North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press point

with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of Croatia, Andrej Plenković
2020-03-04

(As delivered)

Thank you so much, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

It is great to be back in Zagreb and great to meet with you again.

And Croatia is a highly valued Ally, and you contribute to our shared security in many different ways and to different NATO missions and operations. You are contributing troops to NATO's Forward Presence in Poland and Lithuania. You are part of our missions in Afghanistan, in Kosovo and Iraq. And we also welcome the role you play working with the partners in the Western Balkan region.

We also welcome the fact that Croatia has increased defence spending and that we have a clear commitment to meet the guideline of spending 2% of GDP on defence.

We have just discussed the historic opportunity for peace in Afghanistan. And as you mentioned, I was in Kabul with President Ghani and US Defense Secretary Esper to welcome the signature of the framework agreement. This is an opportunity to open negotiations among Afghans and achieve sustainable peace.

In order to take that opportunity the Taliban must honour their commitments. We need to see a reduction in violence and avoid undermining the agreement.

NATO remains committed to Afghanistan's security and stability. And we will continue to support the Afghan security forces with funding and with training.

I welcome Croatia's commitment and contributions to our Resolute Support Mission.

We also discussed the crisis in Syria, and its impact for NATO Allies and EU member states. We agree the situation is highly complex, challenging and volatile. We condemn the indiscriminate bombings by the Assad regime and Russia. They have worsened the horrendous suffering of Syrian civilians and increased the movement of refugees towards Turkey, which already hosts nearly four million refugees.

Greece is also severely impacted by the current situation. I recently spoke with the Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis. Greece carries a heavy burden. And the challenges of migration

are shared challenges which require shared solutions.

NATO's deployment in the Aegean Sea remains important. But the international community needs to address the root causes of the crisis. We need to see a political solution to the conflict in Syria. So the Assad regime and Russia must end their offensive.

Respect international law. And support UN efforts for a peaceful solution.

We also addressed the security situation in the Western Balkans. NATO remains fully committed to stability and security in the region. Croatia plays a key role. You are a champion of NATO's Open Door Policy. And I appreciate your strong political support for the accession of North Macedonia. This process is on track. And in the coming weeks, I look forward to welcoming North Macedonia as NATO's 30th member state.

So Prime Minister, let me congratulate you on the presidency of the Council of the European Union. The security challenges we face today are too complex for any one nation or organisation to face alone. So therefore it is important that we continue to strengthen the cooperation between NATO and the EU.

Thank you.

Question: You said that Croatia committed to contribute 2% of GDP for defence. You asked that from other members as well. Is that really necessary? How much does this contribute to militarisation of Europe? We don't know who is the real enemy of NATO Alliance and this is the question which French President Emmanuel Macron also asked. He said this is not Russia, this is not China, this is the global terrorism, the global terrorism is the enemy. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: We are faced with many threats and many challenges and NATO doesn't have the luxury of choosing either to focus on one or the other.

We have to be able to respond to all of them at the same time. We are stepping up in the fight against international terrorism. That's the reason why we are for instance stepping up our presence in Iraq to make sure that ISIS is never able to return. That's also the reason why we are in Afghanistan. We have to remember that we are in Afghanistan to protect ourselves. To prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a platform for preparing, training, organising terrorist attacks against our countries as they did in 9/11 2001 against the United States. And… therefore it is important that we make sure that the caliphate ISIS lost in Syria and Iraq is not re-established in Afghanistan. So NATO is fighting terrorism and we welcome Croatia's contributions to our mission in Afghanistan and our mission in Iraq.

Then we are also responding to more assertive Russia. We have seen that Russia has used military force against neighbours in Georgia, but also in Ukraine illegally annexing Crimea, that's the first time since the end of the Second World War that one country has taken apart a territory from another country by the use of force. And therefore NATO has deployed combat

ready troops to the eastern part of the Alliance. This is a defensive response, this is something we do to make sure that we have credible deterrence and success of NATO is that as long as we are together, as long as we stand together and make sure that an attack on one Ally will trigger a response from the whole Alliance. We don't provoke a war but we prevent the war.

Our task is not to fight the war but to prevent conflict. And best way of doing that is to send a clear message of deterrence, unity of the Alliance making care that if one Ally is attacked then the whole Alliance will respond and by doing that we have kept peace in Europe for 70 years and that's also the best way to maintain and preserve peace in the future.

Andrej Plenković [interpreted]: Thank you, the second question.

Question: Question to Mr Secretary General, but I will also appreciate thoughts of Mr Prime Minister as well.

We've been listening throughout the last several days leaders of the European Union saying, we have heard the PM as well, saying that Turkey is basically using refugees and migrants in order to pursue its own geopolitical interests. Is there a conflict within the NATO because Turkey is an important NATO Member State when it comes to the issue.

On the other hand Turkey is at the same time under attack by Syria and Russia as a NATO member state. Will the other NATO member states come to help? And how will the issue be resolved especially if we take into account as well the fact that the Special Advisor to the President of the United States has said that the United States will help Turkey in reasonable amount of ammunition and other military help. So is there a big conflict within the NATO itself and how can it be resolved? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: So what we see now is the consequence of the worsening of the conflict in Syria. We see that in Turkey with more refugees coming from Syria into Turkey and we also see the crisis on the border between Turkey and Greece. NATO plays a role in addressing that. There is fundamentally not a military solution to the crisis that we see on the border between Greece and Turkey, but NATO is playing a role partly through our deployment in the Aegean Sea which ships trying to implement, or helping to implement, the agreement between EU and Turkey on the migrant and refugee crisis.

But NATO is also playing the role by addressing the root causes for instance in Afghanistan but also in the fight against ISIS through our participation in the Global Coalition to defeat Daesh and our presence in Iraq.

NATO is not on the ground in Syria, but some NATO Allies are. And we see that the crisis, the violence there has consequences for all NATO Allies and for EU Member States. We condemn the Russian and.. use of force and the use of force from the Assad regime. We have seen indiscriminate bombing, we have seen violation of international law and we call on

Russia and the regime in Damascus to fully respect international law to stop their offensive and to support and engage in constructive talks and… the [inaudible] leadership to find a peaceful, negotiated solution to the crisis in Syria.

Andrej Plenković [interpreted]: I would just like to add one important detail, important for us. What we believe both as presiding EU Council and also as Croatia. We believe that we should go back to the statement between Turkey and EU of 2016 and re-employ everything that has been efficient in the last years. From 100% we came to 2% of intensity of the migration route. We decreased intensity.

We do not want to repeat the situation from four or five years ago and we appeal for dialogue, we want the talks currently held by Charles Michel in Ankara. They are positive, they follow this path and our minister is also going to represent Croatia's position on this line.

Question: The question for the Prime Minister. In the last couple of days we have heard that Croatian politics is calling for army on Croatian border, but army has only the logistics role and can only assist Croatian police. Are you considering changing law and giving more authority to the army at this moment?

Andrej Plenković [interpreted]: What we are doing as a responsible government we are considering all scenarios. We have to be prepared for possible increased intensity. But after what I saw yesterday after the assurances from the Greek Prime Minister we see that the policy of this Greek government will be essentially different. If Greek/Turkey border is not going to leak that we are not going to be faced with many threats. At the same time, Croatian police is guarding our borders.

This is dominant as a responsible people we are going to see if necessary how possibly members of Croatian army can… [inaudible] this process. But now as the Minister of Defence said yesterday this is only at the level of planning and plans B, just in case. Croatian police is here to protect Croatian borders and Croatian army and Croatian police are here to protect the Croatian interests. There is no problem to cooperate.

Very often at natural disasters you saw how important it was to have the whole system of homeland defence, how important is it to serve the purpose what we need at each particular moment. We have to have police, civil protection, firemen and also the Croatian army as well as other services which is necessary. They have to participate. Our citizens know that they all communicate and coordinate their activities.

Question: Mr Prime Minister, you mentioned withdrawal from Afghanistan in phases. You informed Mr Stoltenberg about Croatian plans to withdraw from Afghanistan if I understood you well. So what is the plan to withdraw Croatian troops from Afghanistan? Up until when should they be withdrawn? And Mr Stoltenberg, what is the plan, what do you expect that NATO troops, if everything is fine, if Taliban respect peace agreement, when could NATO withdraw from Afghanistan?

Andrej Plenković [interpreted]: We want that the purpose of the mission of Resolute Support and the presence of international troops there, we want this to be efficient. This is the main reason, the main goal. We must not forget why we are as Allies present in Afghanistan now and why we have been there for many years. This is the second mission in which we participate. And this is the message which you heard from the Secretary General.

The message is that if we say that there is going to be an overnight withdrawn, this is not going to strengthen our negotiating position. We have to have it in mind in political and the strategic terms. The NATO has a plan to downside amount of people there in the future. Talks will be held at political level but also talks between military structures of NATO. The communications will be held between our general staff of Croatian Army, with NATO Command in Mons, and we are going to inform the public accordingly. What has already been agreed that the new Croatian troops contingent 108 or 109 troops is going to go as scheduled, they are going to go to Afghanistan.

After that in the period ahead of us, in agreement with our Allies, with the Secretary General, bearing in mind that this is not a proportional, horizontal downsizing of everybody by certain percentage. No, because each of us has certain specific tasks there and we have to keep in mind that the whole mission as a whole must function and its tasks have to be fulfilled at the expected level. And we have to keep in mind who does what at one particular moment, but everything that we are going to do it going to be responsible, in our interest and also in the sense of our presence in Afghanistan.

Jens Stoltenberg: The agreement that was signed on Saturday is a first step and there is still a very long way to go and a difficult way to go before we have a lasting, sustainable peace settlement in Afghanistan. We welcome this as a first step at the same time we know that there will be these difficulties and also disappointments on the way. The important thing we achieved through the agreement was that Taliban agreed that they should break all ties with international terrorist organisations and prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorists.

Secondly they also agreed to reduction in violence and thirdly they agreed to sit down and start inter-Afghan negotiations. Because at the end of the day the only way to create peace in Afghanistan is to have an Afghan led and Afghan owned peace process.

Peace in Afghanistan cannot be created in Brussels or Washington or Zagreb, it has to be created by the Afghans themselves. We will only reduce our presence if Taliban adhere to or respect the agreement they have signed. Therefore it is a condition based reduction that will take place if we see that the conditions are met.

We have plans in place to gradually reduce and as the Prime Minister said this is not an equal, proportional reduction but it all depend on different tasks but we are ready to reduce if Taliban meet the conditions in the agreement.

I think it is important that we don’t now rush to the exit because that will reduce the likelihood of the deal being implemented. Taliban has to understand that they will never win on the battlefield that we will stay committed to the Afghan security forces, train them, assist them, advise them and provide funding and by doing that we send a clear message to the Taliban that they will not win on the battlefield, they have to sit down at the negotiating table and make real compromises and implement the deal. So therefore we will stay committed, that’s the best way to create the conditions for a lasting peace that will eventually enable us to leave.

We went into Afghanistan together, we will make adjustments together and eventually one day will also leave together. But only when the conditions are met and only when we are sure that Afghanistan doesn’t become a safe haven for international terrorists again.

Thank you very much this concludes the press conference.

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