North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Address

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at GLOBSEC public event in Košice, Slovakia
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Róbert Vass [President, GLOBSEC / Moderator]: Mr Secretary General, the floor is yours.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General] Thank you so much. Thank you, Miroslav, and many thanks to GLOBSEC and to you Róbert for hosting us here today. It's great to see you all. It's great to be here. And it's actually great to be back in Košice, because I was here briefly in July 1991. And that's many years ago, and so much has changed since then. Because that was just a bit more than a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union still existed. And this was not Slovakia, this was Czechoslovakia, and it was a very different Europe.

Many things have changed. One thing that really has transformed Europe, and this part of Europe, is, of course, the enlargement of the European Union and the enlargement of NATO. And this year we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the foundation of NATO. But also the 15th anniversary of Slovakia joining NATO. And there are many reasons to celebrate and to be proud of that. But at the same time, it is extremely important to remember that we should not be complacent. We should not think that the fact that many things have moved in the right direction so far is a guarantee that we will continue to move in the right direction.

It is a great achievement that NATO has been able to enlarge with new members. You are one of them. And you are then part of the most successful Alliance in history and NATO is the most successful Alliance in history for two reasons. One is that we have been able to be united, to stand together; and the other reason why NATO has been a successful Alliance, a military and political alliance, is that we have been able to change, to adapt when the world is changing.

I will briefly reflect on those two main reasons why NATO has managed what we have managed all these years. And then we will have time for some questions and comments afterwards.

First on the unity. NATO is an alliance based on the principle, 'one for all and all for one' and as long as we stand together and as long as we also convey a clear message that if one Ally, one member is attacked, that is regarded as an attack on all Allies, then we are safe, then we are secure and we prevent conflict. Because we have to remember that the main reason for NATO, the main task for NATO, is to prevent war, is to prevent conflict, is to preserve the peace. And by sending that message to any potential adversary, that if one Ally is under

attack, the whole Alliance will respond, then we are deterring any attack against any NATO Ally.

I myself, I come from a small NATO Ally of five million Norwegians, up in the High North, bordering Russia. But we have always felt safe, because we know that we are part of this Alliance. And NATO has been key to preserve the peace in Europe for 70 years. It is hard to find any period in the history of Europe with such a long peace period. It's a unprecedented time of peace in this part of the world. And, therefore, I think it is important to remind people of the fact that war and conflict was the kind of normal situation in Europe for centuries. And after the end of the Second World War we were able to create institutions: the European Union, NATO, and other institutions, which have helped to preserve the peace since then.

So, we are a defensive Alliance. Our aim is to preserve peace. But, as the old Romans said, 'If you want peace you have to plan for war,' – meaning that as long as we are strong, as long as we are together, we are able to preserve peace and avoid conflict. So, that's the main reason why NATO has been able to deliver what we have delivered for seven decades.

The other main reason is our ability to change, to adapt when the world is changing. And for 40 years since NATO was established back in 1949, until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, NATO did actually only one thing: and that was to deter the Soviet Union. That was the only thing we did. And we were able then to end the Cold War without one single shot being fired on European soil. And after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, people started to ask whether we still needed NATO. And it was said by some experts that either NATO had to go out of business or out of area. And we then did something we hadn't done before. As we moved into the 1990s we started to go beyond NATO territory.

We helped to end two wars in the Balkans, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia-Kosovo. We started to also address the global fight against terrorism with our mission in Afghanistan. And for approximately 25 years, the main focus of NATO was not to deter the Soviet Union, because it didn't exist anymore and Russia was actually becoming more and more a partner of NATO, but our focus was beyond NATO territory, beyond Europe, fighting terrorism, managing crises beyond our borders.

Then after Crimea in 2014, the illegal annexation of Crimea, we had to turn back again and again focus on Europe, a more assertive Russia using force against the neighbour Ukraine, but at the same time, we need to continue to be part of the fight against terrorism. We saw the caliphate of ISIS, they controlled, you know, a territory in Syria and Iraq, equal to the size of the United Kingdom, 8 million people. So we then, since 2014 actually, the task of NATO has been both to fight terrorism, manage crises beyond our borders – Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan – but also to focus again on collective defence deterrence in Europe.

We don't have the luxury of either fighting terrorism or focusing on collective defence in Europe, we have to do both things at the same time. And I am actually quite impressed by

NATO, by the way we have been able to then again adapt - again, to respond to a changing and more unpredictable security environment.

We are then now faced with another kind of security environment than in the first years after the end of the Cold War. We see Russia using force against neighbours as they have done in Ukraine. But what really is also of concern now is that Russia is violating a cornerstone arms control agreement, the INF Treaty. For decades the INF Treaty, which is a treaty not limiting, but actually banning, all intermediate-range weapons, has served us all well. It has helped to reduce tensions, to ban a whole category of weapons. Now Russia is again developing and fielding - or deploying these intermediate-range weapons in Europe. We continue to call on Russia to come back into compliance with this treaty. We don't want a new arms race. We don't want a new Cold War. We actually want dialogue with Russia, because Russia is our neighbour, Russia is here to stay. But at the same time we need to make sure that we continue to deliver credible deterrence and defence, also in a world without the INF Treaty and with more Russian missiles in Europe.

This is just one example of how NATO has to respond to new security challenges. The fact that there are now more Russian missiles being deployed, nuclear-capable, that are able to reach targets in Europe.

The last thing I will say to you before I sit down and answer questions is that I know that many people ask the question, 'Why . . . how can NATO continue, because you disagree on so many issues?' And then my answer to that is that, yes, there are differences between NATO Allies. We see differences on trade issues, on climate change, on issues like, for instance, the Iran nuclear deal. We have seen internal discussions in NATO about burden-sharing, defence investments.

But the lesson we have learned is that, despite these differences, NATO has always been able to overcome them and to unite and stand together, again, around our core task, to defend and protect each other. Because we know that we are stronger together than alone, and by preserving peace we create a foundation for stability. Stability is a precondition for economic prosperity and development. So therefore it is in our national interests to stand together, despite that we are different in some ways, we are joined by the common idea of that we protect each other and thereby preserving the peace. So thank you so much for being here today and then I'm looking forward to answer your questions. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much, Jens, for your excellent remarks and for your leadership in steering NATO in very difficult times. Now we have around half an hour and I will be opening the debate, so you can ask questions, physically, so catch my eye, raise your hand, and I will try to distribute the questions. You can also use the online app Slidou, where you can post questions and I will be going back and forth here.

But in the meantime, before I give you the floor, give you some time for thinking about the questions, let me use the opportunity that I'm the Moderator and ask the first question. And

that comes from President Donald Trump. He has several times said that NATO is obsolete, and he is pushing European Allies to invest more. You met several times with Donald Trump. You have met with Mike Pompeo and other US leaders and Donald Trump as well, what was your answer to him?

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: He gave me, actually, the answer to that question at our first press conference, because I visited the White House, I think it was a couple of months after he became President in 2017 and then we had a joint press conference, President Trump and I. You can look it up on YouTube, or you can watch it yourself. He says at that press conference, in the press statement, that, 'I used to say that NATO is obsolete, but NATO is not [sic] longer obsolete.'

So he was very clear about that; he thought that NATO has been able to change and especially in two areas. We have stepped up our efforts in the fight against terrorism, NATO Allies and NATO are a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. And we have made, all of us together, have made enormous progress in defeating ISIS. This is extremely important for our security, for all of us, and NATO has been part of that.

The other reason why the President recognises the progress we have made is, of course, that he sees that NATO Allies - European NATO Allies and Canada - are now investing more. We all have to agree that we need fairer burden-sharing. When we stand together, protect each other, then we have to all carry our part of the burden. And the reality is that the GDP, the national income of the United States is almost exactly as big as the GDP of all European NATO Allies and Canada together. So in theory we should pay approximately the same. But, but the United States has defence expenditure which are more than twice as big as the total defence expenditure of all other NATO Allies and Canada.

So, therefore, NATO Allies agreed in 2014 that we need to do something with that. We cannot continue with such an imbalanced burden-sharing and the good news is that over the last years we have seen a significant increase in defence spending from European Allies and Canada. Just since 2016, and by the end of next year 2020, they will have added hundred, one hundred billion extra US dollars for their defence spending. So that's also a reason why President Trump is now clear about that NATO is not [sic] longer obsolete. NATO is important. NATO's important for Europe, but it's also extremely important for the United States. So we just have to continue to make sure that we have a fairer burden-sharing in the Alliance.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Do you want to react on this?

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK [Slovakian Minister of Foreign Affairs]: I can add, well, I met with Secretary Pompeo twice, and in both meetings he expressed very strong support and obviously understanding of the role and importance of NATO. In my meeting with President Trump, he did not raise the NATO as an issue, as a problem, but the fact is, as Secretary General just referred to, that it was difficult and it has been difficult to explain to President

Trump why the United States should pay for, like, 75 percent of the overall budget of NATO. And the fact is that this has been a voluntary commitment, unwritten rule, that the Allies, the members of NATO should contribute, like, 2 percent of their GDP to investing in defence. And we have never done that before and we were not the only ones. And therefore this issue was, was put on the agenda of a NATO summit in Wales, so long before the arrival of Donald Trump in 2014 and President Obama said that this is no longer serious, that actually the defence spending is declining rather than increasing. Slovakia for all these years was investing around 1 percent of our GDP to NATO. But it's like free ride. So you want to be part of the collective defence, but you don't want to . . . to do your share. That's not fair. I mean if you order a taxi, you pay your bill, so . . . President Trump used his style and his language to remind us all of our commitments, and at the same time it's not President Trump or the United States ordering us to do it – this is the commitment we were . . . we were well aware of and we have accepted voluntarily, 15 years ago. And I'm glad that we are now doing what we were supposed to do. So in 2014 our defence spending was 1.1 percent [of] GDP, this year it's 1.73, and as I said, we adopted a commitment, or made a commitment to reach 2 percent by 2024. But we are going to do it two years ahead of the time – 2022, Slovakia will reach the 2 percent of defence spending and I really believe that it's only fair.

MODERATOR: Excellent, thank you very much. So I would like to open the floor for your questions. It's always very difficult to be the first ice-breaker, in the meantime . . .

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: I have to say, it's only in Slovakia . . .

MODERATOR: [laughs]

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: I'm attending many discussions like these in many countries all over the world and people are eagerly waiting for their chance to ask questions. And there are so many hands raised already. But in Slovakia we are so shy. No one wants to be first, no wants to be . . . no one wants to be special. So go ahead, don't be shy!

MODERATOR: Ah, there is the first. But I have to tell you that I have plenty of questions already on Slidou, so there are a lot of questions in the meantime, I see already, so, so now you've provoked the two hands. Please, on this side, on the left side.

QUESTION: But I'm happy to pass the question to somebody from the . . . from the audience because I'm not . . . I'm not important here, so I was just wanting to break the ice, so go ahead.

MODERATOR: You are a great journalist. Okay.

QUESTION: So I have rather a philosophical . . . philosophical question for Mr Secretary General.

JENS STOLTENBERG: Could you please stand up so we can see you.

QUESTION: So, Mr Secretary General. Democracy, freedom and the sanctity of the individual are core Western values and the foundation of our societies. Do you believe they are also universal? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: Thank you very much. Yes, I believe those values are universal values and they're also core values for NATO. It's actually in our founding treaty that NATO is based on democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. So, yes.

MODERATOR: Okay. I . . . let me, let me pose you the question that came from from Mikhail at Slidou: in light of recent developments in Syria, and the US back and forth on troops withdrawals, how much of a threat does NATO perceive ISIS to remain in the future, Mr Secretary General?

JENS STOLTENBERG: So ISIS have lost control over the territory they controlled just a few years ago. And as I said, a territory that was big, the same size as United Kingdom, eight million people and they were actually able to threaten Baghdad. So, if NATO Allies, the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh or ISIS, and NATO, if we hadn't acted, then we would have seen a very, very dangerous and difficult situation in the whole region, Iraq and Syria. Because of our military efforts, we have been able to degrade and make sure that they don't control territory.

That doesn't mean that ISIS is not [sic] longer a threat, because they are going underground, they are responsible for terrorist attacks, they are trying to operate in other ways, both in Syria and Iraq, but also other places in the world. They have different, you know, organisations and cells and so on in other countries. For instance, in Afghanistan, we see ISIS there, ISIS Khorasan. We have seen them in Africa and so on. So this fight is a generational fight. It is not over, but we have achieved something which is very important: we have deprived them from the territory they controlled. And also the income they had from that territory.

NATO is not on the ground in Syria, some NATO Allies are. We are focusing on the fight against terrorism in different ways. But I think one of the main lessons we have learned from Iraq, from Afghanistan and elsewhere is that sometimes NATO has to be able to deploy a big number of combat troops in big combat operations. But in the long run, it's better if we are able to train local forces to stabilise their own country. And, therefore, we are now more and more focused on how can we help the Afghans to stabilise their own country. How can we help the Iraqis to stabilise their own country and fight terrorism themselves. Because we will always be foreigners, we will always be foreign troops in a foreign country. Sometimes we need to do that, but in the long run it's much better if you can train local forces. That's the reason why our mission in Afghanistan, now it's not [sic] longer a combat mission, but a train, assist and advise mission to train Afghans, to stabilise their own country. And that's the reason why we are now actually in the process of building up a new training mission in Iraq, to help them train and develop local capacity to fight Daesh or ISIS themselves. So that battle

is not over, but we have achieved something that was very important: we have taken away the territory from Daesh that they controlled until recently.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Unless I see some, some hands here, let me go to Slidou, to the second question I see here. And let me pose this to you, Mr Minister. There is a question: how do you perceive the rise of pro-Russian sentiments in the CEE region, is that a real threat?

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: Well, there is a real threat, not in a security sense or military sense, but in a sense of confusion. There is an alternative truth to everything. And it is growing. It is more and more present here. People are confused so therefore it's so important to communicate and to be transparent in our actions and to be able to explain what we do and how we do it. And yes, we are partly responsible for that. I mean, I never start by blaming the other party. We should start from ourselves and the fact that our communication has become too complicated, too technical for people to understand. And it's particularly the case for the European Union, so people lost the feeling that the EU, the institutions are there to deal with their problems, to protect them. It looked like the institutions locked themselves into their own world, using very complicated language and addressing issues that people would not feel as their problems. So that was immediately used and cleverly used. So therefore we need communication. We need clarity, we need credibility and we need transparency.

MODERATOR: Thank you. This is also connected to the spread of misinformation and also that is causing, in many times, erosion of trust in Western institutions. Because the goal of misinformation is not to win the argument, but to decrease the trust in the system. How is NATO dealing with it? Is it a threat that we can lose trust of the people from inside?

JENS STOLTENBERG: The purpose of disinformation is, of course, to undermine trust in our democratic institutions and we have seen examples of efforts to meddle in the democratic processes in several NATO Allied countries with different means, with cyber, with disinformation, with using social media. And we are very much aware of that. NATO helps to counter that in different ways, partly by, you know, countering disinformation when we see it – online, on paper, in the air, in different media platforms. And we strongly believe that the answer to propaganda is not . . . or disinformation, is not more propaganda or more disinformation. But the answer to propaganda, from NATO's side, is facts. It's the truth. Because we are confident that in the long run the truth will prevail.

Then we also strongly believe that this is not only a responsibility for NATO. We work together with the European Union and, of course, at the end of the day, it's very much also a responsibility for each and every member state. Of course, NATO can help Slovakia to address disinformation in Slovakia, but the best people to address disinformation in Slovakia are people in Slovakia, Slovaks themselves. We can help, we can assist, we can share experiences, we can learn from each other. But at the end of the day this is something you have to deal with here.

The last thing I would say about this is that, I think the best way to deal with disinformation, propaganda, misuse of social media, is to have a free, independent press. To have journalists that ask the difficult questions. Journalists and media which are able to check their sources, because then, in the long run, this will be exposed to as what it is: attempts to meddle, attempt to mislead. So we need open, transparent discussions. We need free and independent media. In that kind of society disinformation will never survive.

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: If I may?

MODERATOR: Please.

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: Because I feel very strongly about this, because, unfortunately, we hear voices in Slovakia questioning NATO and the European Union and our membership in that. So my suggestion to you is every time someone approaches you with this criticism, ask them, 'What's the alternative? Tell me what is the better alternative.' With NATO, we have guarantees of security and peace. With the European Union, we have guarantees of prosperity and protection of our human rights. And, there is . . . if someone says, 'We . . . well, we don't need NATO because we are se— . . . secure.' Isn't it the other way around? We are secure, because we are members of NATO? If people say, 'Why aren't we neutral?' My question is: who would guarantee our neutrality? Why? What for? So we, country like Slovakia, with our size, population and geographical location, can only be strong when we are part of a wider environment, which is based on principles of values. And there is no other alternative, no better alternative. I mean, there are other alternatives, but they are bad alternatives. There is no better alternative for this country than to be a trustworthy and credible member of the European Union and NATO.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. This is a very strong message. So in the meantime, just catch my eye or just raise your hands as we go in the discussion. But there is another question that I very much like, because both of you have mentioned the 2 percent. And it has become a buzzword from the US President, but also in Europe. This is a never-ending story. You said, Mr Secretary General that money matters, but what we do with that money is even more important. And there might be a gap between US and Europe on the level of spending, but also how we spend the money. Do we spend the money in Europe efficiently enough? Or what should we do better?

JENS STOLTENBERG: Well first, I think you have to remember that the 2 percent, the guideline or the goal which has been established by NATO, to spend 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product on defence, is not something which is invented by the United States. It's something which is agreed by 29 Allies. And we reiterated that pledge at the summit where all NATO leaders were together, as late as at our summit in Brussels in July last year. And I have been a politician in Norway for many years and I understand very well that most politicians, or, actually, all politicians, they prefer to spend money on something else than defence. They would like to spend money on education, on health, on infrastructure, instead of spending

money on defence. And, therefore, also, all European Allies they reduced defence spending after the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s and the beginning of 2000. Defence spending was going down – in Norway, my own country, in Slovakia and most other countries – because we felt more safe, we saw tensions were going down and then we spent more money on health and education instead of defence.

But my message is that when we reduce defence spending when tensions are going down, we have to be able to increase defence spending when tensions are going up, as they are now; to make sure that we still deliver credible deterrence to preserve the peace.

Then, last thing I will say, because now obviously there are some questions, is that I think that one of the challenges in Europe is that we have a very fragmented way of spending money. In United States they have one main battle tank. And, of course, then they have the economy of scale: the cost of producing one, if you have a large number is smaller than if you have a smaller number of units you produce. Maintenance, training and so on also becomes much cheaper. In Europe there are seven different types of main battle tanks. So, it's a much more fragmentation. This is the case for all different weapon platforms. So, the cost of maintaining the European defence is much higher than the United States. So that actually adds to the imbalance when it comes burden-sharing.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. And I see a question at the back on the left side. And then another question here in the front.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Mr General Secretary, I would like to ask a question regarding the Enhanced Forward Presence units of NATO in the Baltic States, as the Slovak troops are also part of this mission. How well do you think are the units of these . . . of this mission prepared in case of Russia decides to undertake some military action against Baltic countries? And also that leads to the second part of my question: if it has more of a practical value, or it is a political statement to let the Russians know that we are here and we are prepared to undertake any . . . we are ready to use any means necessary in order to secure the security of those Baltic States? Thank you very much.

JENS STOLTENBERG: What you refer to, just to explain to those who don't know the details is that NATO has deployed four battlegroups, four battalions in the three Baltic States and Poland. We did that in 2016, I think it was, and before that we didn't have any combat-ready presence in the Eastern part of the Alliance. This is very important, because we have to make sure that nothing like what we have seen in Georgia, where Russia used force against Georgia in 2008, or like we have seen, for instance, in Crimea or Donbass, can happen to any NATO Ally. And to just make sure that there is no doubt about that, we have deployed these four battlegroups, roughly a thousand in each of them, a bit more, so the total is close to five thousand soldiers.

We have deployed these battlegroups and also have some presence in Romania and the Black Sea region. These battlegroups are combat-ready. They are extremely important

because they send a clear message that any kind of aggression against one of these countries will trigger a whole response from the whole Alliance, because the whole Alliance is already there. There's no way, anyway, you can do something . . . to be responsible for aggression against Latvia or Lithuania without meeting NATO because we are, NATO is already there.

Then, of course, I agree that a thousand soldiers is not that much. Well, they're well-trained, well-equipped, but second, they represent the whole Alliance. And we have the battlegroups, we have, of course, the national forces of the different Baltic countries, and then we have the ability to reinforce. And the way NATO functions is that if we see a need, we will reinforce quickly to make sure that we can defend any Ally. But again, the message is that we want to prevent the conflict – and the best way to prevent a conflict is to avoid any misunderstanding, any power vacuum. As long as there is no reason for miscalculations, then there will be no war, no conflict and we can still live in peace.

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: I would add one sentence which is important also for Slovak public: that NATO is present in the Baltic States because they requested the presence. So it's not that NATO enforced itself upon those countries, because I'm now being currently accused by some people of negotiating behind the back of our Republic, a creation of a NATO base in . . . or a US base in Slovakia. It's not true. We are not negotiating. We are not preparing to set up any base and there will be no base unless we ask for it. NATO . . . we are partners in NATO, so NATO does not make decision without consulting with us. So this is very important to understand.

MODERATOR: And maybe I would just add that, that as we are members of NATO, all our troops are NATO troops, and all our bases are NATO bases. Our bases are NATO bases as . . . everyone else. So . . . but I've seen a question here at, in the front.

QUESTION: I'm from Bratislava. Thank you very much for coming here. I have a question about the topic that was briefly mentioned already today, but could you please elaborate a little bit more about the role of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence for security? Is it something that doesn't let you sleep at night, or not yet, particularly knowing that countries like China or Russia don't have any problems striving to integrate it into the security domain?

And maybe Minister Lajčák, in the similar vein, could you please help us understand, because we're very worried that, for example, Americans are much more advanced than us Europeans in this area, and we're just concerned that we are going to become not able . . . we, we will not be able to work together, what a country, a small country like Slovakia, can do to stay relevant? Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much for the very excellent question on artificial intelligence.

JENS STOLTENBERG: Historically, NATO has always been in the lead when it comes to technology. We have always had a technological edge, meaning that the most advanced technologies, the most advanced weapon systems, have always been developed by NATO and NATO Allies, and, of course, the United States has been key, because of their size. Now we see that we are challenged, for instance by China, when it comes to the use of artificial intelligence. For me, that requires two sets of responses.

One is that we also are investing in technology, artificial intelligence for instance. That's one of the reasons why we believe it is important to also increase defence spending, because this is not only about increasing more, spending more, but also about making sure that 20 percent of the defence budget is used for investments and research and technology, because we need research and development, because we need new technologies. And there is enormous potential when it comes to, for instance, artificial intelligence, big data and many other kinds of technologies. So we need to maintain the technological edge.

The other challenge is to try to develop mechanisms to avoid an arms race with these new technologies. That's not so easy. But we were able to develop, you know, even during the coldest period of the Cold War. At least in the 60s and the 70s, the two superpowers – the Soviet Union and United States, the Warsaw Pact and NATO – were able to agree on ways to limit the number of nuclear weapons and actually gradually start to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, which were the most advanced weapons at that time. And that was a great achievement, partly because we then prevented a very, very costly arms race to become even more costly, and partly because when you reduce the number of nuclear weapons, we reduce the risk of any nuclear weapons being used.

Now we need to look into how can we develop systems, agreements, regimes which are controlling these new technologies, to try to limit or reduce the potential for a new arms race. I'm saying we don't have all the answers to this now, but at least we need to discuss, look into it, because it's a totally different world where we use that kind of technologies as part of our new weapons systems.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Mr Minister.

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: The Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Gutierrez, says there are three most important global challenges of today, and . . . that will shape our future. First one is climate change and our ability to deal with it. The second one is massive movement of people and our ability to manage it. And the third one is what is called Digital Revolution or, or utilisation of new technologies, artificial intelligence. And this will decide who will be the winner and the loser of the 21st Century. And you are absolutely right. The Americans are way more advanced than we Europeans, and Slovakia as part of the European Union. There is no chance for us to compete on our own. So it's like the hard defence - we have to be part of the wider endeavour, a wider effort. And we have to contribute our fair share to this effort. Europe is competitive. What we need – and the

Secretary General spoke about it, referring to the defence, to the hard defence, but it also goes when it comes to science, technology, research. We are too fragmented. So we have the Germans, we have the French, we have the others. We need to join forces and to . . . to do more European research and European projects, for which Slovakia has to be part of it. We must not let the train leave the station without us. And then we can benefit from, from the, from the results, from the outcomes. And it's really important that everybody understands that these are the issues that will define our future.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. There are plenty of questions here, but I'd prefer if there are hands in the room. So I see a question at the back of the room.

QUESTION: Dear Mr Secretary General, my name is Sergei, I'm from Russia, Moscow. I'm studying here in Slovakia. First of all, I'm very pleased to be here and thank you for this opportunity. My question is: as you mentioned before, that Russia is waging war in Ukraine, but the only evidence of this is Mr Poroshenko's, Ukrainian President, show at United Nation Congress, where he showed Russian passports of Russian troops, but we all understand it's . . . we can't take it as an evidence. And the second part of my question is: if NATO has all the army and resources to stop war in Ukraine, why can't NATO come to Ukraine and help Ukrainian troops to stop this war, because they are fighting like the regular separatists from Donbass? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: First, I think we have to remember that we have many, many different treaties which Russia, NATO Allies have signed onto, which guarantee the international recognised borders of every nation in Europe, but especially Ukraine. We have, for instance, the Budapest Agreement. I think it was back in 1994, where it explicitly recognised Ukraine within its international recognised borders, which includes Crimea. Now Crimea is annexed by Russia. So, there is no doubt that Russia has used aggression against Crimea. We saw what was then called Little Green Men, but that was actually Russian soldiers, special operations soldiers and later on Crimea was annexed by Russia – violating the international recognised borders of an independent country. It's not only Petro Poroshenko, President Petro Poroshenko, but we have from open media sources, we have from intelligence, we have from many different sources that Russia is present and supporting the separatists in Donbass in eastern Ukraine. So, there's no doubt about that. And at least what they could help us to do was to control the border between Russia and eastern Ukraine. They don't want to help us to do that. And I think one of the reasons is that they then will not be able to operate as freely as they do between Russia and eastern Ukraine.

NATO . . . then I didn't follow, I didn't fully understand the last part of your question, but we are working for a peaceful solution. We want the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements: ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons, and also allow the international monitors, representing an organisation called OSCE, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, to allow them to operate freely and safely in eastern Ukraine, or

Donbass. This is the only way to a peaceful solution, and NATO strongly supports those efforts.

We also help and support Ukraine with some capacity-building, with some help with cyber, with logistics, with the command structure. But, the main message is that we need a peaceful, negotiated solution to the conflict in Ukraine.

MODERATOR: Let me just add, because there is a question here: is it possible for Ukraine to join NATO? And if, when?

JENS STOLTENBERG: The main message there is that it is for the 29 Allies and the applicant country to decide if and when to join. No-one else has a say. Because very often I hear that, you know, if Ukraine joins or if North Macedonia joins, or if Georgia joins – that's a provocation against Russia, it's an aggressive action against Russia. Just that concept is totally wrong. Because I strongly believe that every nation has the right to decide its own path. And NATO totally respects that, regardless of whether they work for membership of NATO or they say, 'we are neutral.'

We have, for instance, Sweden and Finland, close partners, or Austria, close partners of NATO. They have decided to be neutral. We respect that, a hundred and ten percent. No problem. If they want to be neutral, be neutral. But, you also respect when nations, through democratic processes, decide that they want to join NATO. Like, for instance, Montenegro did recently, or North Macedonia now are in the process of doing. Then we respect that decision. It's not a provocation against a neighbour. The whole idea that this is a provocation against a neighbour is that big states, big nations, big powers have the right to decide what small neighbours do. That's very dangerous and especially, again, coming from not a very big country like Slovakia, or not a very big country like Norway. If we start to just talk and respect the idea of sphere of influence, that big powers can decide what small neighbours do, then we are in a very, very dangerous world. That is the world we tried to leave behind. And, again, speaking on behalf of the country I'm coming from, Norway joined NATO in 1949, Joseph Stalin was very much against that. He didn't like that. But I'm very glad that the United States, United Kingdom and the other NATO Allies in 49 said, 'Norway is a small country. They want to join. Welcome.' Despite the fact that Joseph Stalin didn't like it. So, the answer is that . . . well, these countries will join, when the 29 Allies, the members of today, and that country decide on that, and no-one else has the right to interfere.

MIROSLAV LAJČÁK: And I would add one sentence. You mentioned the spheres of influence, and we know something about it, because 50 years ago, 1968 when Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia, the West didn't care. Why? Because it all happened within the Soviet sphere of influence. So it was like, 'They can do whatever they want, as long as it is within their sphere of influence.' I am profoundly against spheres of influence, because that means that the big ones decide about the fate of the small ones. We will never be the big country. So what we need is a system which is based on rules, and the rules must be

respected by everyone. Otherwise we will always be . . . I mean, not free. And our, our fate our, our future will be decided by . . . by others. So that's why we really have to insist on a system which is based on international law and on rules that apply universally.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much for both of you. There are a lot of questions on . . . on cybersecurity, India-Pakistan conflict, Kosovo and many others that we received in the meantime. We are unable to answer them, because we are out of time. I see another hand here. We are very sorry, unless you say that we can take one more question?

JENS STOLTENBERG: We can take him.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JENS STOLTENBERG: It has to be an easy question now!

QUESTION: Sure. And I have a question regarding China. … [inaudible] from everywhere, we can hear the Chinese companies are trying to buy out European and North American companies. In your opinion, Secretary General, can it lead to a security breach, and if so does NATO have a plan to prevent these breaches?

JENS STOLTENBERG: No, I think that we see a great potential for cooperation with China. China is a rising power, a strong economy. And there is a potential to work with China in many different areas. At the same time we see some challenges. For instance, when it comes to critical infrastructure. I think the reality is that we now have to analyse how to deal with that. NATO Allies are, for instance, addressing the issue related to 5G networks and Huawei. They are not concluded, but in one way or another, NATO Allies need to address that challenge. So, I don't have the final answer, but we are very much aware of both the potential for working with China, but also some of the challenges related to, for instance, on critical infrastructure and advanced technologies.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. Thank you for the last question. Thank you for all of you who joined our debate today and for both, you Jens and Miroslav for joining us here in Košice. I wish you safe travel home, or back to Brussels and to Bratislava, and thank you for your great leadership in NATO and in Slovakia, because leaders like you are making us more secure and we can sleep a little bit better in this very dangerous world. Thank you very much.

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