North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen with Moscow-based journalists

(by live satellite link to the RIA Novosti studios in Moscow)
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ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Thank you very much for getting this opportunity to meet with you. I look forward to answering your questions. But first, I have a few introductory remarks. And today is actually a very good example of NATO-Russia cooperation.

Right now, as we speak, NATO experts and Russian experts are conducting a counterterrorism exercise here in Brussels. But we have also other examples of concrete practical cooperation. Together, we are training counternarcotics officers from across Central Asia. We will soon begin training maintenance crews for the Afghan Air Force and we are working together to fight piracy off Somalia.

And this year, we celebrate the 15th anniversary of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the creation of the NATO-Russia Council.

I think we have come a long way in this time and we are doing a lot together because it makes sense for all of us. We face the same security challenges and by cooperating to deal with them, it brings benefits to all of us.

And that’s exactly what we decided at the NATO-Russia Summit in Lisbon in November 2010. We agreed to build a truly strategic partnership and we stick to our commitment.

I spoke with President-elect Putin and former Minister Lavrov recently and we are all committed to dialogue and practical cooperation. That’s why we have agreed to hold a meeting of Foreign ministers just three weeks from now and that’s why the President-elect and I agreed to meet soon.

Of course we do not always agree on everything, but when we disagree we discuss our disagreements. We listen and we try and find a solution. We’ll do that before the NATO Summit in Chicago and after Chicago.

And I think we owe it to our people to find solutions because NATO and Russia together have a unique capacity to ensure that our world is safer. Of course to work as a team requires confidence and trust and that takes time and it comes from understanding that the right way to build security is through cooperation, not confrontation.

We face many of the same threats so we should deal with them together. This is about being practical and pragmatic. NATO and Russia are not adversaries or enemies. We are committed to being strategic partners and we are working on it together.

Thank you very much. And now I'm ready to answer your questions.

MODERATOR: This is questions and answers. Please ask Rolf for the microphone and introduce yourself first.

QUESTION: I have three very brief questions. The first, many experts are following the announcements about the opening of a NATO station in the (inaudible) region, saw that as threats to the country, how you could command or not? Then two days ago, we saw the 13th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Belgrade. That bombing led to a number of human lives lost. Wasn't that a crime against humanity? And my final question, NATO took part in the military campaign in Libya. At the same time the NATO charter stipulates that NATO's primary aim is to try and hold-back aggression. So how could Libya possibly be a threat of aggression to NATO? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Thank you very much. First question, let me stress that NATO does not constitute a threat to Russia in any way. We have a transit arrangement with Russia. We appreciate very much that transit arrangement. It benefits our operation in Afghanistan. That's also in the interest of Russia.

Let me stress that we use that arrangement for transport of what is called non-lethal goods. That is it's not weapons, we do not transport troops, we have no intention to establish a base in Russia. We have a very practical and pragmatic arrangement which allows us to transport non-lethal goods to the benefit of our operation in Afghanistan and to the benefit of Russia.

Next question concerns our operation in the Balkans in the 90s. We took action in order to prevent a genocide in Kosovo. We acted in full accordance with the basic principles of the United Nations Charter to protect a civilian population against what I would consider the risk of a manslaughter, a genocide.

I think we did the right thing. And our operation was conducted in full accordance with basic principles of international law.

As regards Libya, the third question, we took action on the basis of a clear United Nations mandate. The United Nations Security Council took an historic decision to protect the civilian population in Libya against attack from its own government.

We decided to take action to implement that security council resolution, together with partners from the region. We conducted our operation in full accordance with the United Nations mandate and within international law. I think we have an obligation to protect the integrity of and the respect for the United Nations Security Council by implementing such an important Security Council resolution.

MODERATOR: The next question, the one in the middle. Wait for the microphone and introduce yourself.

QUESTION: Edward Socking(ph), Panorama A.M. I have two questions to Mr. Rasmussen. My first question is as follows. Georgia today seeks NATO membership but the fact remains that the province of Javara(ph) which is populated by Armenians is flatly against that, and if Georgia accedes to NATO that will lead to a political conflict. So how would you set about trying to avert that?

My second question is the existing system of double measures. I think you are a bright example of double standards because having been the Foreign minister of Denmark back in 1998, you spoke in favour of the Greenland referendum which led to the creation of an independent state. But for the past 20 years, it's been already 20 years where more than 19 per cent of the population voted against independence. They are still not recognized. So how can that be reconciled? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First on Georgia, we have an excellent cooperation with Georgia within a special commission, a NATO-Georgia Commission. NATO decided at its summit in 2008 that Georgia will become a member of NATO once in the future, of course provided that Georgia fulfils the necessary criteria. Yet, Georgia doesn't fulfil the necessary criteria but Georgia is making progress and that progress is reflected in the joint work within the NATO-Georgia Commission.

It would be premature to outline any time table as regards a future Georgian membership of NATO. But let me stress that NATO's door remains open to European countries that want to become members of NATO if they fulfil the necessary criteria.

And it is a basic principle for us that it is for each and every sovereign state to decide its alliance affiliation itself. It's a fundamental right for individual countries to decide to which alliance they want to belong.

That's the first question. Secondly, about Greenland, first a slight correction. I have not been Foreign minister of my country. I have served as a prime minister of Denmark and I can confirm that we have gradually granted Greenland more and more of what we call home rule and that's in full accordance with the desire of the Greenlandic people. They have their own government. They are responsible for all, practically speaking, all domestic matters.

Denmark provides a subsidy for Greenland each and every year. And this overall arrangement within the Kingdom of Denmark has been agreed in full accordance with the political authorities of Greenland and supported by the Greenlandic people.

MODERATOR: All right, the next question, the journalist in the corner may ask a question in English.

QUESTION: (speaks in foreign language).

TRANSLATOR: And his question, why should Russia believe that missile shield is not directed against Russian interests?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Unfortunately, I didn't hear the first part of your question because it was translated into Russian and I don't, unfortunately I don't understand Russian. But I think I got the essence of your question. It's about President Medvedev's statements on missile defence and an answer to the concerns raised by Russia as regards the NATO missile defence system.

First of all, let me stress that NATO has decided to develop a NATO missile defence system because we consider the missile threat a real threat and we want to protect our populations and our member states against that threat.

So we have decided to develop a NATO system and we expect to declare what we call an interim capability of that system when we meet in Chicago in May.

At the same time we have invited Russia to cooperate because we think we have a common interest in cooperation on missile defence in order to protect the people of Russia as well as the people of NATO countries effectively, and if we cooperate, we can make the overall system much more effective.

And let me stress that the NATO system is not directed against Russia. It's not designed to attack Russia or undermine what Russia calls the strategic deterrents. So technically it's not designed against Russia.

Politically we have no intention whatsoever to attack Russia. Already 15 years ago when we adopted the Founding Act, we declared that neither Russia nor NATO will use force against each other. And this is still our position.

And actually I do believe that the best way for Russia to ensure transparency and see with Russia's own eyes that our system is not directed against Russia, the best way to do that would be to actually cooperate, to accept our invitation.

Among other things, we have suggested to establish joint centres where we could exchange data, we could prepare joint exercises, we could elaborate joint threat assessments. It is really our intention to demonstrate a maximum of transparency and we think it's in our joint interest to cooperate on missile defence.

So just on a concluding note, we have heard rumours that Russia would consider to deploy offensive weapons directed against NATO territory if we continue to develop a NATO missile defence system.

Honestly speaking, I have to say that would be a complete waste of Russian money to deploy offensive weapons against an artificial enemy, an enemy that doesn't exist in the real world.

That money would be much better spent on economic and social development and modernization of Russia.

So really, I think we should implement what we decided in Lisbon in November 2010, develop a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia.

MODERATOR: The next question. Can you wait? And, sir, also please speak slower. Introduce yourself first.

QUESTION: Good afternoon, Secretary General. My name is Gregory Shaposhnikoff(ph), of Itatas(ph). I have a question for clarification. As I understand you said that, sir, by the Chicago Summit you are going to declare the readiness of the first phase of the NATO missile service defence system.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Yes, I can confirm that it's our intention to declare what we call the interim capability of the NATO system and that is part of the first phase of the development of the NATO missile defence system.

MODERATOR: Right, the next question.

QUESTION: Secretary General, with your permission, I'm going to support my English-speaking colleague and ask a question as to your interpretation of Mr. Medvedev's statement to the effect that the time is running out, that missile defence issue can still be resolved but the time is running out. So are there any positive premises in place for solving this issue? And is there any deadline beyond which we'll reach the point of no return?

And secondly, my second question, you mentioned contacts, possible contacts as a follow up of the Chicago Summit. Do you have a specific, specific roadmap for the actions over the NRC following the Chicago Summit?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First on timelines, let me stress that dialogue and talks and negotiations on missile defence will continue. Chicago is of course not the end of a story or the end of history. We will declare the interim capability of the NATO system in Chicago but it's our intention to continue our dialogue with Russia. And I still hope it will be possible to find effective solutions.

Of course we will do what we can to accommodate the concerns raised by Russia. But some of the concerns are actually unfounded and we have to work closely to make sure that there are no misunderstandings.

So I think it's premature to present any exact timeline. I will just stress that Chicago is not a deadline. We will continue our talks with Russia also beyond our meeting in Chicago.

And that leads me to the second part of your question. It's also our intention to continue work in the NATO-Russia council not only as regards missile defence but also continue our work

on other areas of common interest. Afghanistan of course is one of these areas I understand very well that it is a matter of great interest for Russia to be engaged in a discussion on what is going to happen in Afghanistan in the coming years because we do know from experience that the situation in Afghanistan may also have a direct impact on Russia.

And we are interested in engaging with Russia on Afghanistan and the NATO-Russia Council is an excellent forum for that.

I would also expect us to continue work within the NATO-Russia Council on counterterrorism, counternarcotics. I would like to strengthen our efforts in counternarcotics. Also counter piracy is an area of common interest.

So across the board, we will engage with Russia within the NATO-Russia Council also after the Chicago Summit.

MODERATOR: Right, next question. Don't be shy, colleagues. This is a unique opportunity to go ahead.

QUESTION: Vladimir Lukoff(ph), Counterterrorism Centre, NGO. Nobody has heard about protests against NATO from NGOs in the western countries. And I would like to ask you how can you manage this cooperation between NGOs and military institutions in the west? It's the first question.

How can you achieve this agreement, cooperation and trust between the so-called third sector and the (inaudible) sector, how it can call here our military and police organizations?

And the second question: Do you plan after the Chicago Summit and other summits to cooperate with Russia where public organizations are coming into the big politics, more and more they try to influence the Kremlin, the definite politicians like Ragozin(ph), for example? Do you plan to cooperate with NGOs in this fear of counter-terrorism which I'm interested very much? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First, on cooperation between the military and the security sector and NGOs, we have a good and a seamless cooperation with NGOs, first and foremost because we also respect the integrity and the autonomy of non-governmental organizations. We have a dialogue with them. I engaged personally with leaders of a number of non-governmental organizations, but at the same time we also respect that non-governmental organizations want to protect themselves against any accusation that they are too involved with the military.

And in particular when it comes to humanitarian organizations, it's important for them that they can work in an impartial way without being considered taking part in a specific conflict. And we fully respect that.

At the same time, we do what we can, if requested to protect their work in theatres where war and conflict make the secure situation very difficult and may also hamper their work.

So it's really a delicate balance, but I appreciate very much the work of NGOs and we always stand ready to assist them if they operate in areas where we also operate militarily but with a full respect of their integrity and their impartiality and their autonomy.

Now finally you asked me about cooperation with NGOs in our counter-terrorism efforts. First of all, let me stress that I'm not going to interfere with domestic Russian politics and the relationship between NGOs and the government in Russia. That's definitely not NATO business. But in more general terms, I think counter-terrorism is so important for the protection of the civilian population that we should be prepared to engage with all groups that can contribute to the prevention of terrorist acts and that also includes cooperation with NGOs, with all the caveats I mentioned before, the respect for the autonomy and the integrity and the impartiality of the NGOs.

MODERATOR: I think Victor was first. Thank you.

QUESTION: Victor Litovking, Independent Military Review Magazine. Secretary General, you have reminded us of the anniversary of the NATO Russia Council which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Over the past 10 years the NATO Russia Council have made a long road which perhaps can be characterized by achievements and issues.

One of the issues is that as we are celebrating this 10th anniversary, we may have no NRC in Chicago, or at least this is a topic which has been disputed in Moscow. In your view, what should NATO do and what should Russia do in order to avoid such an outcome in Chicago? That's my first question.

My second question, if I may, you spoke of NATO or the NATO-Russia cooperation in combating terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan, but Russia is a member of the collective security treaty organization, CSTO which also has a mandate in combating terrorism, drug trafficking and it involves Central Asian states.

But I understand that NATO is flatly against cooperating with CSTO although in my view such cooperation would be beneficial both to CTSO, to NATO and to Afghanistan. So why is NATO refusing to engage with CSTO? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First, on the NATO-Russia Council, and Chicago, I spoke personally with Prime Minister Putin when I called him to congratulate him on his election as new President of Russia. And we also discussed the possibility to have a NATO-Russia Council meeting in Chicago. But we both agreed that due to the very busy domestic political calendar in Russia, it's probably not possible to have a NATO-Russia Council meeting in Chicago.

Let me remind you that the new president will not be inaugurated until a few weeks before the meeting takes place in Chicago.

But at the same time, we have agreed that the new president and I will meet bilaterally as soon as possible after his inauguration. And on top of that we have decided to have a NATO-Russia Council Foreign ministers meeting on the 19th of April, here in Brussels.

So NATO allies and Foreign Minister Lavrov will discuss the progress in our cooperation when they meet on the 19th of April.

So this is a testament to our commitment to continuing our dialogue within the NATO-Russia Council. The relationship between NATO and Russia is not dependent on a single meeting in Chicago or elsewhere. It's a much more fundamental long-term project and we will continue our cooperation and our dialogue within the NATO-Russia Council also beyond the meeting in Chicago.

Now on CSTO, we don't think we need new institutional frameworks, but we, actually NATO very often meet with individual members of CSTO and we cooperate with individual members of CSTO also when it comes to counter-narcotics, which I think is a very important project.

So we cooperate with individual nations. We don't think it's necessary to build new institutional structures between NATO and CSTO as an organization.

MODERATOR: Right. Next journalist in the centre. Wait for a second. You'll get a microphone. Thank you.

QUESTION: Rex Press Agency. Two more questions. Well, first of all, how do you see the further developments or relations between NATO and Ukraine? Do you foresee joint conferences, summits, et cetera?

My second question is: Are you planning any interference of NATO in Syria, any interference whatsoever? And what is the official stance taken by NATO as regards the events in that country? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First, on NATO-Ukraine. We have an excellent cooperation with Ukraine. We fully respect that Ukraine has declared a non-alliance policy. But we still a special NATO-Ukraine commission as the framework for our cooperation, and Ukraine has confirmed that Ukraine intends to continue and further develop practical cooperation with NATO, within the NATO-Ukraine Commission and in full respect of the non-alliance policy.

I would expect our cooperation with Ukraine to further develop in the coming years and the Ukrainian President will be invited to participate in Chicago as a member of our ISAF Coalition and discuss Afghanistan in that respect.

On Syria, first of all, let me stress that NATO has no intention whatsoever to intervene in Syria. As regards Syria, I strongly condemn the behaviour of the Assad regime and the behaviour of the Syrian Security Forces. I strongly condemn their crackdowns on the civilian population. I urge the Syrian leadership to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, introduce freedom and democracy. That's the only sustainable way forward.

I strongly regret that the U.N. Security Council has not been able to find an agreement on a binding resolution as regards Syria, but I appreciate that all members of the Security Council, including Russia, supported a presidency declaration from the Security Council recently, a declaration in support of the efforts to find a peaceful solution to the problems in Syria. I think that agreement sends a strong signal to the Syrian regime, and I hope that could be the basis for finding a solution.

MODERATOR: Secretary General, while we understand that your time is extremely limited and as I'm being told by colleagues that was probably the last question and the last answer. I'd like to extend our sincere gratitude to you for the time you spent with RIA Novosti journalists.

Thank you very much. Thank you for your time, Secretary General.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: I thank you. Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: And once again, thanks very much to all the participants and thanks to RIA Novosti for an excellent organization of this TV link.

See you again. Bye bye.

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