North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Defence Ministers
2019-10-24

(As delivered)

Good evening.

NATO's Defence Ministers have discussed today a wide range of issues, including the situation in northeast Syria. There are different views among Allies, and we had a frank and open discussion. But we focused on the way forward.

Over the last week, we have seen significant reductions in violence. We agree we must build on this to make progress in our efforts to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria. And we fully support UN-led efforts to reach a political solution.

Ministers also agree that we need to maintain commitment to our missions and operations in the region. And we agree that we must safeguard the gains we have made in the fight against our common enemy, ISIS. Our training mission in Iraq helps to ensure that ISIS does not return. Our mission in Afghanistan helps to prevent the country from once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorism. All of our missions and operations, from the Western Balkans to the Middle East, play a key role in our collective security. So I welcome that many Allies have announced that they will maintain or increase their commitments to what we are doing together.

We also took stock of NATO's readiness initiative – the "Four Thirties". That means Allies committing 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 combat ships to NATO within 30 days. We are making progress. I welcome that several Allies announced contributions to this important initiative today. And I encourage all Allies to continue to do so.

Tonight, during our dinner, ministers will address hybrid threats, together with our partners Finland and Sweden, as well as the European Union. Civilian infrastructure is a national responsibility. But resilience is important to all of us. So I expect Ministers will agree an update to our baseline requirement for civilian telecommunications. To ensure availability of reliable communication systems in peacetime, crisis, and conflict. And this includes 5G.

With these requirements, Ministers will agree the need for thorough risk assessments. Including to identify and mitigate cyber threats. As well as considering the consequences of foreign ownership, control or direct investment. This is important for our society.

And with that, I am ready to take your questions.

Oana Lungescu [NATO spokesperson]: Okay, we'll go with Deutsche Welle/NPR, over there, lady in red, please.

Question [Deutsche Welle/NPR]: Thank you. Secretary General, we are all anxiously awaiting details of how you plan to move forward in northeast Syria, not NATO, since it's not on the ground there, but how Allies are discussing moving forward. How much discussion was there about . . . about the German proposal? And, and what has Turkey's response been? Is Turkey open to an international presence on the ground, and would it . . . would it try to bring Russia along with that decision? Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: There are different views, and Allies stated in the meeting also views that are publically known. But this was an open and frank discussion among friends and Allies. And I think it's useful, in itself, that when there are different views, that we bring Allies together to sit around the same table, and that they address the challenges we all see in northeast Syria.

The main focus was on the way forward. It was a strong support for a political solution and a strong support for stronger international engagement, political engagement, to support a political solution in northeast Syria and the whole of Syria. There are different views, but we agree on several things, including that Turkey has legitimate security concerns. Also, the need of not jeopardising, but preserving the gains we have made in the fight against our common enemy, ISIS. That's extremely important. And also the importance of maintaining missions and operations, including our activity in the Aegean Sea.

So I think that we recognised that we have seen some progress. We have seen reduction in violence. We have seen some progress. And we shall have to build on that to try to find a more lasting political solution.

Oana Lungescu: Okay, and we have The Guardian.

Question [The Guardian]: Dan Sabbagh from The Guardian. Do you worry about NATO unity at a time when you've got one NATO Ally, Turkey, engaged in military activity that's been criticised and condemned by others? You said it was a frank discussion at the meeting, but do you, do you worry the Alliance can hold together and deal with such situations?

Jens Stoltenberg: It's always easy to be Secretary General of NATO when we all agree on everything than when we see disagreements. That's obvious. Having said that, it's not the first time we have different views in NATO. We are an Alliance of 29 different Allies from both sides of the Atlantic.

So we have seen disagreements before. The strength of NATO is that we have been able, always, to overcome those disagreements without lasting negative consequences for our Alliance. And we also have to understand that, yes, these are disagreements on a very

serious situation in northeast Syria. But, at the same time, if we look at the broader picture, NATO has, over the last years, implemented the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence. The biggest adaptation of our Alliance since the end of the Cold War. And we are doing more together now than we have done for many years. And we agree on the need for a political solution to the conflict in Syria. And we also agree on the need to maintain our unity in the fight against ISIS.

So, yes, there are different views on serious issues, but, at the same time, the broader picture is that NATO is standing together and NATO Allies are standing together and protecting each other.

Let me just add also to the last question that the German Defence Minister, or the previous question, the German Defence Minister, she briefed Allies on her thoughts on a way forward. And again, I think it is broad support for the idea of a political solution and also ways to try to engage the international community to support such a political solution.

Oana Lungescu: Okay. We had Ekho Moskvy.

Question: Thank you very much, Alexey Gusarov, Ekho Moskvy. Will the termination of the INF Treaty lead to increased defence spending by NATO members? And the second question, please. Does the Alliance need new structures to respond to hybrid threats and what is the main source of such threats today? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: If anything, the demise of the INF Treaty is an argument for increased defence spending, because more Russian missiles, nuclear-capable missiles in Europe, able to reach European cities within minutes, that just adds to the uncertainty, adds to the unpredictability NATO Allies are faced with.

The new Russian missiles, the demise of the INF Treaty is part of a pattern. And NATO has already started to respond to that with high readiness of our forces, with deployment of combat-ready troops to the eastern part of the Alliance, for the first time in our history. And also by the fact that Allies have started to invest more.

But as I have stressed again and again, we don’t want a new arms race, we don’t want a new Cold War and we strive for a better relationship with our neighbour Russia, including effective arms control regimes.

On hybrid, we will discuss that tonight. And hybrid threats and hybrid tactics is something we see coming from many different directions, from states and non-state actors. And hybrid tactics is everything from the use of a covert military operation, little green men, as we saw in Crimea, to disinformation campaigns, as we have seen in many NATO Allied countries, or as cyber-attacks.

Of course, NATO is constantly adjusting and changing our structure, modernising the Alliance. So we have, for instance, established a new Operation Centre to deal with cyber-

attacks. We have established cyber as a military domain and we are constantly adjusting, adapting the Alliance to new security threats, including cyber and hybrid threats.

Oana Lungescu: Okay, we'll go to ITAR-TASS.

Question: Thank you very much. Mr Secretary General, back to Syria, if I may. So, should we understand that, for a moment, there is no decision about any concrete steps that NATO countries will undertake to prepare an international mission, according to the initiative of the Germany? And since yesterday, there is some development in Syria, can we now give any evaluation to their memorandum between Turkey and Russia for the stability in north eastern Syria? Thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg: There has been no specific call for any NATO troops in northeast Syria or in Syria. There has been a strong call for stronger international political engagements to try to find a solution. And the German Defence Minister also has presented her proposals and her ideas to Ministers.

I think it would be wrong if I started, in a way, to present her proposals, you can ask her yourself, but I welcome that NATO Allies have ideas, proposals on how we can try to address a very difficult situation in northern Syria. At the end of the day, we need a political solution and therefore, also, we strongly support the UN-led efforts to find a political solution.

What we have seen over the last days and starting with a joint statement between US and Turkey, is a significant reduction in violence. And of course, I welcome that. But then the situation is still fragile. It can change. And it is extremely important that we don't jeopardise the gains were made in the fight against Daesh and that we prevent ISIS fighters or Daesh fighters to be set free from the prisons they are in, in this region. And the forces on the ground, which are from different countries, different places, they have to be responsible for making sure that these prisoners are not able to escape.

Question: Media Network. Secretary General, today you described the differences, very diplomatically, between Turkey and USA. Could you tell us, did the Secretary Esper or Minister Akar brief you or address the next steps of each country in northeast Syria? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: I think it will be the best to … both of them, of course, presented their positions and their views in the meeting today. And the positions of Turkey and the United States are well known. They agree on the importance of the joint statement. They agree on implementing that joint statement and the joint statement, after that, we have seen a significant reduction in violence.

Beyond that, I think, I will not speak on behalf of neither the United States nor Turkey. I think you should ask them. But after joint statement between two NATO Allies, Turkey and United

States, we have seen some steps in the right direction. Still fragile and difficult situation, but at least that has helped to reduce violence in the region.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg: Thank you.

Oana Lungescu: That concludes this press point. Thank you.

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