North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press point

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council
2017-07-13

Good afternoon.

I have just finished chairing a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. The fifth such meeting since April last year.

Dialogue can be difficult, but it is also essential and in times of raised tensions, such as now, it is particularly important to keep channels of communication open. At today's meeting, we had a frank and useful discussion on three key issues: Ukraine, Afghanistan, and transparency and risk reduction. In the case of Ukraine, NATO Allies and Russia continue to have fundamental disagreements. The Crimean issue and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine remain clear points of contention, and heavy weapons have not been withdrawn from the conflict zone. The Minsk Agreements provide the best chance of a solution to the conflict, but they need to be implemented, and the work of the OSCE monitors need to be allowed to proceed unimpeded.

At today's meeting, we also discussed the security situation in Afghanistan, which remains challenging. A stable Afghanistan is essential to regional security. NATO Allies and Russia share a common interest to support the National Unity government and to work towards a free, safe and democratic Afghanistan.

The third and final topic we discussed was transparency and risk reduction. At previous meetings of the NATO-Russia Council we have given reciprocal briefings on exercises and force posture. Such exchanges are important elements of our continuing dialogue. They help to limit the risk of misunderstanding, miscalculation and unintended escalation. This is why it was significant that at today's meeting, we exchanged advance briefings on upcoming exercises. Russia briefed on the upcoming ZAPAD 2017 exercise, and NATO briefed on Exercise Trident Javelin 2017. I am encouraged by this progress. It is a dialogue that can continue at future meetings of this Council.

At the same time, these voluntary exchanges do not substitute for the mandatory transparency required under the Vienna Document.

So, today's meeting covered a range of different topics. Our discussion was frank and constructive. Allies and Russia may hold different views but we are committed to continuing our dialogue as part of our commitment to preserving peace and security.

And with that, I am ready for your questions.

Moderator: Julian, please.

Q: Julian Barnes, Wall Street Journal. On the transparency, two questions. One, Russia and NATO have had very different accounts of the Zapad exercise, NATO saying 100,000 troops, Russia saying under the threshold for notifying under Vienna. Was there any sort of meeting of the minds? Was there any sort of information that NATO got that put you at ease about this upcoming exercises? And secondly, on the issue of air safety, we've had some uptick in recent months on incidents. Was there any discussion of that? Was there any discussion about mitigating the chance for a mishap in the Baltic region during these upcoming exercises?

Jens Stoltenberg (Secretary General, NATO): First on numbers, Russia briefed on exercise Zapad 2017, and they also provided numbers on the total number of forces, but also planes, ships participating in the exercise, and also gave numbers for Russian troops and for troops from Belarus separately. And then many allies asked questions, and we had a discussion about the numbers. I think that my message today is that it's too early to say because it remains to be seen because the exercise hasn't yet taken place. But from previous experiences related to previous exercises, we have every reason to believe that it may be substantially more troops participating than the official reported numbers.

So our message is that we call on Russia to adhere to the Vienna document, and allow for mandatory transparency, inspections and observation of the exercise, according to the Vienna document. But as I said, it remains to be seen because the exercise hasn't yet taken place. But numbers was an important part of the discussion today.

Then on air safety, that was also discussed, and air safety, especially the Baltic region was also discussed. That is an important issue, and it was raised by several members of the council.

Air safety is an example of why dialogue is important. Air safety in the Baltic region was raised last year at the meeting of the NATO Russia Council. Following that we had a Finnish initiative to host and to organize an expert group. I also spoke several times to the Finnish President about these issues. And now there is an expert group with NATO, Russia, littoral states like Sweden and Finland participating, and they are working in a good way. It's promising the work in that expert group addressing air safety in the Baltic region. And for me that underlines the importance of dialogue. It also underlines the importance of dialogue of NATO-Russia, but also involving other relevant states, in this case, Sweden and Finland. And we have seen an increase in air activity in the Baltic region, but with few exceptions, the vast majority of the intercepts are conducted in a safe and responsible manner by all parties.

So there are examples of unsafe behaviour. We have to work more on the risk reduction, air safety transparency, but I think it's important also to recognize the progress and also the fact

that the vast majority of the intercepts are conducted in a safe and secure manner.

Moderator: Yes, please. The lady in the front.

Q: ARD: Secretary General, was Syria not at all on the agenda because NATO is now involved? And any exchange of information about the situation in Syria today or no?

Jens Stoltenberg: Syria was not discussed. NATO is a member of the coalition fighting ISIL in Iraq and Syria. NATO provides support to the coalition. We provide… we have stepped up our support with our AWACs surveillance planes where also Germany's playing a key role, and German personnel are key to that support, and many NATO allies are directly involved in different kinds of air operations, including Germany's also having some air presence and support for the coalition. But Syria was not an item, not an issue, at the meeting today because we discussed Ukraine, Afghanistan, and transparency, risk reduction.

Moderator: Please, Teri, in the front row.

Q: Hi. Teri Schultz with NPR and Deutsche Welle: So you say that the Russia side presented some numbers. And were you satisfied that those numbers are below the observation threshold, if not the reporting threshold? You said that you have some… what did I tweet? Reason to believe that they will be much higher, and we've heard of course estimates of as high as 100,000, which it seems like no matter how you chop that up, would probably require some reporting under Vienna. So what are your concerns? And do you have any leverage over Russia to make them actually follow the requirements under the OSCE? And a quick one like Julian on air safety, there have also been some reports that the Russians say they may not… that they aren't giving direct orders to the pilots who don't follow the rules, who aren't behaving safely in the air. Does that concern you on its own? Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg: On numbers, Russia gave numbers on troops which are going to participate in Zapad, but also on other capabilities, like ships and planes. I welcome that and that also made it possible for allies to ask questions, and they asked several questions about the numbers.

I think it's for Russia to answer about numbers to the media, to the public, but I can say that according to them, according to the official numbers, they are below the Vienna document threshold. And that was then… that was also many allies was focusing on exactly that threshold when they asked questions.

And again, it remains to be seen because the exercise hasn't been conducted yet, so it's hard to tell now exactly how many troops that will actually participate. But NATO will monitor and follow the Zapad 2017 very closely. And of course we will base our information about the exercise not only on official Russian reports, but also on other sources.

And again, for us it is important to not only adhere to and follow the mandatory transparency according to the Vienna document, but I think it's also a good thing, as many NATO allies do,

that they are actually on a voluntary basis even showing even more transparency, notifying even exercises with less troops than the thresholds in the Vienna document.

Then on air safety, again, we have seen increased air activities, meaning that we also have seen more intercepts. Intercepts is a normal thing. That's a thing we do in planes, which are identified approaches NATO territory. But that can be done in a safe and professional manner, and it's not a dramatic thing. It's a routine normal thing. The unnormal thing and the dangerous thing is if the intercepts are conducted in a dangerous way, too close to the plane or… and always conducted in a dangerous way.

So the issue is how can we make sure that intercepts air activities are conducted in a safe… and safe and professional manner? And of course it is the different states who own the planes who are responsible for the behaviour of the planes. And I welcome the work of the expert group hosted by Finland. I welcome the fact that we have seen progress and that the vast majority with a few exceptions of the intercepts are conducted in a safe and professional manner.

Moderator: Lady in the front row here.

Q: Thank you, Secretary. You said you're talking about Afghanistan also in this meeting. Was there issue of the reported support to the Taliban by Russia raised in this meeting? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: It was mentioned, but not as an important issue. We have seen reports, but we haven't seen any proofs, any confirmed information about that kind of support, and Russia has clearly stated that they're not supporting Taliban. The focus of the meeting today was the importance of supporting an Afghan led and Afghan owned reconciliation process. I welcome the fact that President Ghani has initiated such a process. And it was a meeting in Kabul a few weeks ago that was an important first step to try to re-energize or to give more strength to the reconciliation process in Afghanistan.

Moderator: Irina.

Q: Irina Somer, Ukrainian News Agency, UNIAN: Actually two questions. You said that NATO will monitor exercise Zapad 2017, but will NATO be able to send their own observers? It's first part on this one. And did Russians give you any guarantee that these exercises will be not used to occupy other neighbouring countries? And the second question is… like it happened by the way in Georgia in 2012. The second one, I would like to know if Russian asked you about next visit to Kyiv which took place a few days ago. And particularly about the fact that President Poroshenko touched an issue of MAP. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: So every nation has the right to exercise its forces, and that of course also goes for Russia. Second, we don't see any imminent threat against any NATO allied country. Third, we will follow the Zapad exercise closely. And of course if this is an exercise which is

not defined according to the Vienna document and there is a mandatory inspection and transparency then of course we will be part of that.

On the visit of NAC to Kyiv, it was briefly mentioned, and I underlined the message from the North Atlantic Council, and we visited Kyiv on Monday this week, that NATO stands in solidarity with Ukraine. We support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and NATO provides practical and political support to Ukraine. And the focus is on reforms, the importance of fighting corruption and modernize Ukraine's defence and security institutions.

There has been no change in the relationship between Ukraine and NATO. We continue to focus on our partnership and on implementing reforms.

Moderator: Yes, please. Lady in the front row.

Q: Georgian TV Company, RUSTAVI: Secretary General, as you know, last week occupation regime moved occupation line so-called border. It was in South Ossetia region, village ... (inaudible). And today we have more dangers in other villages. Maybe do you discuss this issue today, and in general how you estimate this situation? Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg: We didn't discuss this issue today. And that's not because NATO is not concerned about the situation in Georgia, but that's because the issues we discussed today were Ukraine, Afghanistan, and risk reduction. But as Secretary General of NATO, not related to the meeting that took place today, I can say that of course we are concerned. We have seen that the border posts have been moved several times, and we don't recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as any kind of independent republics or nations. They are a part of Georgia, part of the international recognized borders of Georgia or within those borders.

We therefore support all efforts to try to find a negotiated peaceful solution to these conflicts, and we continue to provide support to Georgia. And we have the training centre. We have the assistance package. We have many other activities, which are going on where we continue to help Georgia to modernize and to strengthen its capability to protect and defend itself, and also to stabilize the country where we see foreign troops on Georgian soil.

Moderator: Okay, we have time for one more question. Ana.

Q: Ana Pisonero, Europa Press: Thank you, Secretary-General. Could you tell us a bit about the numbers that will participate in the NATO exercise? And also is there a bit of clarity of what will happen with the U.S. Patriots that would be deployed in Lithuania, I think? Is it only for the next upcoming exercise or will they probably stay a bit longer just for extra reassurance measures. We understand that especially Lithuania was one of the countries pushing for extra measures ... to fend off from Zapad given that they are extremely worried about this exercise. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: The deployment of the Patriot batteries is a bilateral issue - the United States provides this kind of support or are deploying the Patriot batteries. But of course

that's… they are invited to do so, and it's also part of the strengthening of the U.S. military presence in Europe, and I welcome this increased U.S. presence of… increased U.S. presence in Europe.

How long the Patriots will be deployed? I'm not able to tell you, but I'm certain that the U.S. will be able to answer about that.

Exercise Trident Javelin 2017 is a command post exercise. It's exercising almost the whole of the NATO command structure, which is extremely important, and it's also a part of the preparations to the Trident Juncture 2018 exercise next year, which will be a big live exercise. The numbers are below 5,000. So it's not a big exercise measured in the number of troops, but it is NATO's most significant exercise this year because it's exercising our command structure.

Next year we'll have a much bigger live exercise, and NATO allies are ready to be transparent and to be from Trident Juncture, and of course then we speak about much higher numbers, around 35,000 troops. But of course the final number's yet to be decided because it depends a bit on how many nations will send troops and contribute, but around 35,000.

Moderator: Okay, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg: Thank you so much.

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