North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Joint press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, Kyriakos Mitsotakis
2019-10-10

(As delivered)

Thank you so much, Prime Minister Mitsotakis,

Let me first of all congratulate you on your appointment as Prime Minister. Because as you said this is my first visit to Athens after you became Prime Minister in Greece. And I really look forward to working with you and it's always a pleasure coming to Athens because Greece is a strong and committed Ally and you have been so for decades.

Your troops play an important role in NATO missions, from Afghanistan to Kosovo. You make valuable contributions to our maritime posture. You support our different NATO partnerships. And your planes help secure the skies over our new Ally – our new Ally Montenegro, and you help us also in other missions and operations.

You also lead by example by spending more than 2 percent of GDP on defence. This is also important for our overall collective efforts to adapt to a more unpredictable and challenging security environment.

So all of this shows Greece's strong commitment to our collective security.

Today, as you said, we discussed the preparations for our Leaders' Meeting in London in December, and the need to continue increasing the readiness of our forces to keep our nations safe in an unpredictable world.

One of the issues we have to address as we prepare for the Leaders' Meeting in London is NATO's response to Russia's violation of the INF Treaty, which led to the demise of the INF Treaty. We will not mirror what Russia is doing. We don't have any intention of deploying new ground-launched nuclear missiles in Europe. But we must ensure that we maintain credible deterrence and defence, as well as our commitment to arms control and disarmament.

We also discussed NATO's response to the challenges posed by the refugee and migrant crisis. Greece is on the front line. You are hosting tens of thousands of migrants and refugees. NATO's deployment in the Aegean Sea has helped to curb dangerous human smuggling. NATO ships are there to help Greek and Turkish authorities, and the EU's border agency Frontex, in their efforts to cut the lines of illegal migration. We currently have six ships

in this deployment. And I want to thank Greece for your strong contributions to the NATO activity, presence, in the Aegean Sea.

By working with partners in the Middle East and North Africa, NATO is also helping to address the instability and violence at the root of the migrant crisis. Our training mission in Iraq is helping to strengthen the Iraqi forces, and prevent ISIS from coming back. We also continue to train and advise Afghan security forces, so that they can fight international terrorism and create the conditions for peace.

The fight against terrorism will be an important point on our agenda when NATO leaders meet in December.

So once again, Prime Minister, thank you so much for hosting me here. I look forward to working with you and to meet you again at the Leaders' Meeting in London in December.

Question [Antenna TV]: This is a question to both of you. Are you really worried about the stance of Turkey in Syria and the wider region, in the wider Mediterranean, that is? Do you expect an escalation of the crisis in this region. And then, Mr Mitsotakis, the fact that we are verbally condemning NATO and the EU are condemning the actions of Turkey, does it suffice? Do you think we have to make more practical steps in the near future?

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: I have stated that I count on Turkey to show restraint and to ensure that their actions in northern Syria are measured and proportionate and avoid even more human suffering. We have to remember that we need to continue to stand together in our common fight against the common enemy, which is ISIS. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which Greece is part of, NATO is part of the Coalition led by the United States, Turkey is part of the Coalition, we have together made enormous progress in the fight against ISIS.

Not so long ago, ISIS controlled a territory as big as the United Kingdom, 8 million people, they were threatening Baghdad. And now we have liberated all that territory, all the people living in that territory and we must make sure that we preserve those gains. ISIS doesn't control any territory anymore, but they are still present there on the ground in Iraq, in Syria, but also, for instance, in Afghanistan.

So NATO does a lot. NATO will continue to fight international terrorism. This is important for our own safety, but it's also important to address the root causes of the migrant and refugee crisis. So when we work for a political solution to the crisis in Syria, when we help the Iraqi government to fight the Daesh or ISIS, and we work with Afghanistan, all of that is about helping to stabilise these countries and therefore also addressing the root causes for the migrant and refugee crisis. And Greece being on the front line of course understands the importance of that. We don't stop and reduce our efforts in fighting a common enemy: ISIS.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis [Prime Minister of Greece]: As of day one, Greece has condemned these new unilateral military operations on behalf of Turkey within the territory of Syria. We were fully on the side of the European Union, we share the same views: it's clear that the solution in Syria has to be a political one and any unilateral military actions and activities won't help in that direction. Actually, it's the other way around. This is a country that has been deeply wounded by eight years of a civil war which, civil war in Syria, led to the biggest migration flows we've ever experienced over the past few decades. And so it is imperative that we avoid making steps that would lead to another humanitarian crisis and that could possibly make more difficult a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Let me also dwell, in particular, on what the Secretary General just referred to. Next to the political solution to a highly complicated issue, it is common ground for the world community, for the global community, the quest to absolutely eliminate all the foci of ISIS or Daesh.

That's an extreme version of terrorism that exists within the Syrian territory. And, of course, nothing is certain, it's anything but certain that this intervention now, knowing what's going on the side, would possibly allow the formerly defeated and scattered forces to possibly now regroup. And, you know, the front and the war and the effort that's been exerted by the global community and NATO and the European Union and all the countries that are interested in combating terror, this front has to be unbroken, it has to be undivided, it has to be strong. And I'm afraid that the . . . what happens now will not serve that purpose, our purpose. But then again, these are issues that are certainly talked about on the level of the European Union as well. And you know very well, Mr … [inaudible] that that there is a European summit, it's due next week, and during that next summit of the EU, no doubt of the national initiatives that have also been undertaken, the refugee migration issue will be on the agenda. Of course, by default, there will be discussions about Syria.

[break in transmission]

Question: Now, I will redirect my question, if I may. Now, do you intend to take a clear stance as concerns that Turkish provocations in the Aegean and the Cypriot EZ, given that NATO, time and again, has been accused of keeping equal distances from Greece and Turkey. Every time that Turkey violates international law at the expense of another country that is a NATO Ally, and which is, as is generally acknowledged, an exemplary ally. And to Mr Mitsotakis, Mr Prime Minister, this morning you stated that the European Union will react immediately, vis à vis the Turkish provocations, during the next EU summit. Should we expect you to announce a number of violations? And if there are certain upcoming violations, what will they be about? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: As I already said, NATO is present in the Aegean Sea. We are present there in our naval mission to help kerb the illegal flow of migrants. And we have, together with the EU, with, of course, Turkey and Greece, been able to significantly reduce the numbers compared to the level of migrants crossing the Aegean Sea a few years ago. I know there

has been now an increase again, but I think it's fair to say that the efforts of the EU and NATO, Greece, Turkey, has had an effect and has helped to reduce their numbers.

I think the NATO presence in the Aegean Sea is important, because the presence of a NATO naval mission there brings together Turkey, the European Union, Greece. I visited the mission and it helps to bring together the important actors in the region, addressing this challenge together. We share information. Our mandate is not to stop the boats, but our mandate is to sight . . . to see and then share that information with the Turkish Coast Guard, with Frontex and with the Greek authorities.

Then, when it comes to the challenge related to Cyprus, I think this just highlights the importance of full support to the UN-led efforts to find a political settlement to the disagreements related to Cyprus, including also the continental shelf. We strongly support those efforts, because we think that's the only way to find a lasting solution. But even with the conflict unsolved, we have been able to take NATO-EU cooperation to a further level. And I think that NATO-EU cooperation is important, because it helps us to bring together all NATO Allies, including Turkey and all EU members, including all the members, to address practical and different issues where we are able to work together and addressing common challenges.

We expect, of course, all nations to respect international law. International law is important for NATO Allies. It's important for a rules-based international order, but it's not for NATO to take position on legal issues. That's other international institutions that have that mandate.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis: I comment with regard to the first part of your question first. I do realise that NATO is a big alliance. It's the most successful defence alliance in the history of man. And, obviously, when you have two countries participate in the Alliance, two countries that have certain issues that are unsolved, there has to be a point when NATO will have to take into account the concerns of both countries.

We have always raised these issues within the context of NATO, of course, the policy of equal distances is to be expected, but we believe that it actually is unfair to Greece, because, as we speak, Greece is the victim of violations of international law and the same, of course, goes for Cyprus. I'm talking about the Turkish violations in the Aegean Sea and be it about territorial waters, or maybe overflights and the airspace. These are always violations that we bring to the attention of the Alliance and then, in order for an alliance to be effective and efficient in its role, of course, everything will be facilitated once there is some sort of smoothing over of the relations between the members.

Now, as concerns the second part of your question, I'm not yet ready to provide an answer to you. It's very early. These issues will be discussed at the level of the relevant and competent European institutions. At any rate, the reaction of Europe vis à vis this issue will be well-organised, structured and a concerted response will be there. Greece and the EU are calling upon Turkey to stop these operations directly, immediately, before we are faced with a humanitarian crisis.

Question: Mr Prime Minister, Mr Secretary General, how can NATO be more effective throughout the Aegean, in order to stand in the way of more migration flows? I think that, so far, NATO's outcomes were limited. It's actually just working on the northern part of the Minor Asia coastline and it's not very close to the coastline so that it would stand in the way of more traffickers.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis: Let me kick off. I have had a discussion with the Secretary General with regard to the width and the breadth, if you will, of the missions of NATO in the Aegean. I believe that the operations of NATO have been very useful and we wouldn't be fair if we said that NATO hasn't been really effective, it has played no role whatsoever – it's quite unlike that. That's why I'm asking the Alliance, the Secretary General and everyone to enhance SNMG to the presence, thereof, within this mission. We would like to have more vessels. And as you probably know, there is no limitation to the number of vessels that could possibly be part of these operations. This mission, of course, this is in the hands of the members of the Alliance and, of course, as an issue that I've been always raising and I'm about to raise before our Allies in NATO, during the upcoming London Leaders Meeting. This is very important to me. I believe the presence of NATO vessels is important, and I think it's very important to have Greek and Turkish officials onboard the same vessels. This is facilitating an understanding within the context of cooperation, which is a point of reference for me. I think we have to keep it alive, we have to keep it going, this cooperation, if we wish to make sure that we kerb the new peak to the migrant flows. And, of course, we're always asking for the broadening of the scope of this mission in order to encompass the southern part of the Aegean as well, in order for us to be able to cover all the breadth and the width of our sea borders. But, of course, we acknowledge that the presence of the vessels in the northern Aegean where the problem is biggest now, it's … [inaudible].

Jens Stoltenberg: The presence of NATO in the Aegean Sea has been of great importance, because it has been very instrumental in making sure that the agreement between Turkey and the European Union on the migrant and refugee crisis has been implemented. It's not only because of NATO, but NATO has been instrumental and key in making that possible in the Aegean Sea. Partly because we are bringing together Turkey and the European Union, Turkey and Greece. And I visited the mission and I've seen how Greek officers, are operating together with Turkish officers, and that is important to the improved cooperation, interaction between Turkey and Greece, Turkey and the European Union Frontex.

Second, we are sharing information. It's not our mandate to stop the boats, but our mandate is to share information. The NATO ships are often able to see the boats first, the first sightings. And then we share that information. This is also important and it's recognised both by the EU and by Turkey that this is important.

I am aware that there are still illegal crossings and that you still have a challenge related to the refugee and migrant crisis in Greece, and also it has seen some increase over the last months. Having said that, the level, the number, is totally different than it was before the

agreement and before the NATO activity started. So yes, we still have some challenges. Yes, we still have work to do. And I have called on NATO Allies to provide ships, because more ships will strengthen the presence, and I will continue to call on NATO Allies to provide more ships. Any change in mandate needs a consensus, needs agreement by all NATO Allies. So based on the current mandate, I have called on them to provide more ships.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis: Thank you.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2019/10/10/joint-press-conference