North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Pre-Ministerial press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg
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(As delivered)

Good afternoon.

Over the next two days, NATO Defence Ministers will make decisions to address the changed security environment we are facing.

We will continue adapting our deterrence and defence to meet threats from any direction.

Effective deterrence and defence requires both forward presence of Allied forces, and our ability to reinforce them quickly, if needed.

I expect Ministers to agree to enhance our forward presence in the eastern part of our Alliance.

This will bolster our collective defence.

And at the same time send a powerful signal to deter any aggression or intimidation.

We have already strengthened our military presence in the region.

And we are setting up eight small headquarters to support planning, exercises and reinforcements.

Our adaptation is transatlantic.

The US plan to quadruple the funding for the European Reassurance Initiative is a significant step.

It will fund a persistent rotational presence of air, land, and maritime forces.

More training and exercises.

More pre-positioning of combat vehicles and supplies.

And it will fund more investments in infrastructure such as airfields, training centres and ranges.

This will further increase NATO’s forward presence and our ability to reinforce.

We will also take decisions on how to improve NATO’s response to hybrid attacks, which combine conventional military force with subversion, cyber attacks, and propaganda.

We will speed up our decision-making.

And help ensure that we have all the tools and procedures in place.

We will develop ways to boost our resilience, the resilience of our Allies.

Because our military forces depend on civilian resources, such as food and water supplies, communications and transportation.

And we will work even more closely with the European Union on a range of issues, including dealing with cyber threats.

This is part of NATO’s long term adaptation to a new and more challenging security environment.

And it will require continued efforts, and continued investment.

On Thursday, we will also hold a meeting of the NATO-Georgia Commission.

Georgia is one of NATO’s closest partners.

It is pursuing domestic political and security reforms, which are bringing Georgia closer to NATO.

At the Wales Summit, we agreed a substantial package of support to Georgia.

In areas such as planning, air defence, maritime security and cyber defence.

We will discuss the progress we have made.

And how we can further intensify our support to Georgia.

Let me finally turn to Syria.

All NATO Allies are part of the counter-ISIL coalition.

I expect NATO to provide them with support.

We are actively considering the US request for NATO AWACS surveillance planes to backfill national capabilities.

And I expect we will address this issue at the Ministerial meeting tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.

As this would increase the coalition's ability to conduct air strikes against ISIL.

NATO strongly supports all efforts to end the suffering, reach a ceasefire and start a political transition in Syria.

The intense Russian air-strikes, mainly against opposition forces, are undermining these efforts.

They are driving tens of thousands of people to Turkey's border.

And making a desperate humanitarian crisis even more desperate and even worse.

The increased Russian air activity in Syria is also leading to violations of NATO airspace.

Overall, the substantial Russian military build-up in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean is shifting the strategic balance and raising tensions in the region.

So calm, de-escalation and political solutions are more urgent than ever.

And with this I am ready to take your questions.

OANA LUNGESCU (NATO Spokesperson): We'll go to Associated Press in the first row.

Q: Yes, Secretary General for the lay person could you describe what the situation is now like in the, the military situation in the Eastern and Central European members of the alliance? And what would happen if NATO did not react to what Russia is doing? Would these countries be in danger of attack or subversion or some other threat? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG (NATO Secretary General): What we now see is that NATO is adapting to a changed and more, a changed and more demanding security environment. Partly caused by the turmoil, the violence we see to the south but also caused by a more assertive Russia. Russia which has invested heavily in defence over many years, a Russia which is conducting a wide range of different military exercises including many snap exercises, unnotified exercises and a Russia which has shown the will not only to exercise military force but also to use military force to intimidate neighbours and to change borders in Europe as we have seen in Ukraine and in, and in Georgia.

So this of course requires a response from NATO and that's exactly what we are doing, we are responding and we are adapting. And we have done so by increasing our presence in the eastern part of the alliance with more assurance measures meaning planes, air policing, naval presence in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, increased naval presence and also more boots on the ground with more exercises and troops. And we are also increasing our ability to reinforce, we have tripled the size of the NATO Response Force to around 40,000 troops and this is a force which can move quickly and the core element or the lead element is the Spearhead Force which can move within a couple of days.

Moreover we are establishing eight small headquarters or NFIUs in eight eastern allied countries and these headquarters are crucial both when it comes to planning, when it comes to organizing exercises but not least helping in reinforcements if needed. And then we will make decisions tomorrow to further increase our presence in the eastern part of the alliance and also to increase our defence and deterrence posture by this combination of forward presence and ability to reinforce if needed.

And in this context the US announcements, announcement is so important, because the, to increase the funding for the European Reassurance Initiative is of great importance because it increases the funding for US presence in the eastern part of the alliance but also US presence in the rest of Europe and the ability to invest in, in pre-positioning, in infrastructure and other important capabilities which are important for the deterrence and the defence posture of the alliance.

So what we are doing is actually adapting in a defensive proportionate way to a more challenging security environment and, and that's a great sign of that NATO's commitment to collective defence is unwavering.

OANA LUNGESCU: Wall Street Journal.

Q: Do you hope that the US contribution will spur allies to increase their contributions, specifically into a NATO force in Eastern Europe? And why, and if you could also talk about your efforts to have a dialogue with Russia, where does that stand in terms of having actual conversations between NATO and Russia at this point?

JENS STOLTENBERG: The US is showing leadership and I think it's a very important decision. This is actually a plan that requests a budget which is now going to be decided in the Congress but at least the budget request is something I welcome very much and it shows strong US leadership. I think this is also important because it's a signal to European NATO allies that they have to, also to step up.

And they're actually doing that because we see now that more and more NATO allies in Europe are also increasing their defence investments and 2015 was the first year after many years of substantial cuts in defence spending where we saw at least that the cuts practically stopped. And as a first step this is an important step but of course the European allies have to do more but to stop the cuts is at least a first step towards increased defence spending in the years to follow.

Then the dialogue. Well as I have stated many times there is no contradiction between strong defence and political dialogue. Actually I believe very much that it is the opposite, that as long as we are firm, predictable and strong we can also engage with Russia in political dialogue. We don't seek confrontation with Russia. We don't seek a new Cold War, actually we want to avoid a new Cold War and that's the reason why what we do is proportionate and defensive

and that's also the reason why we continue to strive for a more constructive and cooperative relationship with Russia.

And that's also the reason why we have kept channels for political dialogue open and we meet with Russia in different formats on different levels because we believe that we need political dialogue, we need transparency, we need predictability and I think also that increased military presence along the borders just increases the need to focus on risk reductions, transparency and predictability to avoid incidents, accidents. For instance the downing of the Russian plane which violated Turkish airspace just illustrates how dangerous this can be and we have to avoid that kind of accidents and incidents and also to make sure that if they happen prevent that they spiral out of control and create really dangerous situations.

OANA LUNGESCU: Bloomberg.

Q: Jim Neuger from Bloomberg. What possibility do you see for a naval, a NATO naval mission in the eastern Mediterranean to monitor the refugee flows and perhaps go after traffickers? What will you, are in favour of this? At the Defence Ministers meeting what do you see as the possible risks and how quickly could it be up and running?

JENS STOLTENBERG: I spoke this morning with the Turkish Defence Minister and he informed me about that he will raise this issue at the ministerial meeting which starts tomorrow.

I also spoke with the German Defence Minister and she also then informed me about the talks that took place yesterday in Ankara when Chancellor Merkel visited Ankara. And I expect that the Turkish Minister will provide us with more details when we meet tomorrow and that the Ministers will address this issue because the migrant crisis, the refugee and migrant crisis, is something which is of great concern for all of us and therefore

I think that we will take very seriously a request from Turkey and other allies to look into what NATO can do to help them cope with and deal with the crisis and, and, and all the challenges they face at least or not least in Turkey. NATO decided at the end of last year on a tailored package of assurance measures for Turkey.

That package includes air surveillance or AWACS, air policing, maritime, increased maritime, military maritime presence in the eastern Mediterranean and other military capabilities. We will, I expect the Ministers to discuss the request from Turkey and then, and then to agree how we can follow up but we have to meet tomorrow and start the discussions before I can give you any more details about possible conclusions.

OANA LUNGESCU: We had, yeah, we can go maybe to the front row here.

Q: Thank you very much. General Secretary when do you expect the new Russia NATO summit take place? Or just some kind of a meeting and does the deployment of Very High

Readiness Joint Task Force goes as it's planned? Thank you.

OANA LUNGESCU: Could you please introduce yourself?

Q: Oh sorry. Mikhail Korostikov of Russia Kommersant Newspaper.

JENS STOLTENBERG: The, the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan which also includes the, the establishment of a Spearhead Force or a VJTF Force is, is on track and its going as planned. And I actually saw this new force being deployed in Poland in an exercise last summer.

So that's in place and we are moving on and, and we are on track. And then on the meeting with the NATO Russia Council, well we are exploring and looking into the possibilities of convening a new meeting in the NATO-Russia Council and I think this is one platform for political engagement with Russia. We have never suspended the political dialogue with Russia; we have continued to have a political dialogue with Russia.

Russia is our biggest neighbour and I think that dialogue is important. Especially when times are difficult as they are now. So we have met with the Russian Ambassador here at NATO, I have met with Minister Lavrov, we have met in different formats and we are now looking into whether we can convene a new meeting of the NATO-Russia Council.

OANA LUNGESCU: Süddeutsche Zeitung.

Q: Daniel Brὸssler, Süddeutsche Zeitung. Secretary General would you say that the Russian airstrikes in Syria are something that would make intensifying the dialogue with Russia more difficult and are those airstrikes in a way a challenge to NATO?

JENS STOLTENBERG: The Russian airstrikes in Syria are undermining the efforts to find a political solution and that is of course of great concern for all of us. Because we have seen the horrific suffering, all the killings, all the violence in Syria over many years and this has to end.

And therefore we need a political solution, we need a political transition, we need a ceasefire. And this was very much underlined in the UN Security Resolution which was agreed last December before Christmas. And in that resolution also the UN Security Council calls for an immediate end of the bombing of civilian targets. In particular with indiscriminate weapons as, as airstrikes against civilian targets.

So the Russian intense bombardment against Aleppo and other targets in Syria is undermining the efforts to reach a political agreement, to be able to sit down at the negotiation table and therefore I call on calm de-escalation and that all parties now contribute to a solution where we're able to find a negotiated peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria.

OANA LUNGESCU: Al-Arabiya just behind, just behind, thank you.

Q: Secretary General. Nourredine Fridhi from Al-Arabiya News Channel. Some original actors around Syria may send ground troops to fight Daesh, this is one year and a half bombardment. Would you see it as the right option for the time being? And what could be the NATO attitude since Turkey will be involved in a way or another if this scenario will come to be implemented? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: All NATO allies are part of the coalition fighting ISIL but NATO as an alliance is not part of the coalition, but what NATO does is that we provide support because we build capacity in the region. We do what we call defence capacity building in Jordan. Helping them to stabilize their own country and to increase their ability to fight terror.

We will soon start training of Iraqi officers and of course NATO training of Iraqi officers is also contribution to the fight again ISIL because it will increase the ability of Iraq to stabilize their own country and to defend themselves. And we also work with other countries in the region. So I very much believe that what we should do, both as NATO but of course also as support to the efforts of the coalition, is to build local capacity.

To train local forces and troops and to support governments in the region to enable them to fight ISIL and to fight terror.

And I think very much or I believe strongly that this in the long run, it's a better solution than the deployment of combat forces from outside the region. So that's what NATO is doing now. For instance in Afghanistan, which is also connected to this fight, where we have ended our combat operation but where NATO continues to train, assist and advise the Afghan forces to enable them to fight terror and to stabilize their own country.

So this thinking of training local forces, projecting stability without deploying our own combat forces I very much believe in the long run is a more sustainable solution and a path we should follow.

OANA LUNGESCU: Georgian TV, first row. Lady, thank you.

Q: Georgian TV Maestro, Sophio Makatsaria.. Mr. Secretary General, people in Georgia believe that our country has a chance to be member of NATO without action plan, membership action plan. Is it true meaning or not?

JENS STOLTENBERG: So Georgia has all the practical tools it needs to prepare itself for membership. You have the Annual National Program, you have the NATO-Georgia Commission and you have the substantial package and we are now moving on and we are moving forward and we are implementing the different elements of the comprehensive package we agreed on for Georgia at our last summit in Wales in 2014.

And all of these practical tools are used every day to prepare Georgia for membership and you are moving closer to NATO. The membership action plan is a political status granted by

allies on the basis of consensus. Therefore before Georgia is able to join NATO there must be a consensus decision on the membership action plan.

But what I welcome is that you are making progress, you are implementing your reforms and we will meet in the NATO-Georgia Commission during this defence ministerial meeting and we will be then updated on the progress you are making and we will also then address how NATO can continue to support and cooperate with Georgia,

OANA LUNGESCU: UNIAN, third row please..

Q: UNIAN, Vitaly Saienko. Mr. General Secretary, my question relates to Ukraine and in particular on enhancing military cooperation between NATO and Ukraine. As all we know during the ministerial meetings, we don't have NATO- Ukrainian Commission. Right and my question is does it mean that question of Ukraine is less important topic right now on the agenda of the alliance? Or is it an indication that can somehow weakened NATO position in the face of Russian aggression on eastern Ukraine. Thanks.

JENS STOLTENBERG: Ukraine is on top of our agenda and Ukraine is something which we are very focused on and we continue to support Ukraine. We provide political support for Ukraine, we provide practical support for Ukraine, we provide practical support both as an alliance with different trust funds, where we help Ukraine with command and control logistics and many other areas. But in addition to that NATO allies provide training and help and support for Ukraine.

And we will continue to support Ukraine politically and practically. Then we have had many meetings in the NATO-Ukraine Commission but we are don't, but we are not able to have commission meetings on all our ministerials.

We had a NATO-Ukraine Commission meeting as of just last fall, we will have it again I'm certain, but we, we are not in a position where we can have all the different commissions we have established at all our ministerials. I met with, I met with President Poroshenko recently, we will meet again and we will continue to provide strong support for Ukraine.

OANA LUNGESCU: Lady over there.

Q: My name is Alexia KOSIONI from Mega from Greece. You mentioned earlier that you spoke on the phone with the German and with the Turkish Minister of Defence regarding the involvement of NATO in monitoring the refugee flows. Will that involvement of NATO be focused only on the Turkish territorial waters or it will involve other, other areas too? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: I think it is important to underline that we have not made any decisions. I have received two phone calls and I have listened very carefully to what the ministers have told me and also what they told me about the discussions in Ankara yesterday.

Now this has to be discussed among 28 allies at the meeting tomorrow and I expect them to do so and there we will also of course get more details, we will listen to the Turkish Defence Minister update us on his request but of course we will also listen to other ministers coming from other allied countries and they can share with us their assessments and their analysis and then we can have an open discussion among 28 allies on the question of how NATO can support Turkey but also other allies if they so want in coping with the migrant and refugee crisis.

But again this is something we will discuss among 28 allies tomorrow and then we will have more details about both the needs and the possibility follow up, possible follow up from NATO.

OANA LUNGESCU: Gentleman over there.

Q: Volodymyr Runets from Channel 24, Ukraine. Mr. Secretary General we've heard a lot there this no military solution to what's going on in the Eastern Ukraine and a lot of words have been said about facilitating dialogue with Russia but latest reports from the frontlines in Ukraine show again that it, it's a risky thing to talk to Russia and trust to what it has said. What will be the crossing point for Russian aggression in Ukraine for NATO to interfere if it will? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: First of all I think it's very important to understand that the fact that we have political dialogue with Russia doesn't mean that we are going back to business as usual. We, we have implemented the biggest reinforcement to our collective defence since the end of the Cold War.

So we have responded in a very firm and, and committed way as an alliance which is showing unity and strength by implementing this strong boost to our collective defence and the increased presence in the eastern part of the alliance. What we are doing when it comes to Ukraine is that we continue as I said to support Ukraine, deliver practical support, NATO allies helps Ukraine with the training and NATO provides different kinds of support through our different trust funds. Moreover we give strong political support for Ukraine, their independence, their territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine but of course we then also support the efforts to find and to implement a negotiated peaceful solution to the conflict in Ukraine.

And therefore I think so, it is so extremely important that the Minsk Agreements are fully implemented meaning a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons and not least that the international monitors have full access so they can monitor and make sure that the agreement is fully implemented. And that's what we are doing, we will continue to do so and we will do so in close cooperation with the Government of Ukraine.

OANA LUNGESCU: At the back there.

Q: Christopher Ziedler, Die Tagesspiegel Germany. Secretary General two questions if I may. You mentioned the reassurance measures for Turkey. Could you tell us how long it would take to give them a new operational task if ministers would agree to respond to the German Turkish request tomorrow? And secondly concerning the US request for the AWACS, you said you expected the allies to support the coalition fight against ISIL, would you say there's a military necessity for the AWACS deployment? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: NATO is already supporting the efforts of the coalition in the way that we are doing or conducting activities in the region which are of importance for the fight against ISIL and, and ISIL and international terror. We do defence capacity building in Jordan, we work with a country like Tunisia, we are now working on for instance special operation forces intelligence and we will soon start training of Iraqi officers and of course when NATO does training of Iraqi officers that, that's directly linked to the fight against ISIL because it strengthens Iraq's ability to defend itself and to stabilize its own country by fighting ISIL. So NATO already provides support to the efforts to fight ISIL.

What we now are going to look into is whether we will also provide additional support by providing AWACS to backfill national capabilities and thereby increasing the ability of the coalition to conduct airstrikes against ISIL. This will be addressed at our meeting tomorrow and I think it will be wrong if I start to prejudge the outcome but this is a US request and we will address it tomorrow and then agree on how we follow up. The other question was about?

Q: Reassurance measures, Turkey…

JENS STOLTENBERG: Yeah so we agreed on a package of many different kinds of reassurance measures for Turkey. Spain agreed to maintain its patriot batteries in Turkey which augment the air defences of Turkey. We have agreed on maritime patrol aircrafts on increased maritime or naval presence in the eastern part of the Mediterranean.

AWACS planes, NATO AWACS planes flying over Turkey and also enhanced air policing and also more ISR or intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance. So we have these measures in place, we have the capabilities but I think it's wrong if I start to speculate whether we will change the scale and the scope on this related to the request coming from Turkey.

We will now sit down, listen, discuss with allies, with all allies which are in different ways involved and then agree on how we do the follow up and I think we all are concerned, we all see the need to manage and to, and to tackle the human tragedy but also the many problems which are linked to the refugee and migrant crisis we see in Europe.

OANA LUNGESCU: We're fast running out of time. I know there's lots of questions, we'll try to take maybe two very quick questions. We'll go with the lady over there.

Q: Compact Magazine, Germany. Thank you very much. If there is a decision during these two days regarding the AWACS missions, will, could you imagine that there will be any

coordination with Russia regarding the airstrikes? And if it is decided what would be the chain of command for these AWACS missions? Thank you very much.

JENS STOLTENBERG: I think it is important to understand that it's not NATO that is going to go in in any kind of combat role. All NATO allies are part of the coalition, many of them conduct airstrikes against ISIL but it's not a question of NATO going into that role.

The thing we are discussing is whether NATO will provide AWACS but we will do that by backfilling national capabilities so that can free other capabilities so they can then conduct their, so also to increase their presence and providing the coalition with information which is important for their efforts to fight ISIL. So everything related to the chain of command is something which is dealt with by the coalition when it comes to conducting airstrikes.

And Germany is part of the coalition, the United States is part of the coalition and this is a request then from the United States and we are looking into how we can answer that request and it will be addressed at our meeting tomorrow.

OANA LUNGESCU: Gentleman over here, I'm sorry we don't have the time, thank you.

Q: Thank you. Arsen Tsymbaliuk, Fifth Channel of Ukraine. Mr. Secretary General several days ago several media especially the Daily Telegraph reported that British Forces in Jordan will conduct military drills and especially will practice actions in the scenario of aggression from the east and even confrontation Russia and NATO confrontation and in deploying forces to Ukraine. Do you confirm this information? And maybe you have some details?

JENS STOLTENBERG: This is a bilateral thing which you have to ask the United Kingdom about. I'm not able to provide any more details about that. In general what I can say is that of course NATO … NATO forces and NATO allies we are exercising all the time. We are exercising many different kinds of scenarios and many, and also our ability to respond to many different kinds of, types of threats.

So for instance we had a big or large, we had the Trident Juncture exercise last year which was the biggest exercise in many years for NATO and there we exercised many different kinds of scenarios. So it's not a new thing that we are exercising how to defend NATO allies and to make sure that we are able to respond to all kinds of threats against any NATO ally.

OANA LUNGESCU: We'll have more opportunities to ask questions tomorrow and the day after and that concludes today's press conference. Many thanks.

JENS STOLTENBERG: Thank you so much, see you later.

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