Russia’s war on Ukraine: NATO response

NATO has condemned Russia’s war on Ukraine in the strongest possible terms, and calls it ‘the biggest security threat in a generation’. The Alliance calls on Russia to cease hostilities immediately, withdraw all its forces from Ukraine and work towards a peaceful diplomatic solution. To avoid direct confrontation with Russia, NATO has made clear that it will not deploy forces to Ukraine, which is not a NATO member, nor will it enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine. The delivery of weapons and equipment to Ukraine (by individual NATO Allies) and the imposition of unprecedented sanctions are being organised predominantly outside the NATO framework. In order to deter further Russian aggression and reassure its Allies, NATO has substantially enhanced its own deterrence posture, with large deployments of troops and equipment to the eastern flank of the Alliance’s territory.

NATO response to Russia’s war on Ukraine

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO held three extraordinary meetings within a few weeks: meetings of defence ministers, and foreign ministers – both with the participation of partners – and an extraordinary NATO summit. NATO leaders called the Russian war on Ukraine the ‘gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades’ and condemned the invasion in the strongest possible terms. They stressed that Russia must immediately stop the invasion and withdraw its forces from Ukraine. Allies reiterated their resolve in countering Russia’s attempts to destroy the foundations of international security and stability, and to defend its 30 Allies and ‘every inch of Allied territory’. NATO reiterated that it is united and resolute in opposing Russian aggression, and underlined its iron-clad commitment to Article 5, the Alliance’s collective defence clause. The Alliance also condemned Russia’s decision to recognise the separatist regions of eastern Ukraine, and emphasised that it stands with the people of Ukraine and its legitimate, democratically elected president, parliament and government. Allies called on Russia to engage constructively in credible negotiations. NATO also reaffirmed its commitment to NATO’s open door policy. In December 2021, Moscow had issued demands in the form of draft security pacts to the United States and NATO, demanding NATO pull back troops from eastern Europe and cease its open door policy for future members, including Ukraine, which the US and NATO rejected.

NATO support measures for Ukraine following the Russian war on Ukraine

The delivery of weapons and military equipment, as well as the imposition of sanctions, is taking place outside the NATO framework. NATO has repeatedly emphasised its role as a defensive alliance, and that it is not seeking a war with Russia. It has ruled out enforcing a no-fly zone over Ukraine, which would risk the crisis escalating and spilling over into a wider European conflict involving NATO Allies, or even potentially leading to World War III, although experts believe that the latter is unlikely. NATO has also reiterated that it will not deploy forces to Ukraine. At the same time, NATO has warned Russia that it must stop its ‘nuclear sabre-rattling’ and that any use of chemical weapons will have far-reaching consequences. NATO’s strategy has thus been ‘a careful balancing of its defensive mission, its credibility and the need to avoid escalation’. NATO says that it is assisting in the coordination of requests for assistance and supporting Allies in the delivery of humanitarian and non-lethal aid, however details on this are unclear. NATO has also repeatedly expressed support for the delivery of weapons and military equipment to Ukraine by individual NATO Allies. Allies such as the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and EU Member States have provided Ukraine with weapons and equipment. Following a tasking from NATO leaders, at the meeting of foreign ministers on 6-7 April, NATO agreed to further strengthen and sustain support to Ukraine. Allies agreed to do more when it comes to weapons and military support. NATO committed to enhancing practical support to regional partners, including Georgia (e.g. on cyber and situational awareness) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (new defence capacity-building package), but also to increase practical and political cooperation with Asia-Pacific partners (Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand) on issues such as countering disinformation and cyber-threats. Ministers agreed that NATO’s next Strategic Concept (adoption of which is planned at the Madrid Summit in June 2022) must set guidelines for NATO’s future relationship with Russia and provide a roadmap for the Alliance’s adaptation to a more volatile and competitive world.
NATO relations with Ukraine

Ukraine is not a NATO member. While NATO had assured Ukraine in 2008 that it would one day join NATO, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy recently acknowledged that Ukraine will not seek NATO membership, a fact that has been implicitly true for a long time, due to opposition from several NATO Allies stemming from a fear of escalating tensions with Russia. In fact, Ukraine was never offered a Membership Action Plan, a key step in the NATO accession process. Despite this, NATO maintains its open-door policy, as any reversal on the matter would breach its founding treaty (Article 10), violate the principles of the European security order and assign blame to NATO enlargement for escalating tensions. Relations with Ukraine date back to 1991, when it joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. In 1994, Ukraine joined Partnership for Peace, a practical bilateral cooperation programme with NATO. In 1997, the NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC) was established, to oversee Ukraine’s ‘Euro-Atlantic integration process’. Under its direction, areas of cooperation include, inter alia, building capabilities, including cyber, interoperability measures, training, security and defence reform and exercise participation, with the aim of enhancing Ukraine’s ability to defend itself. Ukraine actively contributes to NATO-led operations and missions: most recently Ukrainian special forces were commended for their role in evacuating 96 Ukrainians and Afghans at high risk from Kabul. In recognition of its strong commitment to NATO, Ukraine became one of six Enhanced Opportunities Partners (alongside Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden) in 2020, granting it enhanced access to interoperability programmes, exercises and information-sharing.

NATO deterrence measures within the Alliance

NATO has significantly enhanced its defence and deterrence measures in response to Russia’s war on Ukraine, through the deployment of elements of the NATO Response Force, a multinational rapid-response force. As a result of substantial reinforcement by NATO Allies, there are currently 40,000 troops under direct NATO command stationed on the eastern flank of the Alliance. Additionally, 130 allied fighter jets and 140 allied ships are in the region, as well as national deployments of troops and weapons by Allies, including the UK, the US, Canada and European allies. Most significantly, US deployments of troops and equipment, such as Patriot missiles, to Europe have been stepped up, with 15,000 more US soldiers since February 2022, bringing the number of US troops stationed in Europe (including western Europe) to a total of 100,000. At the extraordinary NATO Summit on 24 March, leaders agreed to form four further multinational battlegroups, in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, bringing the total to eight. This deployment constitutes the ‘biggest reinforcement of Alliance collective defence in a generation’. NATO’s rapid reinforcement strategy ensures that these can be strengthened quickly. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg recently announced that NATO is working to transform the Alliance’s presence in the east to a large, permanent military presence. NATO had already decided in 2014 to enhance its deterrence posture in the east, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. And at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, it decided to increase NATO’s forward presence on its eastern flank, an important component of NATO’s deterrence and defence posture and reassurance measure. In 2017 the first four multinational battlegroups were deployed to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

European Parliament position

In an extraordinary plenary session, on 1 March, addressed by President Zelenskyy, Parliament adopted a resolution in which it noted that NATO remains the foundation of the collective defence of the Member States who are NATO allies, and welcomed the unity of the EU and NATO in facing Russian aggression. Parliament encouraged the strengthening of NATO’s enhanced forward presence on the eastern borders, and underlined the need to increase NATO’s collective deterrence posture, preparedness and resilience. Parliament welcomed the activation of NATO’s defence plan as well as the activation of the NATO response forces and their partial deployment in addition to troop deployments from NATO Allies. Parliament encouraged Member States to increase defence budgets, develop more effective capabilities and fully utilise joint EU efforts to strengthen NATO’s European pillar, which increases both NATO and EU security. In 2021, Parliament had adopted a resolution on EU-NATO cooperation, in which it welcomed the intensified cooperation with NATO since the 2016 Warsaw Joint Declaration and 2018 Brussels Joint Declaration, and emphasised that a strong EU-NATO partnership is vital to address the security challenges faced by both organisations. The EP also called on the EU to keep deepening its important partnership with NATO, and noted that, for Member States that are NATO Allies, NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence.