North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Keynote speech

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Oxford Union
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NOAH LACHS (President, Oxford Union): Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the first event of three today. Our next speaker is a former Prime Minister of Norway, and in October of 2014, he became the thirteen Secretary General of NATO. Please join me in welcoming Jens Stoltenberg.

CROWD (Oxford Union): (Clapping).

JENS STOLTENBERG (Secretary General of NATO): Thanks so much and good afternoon. It's really a great honour and a great pleasure to see you all today and to be able to speak to you because I know that the Oxford Union has really been a platform for free speech and for open debate for almost two hundred years. And for me, to be able to speak to you is really an honour because free speech and open society is what NATO is there to defend. That's our core value is to defend open and free societies. And that I also would like to tell you that there are many alumnis from Oxford that have, and people who have been members of this union for many years that have served in NATO for many years. One, general called Wesley Clark– he was our Supreme Allied Commander for some years and he's a Oxford Union member. And also my Assistant Secretary General, sitting there, Patrick Turner – he's responsible for operations and he is a member of the Union, he studied here and he told me, just now, that he studied Medieval History and Medieval War, and then he started to work for NATO, which also…

CROWD (Oxford Union): (Laugh).

JENS STOLTENBERG (Secretary General of NATO): How should I say, not only good news. So, my task, or what I will do today, is that I will try to be brief, not too long, and to share with you some reflexions on NATO and how NATO is adapting to a new and more demanding security environment. And after that, I'm happy to take questions and answer. So, to have time for that, I'll try to be brief and not covering all the issues but at least, pointing out some of the main challenges we face as an alliance today. And NATO's core task being a military and political alliance is to defend and protect all allies – 28 member states from Europe, US and Canada. And we do so by protecting and defending each other while standing together based on the principle or the idea of "one for all, and all for one." And this idea or this principle is enshrined in our founding treaty, the Washington Treaty, in something called Article 5, which is our collective defence clause. And the main message there is that an attack on one ally would be regarded as an attack on all allies, on the whole alliance. So, by standing together,

and promising to defend each other, we are strong and we have been able to contribute to peace and stability in Europe for almost seventy years and to be the strongest alliance in history, protecting all allied countries. We have done so under very different circumstances. For approximately forty years, we did that during the Cold War, from our foundation in 1949 until the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and then elated, the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But during the Cold War, we had a big confrontation between NATO, the United States on one side, and then the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact on the other side. And we successfully were able to deter the Soviet Union and the Cold War ended without any shot being fired, and we started after the end of the Cold War to try to build a partnership with Russia. We enlarged more and more of those countries that were previously members of the Warsaw Pact, they became NATO members. And people started also to ask whether we needed NATO anymore, because the reason why we existed – to confront the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact – didn't exist anymore.

But then we soon discovered that it was still a need, still a reason to keep NATO as a strong alliance, because we saw that we had instability around our borders close to NATO allies, first in the Balkans, where we had a civil war in the 1990's, or several wars in the 1990's, and NATO moved into Bosnia and Herzegovina with a big military operation. We went into Kosovo to preserve, or to end the war and to preserve the peace and stability in the Balkans. That was, of course, important for our own security because the fighting and the civil war we saw in the Balkans was also a direct threat to NATO allied countries. Then we conducted a big military operation in Afghanistan after attacks on the United States, 9/11. We have been fighting piracy off the Horn of Africa, conducted air strikes in Libya and we have done what we, in the NATO language, call "crisis management" or "projecting stability" beyond our borders because when our neighbours are stable, then we are more secure. So, for about twenty five years, we didn't focus so much on collective defence in Europe because the Soviet Union wasn't there. We didn't see a real threat coming from Russia. And we focussed on crisis management, projecting stability beyond our borders: Afghanistan, the Balkans and other places in the world. Then the world changed again with a more assertive Russia, with Russia using force first in Georgia, then later on in 2014, against Ukraine, illegally annexing Crimea. And then NATO was called upon again. And then we are now faced with the double challenge of both, continuing to project stability beyond our borders with actually more instability, more violence close to NATO borders: Iraq, Syria, ISIL and North Africa. And Afghanistan is still a challenge for us. So we have to continue to do crisis management, project stability beyond our borders, but at the same time we have to do more collective defence in Europe. So we have in a way, not the luxury of choosing either crisis management beyond our borders or collective defence in Europe. We have to do both at the same time. That's exactly what NATO now is doing. We are adapting NATO to a new and different world. We are increasing our strength in Europe. We have implemented the biggest reinforcement to our collective defence since the end of the Cold War. We have increased the readiness and responsiveness of our forces. We have tripled the size of something we call the "NATO Response Force," a force which is able to reinforce to deploy quickly. And then, we have also

for the first time deployed forces, so we are in the process of deploying forces, to the eastern part of the Alliance with the battle groups in the three Baltic countries, and to Poland and also increased presence in the south east of the Alliance. We do this because for us it is, of course, a co-responsibility is to continue to provide the necessary deterrents to prevent the war, not to provoke a war and we have adapted to a more assertive Russia, being responsible for aggressive action in Ukraine.

The important thing to remember is that, what NATO does is defensive, it is proportionate and we don't want a new Cold War. We don't seek confrontation with Russia and we, therefore, keep the channels for political dialogue open with Russia. And we are not strengthening our defence because we want to fight the war, but we are delivering strong deterrents because we now that's the best way to prevent a war. At the same time, we are also now starting to increase defence spending because this has a cost, so we decided at our summit in Wales in 2014, that we needed to invest more in our defences. And some countries already meet the NATO target of spending 2 per cent or more on defence. The UK is among those countries, the United States is another. But most of the NATO allies do not spend 2 per cent, they spend less than 2 per cent of GDP on defence. So one of my, or perhaps, my main priority since I became Secretary General of NATO back in 2014, has been to urge member allies to invest more in defence. The good news is that they have actually started to do so. After many years of decline, defence spending have started to increase and there's a long way to go, there's still much to do, but at least, it is a good thing to see that more and more allies understand that they have to invest more in our security when times are changing, and when we see a more challenging and demanding security environment. In addition to doing more on collective defence in Europe, increasing our presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, we have also stepped up our efforts to fight terrorism and to stabilize our neighbourhood. We continue in Afghanistan our biggest military operation ever. We support the effort of the coalition fighting ISIL. We train Iraqi officers. We provide support with our AWACS surveillance planes to planes from the UK and from the United States, and from other countries conducting airstrikes over Syria and Iraq against DAESH or ISIL. And we also work with other countries in the region like Jordan and Tunisia to help them being able to fight terrorism and to stabilise their own, or to maintain their own countries, as stable countries in the region. We are also present in the Mediterranean. We have deployed ships to the Aegean Sea to help cut the lines of illegal trafficking of the Aegean Sea.

The reason why I tell you all this is just to illustrate that NATO has been able to adapt and to change. The world has changed, so NATO has changed and we are doing both a collective defence in Europe but we stepped our op at the same time, our efforts to stabilize our neighbourhood. And that's perhaps the most important thing, is that NATO has proven again and again that when the security environment changes, we are also able to change. We are changing the way we are delivering our core tasks. But our core tasks remains exactly the same that by standing together, by being strong and by defending each other, we make sure that all allies are safe and by that also, preserving peace and stability in Europe and North

America. So for NATO, it is important to continue to be united and that's the most important strength of our Alliance. I will stop there to make sure that we have time for some questions. Thank you so much.

NOAH LACHS (President, Oxford Union): Thank you very much Secretary General. You ended there saying that the world has changed and therefore NATO has changed. To what extent to you think Russia who, you know, originally the power you are blocking in terms of the Warsaw Pact, in terms of the potential saying the invasion to what extent are they once again the greatest threat to European stability and European peace?

JENS STOLTENBERG (NATO SECRETARY GENERAL): So we don't see in there any imminent threat from Russia against any NATO country but what we see is a more assertive Russia, a Russia which has, over many years, invested heavily in defense. They have tripled their defense spending since the year 2000 in real terms. They have modernized capabilities, they are exercising more and they are much more modern in defence capabilities now, than they had just a few years ago and they are also modernizing their nuclear forces and they are also using a lot of, what I should say, rhetoric to intimidate neighbours and also related to their nuclear forces, a rhetoric related to the use of nuclear forces but, the most important thing is that we have seen a Russia which is willing to use military force against neighbours.

We saw it first in 2008, in Georgia, but even more serious, we saw it in Ukraine, where they annexed, illegally annexed, Crimea and where they continue to destabilize Eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation. Crimea is the first time since the end of the Second World War in Europe, that one country has used force to annex a part of another country so, all of this is the reason why we have stepped up, why we are investing more in collective defense, not because we want confrontation, not because we want a new arms race but because we have to respond in a measured, responsible, proportioned way to make sure that there is no miscalculations in Moscow about our resolve to protect and defend all allies.

Q: Sir, what do you think of the reasons for this sort of aggressive rhetoric, the increased defence spending. Are Russia paranoid or is there an expansionist agenda?

JENS STOLTENBERG: I think as always, what I say, I am bit reluctant to speculate too much about the thinking but what we can see is, what they actually do. And, what they actually do, is that they are trying to re-establish some kind of sphere of influence in the neighborhood to re-establish the thinking we had after the Second World War with the Yalta Agreement, where Europe was divided in spheres of interest. That is history, that is not a way to, what should I say, govern Europe because that is undermining or violating the respect for each and every nation's sovereignty and a right to decide its own path. So we don't believe in spheres of influence, we believe in the independence and the sovereignty of all nations but what Russia does in Georgia, in Moldova, in Ukraine and in other countries is to try to, in different ways, to re-establish some kind of neighborhood which they control and especially for the Baltic countries which were part of the Soviet Union of course for them it is extremely important to

have the guarantees from NATO, that we will protect them, that they will be independent and free countries and that NATO is there to make sure that no one violates their sovereignty and their the territorial integrity of those countries.

Q: Another place that Russia seems to have some influence is in the mind of President-elect Donald Trump who has hinted that he might be willing to join Putin in Syria to re-establish the total rule of Bashar Al Assad and defeating ISIS in the process. If this is not simple rhetoric and if it is true, what does it mean for Russia's and NATO's, sort of former satellite states?

JENS STOLTENBERG: First of all the important thing is that I am absolutely certain that the United States will continue to be committed to NATO and to our collective defense and to US security guarantees to Europe. I spoke with the President-elect last week on the phone and he expressed strong support to NATO. He expressed strong support to the idea of NATO, of our collective defense, our security guarantees and I am certain that that will continue to be the case, not only because President-elect Donald Trump stated clearly that he supports NATO, and the obligations we all have made as in being members of the alliance, but I also strongly believe of it because a strong NATO is not only good for Europe, it's obviously good for us because that is a cornerstone of security, but it's also good for the United States. I think that two World Wars and the Cold War have taught us all, including the United States, that stability and peace in Europe is also important for the United States and we have to remember that the first time we invoked the Article 5, the collective defense clause NATO, was after an attack on the United States after the 9/11 attacks on the United States back in 2001 showing NATO's solidarity is also important for them, and hundreds of thousands of European NATO soldiers have served in Afghanistan in an operation which was triggered directly as a result of an attack on the United States. So, I am certain that the United States will continue to be committed to NATO. Then for NATO it is no problem that NATO Allies talk to Russia on different issues. Actually NATO decided at our summit in Warsaw in July this year, that we will keep channels for a political dialogue open with Russia. Russia is our biggest neighbour and we have to talk to them, we cannot isolate them, and we have to sit down and address different issues, both as NATO as an alliance, but also individual allys. For instance, the United States. They have spoken with Russia on issues related to Syria, many times, both on how to try to find a peaceful negotiated solution, but also how to make sure that there is no, how shall I say, incidents, accidents taking place in Syria where both Russian forces operate and the United States operates. Russia was instrumental when it came to, regarding the Iran nuclear deal so to speak to Russia, to talk to Russia, to have dialogue with Russia is, is, absolutely in line with NATO policies and NATO decisions. So that's nothing we should be concerned of.

Q: Okay, one of Donald Trump's major gripes with NATO is similar to your own, it's people not paying their way, not reaching this 2% and in fact there is four countries in Europe that make that 2% and as you said it's England, Poland, Estonia and Greece. What's the reason that the other countries aren't paying their way?

JENS STOLTENBERG: The reason is that almost all politicians that I have met they would have preferred to spend money on defense, no sorry, on education, on health and infrastructure instead of defense because most people like education, health more than defense. So, if politicians have, and what I say, an opportunity to do, to spend more on health and education and less on defense, they will do it; and I think we also have to understand that this is linked to the fact that for many years we saw tensions going down. After the end of the Cold War, tensions went down, and the Warsaw Pact was dissolved and we felt that we lived in a safer world and I have told many people before that when I was Minister of Finance back in Norway in the 1990s I was responsible for cutting defense spending and I was quite, as I say, impressed by my ability to do so; but, when I became Prime Minister later on, I was also responsible for increasing defense spending in Norway after 2008, and the reason why I am saying that is, that I think it's absolutely understandable that countries reduce defense spending when tensions are going down as long as they are able to increase defense spending when tensions are increasing and we live in a more dangerous world and that's exactly the case now. So, yes, it was possible to explain why we reduced in the 1990s and perhaps in the beginning of the year 2000, but now we have to be able to increase and as I said, the, the picture in Europe is still very mixed, but at least the picture in Europe is better than it was two years ago, because in 2014 it made a decision to start increase defense spending and now European Allies have started to move in that direction. The UK leads by example because more nations are now following the UK and have started to increase defense spending.

Q: Do you think there is something to worry about in Europe, in that stable Europe that you have described with the recent Brexit referendum here and potential referendum in France if Marie Le Pen gets in? That the EU could disintegrate and we'd see sort of more sectarian violence as we used to maybe 100 years ago?

JENS STOLTENBERG: First, I would like to state that what you have seen is, of course, for many, many years that there has been a lot of debate about the European Union. We have seen different discussions about the future of the European Union and that is important. But, at the same time, we are seeing that NATO has remained united and strong. So, of course, Brexit, that is not for me to comment. I don't have any opinion on Brexit but Brexit has not, what shall I say, made NATO less united, if anything the opposite. NATO is an alliance of 28 democracies soon to be 29 with Montenegro. People in different allied countries elect people from, or leaders from different parties with different political views, there are many different opinions among leaders in NATO countries but we have always proven that we are able to agree on our core cause to be together, to stand together and to protect each other and as long as we are able to do that, NATO is able to deliver what we are supposed to deliver; a strong collective defense deterrent and by that, protecting all allies. So I am not going to debate about the future of the European Union but I have seen that NATO has been able to stay united, stay strong, also in times where we have seen more instability and political uncertainties around us.

Q: So one of those nations with a complex relationship with the European Union, but a strong relationship with NATO is Turkey. Now in 2015, Turkey involved Article 4, after the threats by ISIS to its territorial integrity yet Kurdish forces accuse Turkey of enabling and even helping ISIS. Can Turkey rely on NATO's support to protect itself from ISIS but also use ISIS to pursue and anti-Kurdish agenda?

JENS STOLTENBERG: Turkey is a key ally for NATO, not least because of its geographical location. Turkey is bordering Syria and Iraq, bordering ISIL in Syria and Iraq and Turkey is bordering both Ukraine and Russia in the North in the Black Sea and Georgia in the East. So, and Turkey has the second largest army in NATO. Turkey holds 3 million, around 3 million refugees, so Turkey's key, both when it comes to the way we respond to a more assertive Russia, but also in the way NATO addresses the challenges with turmoil, violence to the South, ISIL DAESH, but also the migrant and refugee crisis. All of this makes Turkey important, not only for NATO but for the whole of Europe and also for the European Union. Turkey is a member of NATO but not a member of the European Union. I visited Istanbul when I met with President Erdogan on Monday. We discussed many different challenges we face together, but one of the challenges of course we discussed was the fight against ISIL and Turkey has now stepped up its effort, its efforts to fight ISIL. They have ground troops in Syria and in Iraq where they fight ISIL and the important thing for me is that there is maximum coordination between Turkey, with its forces in Syria, and the US and other NATO allies which are present in the same countries. NATO as an Alliance, is not present in Syria. NATO, as an Alliance, supports Turkey. We have increased our military presence equal in insurance measures in Turkey, and we are supporting the Alliance, but NATO as an organization is not responsible for ongoing operations in Syria, so how those operations are conducted I think it's right of me to leave to the US, Turkey and the other countries which are on the ground.

NOAH LACHS: Thank you very much. Now I would like to go to the audience. If you have a question put your hand up high and wait for the microphone to get to you. Could we go to the gentleman on that side.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Yes Sir. Thank you very much for being here today. You spoke a lot about NATO's deterrence capability vis-à-vis Russia, and I wonder, it seems to me that, that the deterrence capability is best, best organized to deter a conventional threat and there's a lot of talk today about hybrid warfare as a threat that emanates from Russia and I wonder if Russia isn't really operating with tanks and fighter aircraft and overland assault but rather through propaganda, political subversion, little green men how exactly is NATO positioned to deter that threat?

JENS STOLTENBERG: First of all I think you are very right that cyber and different kinds of covert operations, sometimes called hybrid warfare is, what I say, is a very big challenge and many of the threats that we have seen, have been much more related to that kind of warfare than more conventional attacks and what we saw in Crimea was what is referred to as "hybrid warfare" with what you called "little green men". It's hard to where the idea is to conduct

covert operations, to deny in a way, responsibility and then create and use propaganda and so on to try and destabilize the country and by that conduct aggressive operations. This was one of the issues I discussed with Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday. Cyber is extremely important in modern warfare. It's hard to imagine any conflict without a cyber-component and the U.K. is lead, the U.K. has capabilities, competent skills in cyber, which is of high value for all of us. NATO has decided, and we are in the process of strengthening our cyber-defenses. At the Summit again in Warsaw in July of this year, we made two important decisions.

First we made the decision to establish cyber as a domain, as a military domain so now we have air, sea, land and cyber as military domains and that will enable us to be more, to better coordinate our efforts, to better focus our efforts related to cyber and cyber-attacks.

Second we agreed on a cyber-pledge which is a kind of road map on our way in many different ways can increase and strengthen our cyber defenses. That's partly about protecting our own networks against cyber-attacks and partly about assisting, helping allies to improve their defenses of their own networks because the responder is the nation, then NATO is there to help and assist if needed. An important thing with cyber is that, is that that's something which is ongoing, because when you speak about other kind of threats there is a kind of theoretical possibility that we will have a conventional attack sometime in the future but cyber that happens almost daily against NATO Allies and NATO, so we have to defend ourselves against cyber-attacks every day and one of the key issues about that is attribution, is to tell who is behind and so increase and improve cyber-defenses is high on our agenda and Prime Minister May is very focused on that. The U.K. is the lead nation and we work closely with the UK in addressing those challenges.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Thanks.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: More questions please.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: Thank you. So if we look back at NATO- Russian relations starting with the post, with the beginning of the post-Soviet period, so there was a period of dialogue and even expectations that a new democratic Russia would actually join NATO. Then by the end of the 90s, with the bombings of Yugoslavia, with many post-communist states becoming NATO members these relations have really gone sour, then there was a rapprochement after the 9/11 when Putin supported Bush in the war of terror in Afghanistan, then starting with I think the Iraq war, there has been a constant period of falling and deteriorating relations. So my question is, has NATO membership or some sort of a joint security programs with Russia, have they ever been on the table and if the cooperation with post-Soviet Russia failed, why do you think is the reason for such failure?

JENS STOLTENBERG: So first of all you are quite right in that for many, for several years we actually established closer and closer corporation and dialogue with Russia and I was myself, as Prime Minister, attending different NATO Summits where Putin attended and Medvedev attended, President Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev so, so that was an example of how

we were working together and we also had practical cooperation in different things. Of course there were some ups and downs, but at least we were moving in the direction of more cooperation.

The main reason, there are different reasons, but the main reason why this has changed is Crimea. The illegal annexation of Crimea, to use military force against a neighbour is unacceptable and of course NATO had to respond and we have responded partly by, increasing our military presence in the Eastern part of the Alliance, to send a clear signal that we are ready to defend all allies against anything similar to what has happened in the Ukraine, Crimea. We also responded by suspending our practical cooperation with Russia, so we still have political dialogue with Russia but we don't have practical cooperation with them and then of course the West has also responded by implementing economic sanctions against Russia. That's not a NATO decision, but all NATO allies have, through the European Union the United States and Canada, have implemented sanctions. So the main reason for the, the worsening, the deteriorating relationship is Crimea. Then the question is why did Russia do that? Well I think it's because they have this idea of some kind of, they want to control their neighbours and to control neighbours is not compatible with the idea sovereign nations and sovereign states. I am coming from the neighbour State of Russia and of course I am very glad that I haven't tried to control Norway in the same way, as they have tried to control other neighbours and ah, and ah, but at the same time one of the lessons that I have learned from regional politics is that it is possible to talk to Russians. It is possible to have a dialogue with them and Norway having a very long border line in the sea where we have gas and oil on the Barren Sea and the Polar Sea but also on land, we have been able to work in a pragmatic way both with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but also with Russia but the reason why we have been able to work with Russia is not despite of our membership in NATO but it's more because of it, because as long as we are strong, as long as we are part of a strong military alliance, we have the best possible foundation also to engage in dialogue with Russia. So I believe that we should, we have to stay strong, we have to stay united, but based on that we should continue to work and strive for a more cooperative and constructive relationship with Russia. We should continue to have a chance for political dialogue open and manage our relationship with Russia as good as we can because Russia will not disappear, Russia will be there, Russia will be our biggest neighbour and therefore we have to relate to them in the best possible way.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Do you think one of the reasons you were appointed as Secretary General is because you have experience in this sort of corporate dialogue with Russia from when you were Prime Minister?

JENS STOLTENBERG: It's hard for me in a way to answer why the leaders of NATO appointed me but as least they have, what I have said to some of them is that, is that it has also to do with my, my, let me put it another way, of course it has to do with my experience as a Norwegian politician because that's what I have done all my life and I became Secretary General so it's hard imagine something else and, and, and one important part of my political

life in Norway has been to relate to Russia. Actually when I became Deputy Minister for Environment back in 1990 one of my first tasks was to start to work with Russia on addressing pollution, emissions of sulfur up in the (inaudible) which damaged a lot of nature in Norway and I went to (inaudible) and Murmansk and different cities and we discussed practical environmental cooperation. Then later on in the 1990s I became Minister for Energy and Industry and we had a lot of commissions, we had a Norwegian Russian Commission on Industry and Energy. We met in Moscow, we met in Oslo and we developed a lot of projects on energy and industry with the Russians and that was a mutual benefit both for Norway and for Russia and then when I was Prime Minister we worked on the Delimitation Line which is a borderline in the sea, in the Barents Sea, but it's important partly because it's a big, big sea, territory but also, because it divides the continental shelf and there is oil and gas there and we were able to reach an agreement with President Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev. That was good for Norway, it was good for Russia and part of that agreement is also that we are going to cooperate up in the High North related to energy and also when I was Prime Minister I also and that's still the case we had to know that the Russian military, the Sixth Fleet, the fleet up at the (inaudible) Peninsula they meet with the Norwegian Armed Forces every week, that is they communicate with them regularly to make sure that there are no misunderstandings, no incidents and no accidents. We also have strong joint exercises with them related to search and rescue and so on up in the Barents Sea. The reason why I say this is that, in the North there is some practical, as I say pragmatic relations between a NATO ally Norway and Russia but that takes place based on some absolute principles that they respect our sovereignty, our territorial integrity and actually they respect it so much that they have agreed on a new borderline and of course it's based on the knowledge that NATO, sorry that Norway is a NATO ally so even if Norway is not really a big power they know that NATO is there to protect and defend us. So for me, Norway is an excellent example of how strength and dialogue, defense and dialogue is not something which contradict each other but reinforce each other and I guess that's one of the reasons why I was elected as Secretary General of NATO.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Thanks. Let's get another question from the audience. Let's go to the sort of turquoise jumper.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Can you understand that Vladimir Putin sees it as a provocation that NATO has expanded to the east after the end of the Cold War, especially in light of the belief of apparently some Russians that the negotiations about the reunion of Germany were based on the promise or implicit promise that NATO would not expand to former Warsaw Pact countries.

JENS STOLTENBERG: The answer is no, I cannot understand that Russia has the opinion that it is a provocation, that NATO has enlarged with new members from central and eastern Europe and the reason why I can't understand that and I cannot accept that is that I very much believe that every nation, big or small, east or west, have the right to decide its own path. So, it's not, in a way, NATO that has expanded, it is Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia,

Hungary, that has applied for membership because they want to become members through the democratic processes and should we then tell them no, you're not allowed to become a member of NATO because Russia would not like it. That's an impossible message. And it's violating everything I believe in when it comes to the respect for people to decide their own destiny and their own future. So, the notion of NATO expanding sounds like we are, in a way, grabbing land. No, they are coming to us asking for membership and after various thorough assessment procedures and they have to qualify and meet standards and implement reforms, then they are invited in, but only as long as there are democratic processes and they meet NATO standards, and after many years of assessment. So this is based on the idea that Russia has the right to decide the destiny of its neighbours and Russia do not have that right but neither do any other country. So, for instance, yesterday I met the Serbian Prime Minister and Serbia do not want to become a member of NATO. That's fine. We respect countries if they say we don't want to be a member of NATO and respect them if they say they want to be a member of NATO. It's not for us to decide, it's for them to decide and Russia should be more relaxed and accept that neighbours decide their own path and that will be good for the neighbours and for Russia.

UNNAMED PERSON: Let's go to back middle, yeah, you're turning around.

Q: Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary General. I wanted to ask you about Afghanistan. NATO has been involved in Afghanistan since 2003. I think Operation Resolute Support is going into its' 3rd year and 10 years prior to that with ISAF. The treasure and blood that has been spilled in Afghanistan is quite astounding in NATO's history and I wanted to ask you whether this has led to lessons learned or any lessons for NATO members in terms of expeditionary versus neighbourhood activities?

JENS STOLTENBERG: I would also like a moment, I just have to add one small thing to my last answer and that it's not true, it's a false statement that it was an agreement when Germany was unified that NATO should not have new members. So that's not true but second, even if it was on such an agreement, it would have been absolutely unacceptable that in a way the President of the United States or someone else should agree on what Poland or Hungary or Latvia have the right to do. So it's double wrong. It's wrong because it didn't happen and if it happened, it would have been wrong anyway. So that's not the case.

Second on Afghanistan, of course there are lessons learned from Afghanistan and I think that the most important lesson, there are actually two lessons. One is that it was right to go into Afghanistan because it was necessary to react to an attack that killed thousands of people in Washington and New York, the Twin Towers on the 9/11 attacks, and it was impossible to accept that Afghanistan remain a safe haven for international terrorists. It was a clear UN mandate, the international community supported it and NATO has been the instrument for the international community to fight terrorism and to prevent Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for international terrorists.

The other lesson I think we have learned from Afghanistan is that we should have started earlier to train local forces because in the long run, it is difficult to beat foreigners, in a way, coming from NATO countries and partner countries and to fight the war in Afghanistan for the Afghans. So it's much better if local forces, forces from the country itself, can take responsibility for security and stability in its own country and therefore, we have now ended our combat mission in Afghanistan. Since 2015, we are only in to train, assist and advise mission where we train and advise local Afghan forces and I'm absolutely certain that in the long run, that's a much more sustainable and viable solution that we don't do the big combat operations but we enable the Afghans themselves to stabilize their own country. This is a lesson which is relevant for Afghanistan and if anything, we should have started to train local forces earlier so we could have ended our own combat operations earlier but I think it was an important lesson learned for other countries because I think one of the best weapons we have against terrorism is to train local forces, is to enable local forces to fight terrorism themselves because the fight against terrorism is not a fight between the West and the Muslim world. Most of the victims of terrorist attacks are Muslims. So we have to enable countries in the region, in the Middle East, in North Africa, to fight ISIL, DAESH, terrorist organizations themselves and in the long run, that's a more stronger weapon than we fighting their wars.

UNNAMED PERSON: We have time for one more question. Let's go to the person there.

Q: General Secretary, thank you for your time. I was wondering what is NATO taking in steps into de-escalating the tension between the NATO Alliance and Russia on a non-military basis. Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: What we do is that we keep the channels for political dialogue open in different ways. We have something called a NATO-Russia Council, which is a council that was established back in the 1990s where Russia and the 28 NATO allies meet. This kind of dialogue is important because it is important in a way to just sit around the same table and address some of our different security challenges and even if we don't agree on all of them, I think it's important that we talk, that we have dialogue, that we speak because that at least helps us to find solutions. For instance, we have discussed Ukraine, we didn't agree, but I think it's important that we meet, discuss Ukraine. We have discussed Afghanistan and we have discussed what we call risk reduction and transparency and that is about how can we avoid incidents, accidents related to military activity because with more military build-up, more military activities along our borders, the risk for incidents, for accidents, has increased and we saw the downing of the Russian plane over Turkey last year and we have to try to do whatever we can to avoid that kind of incidents or accidents and if they do happen, prevent them from spiralling out of control and create real dangerous situations. So the higher tensions, the more military activity, the more important it is that we have direct dialogue, direct contact, to avoid misunderstandings and miscalculations that can create really dangerous situations. So, we do this, we continue to do that and of course, we also then continue to meet. On a political level, I have met Foreign Minister Lavrov, my deputy

secretary general has contact with her counterparts with Russian officials, so we continue to have and also many NATO allies have on a bilateral level contacts and dialogue with Russia. I mentioned Norway but also other NATO allies engage with Russia in different ways, for instance, the United States. The other thing is that NATO's response, our increased military presence for instance in the Baltic countries, is measured, it's responsible. We speak about battalions, which is an important but limited military presence. So there's no way that can be a threat. NATO does not pose any threat to any country. So we also calibrate our military response in a way that contributes to keeping tensions down. We are there not to provoke, we are there to prevent conflict and to provide the necessary deterrence to make sure that all allies are safe in a more unstable world.

UNNAMED PERSON: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, firstly join me in thanking Secretary General JENS Stoltenberg. [APPLAUSE]

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