North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Online press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the first day of the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers
2020-10-22

(As delivered)

Good afternoon.

NATO Defence Ministers have just met to address our deterrence and defence.

NATO is determined to keep our cutting edge in all domains.

Land, sea, air, cyber, and space.

Last year, we declared space as an operational domain for NATO.

And today we took another important step.

Ministers agreed to establish a new NATO Space Centre at Allied Air Command in Ramstein, Germany.

It will help to coordinate Allied space activities;

Support NATO missions and operations from space, including with communications and satellite imagery;

And protect Allied space systems by sharing information about potential threats.

Today, we also addressed Russia’s growing arsenal of nuclear-capable missiles.

The challenge is serious, and growing in scale and complexity.

Allies have already agreed a comprehensive response package of political and military measures.

Today we assessed our progress.

Allies are acquiring new air and missile defence systems, including Patriot and SAMP/T batteries.

We are also strengthening our advanced conventional capabilities.

Allies are investing in these new platforms, including fifth generation fighter aircraft.

We are adapting our intelligence, and exercises.

We are also keeping our nuclear deterrent safe, secure and effective.

Including through our annual nuclear deterrence exercise.

At the same time, NATO Allies remain fully committed to arms control and disarmament.

Allies place great importance on the extension of the New START agreement, which expires early next year.

We have seen progress on this in recent days, which is welcome.

Because we should not find ourselves in a situation where we have no treaty governing the number of nuclear weapons.

Having a strong military is fundamental to our security.

But strong militaries depend on strong societies.

NATO is playing an important role, including by setting

minimum resilience standards for Allies.

Ministers received a comprehensive

report on the state of our critical infrastructure.

Including ports and airports,

Supplies of fuel, food and medical equipment,

and telecommunications, including 5G.

While we have made progress,

There are still vulnerabilities.

For instance foreign control of the critical infrastructure upon which our societies and our militaries rely.

Countries like China are investing aggressively in ports and airports, and our telecommunication networks remain vulnerable to attacks from the outside, and compromise from the inside.

So we must continue to build up our resilience.

And we have agreed that we will strengthen our resilience pledge when NATO leaders meet next year.

Ministers also assessed our progress toward fairer burden sharing across the Alliance.

2020 will be the sixth consecutive year of increased defence spending by European Allies and Canada.

With an increase this year of 4.3 percent in real terms.

Allies are also investing in major new capabilities.

A majority of our nations now invest 20% or more of defence spending in this area.

We also agreed on the importance of ensuring our missions and operations are fully resourced.

I also raised with ministers the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

We had a productive exchange of views.

We all agree that tensions should be solved on the basis of international law and Allied solidarity.

And we all recognize the importance of avoiding words and actions which can escalate tensions.

Ministers also expressed strong support for the NATO de-confliction mechanism to avoid incidents and accidents in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Avoiding loss of life at sea and in the air is a heavy responsibility.

And we should not place it solely on the shoulders of the captains of our ships or the pilots of our jets.

It is for us as politicians to do everything we can to resolve these disputes at our level.

Clearly, the military de-confliction mechanism will not solve the underlying disputes.

But it can provide the space for political discussions.

And I hope it can pave the way for exploratory talks under German auspices as soon as possible.

So with that, I am ready for your questions.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: And the first question comes from Merle Tilk from ARD, German Television.

Merle Tilk [ARD]: Yes. Thank you. Two questions if I may. First on the new Space Command, could you elaborate a little bit on that? What will be the specific tasks? How many people will work there? And when will it be operational? And then the second question on the US election. You always stress that NATO is an alliance of shared values and democracies. President Trump has repeatedly said that he might not accept the results of the upcoming presidential election. If that were to happen, what would be the impact on NATO as an alliance of shared values? And are you concerned about it? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: First on the Space Centre, I think you have to understand the importance of this Space Centre, because what happens in space is of great importance for what we can do on the Earth: communications, navigation, cell phones, military communications, transmission of data and a lot of activities on the Earth, at sea and on land, is dependent on capabilities in space, not least satellites. So this is important for our civilian societies, but also, of course, for military capabilities.

And, therefore, we have to make sure that we have safe and reliable systems in space. And that's the reason why we also are concerned about the development we have seen that, for instance, Russia and China are now developing capabilities that can blind, destroy, for instance, satellites, which will have severe impact on both military and civilian activities on the ground.

And, therefore, we build on the competence, the knowledge we have at Allied Air Command Ramstein. And based on that, we then established a new NATO Space Centre to help to ensure that Allied activities in space are more coordinated, because different Allies have different capabilities in space – and to coordinate those activities will help and strengthen the Alliance.

We are also making sure that NATO missions and operations are supported from space, including communications and satellite imagery. So when we operate in Afghanistan or in Kosovo, or we have our forward presence in the Baltic countries – Germany is one of the lead nations – then, of course, these NATO activities, air policing, naval missions, are dependent on information, imagery and communications, which are delivered from space assets. And then, to make sure that our missions and operations have access to all this when we operate together, it's also one of the tasks for the new Space Centre in Ramstein.

And lastly, Allied space systems are better protected by sharing information about potential threats to satellites. So sharing information, sharing best practices is a way also to help to protect national space capabilities which are important for the whole Alliance.

These are the main tasks of the Centre. It can start to work . . . it can build on the competence we already have there. It is the first step, so the number of people are limited in the beginning. But we plan to expand and increase the size and the importance of the Centre as we move forward.

Then on the US elections, well, I will not comment on the US elections, simply because I strongly believe that it is wrong if I start to comment on hypothetical outcomes of national elections. I am confident that the US will remain a strong and committed NATO Ally, also after the US elections.

Oana Lungescu: For the next question, we go to Prague and Rikard Jozwiak from Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty.

Rikard Jozwiak [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty]: Mr Secretary General, it's actually a question about your meeting yesterday with Armenian President. I wonder, he was accusing Turkey of playing a negative role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and I wonder if you brought up this question with the Turkish Defence Minister today or if you will do so, perhaps with the Turkish NATO Ambassador later? And I also wonder if you will meet, since you met the Armenian President, if you also will meet, or perhaps via videoconference, meet the Azerbaijani President?

Jens Stoltenberg: Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are partners, valued partners of NATO. And when the president of a partner nation comes to Brussels and asks for a meeting, then it's natural to meet that president. We have also had visits of President Aliyev of Azerbaijan previously, here at the NATO Headquarters and, of course, I'm ready to talk to the President of Azerbaijan. So, it's part of being a partner to NATO that we meet, talk to, the political leadership in the different partner nations and both Armenia and Azerbaijan are partners and I met both the President of Azerbaijan and the President of Armenia. But most recently, of course, the President of Armenia, ready to meet also the President of Azerbaijan if he requests such a meeting.

NATO is not part of the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey is a valued Ally and I also stated that clearly to the President of Armenia. We are deeply concerned about the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, especially the targeting of civilians. We have seen several examples of that. And therefore, we call on Azerbaijan and Armenia to de-escalate, to end the fighting, to cease hostilities and to respect and implement a ceasefire.

There has to be a political solution to the conflict. Therefore, we support the efforts of the Minsk Group, the co-chairs. And we welcome the fact that there will also now being a meeting in the United States between the two foreign ministers. And we think it's important to now find a political solution and we strongly support those efforts. But again, NATO's not part of the conflict and I stated that very clearly to the Armenian President when I met him yesterday.

Oana Lungescu: The next question goes to Ansgar Haase from DPA.

Ansgar Haase [DPA]: Secretary General, NATO's military leadership is warning that Russian navy is aggressively probing undersea communications cable networks. So I would like to know if this subject was raised today and if so, if there was any concrete decision on how to respond to those kind of threats? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: Yes, undersea cable networks was addressed today, because that's part of a discussion when we address NATO's deterrence and defence and also when we address resilience.

It is natural to also address the crucial importance of undersea cables because, as you know, they transmit the vast majority of global communications data: telecommunications, transmission of data, financial markets are dependent on undersea cables.

And, therefore, this is of great importance both for the civilian society, but also for different military capabilities.

We received a report, or the ministers received a report on the importance and the vulnerabilities related to undersea cables and the importance of being able to protect undersea infrastructure. I think it's important to address this, because it is important to understand that most of these cables are privately owned and it's publicly known where they are. And that makes them potentially vulnerable. So we need to monitor the potential vulnerabilities. That's partly the reason why we have produced this report. We have tools to protect them and to monitor threats. And we have also established a new Atlantic Command in Norfolk, a new NATO command in Norfolk. And one of the tasks of this new North Atlantic Command is also to look into how to protect, how to monitor threats against undersea infrastructure. For instance, the internet is dependent on these cables and that just highlights the importance of the undersea cables.

One of the main issues at the meeting today was resilience, and that's about civilian infrastructure, health services, telecommunications. But, of course, as part of our effort to strengthen the resilience, undersea cables, undersea infrastructure is an important part of that.

Oana Lungescu: And the next question goes to Yannis Palaiologos from Kathimerini.

Yannis Palaiologos [KATHIMERINI]: Yes, hello. Can you hear me?

Jens Stoltenberg: Yes.

Yannis Palaiologos: Great. Thank you. Thank you for the question, Secretary General. I wanted to ask about the military deconfliction mechanism that you mentioned in your opening remarks. To your knowledge, has it been activated by the two sides during the current round of tensions? And if not, have you or other NATO officials urged the two sides to . . . to use it, given the heavy responsibility, as you say, for avoiding loss of life, which should not only fall on the commanders on the ground and at sea? Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg: So first, I would like to commend Greece and Turkey for showing flexibility and for establishing this mechanism. It is about, first of all, reiterating their support to conventions, procedures, which ensures responsible behaviour at sea and in the air. It's about establishing . . . or, we have established, also, using NATO safe and secure networks a

24/7 hotline. And also that we're now looking into how we can further expand and strengthen this mechanism.

Of course, these are issues we have discussed at the political level, meaning that I went to Ankara, I went to Athens and I discussed it with the political leadership in both countries, with President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Mitsotakis. But the talks and the deconfliction mechanism have been developed at the technical military level. And I think that's important, because this is, for us, a technical military issue, where we need to make sure that we have the tools to prevent incidents and accidents. And it is extremely important to understand that this – the responsibility of preventing incidents and accidents at sea – cannot solely be put on the shoulders of the captains and the crew and the soldiers and the pilots who are operating in the Eastern Mediterranean. And that's the reason why I so clearly called on all of us to make sure to make the necessary political decisions to prevent any incidents or accidents.

Greece and Turkey meet on a daily basis here at the NATO Headquarters. I think that's one of the advantages of NATO, is that we provide a platform for Allies to meet and to discuss on a daily basis, also when there are difficulties and disagreements, differences. It was an issue that was also discussed between the ministers at the ministerial meeting today, and there was broad support for the deconfliction mechanism for dialogue, for reducing tensions, and also broad support for looking into how we can further strengthen the deconfliction mechanism at NATO.

Oana Lungescu: And the last question goes to Euronews, Sertaç Aktan.

Sertaç Aktan [Euronews]: Yes, Sertaç Aktan from Euronews. Two questions if I may, Mr Secretary General. My first question will be a follow-up on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. You . . . you said there should be a diplomatic solution to this. However, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Armen Sarkissian, just a day ago, on a Facebook video message, clearly stated that there seems to be none as a political solution. And he called to his citizens to be voluntarily come and fight in the forefront of this conflict. How do you feel about that? How do you evaluate that situation? And my second question will be on the Turkish forces begun withdrawing from Ankara's largest base in Syria's northern eastern Idlib province shortly after midnight Tuesday. It's the Morek base, one of 12 Turkish observation posts established in the region for monitoring the ceasefire, as you know. It's known that Russia and Syrian regime are trying to push Turkey north, or at least to evacuate these observation posts. How does NATO feel about this development? Were you informed by Ankara about this withdrawal? Was this discussed during your meeting, or will it be? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: First on Nagorno-Karabakh. It is a very serious situation and we have seen hostilities, we have seen fighting, we have seen a high number of casualties. We have seen reports about targeting civilians and we have seen a high number of civilian casualties. So all of this makes this a very serious situation, which all Allies are concerned about. At the same time, NATO's not part of that conflict. And therefore we strongly support the efforts by a well-

established framework, the Minsk Group and the three co-chairs, because the international community has asked them and NATO supports that call to try to facilitate, to help, to find a way to find a political solution.

I don’t say a political solution is easy, that a political solution is something we can achieve in the near future, but I strongly believe that that’s the only way forward. And then, while we are working for a lasting, sustainable political solution, we need an immediate ceasefire and full respect for the ceasefire and cessation of all hostilities.

And, therefore, I call on both Armenia and Azerbaijan to cease fighting. That was the message yesterday, that is the message today and that has been my clear message over the last weeks.

Then, as I also have said, Turkey is a valued Ally, but I also expect Turkey to use its considerable influence in the region to calm tensions.

On Syria, NATO is not on the ground in Syria. We are part of the efforts to defeat ISIS. We provide training in Iraq. Turkey is a valued Ally, which has played a key role in the fight against ISIS. But NATO, as an alliance, is not on the ground in Syria. We support the UN-led efforts to find a political solution, and again, that’s the only way to find a peaceful solution to a very difficult and challenging conflict in Syria.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much, Secretary General. This concludes this press conference.

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And protect Allied space systems by sharing information about potential threats.

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