [NATO’s Military Response to Russia: November 2016 Update](#), 3 November 2016
- House of Commons Library, [NATO Summit Warsaw 2016: A Primer](#), 4 July 2016
- The House of Commons Defence Committee is currently conducting [an inquiry into United States, NATO, and UK defence relations](#). On 14 March 2017, the [Committee took oral evidence from witnesses](#) Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King’s College London, Franklin Miller, Principal of The Scowcroft Group, and Phillips O’Brien, Professor of Strategic Studies at University of St Andrews.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Boffey and Toby Helm, [‘Trump Warned by NATO Chief That “Going it Alone is not an Option”](#)’, *Observer*, 13 November 2016.

<sup>2</sup> NATO, [‘Operations and Missions: Past and Present’](#), 21 December 2016.

<sup>3</sup> NATO, [‘Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference’](#), 13 February 2016.

<sup>4</sup> NATO, [‘Readiness Action Plan’](#), 25 January 2017.

<sup>5</sup> NATO, [‘Boosting NATO’s Presence in the East and Southeast’](#), 15 March 2017.

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- <sup>6</sup> NATO, '[NATO's Airborne Warning and Control System Flights Reach Milestone: 1,000th Patrol over Eastern Europe](#)', 6 October 2016.
- <sup>7</sup> NATO, '[Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries \(2009–16\)](#)', 13 March 2017, p 3.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> David A Shlapak and Michael W Johnson, '[Outnumbered, Outranged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO](#)', War on the Rocks Blog, 21 April 2016.
- <sup>10</sup> Foreign Affairs, '[The Real Problems with NATO](#)', 2 March 2017.
- <sup>11</sup> Ewan Lawson and Richard Barrons, '[Warfare in the Information Age](#)', *The RUSI Journal*, 2016, vol 161, no 5, p 23.
- <sup>12</sup> Brookings Institute, '[NATO: Necessary but not Sufficient](#)', 7 December 2016.
- <sup>13</sup> Chatham House, '[Handling Russia Should not be so Difficult for the West](#)', 21 February 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, '[Russia: Implications for UK Defence and Security](#)', 5 July 2016, HC 107 of session 2016–17, p 37.
- <sup>15</sup> Ewan Lawson and Richard Barrons, '[Warfare in the Information Age](#)', *The RUSI Journal*, 2016, vol 161, no 5, pp 21–2.
- <sup>16</sup> Institute for National Strategic Studies, '[The NATO Warsaw Summit: How to Strengthen Alliance Cohesion](#)', June 2016.
- <sup>17</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, '[The United Kingdom's Relations with Russia](#)', 2 March 2017, HC 120 of session 2016–17, p 60.
- <sup>18</sup> BBC, '[Turkey-Netherlands Row: Dutch Ambassador Barred](#)', 14 March 2017; and '[Turkey-Netherlands Row: Erdogan Slams Dutch over Srebrenica](#)', 15 March 2017.
- <sup>19</sup> Arthur Beesley, '[NATO Calls for Calm in Turkey-Netherlands Spat](#)', *Financial Times* (£), 13 March 2017.
- <sup>20</sup> BBC, '[Trump Worries NATO with "Obsolete" Comment](#)', 16 January 2017.
- <sup>21</sup> Heather Stewart, '[Theresa May says NATO has 100 Percent Support of Donald Trump](#)', *Guardian*, 27 January 2017; *Time*, '[Read President Trump's Speech Claiming the Press Doesn't Report Terror Attacks](#)', 6 February 2017.
- <sup>22</sup> Royal United Services Institute, '[Hail Fellow Well Met: Mattis Meets NATO's European Allies](#)', 15 February 2017.
- <sup>23</sup> Foreign Affairs, '[Ripped Off: What Donald Trump Gets Right About US Alliances](#)', 12 September 2016.
- <sup>24</sup> Foreign Affairs, '[The Real Problems with NATO](#)', 2 March 2017.
- <sup>25</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, '[European Defence and the Two Percent Mantra](#)', 28 February 2017.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, '[Europe in the World: Towards a More Effective EU Foreign and Security Strategy](#)', 16 February 2016, HL Paper 97 of session 2015–16, p 16.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p 4.
- <sup>29</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, '[Oral Evidence: The Indispensable Ally? US, NATO and UK Relations](#)', 14 March 2017, HC 992 of session 2016–17.

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