North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Joint press point

with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, Marin Raykov
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Good afternoon.

Prime Minister, it is indeed a great pleasure to welcome you to NATO Headquarters. Your visit soon after you took office proves Bulgaria's strong commitment to the North Atlantic Alliance.

Bulgaria is an important NATO Ally and a pillar of our security in Southeast Europe.

You are committed to our collective defence and to our operations. And you are making significant contributions to our missions. We thank you for your firm support and we thank your troops for their courage and professionalism.

In Afghanistan, with Bulgaria's support, the Afghan forces are on the way to take full responsibility for their own security. Our mission in Afghanistan is challenging. But our strategy is clear, and we are making steady progress.

In a matter of months, Afghan forces will move into the lead across the country. And by the end of 2014, our combat mission will be concluded. But we are planning a new mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan forces after the end of 2014.

Bulgaria is also making a valuable contribution to our operation in Kosovo, where NATO has been a guarantor of security and stability for over a decade. We continue to provide a safe and secure environment for all people in Kosovo.

Looking at the Western Balkans as a whole, we have a clear vision. The most effective way to bring lasting stability is to actively support Euro-Atlantic aspirations in this region. And I know that Bulgaria is a strong champion of this vision.

Today we also discussed how we can ensure our security in these tough economic times. We need to make the best of what we have, by spending more smartly and working together. This is a collective effort where all Allies have a role to play. The more we can work together, the more we will be able to achieve for our shared security.

So Prime Minister, thank you for your country's contributions and we look forward to continue working with you.

Marin Raykov (Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria): Thank you, Mr. Secretary General. May I first thank you for your time at this very busy moment for the Alliance, and let me be very clear. my visit to Brussels today reflects the centrality of the EU and NATO as far as Bulgaria's political agenda is concerned.

I would join your, readily of course, join your assessment that today we have had really an excellent discussion about the issues that you mentioned. And of course this exchange is quite inspiring for me and quite enriching.

First, I took some time to brief you on the political developments in Bulgaria, on the priorities and objectives of my government, and the way that we see the implementation of the tasks that we have to fulfil. I mentioned that until we have these democratic and transparent parliamentary elections, the 12th of May, the main task of my government will be to ensure stability, predictability, and of course, continuity in the different areas that are of common interest.

Secondly, we, during this meeting, we exchanged views on the current NATO's political agenda. I insisted on saying that Bulgaria will continue to support the open-door policy of the Alliance, and the aspirations for NATO membership of the countries of the Western Balkans and Georgia.

So I insisted that we will continue considering partnerships as an area where NATO can do more in order to broaden its political support and its efficiency in contributing to the international peace and security.

And, finally, we stressed our resolve to maintain NATO as the most effective collective security organization. I used the opportunity to reaffirm our commitments, as you rightly said, to the Alliance's collective security and its operations. In this very context we discussed important topics, issues on the NATO defence agenda.

Once again, let me say, Mr. Secretary General, how committed we will continue to be in everything that concerns our role in NATO. This is the reason why I'm here, just to pass through a message of continuity, and I was very much inspired by the exchange that we had on these issues.

Thank you so much.

Oana Lungescu (NATO Spokesperson): We'll go... introduce yourselves and say who your question's addressed to.

Q: (Inaudible...) Bulgarian National Radio. Mr. Secretary General, would you say that despite of, let's say, the recent turbulences, Bulgaria is still a predictable and reliable member when it comes, first of all, to NATO operations, and secondly, to military capabilities in smart defence? Thank you.

And for the Prime Minister Raykov, we're in a position to give assurances that Bulgaria will keep fulfilling all its obligations, let's say, in Afghanistan after 2014?

Anders Fogh Rasmussen (NATO Secretary General): On your first question, yes, indeed Bulgaria is not only a staunch Ally, but also predictable Ally, and actually, I think the Prime Minister's decision to go to NATO Headquarters so soon after he took office is a reaffirmation of Bulgaria's strong commitment to our Alliance, and a clear demonstration of continuity in Bulgarian policies when it comes to the transatlantic relationship. And I really appreciate that, and in our discussion today the Prime Minister has clearly outlined Bulgarian policies and they reflect that continuity and I have, of course, thanked the Prime Minister for that strong commitment to our Alliance.

As regards military capabilities, actually I have highlighted in my meeting with the Prime Minister today, that Bulgaria participates in a number of multinational projects. The Allied Ground Surveillance Project, the C-17 Transport Project are excellent examples of how Bulgaria contributes to a collective effort when it comes to the development... the acquisition and development of military capabilities. It's a fact that in the future it will be increasingly difficult for individual nations to acquire military capabilities on their own, so we need a new culture of cooperation.

And I think Bulgaria has demonstrated that spirit and I have thanked the Prime Minister today for that.

Marin Raykov: Thank you. Well, to your second question, as a matter of fact Bulgaria's commitment to ISAF remains unchanged, and this is obvious. We continue, and we shall continue, to provide essential capabilities in the area of responsibility of the Afghan National Army.

And what concerns the post-2014 mission, our participation in it is also under consideration. We discussed this issue today. And this will be, of course, as part of our strategy, and it will be dependent on the final setup of the mission. For the moment being we are considering the eventual possibility of sending around 100 people, personnel, on the ground.

But, of course, what I insisted on underlining in my exchange with the Secretary General was that for us Bulgarians the political process in Afghanistan is also very, very important in order to find a durable solution to the conflict.

Q: Mr. Secretary General, are you concerned about the level of defence spending in Bulgaria in view that the country's facing a very serious economic and social crisis? Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: I'm concerned about the level of defence spending all over NATO, because it's a fact that we have seen, and we are seeing, declining defence budgets in most NATO countries. And that is a matter of concern because there is a lower limit as to how little

countries can spend and still live up to the overall requirement, if we are to maintain our level of ambition.

And I convey that message to all governments, including the Bulgarian Government. As a politician I'm also realistic. I mean, when governments are forced to cut budgets across the board, health programmes, education programmes, welfare and social programmes, then it's difficult for a government to argue that the Minister of Defence, of all, should be exempted from that exercise. I realize this is a fact of life.

But having said that, I encourage governments to hold the line, stop the cuts, and once economies recover then start again to gradually increase defence investments, because we need a sufficient investment in our security. It may be that defence costs, but I can assure you that insecurity might be much more expensive. If we are not able to effectively protect our societies against emerging threats and security challenges then it will be very expensive in the future.

So, in our discussion today I have expressed my appreciation of the Bulgarian commitment to NATO-led operations, and despite economic challenges Bulgaria remains committed to our operation in Afghanistan, and I highly appreciate that.

Oana Lungescu: I think we have time for just one final question. Reuters.

Q: Adrian Croft from Reuters. A question for the Secretary General, please. About Syria. The Syrian opposition leader, Mr. Alkhatib is asking the West to extend the Patriot coverage over the northern areas of Syria to protect the rebel-held areas, and also in a BBC interview, the former head of the UN military mission in Syria, General Mood, is saying it's time for the international community to consider imposing a No-Fly Zone in northern Syria.

Is this something that NATO is looking at, or could consider, extending the range of the Patriot missiles?

And for the Prime Minister Raykov, could I ask you whether you could clarify for us Bulgaria's position on whether it intends to ask the European Union to put Hezbollah on the EU terrorist list, please?

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: In brief, no, we have no plans to change the purpose of, and coverage of the deployed Patriot missiles. We made clear right from the outside that this deployment of Patriot missiles is purely defensive. We have no offensive intentions. We are there to ensure effective defence and protection of the Turkish people and Turkey's territory. We consider that a core task of NATO, to protect our Allies. And we stick to that declaration, which was issued when we decided to deploy the Patriot missiles.

Marin Raykov: Concerning the second question, of course we continue to be very much affected by the terrorist attack in Sarafovo. And of course, you're quite aware of the fact that

we have provided clear evidence... well, at least the one that we have at our disposal in Bulgaria, to our partners.

Of course, what I can say is that some of our partners have a different approach, or at least they're not sufficiently convinced by the evidence that we have provided, and for Bulgaria it is of key importance to have a common position, to have a consensus on this. That's why your question related to the listing issue, I might say that well, of course, we will continue the investigation, we will continue to work on this very seriously, very actively. We will provide the needed evidence, but it's not for Bulgaria to initiate the technical procedure for the listing.

I think that our partners will be able to do this once they reach a certain level of consensus on this issue.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much.

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