North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Monthly Press Conference

by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen
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Good afternoon.

Earlier this month, I visited Afghanistan. I met senior Afghan leaders in Kabul, including President Karzai. And I visited the Helmand province and met our troops.

I have been to Helmand several times over the last six years. What I saw on this occasion was a significant shift.

The Afghan army and police are in charge of the security for three quarters of the province. They are already conducting nearly all security operations. ISAF's role has already shifted to training, advising and assisting.

C'est le principe même de la transition : les forces afghanes passent au premier plan. Et relèvent le défi d'assurer la sécurité.

Il s'agit d'inverser l'équilibre entre la FIAS et les forces afghanes. Et dans le Helmand, ce changement a déjà eu lieu.

D'ici à moins de deux ans maintenant, les Afghans assumeront la pleine responsabilité de la sécurité de leur pays. Entretemps, nous devons consolider les progrès que nous avons accomplis.

The Afghan forces have already shown that they can do the job. In places like Helmand, they are doing the job. Now the challenge is to make sure that they can keep on doing the job.

That means providing the training they need in leadership. And in specialised skills such as logistics, management and maintenance.

The next two years will not be easy. There will be hard fighting. There will be casualties. And there may be setbacks.

But already, Afghanistan's forces are stronger than they have been at any other moment in history. They will continue to grow stronger, more effective and more experienced. And we are determined to support them through 2014, and beyond.

Helmand is also a province that has seen real change in its local governance. Elected district councils are investing in development, using donor funds channeled through the central

government. The governor in Helmand told me that security was his priority and that the people in Helmand have increasing confidence in their army and police.

So this is the Afghan people's chance to take control of security. And to take control of their destiny. I believe, and the Afghans with whom I spoke believe, that this is a chance which they must seize.

That is a message which I also heard from a group of young Afghan leaders – men and women – whom I met in Kabul.

They were from different parts of the country. They came from different backgrounds, ethnic groups and professions. They spanned the public and private sectors. They all belonged to a younger generation – the Afghan men and women of today who are helping shape the Afghanistan of tomorrow.

They are united by energy and determination.

By a long-term vision of Afghanistan as a democratic and stable country.

By a commitment to the constitution. To the country. And to each other.

They told me this: Afghanistan is our country. It is our responsibility.

That sense of responsibility is vital for the future.

A new generation has emerged in Afghanistan. This young generation wants a new way of life, not a return to the dark days of the past. The Afghan people has tasted freedom and seen which progress it can bring. So in the future, the enemies of Afghanistan must not only fight a strong Afghan army. They will also have to fight the aspirations of the Afghan people towards freedom, peace and prosperity.

Afghanistan faces many challenges beyond security, which perhaps are even greater than security: challenges such as governance, development, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights and freedoms – including women's rights and press freedom.

Tackling those challenges will demand work. Commitment. And support from the international community. Not just NATO.

Above all, it will demand engagement by the Afghan people themselves – first and foremost, during the presidential elections next year. It will be vital that those elections are inclusive, and that the process and the outcome are acceptable to the Afghan people.

That will be the best way to maintain stability within Afghanistan, and support within the international community.

Because the story of transition is the story of the Afghans taking their country back into their own hands.

Taking responsibility.

That is what we need to see in the next two years. And, after my meetings in Kabul and Helmand, it is what I believe that we will see.

It will not be easy. But it can be done. And together, we must see that it is done.

And with that, I'm ready to take your questions.

OANA LUNGESCU (NATO Spokesperson): Kuwait News Agency.

Q: Nawab Khan from the Kuwait News Agency. Mr. Secretary General, last week, two important EU member States, France and UK, which are all members of NATO, called for the lifting of the arms embargo on Syria. What is NATO's position on this lifting of arms embargo? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN (NATO Secretary General) : This issue is a European Union question. And I speak on behalf of NATO ... as Secretary General of NATO, I have no intention whatsoever to interfere with this discussion within the European Union.

NATO's mission is clear: it is to ensure effective defence and protection of NATO Allies, in this case of the Turkish population and Turkish territory. And this is the reason why we have decided to deploy Patriot missiles to Turkey to ensure such effective defence and protection of the Turkish people and territory. And I'm sure that the decision to deploy these Patriot missiles has also contributed to de-escalate the situation along the Syrian-Turkish border. And that's our core mission.

OANA LUNGESCU: Radio Free Europe.

Q: Rikard Jozwiak, Radio Free Europe. The US recently announced that they will scrap the fourth phase of the Defence Missile plans they have in Europe. Do you think that this will help NATO's relations with Russia now? And will you go to Russia, Moscow, anytime soon to discuss these things?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First of all, let me stress that the US decision has nothing to do with Russia. And I would like to stress three points in relation to the US announcement. Firstly, that Secretary Hagel as he announced this decision also stressed the strong and continued commitment of the US to the NATO missile defence. That commitment remains “iron-clad” as Secretary Hagel expressed it.

Secondly, as you will recall, the development of the NATO missile defence system is a so-called "phased adaptive approach" in four phases. And phases one through three will be implemented including sites in Poland and Romania. And these three phases that will be

implemented will provide coverage of all European NATO populations and territory, as planned by 2018. And thirdly, and consequently, the Europeans will see no difference in their missile defence. And there will be exactly the same coverage of NATO-Europe as in the original plan. I think these three points are very important to emphasize.

We have invited Russia to cooperate on missile defence. This invitation still stands. Let me stress that the NATO missile defence system is not directed against Russia. And both NATO countries and Russia would benefit from such cooperation. So I hope Russia will take our invitation seriously. We are sincere about cooperation with Russia on missile defence. We hope that Russia will accept the invitation to develop such missile defence cooperation.

Finally, as regards an invitation to visit Moscow, the Russians have renewed the invitation to visit Russia. We are now considering dates and schedules. So hopefully, at a time that is convenient for all parties, we will have an opportunity to continue our political dialogue.

OANA LUNGESCU: NPR.

Q: Teri Schultz with National Public Radio and CBS News. The recent... I would say harsher rhetoric between President Karzai and the US can't just be dismissed as a bilateral issue when the US is obviously the largest force in Afghanistan. Are you concerned by this seemingly... seeming deterioration, at least publicly in the relationship with President Karzai's harshening rhetoric?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Obviously, I'm concerned because the fact is that a lot of efforts have been invested in helping Afghanistan to peace, prosperity and ensure security for the Afghan people. And troops from 50 ISAF nations have sacrificed in order to bring progress to Afghanistan and prevent the country from, once again, becoming a safe haven for terrorists.

As I mentioned in my introduction, there is still a lot of work to do. But the fact is that we have achieved a lot of progress. And I think that should be acknowledged by the Afghan authorities. And obviously, I reject the idea that was publicly launched by President Karzai that one way or the other there is a so-called collusion between NATO, ISAF, US and the Taliban. It's an absolutely ridiculous idea. And I've also taken note of the fact that President Karzai, afterwards, has modified some of his statements and stressed that his remarks were meant to help reform, not destroy, the relationship. He stressed that we want good relations and friendship with America. But the relationship must be between two independent nations.

We fully respect the sovereignty of Afghanistan. But we would also expect acknowledgment from the Afghan side that we have actually invested a lot in blood and treasure in helping President Karzai's country to move forward.

OANA LUNGESCU: Al-Hayat TV.

Q: Oui, Monsieur le Secrétaire-Général, j'ai deux questions: une question concernant la Syrie. L'opposition syrienne se réunit en fin de cette semaine en Turquie et l'un des leaders de l'opposition syrienne, il envisage de demander au Conseil de sécurité d'instaurer une force internationale au niveau de la frontière turque-syrienne. Jusqu'où l'OTAN est-il prêt à participer à cette question?

Deuxième question. Lors de votre meeting avec le président Karzai, est-il vrai que le président Karzai a demandé si les troupes de l'OTAN peuvent encore rester en Afghanistan au-delà de 2014? Il dit que l'armée afghane n'est pas encore prête pour instaurer la sécurité et la stabilité en Afghanistan.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Premièrement, en ce qui concerne une force internationale de l'ONU, nous n'avons pas discuté ce sujet au sein de l'OTAN. Comme vous le savez, nous avons déployé des missiles Patriot en Turquie. Et à mon avis, c'est suffisant d'assurer la défense et la protection de la population turque et le territoire turc. À mon avis, il n'est pas nécessaire de déployer une force internationale au terrain.

En ce qui concerne notre mission après... post 2014 et le cadre légal, l'Afghanistan est un pays souverain. Et nous tenons des consultations avec les autorités afghanes au sujet des modalités détaillées de la mission post 2014. Pour l'instant, les pays alliés et partenaires sont toujours en train de débattre des détails de notre future mission. Toutefois, d'un point de vue pratique, nous espérons qu'un seul accord couvrira l'ensemble de la mission dirigée par l'OTAN.

OANA LUNGESCU: ARD.

Q: (Inaudible) ARD, German Public Radio. On Syria again, Mr. Secretary General, you said this is not a NATO issue. This is an EU issue. But some countries like mine, for example, Germany they have the fear that if the arms embargo is ending that this could lead to a kind of vicious circle that not only the rebels will get more weapons; but other sides like Russia can bring more weapons to Syria to make even Assad stronger. Do you have this concern as well?

And short additional questions. We all hear rumors about an extra summit in June. Could you tell us maybe more details about that? And maybe could this be a summit together with the Russians; because they will be at the G8 Summit in Northern Ireland as well? Thanks.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Firstly, on Syria and the arms embargo, I have said what I can say on that. I mean, it's not NATO business. And I'm not going to interfere with the EU discussions. And I stick with that.

As far as possible leaders' meeting or summit is concerned, let me stress no decision has been made. It is an idea that has been floated, not least because mid-2013 will represent what we call a milestone in Afghanistan; because by mid-2013 we will have handed over the

whole of Afghanistan to lead Afghan responsibility. And it's... I mean a leaders' meeting by mid-2013 might be an occasion to mark that important milestone; plus make decisions as regards the post-2014 mission. But again, no decision has been made yet. It's an idea that is under consideration. And that's what can be said about it at this stage.

OANA LUNGESCU: Reuters.

Q: Adrian Croft from Reuters. Secretary General, how concerned were you by Northern Korea's threat earlier in the month that it could stage a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the US? And is NATO going to take any measures in response to that, apart the missile.... anti-missile measure that was announced by the US Defence Secretary last week, thanks?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: No. We are not considering further steps. But obviously, we are very much concerned about what we have seen from North Korea. The North Korean steps, their actions have been broadly condemned, not only by NATO; but by the whole of the international community, including, by the way, China. So the North Korean regime is as isolated as ever.

Obviously, it's a matter of concern. And I understand very well that the US and others take steps to ensure effective defence and protection of their populations.

OANA LUNGESCU: One last question over there.

Q: Philippe Regnier, Le Soir. Sur le bouclier anti-missile à nouveau. S'il n'y avait que la phase un, deux et trois, la protection parfaite de la population des territoires européens est assurée et donc qu'il n'y a aucune différence, à quoi servait la phase quatre? Et qu'est-ce qui va changer? Ce n'est pas clair pour moi.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Comme l'a déclaré M. Hagel, l'engagement des États-Unis en faveur de la défense anti-missile de l'OTAN en Europe est inébranlable. Monsieur Hagel a également indiqué clairement qu'il n'y avait pas de changement de plan pour les trois premières phases de déploiement de défense anti-missile des États-Unis en Europe. Et ces déploiements permettront d'assurer la couverture du territoire et des populations de tous les pays européens de l'Alliance, comme prévu... comme prévu. Et laissez-moi souligner les plans de la défense anti-missile de l'OTAN ne sont ni conçus ni dirigés contre la Russie. Techniquement parlant, ils ne permettront pas d'entamer le potentiel de dissuasion de la Russie. Et notre offre de coopération avec la Russie en matière de défense anti-missile reste valable. Et je n'en doute pas, la Russie verra les avantages qu'il y a à coopérer et saisira cette occasion. Et le nouveau projet des États-Unis ne gênera pas cette évaluation.

OANA LUNGESCU: Merci beaucoup. Thank you very much. And of course, the Secretary General will be back at the main entrance with the Estonian President Mr. Ilves in just under an hour from now. Thank you.

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