North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference by the NATO Secretary General and Chairman of the NATO-Russia Council, Anders Fogh Rasmussen

following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in Defence Ministers session
2013-10-23

Good morning.

We have just held a productive meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. We discussed our practical cooperation, and we exchanged views on current and pressing international security events. In particular in the Middle East, including Syria.

We are doing more together than ever before. And counter-terrorism is a centre-piece of our cooperation.

Today, in the NATO-Russia Council we condemned the terrorist attack on a bus in Volgograd. We expressed our condolences to the victims and their families and loved ones.

There can never be a justification for such cowardly attacks on innocent people. And nobody should doubt the determination of all members of the NATO-Russia Council to stand shoulder to shoulder against terrorism.

As an example of what we are doing together, last month, in the skies over Poland, Russia and Turkey, pilots conducted a flight exercise under the NATO-Russia Council Cooperative Airspace Initiative. This involved fighter aircraft, military personnel and command centres from the Arctic to the Black Sea.

The aim of this initiative is to prevent terrorist attacks using civilian aircraft. And the exercise was a great success. We now have a proven joint capacity to respond to the hijacking of civilian aircraft. And we have showed how effective the NATO-Russia Council is in this field.

This year, we have also made progress in the fight against terrorism on public transport systems. We took a significant step forward with the testing in real life-conditions of our STANDEX project. A technology developed jointly by our scientists to detect explosives in public spaces, such as airports, metro stations and train stations.

Afghanistan is another area where we continue to cooperate. So we can build security and stability in the region.

Our project to train technicians to maintain Afghanistan's helicopter fleet is well under way. The NATO-Russia Council has already provided training for 20 percent of the Afghan air forces helicopter technicians. Others are still in training. And we are making available vital helicopter spare parts.

This will, literally, help keep the Afghan air force flying – and help keep Afghan soldiers on the ground safe.

Another project, to train counter-narcotics officers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, is also delivering. It has already trained 3,000 officers from the seven participating countries. They are in the front line of the fight against drugs.

But there is more untapped potential. Today we also discussed plans to dispose of excess and unsafe ammunition in Russia. I expect that we will be able to finalise the details, and launch a new trust fund to support the project, in the coming months.

We have also discussed transparency concerning our military exercises, which is an area we want to further enhance.

In a relationship as strategic as that between NATO and Russia, it is vital to make sure that the exercises are conducted with the maximum transparency. So we welcomed recent steps to enhance transparency, and we discussed how we can achieve more.

It is no secret that we have not yet found the way to work together on missile defence. However, ministerial discussions are valuable in addressing existing concerns. And we need to continue to engage frankly and directly to overcome our differences.

Finally, we also discussed international security issues, especially Syria. We agree that there is a pressing need for an international conference to pave the way for a political solution to this tragic conflict. And we fully support plans to hold it next month.

We also welcome the agreement in the United Nations on the destruction of Syria's stocks of chemical weapons, and the work to put that resolution into effect. This is a significant step forward. It is vital that the agreement should be implemented fully and with maximum transparency.

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

OANA LUNGESCU (NATO Spokesperson): We're going to the front row. ITAR-TASS, please.

Q: Denis Dubrovin, ITAR-TASS News Agency. Mr. Secretary General, you have said before that post-Afghanistan NATO will focus on preparing its troops and having live military exercises. Are we playing in any kind of military exercises in the NATO-Russia Council for the coming years and in which area this exercise will be held? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN (NATO Secretary General): We have not taken any decision on joint military exercises next year. By the way, we are, right now, working on our work program for 2014. As I mentioned in my introduction, we have actually conducted a joint exercise this year and in principle joint exercises are a possibility. Let me remind you that in the document from 2002 that actually established the NATO-Russia Council it is foreseen that we can conduct joint exercises within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council.

OANA LUNGESCU: Radio Free Europe at the back.

Q: Rikard Jozwiak, Radio Free Europe. Mr. Secretary General, you were recently quoted in Russian media saying that Ukraine and Georgia won't join NATO. Has the positions of NATO changed on this?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: If that's the quote it's not an accurate quote of what I have actually said, because let me stress there is no change whatsoever in our position when it comes to Georgia and Ukraine. And let me remind you that already in 2008 we decided that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO. We decided that in 2008 and that decision still stands.

They will become members of NATO, provided, of course, that they fulfil the necessary criteria and provided they wish to join our Alliance. I mention the latter because, as you know, the current Ukrainian leadership has decided to pursue what they call a non-bloc policy. So they have decided not to pursue NATO membership. That's their decision. We fully respect that, but at the same time, Ukraine has decided to continue its cooperation with NATO within the NATO-Ukraine Commission. And in a recent meeting with President Yanokovych, he confirmed that Ukraine would even like to expand practical cooperation with NATO. We appreciate that, while at the same time, fully respecting that it’s Ukraine's decision whether they want to pursue NATO membership or not.

As regards Georgia, our decision still stands. Georgia will become a member of NATO provided they fulfil the necessary criteria and I'm pleased that the new government in Georgia has reaffirmed Georgia's NATO aspirations. So we're working together with Georgia, within the NATO-Georgia Commission to promote the necessary reforms so that, one day, Georgia can hopefully fulfil the necessary criteria.

OANA LUNGESCU: I think we have Europa Press over there.

Q: Thank you. Secretary General, was there any discussions with the Russian counterpart on creating a mechanism inside NATO, the bilateral council, to chip in the cooperation for the mission to eliminate chemical weapons in Syria? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: We haven't taken any decisions in that regard. Let me stress that we all agree that the United Nations and the organization, OPCW, should be in the lead

of the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution to fully eliminate chemical weapons in Syria.

So the UN and OPCW are, and should remain, in the lead. At the same time, of course, we are taking note of the UN Secretary General's call on all United Nations member states to assist OPCW in their demanding task. We have not received any formal request, but I would suppose that all members of the NATO-Russia Council would stand ready to assist the UN and OPCW if requested, but in today's meeting we haven't discussed concrete action.

Let me express once again, we fully respect that the United Nations and OPCW are in the lead.

OANA LUNGESCU: One last question in the front. Reuters, please.

Q: Just a follow-up then on that. I mean, would you say that there is an opening then, a possible opening for NATO to give support? I mean, you seem to not rule that out, and even though a formal request, no formal decision's be made you seem to be leaving it quite open that there may be a NATO role in helping either secure or destroy these chemical weapons. Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: It is premature to make any assessment of a NATO or a NATO-Russia counter role in this. We haven't received any request, but of course all members of the NATO-Russia Council have taken note of the UN Secretary General's call on UN member states to assist the UN and OPCW if needed.What I say, based on our discussion is, that I would expect members of the NATO-Russia Council to respond positively if the United Nations actually forward a request. Whether that would be executed on an individual national basis, or collectively, it's really premature to make any assessment on that, at this stage.

OANA LUNGESCU: Thank you very much. That's all we have time for now, but the Secretary General will be back at 14:00.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2013/10/23/press-conference-by-the-nato-secretary-general-and-chairman-of-the-nato-russia-council-anders-fogh-rasmussen