

NATO looks to the 2030s

Launched by the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Jens Stoltenberg, in June 2020, the NATO 2030 process aims to generate recommendations on ways to strengthen and adapt the alliance. NATO created a marketplace of ideas with inputs from stakeholders, to inform the revision of its guiding strategic policy document, the strategic concept. A NATO summit in Brussels is expected in the first half of 2021.

Adaptation knocks at the door

With the mission to ensure the protection and defence of the Euro-Atlantic space while deterring threats and adversaries, NATO's history 'is marked by both [profound continuity and deliberate adaptation](#)'. The complexity of NATO's security environment has exacerbated due to the need to simultaneously respond to multiple and diverse challenges. These range from 'traditional' ones such as Russian provocations on the eastern flank and the enduring terrorist menace, to non-traditional and often non-military ones such as hybrid threats, critical infrastructure resilience and the impact of climate change on security. At the same time, issues such as tensions in the [eastern Mediterranean](#), Turkey's [purchase](#) of Russian military equipment, and strains on democratic institutions and values have challenged the political cohesion of the alliance. In December 2019, the Secretary General noted that 'NATO will continue to change' and announced the [tasking received by heads of state and government](#) 'to initiate a reflection process ... to further strengthen the political dimension of NATO' in time for the 2021 summit.

Some suggest other factors that may have [influenced](#) the timing of this process include a well-publicised *The Economist* interview where French President Emmanuel Macron [argued](#) that 'the brain death of NATO' is taking place, and former President of the United States Donald Trump depicting NATO as '[obsolete](#)'. A combination of political and security elements therefore created the momentum to launch NATO 2030.

The NATO 2030 process

'[NATO 2030](#) is about how we adapt to this new normal', declared Secretary General Stoltenberg when launching the initiative on 8 June 2020. He set **three broad ambitions** for this process: to make NATO stronger militarily, stronger politically, and with a more global perspective. To remain strong and agile, the alliance 'must continue its adaptation and focus on how to respond to a rapidly changing security environment', by 2030. The **first priority** means ensuring NATO's ability to maintain its military edge and provide defence and deterrence fit for 21st century challenges. The **second** means strengthening NATO's political dimension including by enhancing its role as a consultation forum in addressing differences between allies. Commitment to [core values](#) such as 'democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law' are a key aspect of this priority. The **third priority** means equipping NATO with a global mind-set. While keeping NATO's regional focus intact, 'collective attention' must also be paid to ensuring resilience to global challenges ranging from terrorism and cyber-threats to climate security. Additionally, defence burden-sharing is a crosscutting element that weighs heavily in this forward-looking reflection process.

A marketplace of ideas: Experts, youth, private sector, parliamentarians, civil society

During the launch, the Secretary General affirmed that he would actively consult with allies and with a wide number of [stakeholders](#). To inform his thinking, he appointed an independent group of renowned experts, a group of young leaders, and a group of emerging technology experts, next to dialogues with the private sector and civil society. The logic behind this approach is that engagement with 'a broad set of stakeholders' and perspectives is important in a complex world with '[diverse and diffuse](#)' security threats.

Independent experts

Appointed in March 2020, the gender-balanced group consisted of 10 experts with senior roles across public service, academia, and the private sector, and with prominent political positions. The work of the expert group culminated with a rich report containing 138 recommendations. The '[NATO 2020: United for](#)

[a new era](#)' report was presented in November 2020 and focuses on the political dimension of the alliance. It recommends enhancing NATO's role as a 'unique and essential transatlantic forum for consultations', to 'devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China', and that allies 'pledge themselves to a code of good conduct' in respect of NATO's values. The report advises reinvigorating trust between the European Union (EU) and NATO by examining areas for greater cooperation. It also recommends that NATO welcome EU efforts 'towards a stronger and more capable' defence capacity, which contributes to fair transatlantic burden-sharing.

Young leaders

At the NATO 2030 Youth Summit on 9 November 2020, NATO appointed [14 young professionals](#) from across the alliance to provide recommendations to Secretary General Stoltenberg in the form of a report. Aiming to provide the perspective of the younger generation, the resulting report, '[NATO 2030: Embrace the change, guard the values](#)' was published on 4 February 2021. It argues that the 'alliance must broaden and re-conceptualise security to more accurately account' for an evolving threat spectrum. The recommendations cover five areas: defence, deterrence and resilience; values; partnerships; climate change; and emerging and disruptive technologies. They reflect 'a more comprehensive, holistic, and inclusive understanding of security', where hard power is complemented by non-traditional security.

Emerging and disruptive technologies advisory group

Secretary General Stoltenberg also appointed an advisory group on emerging and disruptive technologies in July 2020, although not as a NATO 2030 initiative. Composed of 12 experts from the private sector and academia, this group advises 'NATO on its efforts to drive the adoption of new technologies'. Its [first report](#) was published in March 2021 and includes recommendations for the short and long terms for NATO to 'be a global driver for a values-based innovation agenda', such as developing an allied innovation ecosystem.

Dialogues: The private sector, civil society, youth, and parliamentarians

Complementing the appointed groups, a variety of dialogues have been launched to enrich the input received by NATO in this reflection process. November 2020 saw the launch of the '[NATO 2030: NATO-private sector dialogues](#)', which intended to 'deepen the involvement of the private sector across the transatlantic sphere' particularly as regards the future of warfare and new technologies. In January 2021, NATO organised its first '[policy hackathon](#)' with ten universities competing for the best policy pitch on strengthening the alliance. In February 2021, NATO hosted a [digital dialogue on human security](#), gathering experts, civil society, think-tank and academic representatives to feed into NATO's upcoming policies on 'preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence' and counter-human trafficking. Finally, the Secretary General also engaged with parliamentarians in the [NATO Parliamentary Assembly](#), the latter having published a declaration pleading for a more united and stronger alliance in the next decade.

Keyword 'strategic': Reflections, concepts and compasses

NATO is not the only organisation undergoing a major strategic reflection and is joined by the [EU's strategic compass](#), a process to better define the objectives and concrete goals of the EU common security and defence policy. It is set to be adopted in 2022, the same year that adoption of NATO's strategic concept is expected. Both are forward-looking processes aimed at better responding to ascendant threats. [EU-NATO cooperation](#) has been enhanced to unprecedented levels since 2016. The political momentum appears to favour an even closer relationship in security and defence, as confirmed during Secretary General Stoltenberg's [participation in the European Council](#) meeting on 26 February 2021.

Next steps

A NATO summit of heads of state or government is expected in Brussels in the first half of 2021, taking stock of the input received in the strategic reflection. It will be the first for US President Joe Biden, who was quick to [express his support](#) for collective defence. At the February 2021 meeting of NATO Defence Ministers, the Secretary General [tabled](#) several proposals likely to appear on the summit agenda: increasing NATO's funding for deterrence and defence, adopting national resilience targets, a NATO defence innovation initiative, and enhancing cooperation with like-minded partners, among other things. He is expected to recommend updating NATO's strategic concept – the official document outlining NATO's security tasks and providing guidelines – by 2022. The European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee is also drafting an own-initiative [report](#) on 'EU-NATO cooperation in the context of transatlantic relations'.

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