North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference

with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the US Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken
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(As delivered)

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken

Good afternoon everyone is as always a great pleasure to welcome the Secretary General back to Washington back to the State Department. Jens, so good to be with you. Before I begin and with your permission, I just want to briefly update everyone on our efforts to assist Türkiye and Syria in the aftermath of Monday's earthquakes. The loss of life has been truly staggering. Shocking. We, I think, along with people around the world, are mourning those who've been lost and also our thoughts are so with those who have lost loved ones. So far, we've deployed more than 150 search and rescue personnel to Türkiye. We have US helicopters that are helping to reach areas that would otherwise be difficult to access. In Syria we have NGO partners that we have funded over the years that are providing life-saving assistance to those in need. Across both countries we've deployed experienced emergency managers, hazardous materials technicians, engineers, logisticians, paramedics, planners, others, along with about 170,000 pounds of specialized tools and equipment. So that's been the initial response. In the days ahead, we'll have more to say about how we'll continue to support both the Turkish and Syrian people as they work to recover from this devastation.

Turning back to today, the Secretary General and I were last together in November for the NATO foreign ministers meeting. The members of our Alliance left that meeting in Bucharest even more unified, more resolute and more committed in our support for Ukraine, which is in large part due to the remarkable leadership that Secretary General Stoltenberg has engaged in over the last year. During what has been a decisive time for NATO and for the world, his strong and steady hand has helped steer our Alliance in the right direction. Now, as we approach the one year mark, since President Putin launched his brutal war against Ukraine, it's critical that we maintain and increase that support.

President Putin’s war continues to be a strategic failure. He's failed to overthrow the democratically elected Government of Ukraine. He's failed to subsume Ukraine into Russia or to break the will of its people. He's lost the battle for Kiev for Kharkiv and Kherson. His military is suffering staggering losses on the battlefield. And he's failed to weaken our Alliance and what it stands for, in fact, that Alliance, NATO is stronger and more united than it's ever been.

Today, we focused on steps that we can take to ensure that Ukraine has the security assistance that it needs to defend its territory against Russian aggression. And we'll continue that conversation this afternoon when we're joined by the Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin and the National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, here at the State Department.

We've calibrated our assistance to meet Ukraine's changing needs from the outset of the Russian invasion. And that's exactly what we'll continue to do. Two weeks ago, President Biden announced that the United States would send Abrams tanks to Ukraine, Germany committed to send it’s Leopard tanks and authorize other partners to do the same. This followed the earlier announcement by the United Kingdom that it would be sending Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine's defenders. Last week, we also announced two new assistance packages, which will provide critical air defense and counter drone capabilities to help Ukraine defend it’s people, including against the threat posed by UAVs supplied by Iran, which shares Russia's authoritarian vision, and is increasingly aiding and abetting its aggression.

We're also providing armored infantry vehicles and more of the equipment that Ukraine is using so effectively, like Javelin anti tank missiles, artillery, ammunition, and rockets for US provided HIMARs. In total, the United States has committed nearly $30 billion since the beginning of Russia's invasion, and our allies and partners have provided more than $13 billion in military assistance over the past year, and $10s billions more in humanitarian and economic support.

The contributions that Europe writ large has made to this effort are very significant and making a profound difference. As President Zelensky has said, diplomacy is the only way to definitively end Russia's war of aggression and to create a path to peace that is both just and durable. Clearly, President Putin has no genuine interest in diplomacy right now. Here's what he said just a few weeks ago, “Unless and until Ukraine accepts the new territorial realities” in quotation marks, “there is nothing to even talk about”. In other words, Ukraine and the world must somehow acquiesce to President Putin's land grab. That should be a non-starter for every country in the world that cares about the UN Charter and preserving international peace and security.

The best way to hasten prospects for real diplomacy is to keep tilting the battlefield in Ukraine's favor. This will help ensure that Ukraine has the strongest possible hand to play at a negotiating table when one emerges.

We also discussed the systemic and tactical challenges that China presents to the Alliance and the broader international system. Last week, Beijing violated international law and US sovereignty with the presence of a Chinese surveillance balloon in US airspace. This was an irresponsible act in response to which we acted responsibly and prudently to protect our interests. There is an ongoing operation to recover the balloons components. We're analyzing them to learn more about the surveillance program. We'll pair that with what we learn from

the balloon, what we learn to the balloon itself, with what we've gleaned based on our careful observation of the system when it was in our airspace, as the President directed his team to do. Now, we'll also share relevant findings with Congress as well as with our allies and partners around the world. Senior administration officials are on the Hill this week and we already shared information with dozens of countries around the world, both from Washington and through our embassies. We're doing so because the United States was not the only target of this broader program, which has violated the sovereignty of countries across five continents. In our engagements, we are again hearing from our partners that the world expects China and the United States to manage our relationship responsibly. That's precisely what we set out to do. We continue to urge China to do the same.

We're also continuing to strengthen and broaden NATO's partnerships and weave them together in new ways. The United States welcomed the Secretary General's visit to South Korea and Japan last week, as an extension of those efforts, demonstrating the growing synergy between our Atlantic and Pacific alliances. And of course, we're very focused on the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO. These countries are ready to bring their strengths to bear on our Alliance. They're capable, they're trusted partners. They're strong democracies that are dedicated to the values that underpin the Alliance will continue to push for the completion of this process, as we head toward the Vilnius summit in July. And as we look to Vilnius, our Alliance is working to operationalise the strategic concept to make sure that NATO is fit for the future, including on challenges like emerging technologies, cyber defence, climate and energy security. These were all significant achievements under the leadership of Secretary General Stoltenberg in bringing forward and having approved a new strategic concept for the Alliance to reflect the realities of the moment we're living in and to project what we need to do into the future. So it's a busy time, but we're confident about what our Alliance can achieve. Confident because of the great unity that we shown again and again over the last year and confident because of the shared purpose we bring to the year and the years ahead. With that, Jens, over to you.

NATO Secretary General

Secretary Blinken, dear Tony,

It’s great to be back in Washington, and to be together with you again.

I would like to start by commending President Biden and the United States for providing such strong leadership at a time when we face the most serious security crisis in a generation.

And thank you, Tony, for your personal commitment and your leadership on every issue related to NATO and the vital bond between America and Europe.

Unwavering American leadership and bipartisan support have ensured that NATO Allies are united like never before. And our unity makes a real difference.

President Putin launched his illegal war of aggression almost a year ago.

Since then, NATO Allies have provided unprecedented support for Ukraine.

Around 120 billion dollars in military, humanitarian and financial assistance.

As the biggest Ally, the United States is playing an indispensable role in supporting Ukraine.

European NATO Allies and Canada have stepped up as well.

Contributing over half of the overall assistance.

Including tanks, advanced air defence systems and other military equipment.

Europeans have also welcomed almost 5 million refugees from Ukraine.

Applied unprecedented sanctions.

And decoupled from Russian gas and Russian oil.

This shows how much we can do when Europe and North America stand together.

Today, we discussed the situation in Ukraine.

Putin started this war of aggression.

And he can end this war today by withdrawing his troops from Ukraine.

And coming to the negotiating table.

But regrettably, we see no sign that Russia is preparing for peace.

On the contrary, Moscow is preparing for new military offensives.

So we must continue to provide Ukraine with the weapons it needs to retake territory, and prevail as a sovereign, independent nation.

If Putin wins, it would be a tragedy for Ukraine.

But it would also be dangerous for all of us.

It would send a clear message,

not just to Putin, but also to other authoritarian regimes,

that when they use force, they can achieve their goals.

That would make the world more dangerous.

And all of us more vulnerable.

Beijing is watching closely.

And learning lessons that may influence its future decisions.

So what happens in Europe today could happen in Asia tomorrow.

China is substantially building up its military forces,

including nuclear weapons, without any transparency.

It is attempting to assert control over the South China Sea, and threatening Taiwan.

Trying to take control of critical infrastructure, including in NATO countries.

Repressing its own citizens and trampling on human rights.

And deepening its strategic partnership with Moscow.

So NATO Allies have real concerns, which we discussed today.

In this more dangerous and more competitive world, we must continue to strengthen our deterrence and defence.

And further increase defence spending.

And that is what we are doing.

In 2014, under the Obama-Biden administration, all NATO Allies agreed the defence investment pledge.

Since then, we have seen eight consecutive years of increased defence spending across Europe and Canada.

With an additional $350 billion extra dollars spent.

More countries are now spending at least 2% of GDP on defence.

And I expect that trend to continue.

Today, we also discussed the importance of completing Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO.

At the Madrid Summit last July, all Allies made the historic decision to invite both countries to join NATO.

All Allies have signed the accession protocols.

And 28 Allies have already ratified the agreement.

Finland and Sweden are now being integrated into the civilian and military structures of our Alliance.

This has already strengthened their security.

And it is inconceivable that Allies would not act, should Finland or Sweden come under pressure.

It is important that we conclude this membership process as soon as possible.

This will strengthen the security of all Allies.

So Secretary Blinken, dear Tony, thank you again for your strong personal commitment.

And for the extraordinary leadership of the United States as we face global challenges together.

Thank you

Moderator

Now we turn to questions. We will start with Leon Bruno of the AFP.

AFP

Hi there, Mr. Secretary and Secretary General. Thanks for doing this. Mr. Secretary, you started the press conference speaking about the tragic earthquake in Türkiye and Syria. And naturally, that's my question, is relevant to that. Specifically, as you know, there's one border crossing in the northwest of Syria, which is damaged by the earthquake and there are no other crossings and so obviously, it's going to be difficult to get the aid near. And you also said that you were adamant saying that all US aid would go through local NGOs, US funding local (inaudible). And so my question is this. I was wondering if the administration has had any contact at any level with the Syrian government. And if there were a request through the Syrian government would the US administration accede to that request to coordinate aid for the Syrian people. And question for the Secretary General since Türkiye is obviously a NATO member. Could you provide us some detail on what NATO is actually doing to help with the recovery efforts in Türkiye and also tragically, will this tragedy in any way help to ease tensions with Türkiye on relevant issues that you mentioned on your agenda, thank you very much.

Secretary of State

Now thank you very much with regard to Syria. I'm not aware of any contacts between the United States government and the Syrian Government in recent days, since the earthquake.

But here's what we've been doing. If you go back to 2011, we provided more than $15 billion in assistance to the Syrian people through NGO Partners, International NGO partners, partners on the ground in Syria. We're a leading provider of humanitarian assistance to Syria to the Syrian people, not to the government. And working through these partners, we've tried to make sure that the assistance gets to where it's needed, and that's the people who are affected by the horrific war that Assad has waged on his own people since 2011. And now in the case of the earthquake to people affected by the earthquake. You're exactly right that there is one crossing that allows assistance to get into Syria from the outside, and that was disrupted by the earthquake. It's exactly why we have been fighting every single year not only to preserve that crossing – it's authorized, as you know by the United Nations- but to get additional ones, so that if a crossing was taken out of action there would be other places that people could get humanitarian assistance in. And of course, year after year, Russia has sought to block those crossings or to limit them. And that only compounds the tragedy that people in Syria are now experiencing.

Secretary General

Just a couple of hours after the earthquake we sent out a call from the NATO headquarters to all NATO Allies to provide immediate support to help Türkiye with the consequences of a devastating earthquake and I welcome that Allies have stepped up and are now providing different types of support. Of course, the US, as Secretary Blinken has mentioned, has also provided a lot of support, but also other allies are stepping up and that's the continued message from NATO, is that we should support Türkiye, a valued and important NATO ally. Where we see human suffering and the devastating consequences of the earthquake. And of course Allies have also expressed their deepest condolences and it is heartbreaking to see all the suffering, but also to see how people and Allies are stepping up to provide as much help as possible.

Q

Question for Secretary Blinken. How important is it for the Biden administration that Sweden is also allowed to join NATO not just Finland. And what is the US doing to solve this argument with Erdogan and Türkiye? What how can the US influence that Türkiye changes position?

Thank you. Well, first, this is not a bilateral issue between the United States and any other country. This is an Alliance matter. And our view is very clear. Both Finland and Sweden are ready to be NATO allies and the Alliance should welcome them as quickly as possible. Their militaries already work seamlessly with Alliance forces. As I said earlier, they're strong, vibrant democracies. We're confident that NATO will formally welcome both countries and that that will happen soon. And this will in turn enhance security across the entire Euro Atlantic region. As this process continues, we are fully committed to Finland and Sweden succession to the Alliance. And again, I think you can see the strength of that support across the Alliance- nearly all countries took swift action. Our Senate overwhelmingly and on a bipartisan basis,

voted for their membership. And the time is right, now, to finalize that accession process and to welcome as full members of NATO. We support the work that both countries have been doing with Türkiye to address legitimate concerns that Türkiye has brought to the table about it's security. There's an ongoing process there. But as you know, both countries Finland and Sweden took significant steps to address concerns that Türkiye raised. They made commitments under a memorandum of agreement that was signed in Madrid, and they are making good on the commitments that they've made. Again, we acknowledge Türkiye's longtime security concerns. We appreciate the tangible actions that both countries Finland and Sweden have taken to address.

PVS

Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary, forgive me two questions for you and then I'll turn to the Secretary General. Today the British Prime Minister announced that the UK would provide fighter jet training Western fighter jet training to Ukrainian pilots and would examine the possibility of providing Western jets to Ukraine. Why does the US continue to oppose a step that the British government now believes would be helpful to Ukraine, long term. And on the balloon you've described now, the network of aerial surveillance conducted by China in five continents. Do you believe that that network is run by the PLA Air Force? And do you believe Xi Jinping himself was aware of the balloon last week? And Mr. Secretary General, US officials have described that Chinese surveillance balloons have flown over at least one European country is that something that NATO is aware of? And are you concerned about? Thank you.

Thanks very much. So first of all with regard to the balloon, we will have more to say about that in the days ahead. We are getting more information almost by the hour as we continue to work to salvage the balloon. We're learning from that. And as well, we're learning from what we saw and picked up as the balloon traversed the United States. As to who's responsible for that. China is. And it doesn't matter on one level, which individuals may or may not have been, have been responsible. The fact is China engaged in this irresponsible action, a violation of our sovereignty and territorial integrity and international law. And as we noted, as well, we're not alone in this. Countries across five continents have also had surveillance balloons overfly their territory, which is why we're sharing this information with others. We continue to look to China to act responsibly. And as well as to help us in managing this relationship responsibly. That's what we continue to look for.

And I'm sorry, the first part of your question of the fighter jets. As we've said throughout this process, every single turn, we will, working very closely with the Ukrainians, as well as working with other partners and allies, work to make sure that Ukraine has what it needs when it needs it to effectively defend itself and to continue to take back the territory that's been seized from it by Russian forces.

As the nature of the conflict of the aggression has evolved. So too, is the support that we provided. And what we did initially, in fact, before the Russian aggression itself, as we saw, as we saw it coming and wanted to make sure that Ukraine had in his hands what it would need to defend itself. We did these very significant draw downs, a year, well more than a year or year and a half ago, back in September, before the aggression, Christmas before the aggression. And as a result, they had things like stingers and javelins on hand when Russia went to Kyiv and they were able to repel the attack and push it back. At every step along the way, as needs have evolved, so to is what We have provided, Ukraine and that most recently took place with the decision to provide the Abrams tanks and of course, Germany providing the Leopard tanks and other Europeans doing the same.

We've also been very clear all along that what's vital is not just a particular weapon system, piece of equipment. Equally important is the ability of Ukrainians to use it effectively and that requires, in some cases, significant training. Equally important is the ability to maintain it. And then finally, all of that has to be brought together in an actually, in a coherent strategy. All of those elements are important. It's a long way of saying this is an evolving process and we will continue to make judgments about what we think Ukraine needs and what it can be most effective in using. We will do that in very close consultation with Ukrainians and of course, in consultation with our partners.

The Chinese balloon over the United States confirms a pattern of Chinese behavior where we see that China over the last years has invested heavily in new military capabilities, including different types of surveillance and intelligence platforms and we've also seen increased Chinese intelligence activities in Europe. Again, different platforms. They use satellites, they use cyber, and as we've seen over the United States, also balloons, so we just have to be vigilant. We need to be aware of the constant risk of Chinese intelligence and then step up what do we do to protect ourselves. And we need also to react in a in a prudent, responsible and vigilant way as we have seen the United States has reacted to this specific balloon over North America and United States.

I think it also highlights that security is not regional, security is global. What happens in Asia matters for Europe and what happens in Europe matters for Asia and also of course for North America. This was a message that was very much confirmed during my visit to Japan and South Korea, East Asia last week, where those close partners of NATO very much highlighted the importance of strengthening the cooperation between NATO and our partners in the Indo Pacific to address the challenges that China poses to our security, to our values and, and to our interest. And I think that this balloon over North America just confirms that pattern.

Thank you very much. So back to Türkiye then, because Türkiye is now sending the signal that it might accept Finland but not Sweden into NATO, separating the processes. I wanted to ask you both, To what extent do you see this as a possible or viable path forward? Thank you.

First of all, I think we have to remember that all Allies, also Türkiye, made an historic decision in July last year when all Allies at the NATO summit in Madrid, invited both Finland and Sweden to become members of the Alliance then all Allies, all 30 Allies, signed the accession protocols. And so far, already 28 or 30 Allies have ratified the accession protocols. These are historic decisions. And so far, this has been one of the quickest accessions processes in NATO's history, the quickest in NATO's modern history. Because we have to remember that Finland Sweden applied in May last year and only in July they were invited and now 28 out of 30 have ratified the protocols. They applied together. They were invited together and 28 Allies have already signed both protocols. I think it's important that we recognize the importance both for Finland and Sweden, but also for the whole Alliance, that they will become members as quickly as possible. As part of the decision in Madrid, Finland, Sweden and Türkiye has signed a joint memorandum on how to step up co-operation not least in the fight against terrorism. Finland and Sweden have delivered on their commitments under that memorandum. I also expressed that view in my meetings with the Turkish leadership. So I'm confident that both will become a member, but I'm not ready to go into exactly when that will happen.

Secretary State

What he said. Thank you.

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