North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Doorstep statement

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers in Brussels
2019-10-24

(As delivered)

Good afternoon.

Over the next two days, NATO Defence Ministers will meet here at the NATO HQ and address a wide range of different issues. They will also address the situation in northeast Syria. And I'm encouraged by the fact that over the last days we have seen a significant reduction in violence, in fighting, and we have to build on that to work for a political lasting solution of the crisis in Syria. The situation is still fragile, but at least we have seen some progress by the fact that we have seen reduction in violence over the last days.

We will address also all NATO's missions and operations, from the Balkans to Afghanistan. And we will of course also address NATO's participation and contribution to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and our training mission in Iraq.

During the dinner tonight we will discuss hybrid threats, hybrid tactics and how NATO is responding to that. Also, the importance of resilience of our societies and I expect that the Ministers will, during the meeting, agree on new baseline requirements for telecommunication resilience. Which also included requirements for 5G networks.

Then, we will, tomorrow, discuss the readiness of our forces, and burden-sharing. We will take stock of where we are, and I will once again highlight the importance of burden-sharing, both when it comes to spending, but also contributions and capabilities and I will prepare a report for the Heads of State and Government when they meet in London in December.

And then the last meeting tomorrow will be with our partners in the Resolute Support Mission where we will discuss Afghanistan. NATO is committed to our Resolute Support Mission, to train, assist and advice Afghan forces. We strongly believe that the best thing we can do to create the conditions for a negotiated peaceful solution is to continue to support the Afghan forces, so that Taliban understands that they have to sit down at the negotiating table and make new compromises.

And with that I'm ready to take some questions.

Q) What do you think about the German proposal for a security zone in northern Syria and would kind of role could NATO play in that?

Secretary General: I have discussed this proposal with Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. It is positive that NATO Allies, in this case Germany, have proposals and ideas of how we can move forward, how we can create the conditions for a lasting political solution. Of course there are many challenges and many questions that have to be answered. But the idea of trying to create an agreed international framework for the situation and the challenges we are faced with in northern Syria is something which I think that Defence Ministers, when they meet later on today, would like to discuss. Because all NATO Allies strongly support the efforts to find a political negotiated solution, an internationally agreed solution. The German proposal is one element of that.

Q) How worried are you about the status of the ISIS prisoners in Syria? The US has said that it is the responsibility of Turkey now. Do you feel confident in their ability to keep a lid on this? And what happens if they can't?

Secretary General: I have stated several times that I am concerned about the risk that the increased violence, the fighting and the instability we have seen can lead to that ISIS fighters, who are in prison, are able to escape or are set free. That is exactly why it is so important that we have seen some progress over the last days, with reduced fighting, with some reduction in tensions. That reduces the risk that ISIS fighter being set free. One of the issues we will discuss today during our meeting is how NATO Allies can do more to provide support to the Counter ISIS Coalition. All NATO Allies are part of the Coalition. NATO is part of the Coalition. We provide support in different ways, including with a training mission in Iraq. It is extremely important to make sure that captured ISIS fighters are not set free. Therefore those who are present on the ground have a responsibility to make sure that does not happen and that they are still in captivity.

Q) In light of the question asked by my colleague, along with the German proposal there are ideas floating around that United Nations troops should be based in the safe zone. I would like to know – I know that NATO is not on the ground in Syria – but does NATO foresee a role for itself in the creation of a safe zone?

Secretary General: There has been no call for a NATO mission in north-east Syria. The way I understand the proposal from Germany, from Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer is that there is a need for a UN decision. And that requires a process in the UN. Of course, it is not possible today to say whether this will be easy or very difficult. This is a proposal that has to be discussed more in detail before any decision can be made.

Q) Will NATO consider taking up a role in northern Syria if it came up?

Secretary General: If I started now to speculate about all possible and impossible options I would only add to the uncertainty. We all now need to try to deescalate, reduce tensions and look for ways for a political solution. The best way to do that is not to throw in all possible and impossible options. There has been no call for a NATO mission in north-eastern Syria. I strongly believe that what we need is an effort to support a political process, a lasting political

solution. NATO therefore strongly supports the UN-led efforts to find a political solution to the crisis in Syria.

Q) NATO's two biggest armed forces – and you mentioned uncertainty – are playing with fire in the north-east of Syria. If we look at Turkey with the S-400 for example. If we look at Afghanistan, we had peace talks where the government wasn't really involved in those. We heard the US are drawing down troops, although it seems to be an adjustment, but we are not quite sure. How helpful is that to NATO's coherence and do you actually understand the policies of both Presidents in Washington and Ankara?

Secretary General: We see differences when it comes to the situation in north-east Syria. I also clearly stated my deep concerns. That is also the reason why I welcome the fact that two NATO Allies – Turkey and the US – agreed a joint statement a week ago. And we have seen since then some steps in the right direction, especially the fact that we have seen a reduction in violence and we have to build on that to make further progress. When it comes to the bigger picture we have to recognize that north-east Syria is difficult, complex and there is no easy way out. But when it comes to NATO more in general, we have seen that NATO has implemented the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence in decades – the biggest adaptation of our alliance since the end of the Cold War. NATO Allies are doing more together than we have done for many years. The US is not decreasing its presence in Europe but actually increasing its presence in Europe. We will soon have a big exercise with more US troops in Europe than we have seen for many years. We have also stepped up our fight against terrorism. We continue our mission in Afghanistan and the reason why we are in Afghanistan is to fight international terrorism. We have to make sure that the caliphate that was lost for ISIS in Iraq and Syria is not re-established in Afghanistan. And that is the reason we continue to stay in Afghanistan. We have played a key role in the Global Collation to defeat ISIS. Yes, the situation in northern Syria is difficult, we have seen differences between NATO Allies on that issue. But at the same time, as an Alliance, we do more together and we stand together. We do more together than we have done for many years.

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