North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers on 14-15 February
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(As delivered)

Good morning.

Tomorrow and Thursday, NATO Defence Ministers will meet here in Brussels to prepare for our upcoming Summit in July.

We will begin with a meeting of the Nuclear Planning Group.

This is part of our regular consultations to keep NATO nuclear forces safe, secure and effective.

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Later in the day we will take decisions to modernise NATO's Command Structure.

To ensure our twenty-nine nations can act as one − quickly and effectively.

I expect we will agree to establish a new Joint Force Command for the Atlantic.

This will focus on protecting sea lines of communication between North America and Europe, as well as critical infrastructure.

The Command would play a crucial role in crisis and conflict.

Eighty percent of SACEUR's Area of Responsibility is covered by water.

And we need to stay ahead of potential threats both on sea and under it.

I expect we will agree to establish a new support command to improve the rapid movement of troops and equipment within Europe.

This is a key part of our collective deterrence and defence.

Fair burden-sharing is also crucial for our shared security.

Allies agreed in 2014 to move towards investing 2% of GDP on defence by 2024.

They also agreed to invest more in key military capabilities and equipment.

And to contribute personnel to NATO missions and operations.

In other words: more cash, capabilities and contributions.

Last year, Allies decided to report annually on how they intend to make progress on all three.

The first set of plans is now complete.

And tomorrow, we will take stock of our progress.

[SLIDE 1: DEFENCE SPENDING]

After years of decline, since 2014 we have seen three years of increasing defence spending across European Allies and Canada.

Amounting to an additional 46 billion US dollars.

The national plans show that we can expect further increases.

In 2014, only 3 Allies spent 2% of GDP or more on defence.

This year, we expect 8 Allies to meet the target.

And by 2024, we expect at least 15 Allies will spend 2% of GDP or more on defence.

This is substantial progress, and a good start.

But we still have a long way to go.

[SLIDE OFF]

On capabilities, European Allies and Canada invested 19 billion US dollars more on major equipment over the last three years.

By 2024, 22 Allies are expected to invest 20% or more of their defence budgets on major capabilities, which is NATO’s guideline.

This should lead to significant improvements to our forces and their readiness.

Which leads me to contributions to operations, missions and activities − both NATO and non-NATO.

Almost all Allies intend to maintain or increase their contributions.

So we are stepping up on all three: cash, capabilities and contributions.

And I look forward to even more progress in the years ahead.

Later on Wednesday, we will meet with High Representative / Vice President Federica Mogherini.

As well as our colleagues from Sweden and. Finland

We will discuss the EU's plans on defence, and NATO-EU cooperation.

More European defence spending and capabilities can strengthen NATO and contribute to fairer burden-sharing.

But only if the EU's efforts are developed as a complement and not an alternative to NATO.

On Thursday, we will discuss NATO's deterrence and defence posture, and our role in projecting stability and fighting terrorism.

NATO contributes to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with AWACS surveillance flights and training for Iraqi forces.

The Coalition has made great progress, primarily due to the resilience and professionalism of the Iraqi forces.

Today, almost all the territory once held by ISIS in Iraq and Syria has been retaken.

More than seven and a half million people have been liberated.

As the Coalition shifts focus from combat operations to capacity-building, NATO's training support will become even more important.

So I expect that on Thursday, we will agree to start planning for a NATO training mission in Iraq.

With the aim of launching the mission at our Summit in July.

Years of experience from Afghanistan have taught us that strengthening local forces is one of our best tools in the fight against terrorism.

At least twenty-eight Allies and partners are increasing their troop contributions to our training mission in Afghanistan.

We are aiming to have close to 16,000 personnel there this year.

Up from around 13,000 last year.

This is a clear sign of our continued commitment to Afghanistan's security.

And with that, I'm ready to take your questions.

Moderator: OK, we'll start with Reuters, second row.

Question [Reuters]: Thank you very much Secretary General, on your, one of your final points you mentioned Iraq and the training mission, obviously there is a small training mission there already but do you personally support the US call for a larger training mission and if so why?

Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: I expect ministers to decide to start planning and the reason why I expect ministers to do so is that we all see a need for more training of Iraqi forces, because we are now turning away from the combat operations in the coalition to building local capacity enabling the Iraqis to make sure that Iraq is a stable country and that they avoid ISIL or all the terrorist groups coming back. And we have learned from previous situations, or from other countries, both in Afghanistan, but also actually previously in Iraq, that it is of course extremely important to stabilise the country after the combat operations have ended. And by turning the activity which they have - which is quite modest - into an operation we will provide a much better framework; we will be able to use the NATO command structure; our procedures for force generation, but also enable better funding and resourcing of the operation, so that will make it possible to increase the training activities.

But what we will do in Iraq will of course be done in close coordination with the Coalition with other actors as, for instance, the European Union, and it will be based on a request which we have received both from Prime Minister al-Abadi; we received a letter from him a few days ago and also a request from the Coalition.

So this will make it possible to do more in a coordinated way to professionalise the Iraqi forces to help them build defence institutions, military academies, and also to help them, for instance, with counter-IED, and other areas where we can provide training and help them to build local forces. And I will meet Prime Minister al-Abadi in Munich later on this week.

Moderator: KUNA, first row.

Question [KUNA]: Sir, an international conference on the reconstruction of Iraq is being held this week in Kuwait and today also there will be a conference on the international Coalition against Daesh.

So my question to you sir is how important are these meetings in the region itself for the stabilisation of Iraq and the whole region?

Jens Stoltenberg: These meetings are important because they provide international support to Iraq. Both will need funding for reconstruction. But also the efforts of the Coalition to continue to provide military support to Iraq, not primarily then to combat operations because we are moving towards a situation where we don’t have to conduct combat operations anymore because ISIL is at least much weaker - they have lost almost all the territory they previously controlled.

But we have to win the peace and therefore we have to continue to provide a capacity-building training for the Iraqi forces and that's what the Coalition is going to do and that is what also NATO is going to do.

NATO is present at the Coalition meeting in Kuwait and several NATO Allies are also of course providing funding for national support to the reconstruction of Iraq.

So again we have to learn that we cannot leave Iraq now. Now we have to make sure that Iraq can be a stable country in the future.

Moderator: OK, we'll go to the very back, Financial Times.

Question [Financial Times]: Secretary General, you mentioned that EU Defence cooperation had to be complementary and not an alternative to NATO. Obviously the United States has made similar points. Are there particular areas of concern that you have at the moment in the way that European defence cooperation is evolving and, if so, what are they?

Jens Stoltenberg: It has been clearly stated from the European Union, from European leaders that the EU efforts on defence is going to be complementary to NATO. It's not an alternative and it's not going to compete with NATO and, therefore, I welcomed the efforts to strengthen European defence and the EU efforts because I think that can strengthen NATO; it can strengthen Europe and the European Union, and by providing stronger European defence we can strengthen the European pillar within NATO and this has been clearly stated again and again also from European leaders.

It will be absolutely without any meaning if EU and NATO started to compete because we share the same members. 90% of the people living in EU they live in a NATO country - more than 90%. And European allies are absolutely aware that the defence, the protection of Europe is dependent on NATO, especially after Brexit.

80% of NATO's defence expenditures will come from non-EU allies. Three of the four battle groups we have in the Baltic countries and Poland will be led by non-EU allies: US, UK and Canada.

So there is no way EU can replace NATO but more efforts within the EU on defence issues can actually contribute to more spending, more capabilities and by that strengthen the European pillar within NATO.

We are satisfied with the fact that European leaders, both EU leaders, but also from the different member states have clearly stated that they don't want EU to duplicate what NATO already does. So they don't want duplicating NATO's command structure and we have to, for instance, make sure that there is coherence when it comes to the capability developments. We cannot end up with one list from NATO on capability requirements and then a conflicting list from the EU because actually we ask the same nations to provide their capabilities. We are only one set of forces and we cannot have two lists of conflicting capability requirements.

This has been clearly stated again and again from the EU; we are in close dialogue with the European Union and we will discuss this also at the Defence Ministerial meeting during the dinner tomorrow.

Moderator: Jane's.

Question [Jane's]: Let me build on my FT colleague's question. Assuming that you've got all the coordination of capabilities going that's fine. Does NATO have any industry or market access concerns about the way that the EU is going to develop its PESCO projects? The risk is that it might exclude non-EU members of NATO such as United States, Canada and your own country, Norway. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: We have to avoid new barriers inside NATO and that's also one of the issues we have addressed in our dialogue with the European Union.

What we would welcome is a more competitive defence industry because that will benefit all NATO Allies. And I hope that one of the things the European Union may achieve with both the cooperation within PESCO, the structured cooperation, but also with European defence fund is to address the fragmentation of the European defence industry which reduces the competitive of European defence industry.

So as long as this is done in a way which doesn't create new barriers, I welcome efforts to also strengthen the defence industry because that will provide more capabilities through lower cost for all NATO Allies.

Moderator: Suddeutsche Zeitung.

Question [Suddeutsche Zeitung]: Secretary General, I'd like to ask about burden sharing. When you look at German coalition agreement are you worried that the language on the increase of defence expenditure is rather lofty and that there is no specific mention of the 2% goal? And second question, if I may, in case – and this possibility is there - there will be no new coalition government in the next coming weeks, are you worried about that? Is that something that the transatlantic community should worry about? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: Germany is a key Ally for many reasons but not least because of its size. It's the biggest European economy and they contribute in many ways to the NATO Alliance, both through our collective defence. They are leading one of the battle groups in the Baltic countries in Lithuania. And they are present in the Aegean Sea in the Mediterranean and our maritime operations there; and Germany is also one of the lead nations in Afghanistan and they have been there for many, many years with several hundred troops.

I also welcome the fact that Germany has started to increase defence spending. So what we decided in 2014 was to stop the cuts, gradually increase, and then move towards spending 2% of GDP on defence. And I welcome the fact that Germany has stopped the cuts, started to increase and also started to move towards spending 2% of GDP on defence.

So I expect that to continue, I expect Germany and all other NATO Allies who spend less than 2%, which spend less than 2%, to continue to increase in real terms defence spending and we have made a lot of progress.

We have over the last three years gone from a situation where we've had significant cuts every year in defence spending across Europe and Canada to a situation where we have three consecutive years of increases and I expect that to continue. And that has been one of my top priorities since I have become Secretary General: to address this issue in all the capitals with all the political leaders to make sure that this is a development that continues and, of course, Germany has to be part of that.

I will not go into domestic politics in Germany. I am absolutely certain that Germany will have a good government.

Moderator: Wall Street Journal.

Question [Wall Street Journal]: The situation in Northern Syria is not directly NATO business but we have two Allies, the US and Turkey, that are at odds over Afrin. Are you going to be involved at all? You have good relations with both countries. Are you going to be involved in the sidelines of this Defence Ministerial in trying to resolve this or ease tensions between the US and Turkey, and do you hope that NATO meeting can be a forum to ease tensions in northern Syria?

Jens Stoltenberg: The situation in Syria and in northern Syria is of great concern to all NATO Allies: the humanitarian situation, the ongoing conflict and fighting and, therefore, NATO is part of the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS and we provide support to the Coalition, but we are not present with NATO forces on the ground in Syria.

Turkey has briefed NATO on the Operation Olive Branch. They did so last week and I have been in regular contact with the Turkish leadership, including with President Erdoğan, regarding the situation in Syria and the Operation Olive Branch. I expect Turkey to continue to brief Allies. Turkey has legitimate security concerns and no NATO Ally has suffered more terrorist attacks than Turkey and of course they have the right to address these security concerns, but they should do that in a proportionate and measured way.

NATO is providing support to Turkey. We augment their air defences and we also have some assurance measures in Turkey and we also have Patriot and SAMP/T batteries deployed in Turkey.

So I think that NATO Allies during the meeting will discuss how can we fight terrorism; how can we provide continued support to the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, but I don't expect any Ally to suggest any NATO role on the ground in Syria.

Moderator: Lady in the first row here with the white jacket.

Question [Kommersant]: I would like to ask about the locations of the new commands. Is it true that United States and Germany have offered to host to a new proposed command, and if it's not true what would be the location of this commands? You told in November that this year we will get these decisions. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: What we will do during our defence Ministerial meeting tomorrow is to decide the structure and I expect defence ministers to decide to establish a joint force command for Atlantic; a joint force command for logistics or support, and; a new cyber centre at our headquarters in SHAPE; and also to do other adjustments of the command structure. But I don't expect, or actually … the plan is not to make any decisions on the geographical footprint or where the different new commands are going to be located.

That is a discussion or a decision we will take later on this year. We will decide the structure tomorrow and then the geographic location of the different commands later on this year.

Moderator: OK, gentleman in the first row in blue in the middle there.

Question [Public Broadcaster, Ukraine]: Thank you very much. As we know, Hungary has blocked the NATO-Ukraine Commission meeting that was rescheduled for these days. The question is what is NATO doing to resume the work of this Commission and when do you expect it can be resumed? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: Ukraine is a close partner of NATO; we continue to work closely with Ukraine; we support the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and we provide both practical and political support to Ukraine. The North Atlantic Council recently … or last year visited Kyiv and Ukraine, and we also have had different meetings in the NATO-Ukraine Commission.

We will continue to provide support and we will continue to work closely with Ukraine, and I will meet President Poroshenko later on this week in Munich.

Then we are aware of the challenges related to the language law and the strong position, or the challenges to resolve that issue because Ukraine and Hungary cannot agree. I have spoken both with Prime Minister Viktor Orban and President Poroshenko. I have urged them to try and find a solution to this issue. This is about to find a balance between minority rights - to learn their minority language, but also of course that every state has the right to also make sure that they learn the state language.

There is a proposal now on the table from the Venice Commission. I welcome the opinion and the recommendations from the Venice Commission, and I encourage Ukraine to closely look at the recommendations because they outline the way to try to solve this issue between Ukraine and Hungary. But NATO will continue to work with Ukraine, will continue to provide support to Ukraine, and NATO Allies are also providing different kinds of support.

Moderator: OK, NPR.

Question [NPR/Deutsche Welle]: Thank you. Julian's question was actually more about whether it's complicated for NATO, even though you are not playing a role, when the US and Turkey, two of your very strong Allies, have tension between them and if I could also bring into this whether the Alliance, whether you expect ministers to discuss any further Turkey's purchase of the S400 from Russia, and to your understanding has that been finalised, is it a done deal and no longer needs to be discussed with Turkey? Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg: The situation in Syria is complicated and it's very serious, not only, not least for the people living in Syria. Tens of thousands of people have been killed, hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee and there is a very severe and difficult humanitarian situation in Syria. And that it is not only problem for people living there but is also a challenge for all of us. This is close to NATO on the border of NATO, on the border of the NATO Ally, Turkey.

I welcome that there are contacts, talks between Turkey and the United States to address the issues on the ground in northern Syria. But as I said, we are not present on the ground but we will continue to provide support to the Global Coalition and we will continue to provide support to Turkey as I just mentioned.

When it comes to the S400, I think that it's for Turkey to provide details about the status of that deal. But what I can say is that we welcome that Turkey has also started now to have a dialogue with two NATO Allies, with France and Italy, on the potential investment in another type of air defence system, something called EUROSAM, or SAMP/T, which is a system which these two countries are developing together and I welcome that Turkey is now working with France and Italy and the EUROSAM Group to try to acquire this system as part of their air defence system.

Moderator: Gentleman in the front row.

Question [K24]: Just yesterday Peshmerga spokesperson said NATO have plan to create a Peshmerga new strategy, new structure, under supervisor, NATO. Can you tell me detail about this?

Jens Stoltenberg: What we are doing now is that based on the request from Prime Minister al-Abadi and from the Coalition we will start planning for a NATO training mission in Iraq. What we will do there will, of course, be done in close coordination with Global Coalition to defeat ISIS and, of course, also in support of the government in Baghdad because they have requested us to provide more support.

So I am not able now to go into the details about exactly what kind of training mission we will have, but Prime Minister al-Abadi has asked for help to professionalise the Iraqi forces, especially when it comes to military academies, building military education in different fields.

So later on, I will be able to provide you more details but we are now following up and responding to requests from the government in Baghdad, Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Global Coalition.

Moderator: OK, we go over there, the lady in the middle.

Question [TV2 Denmark]: I have a question going back to the burden sharing.

You said that in 2024, 15 Allies will reach, or you hope that they will reach the 2% of GPD for defence spending. It that satisfying in your point of view and if it is, are you then ready now to tell the US Defence Minister that this is as good as it gets or are you going to continue having this discussion about reaching something that you may never reach, or are you going to have a new goal saying that in 2034 we will reach that goal of the 2% of GPD?

Jens Stoltenberg: What I say is that what we have seen so far is a good start but we still have a long way to go and we have seen a substantial increase in defence spending since 2014. After years of decline, defence spending has started to increase again across Europe and Canada and around 5% increase in real terms in 2017 is significant, and I think actually more than most people expected back in 2014. So we have seen progress when it comes to the real change.

Second, we have now got the first round of national plans and they show that the progress will continue. They show that all Allies have plans to increase defence investments in real terms and I welcome that. But I will continue to address the issue of meeting the commitment we all made in all my meetings in all the capitals with all the political leaders. That has been one of my top priorities since I came in 2014 and it will continue to be one of my top priorities because we have to deliver both on what we promised when it comes to spending but also when it comes to capabilities and contributions. So my message to all Allies is that, yes this is a good start, this is encouraging, this is really NATO delivering but we still have much to do both to continue to increase, but also to deliver on what we decided, both when it comes to spending, capabilities and contributions. That’s my answer.

Moderator: AFP, just in front.

Question [AFP]: [Interpreted]: Yes, a question in French. If you all allow us, you have just explained that European Allies have given assurances in terms of European defence so why is the US so angry against Europeans and France in particular, is there a disagreement and how can you manage an Alliance where this is no trust among Allies and I would like to come back to this issue of relations between the US and Turkey, there again, there is a lack of trust, so how can you manage an alliance where there is no trust?

Jens Stoltenberg: Well the question was about lack of trust. There is no lack of trust. Actually what we have seen is that NATO is able to deliver and to respond in a very unified way to a changing and more challenging security environment. We have seen that over decades but

we have seen it especially since 2014. Because in 2014 we saw Russia being willing to use military force against their neighbour, Ukraine, illegally annexing Crimea and destabilising eastern Ukraine. And we saw ISIS - Daesh - taking control over large parts of Syria and Iraq, and NATO has since then responded in a very unified way. And we see North America, the US and Canada, they are stepping up. After years of reducing their military presence in Europe, Canada is now back. And the US is increasing their military presence in Europe with more forces; with more funding for training; for equipment; for prepositioned supplies. And at the same time we see European allies stepping up with more investments with their contributions to the High Readiness Armed Forces. We have tripled the size of the NATO Response Force, and we have the four battle groups in the eastern part of the Alliance. We have increased our presence in the south east of the Alliance too.

So we are now in the process of implementing the biggest adaptation of NATO since the end of the Cold War and we do that together: US, Canada, and the European Allies. And I am actually impressed about how much we have been able to implement over a very few years, over a very short period of time.

Yes, there are different opinions, different views between leaders in NATO. That has always been the case. But the strength of NATO is that regardless or despite different views on different political issues; climate, trade, other issues - we have always been able to agree on the core task of NATO, and that is to protect and defend each other. So this is only possible because we trust in our commitment to protect and defend each other.

The last part of that question I can't remember, it was about Turkey. I think I have answered about Turkey. We are concerned about the situation in Syria. Turkey has legitimate security concerns. They have to address them in a proportionate and measured way, and I welcome that Turkey has briefed NATO Allies and I expect them to continue to brief NATO Allies.

Moderator: Gentleman in the second row in blue jacket.

Question [LETA]: A question about US military presence in Norway. So there are these US troops close to border between Norway and Russia. What is the future operational role of these US troops and is it somehow linked to Russia’s so-called Arctic Policy? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: I think “close to the Russian border” is to exaggerate a bit. Trondelag, where these troops is quite long from the Russian border but of course they are part of a US commitment to European security. I welcome that the US has increased their presence in Europe, including with some rotational forces in Norway, in the middle of Norway, and that reflects that we are faced with a new and more challenging security environment. So after decades when the US reduced their military presence, the US has now increased their military presence. But what NATO does is proportionate, it is defensive and there is no doubt that we respond to a more demanding security environment which was very much triggered by what we saw in 2014 when Russia used forced against a neighbour.

Moderator: Lady at the back.

Question [SIC Portugal]: Thank you. Actually still under target of the 2% of GDP, some countries are arguing that it's not only about quantity but also about quality of the investment in defence. I am thinking about Portugal for instance, but also for other countries that are still not there yet or they are still under the 2% of GDP, and I would like to understand if you are going to assess these plans and to look at the quality, not only about quantity but also of the quality of the investment, and if this can only also be an argument to present to some countries like the United States in 2024 when you will have to tell them that their target is not reached? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: We made the pledge in 2014 to spend more but also to spend better and we need both. We need both that NATO Allies invest more but we also need that we invest in a better way, spend in a better way. And, therefore, I welcome both the efforts when it comes to increased defence spending but also the efforts when it comes to investing more in new capabilities, technology and also to make sure that NATO Allies work together in, for instance, development of new defence capabilities. But we cannot either spend more or better, we need to do both, both more and better and that's exactly what we are doing.

I recently visited Portugal. I welcome that Portugal has now started to increase defence spending and the good thing is that in Portugal, as in several other European NATO Allies, we have seen that they have been able to again get economic growth, there is again economic growth, which provides more money and more funding also for defence.

So the national plans provides us with information on how can we go further, and the message based on the national plans is that all NATO Allies have plans to continue to increase defence spending in real terms. But at the same time since we focus on capabilities and contributions, we look at the input - spending, but we also look at the output and we will address all three of them: cash; capabilities and contributions as we move forwards and develop the national plans.

Moderator: Thank you very much, this concludes this press point, sorry we couldn't take all the questions but there will be more opportunities over the next few days at the meeting of defence ministers. Thank you.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2018/02/13/press-conference