North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

NATO Secretary General's roundtable with international journalists

on the margins of the Munich Security Conference
2017-02-17

(As delivered)

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: We've just finished a series of bilateral meetings, they were all constructive and good and I think it underlines the importance of the Munich Security Conference as a platform for political dialogue and it's always important but it's particularly important in times like this with more turmoil and more unpredictability than we had before. So I think actually that I will stop there, just saying that I'm ready to take some questions.

Q1: Unian, Irina Somer: did you discuss a last communication from Washington to Moscow that Crimea must be given back to Ukraine and did you hear any changes in the Russian rhetoric?

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: My meeting with Minister Lavrov was part of our political dialogue with Russia and we have met several times, including at the Munich Security Conference last year. We addressed a wide range of different issues, we of course discussed Ukraine and there are well known disagreements between NATO and Russia. I underlined the importance of the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements that NATO supports the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine and I also underlined the importance for the OSCE monitors to have full access to be able to monitor the situation in eastern Ukraine. Then we addressed transparency, risk reduction, predictability related to military activities with more military presence in Europe, close to our borders. There is an increased need for predictability, transparency related to exercises and military activity. We have seen just yesterday the passing of an American ship in the Black Sea, unsafe, and unprofessional behavior of Russian planes and we need to avoid these kinds of incidents and if they happen make sure that they don't spiral out of control. We are also working on air safety in the Baltic Sea, we welcome a meeting which will soon take place in Helsinki with experts addressing how we can improve air safety in the Baltic Sea. And we also addressed Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. And in terms of Afghanistan, I would just like to underline that NATO will continue to support the unity government and to help to train the Afghan forces.

Q2: Reuters, Robin Emmott: Did you notice any change in tone with Minister Lavrov, it seems like we could be having the same press conference as a year ago with the same kind of

language, the same kind of message, the same kind of problems.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: I will say that there are well known positions from both NATO and Russia but I think it's useful to have dialogue also on issues where we have different views, like for instance Ukraine. To update and to exchange views. Then on transparency, risk reduction we have actually been able to make some progress after our meeting here last year when Minister Lavrov and I met a year ago that was actually the meeting that enabled the meeting of 3 meetings of the NATO-Russia Council. Until then we hadn't had a meeting for almost two years. So I think that the meetings with Minister Lavrov and especially the meeting I had in this place actually a year ago has proven to be productive in the way that they have enabled us to move forward on the dialogue of NATO-Russia and based on the agreements we reached last year we have been able to have 3 meetings and also to make some progress on briefings, on exercises, in December we briefed on NATO exercises, Russia briefed on Russian exercises and also we had a briefing on air safety in the Baltic Sea region in December last year, and now we had a process which is led by Finland with experts on air safety. And these are concrete outcomes of the work that we started here at the meeting a year ago and we are following up in the NATO-Russia Council. Hopefully we can make new steps following our meeting this time.

Q3: Washington Post, Michael Birnbaum: Yesterday Defense Secretary Mattis said that the US isn't ready for military cooperation with Russia, but that political discussion was a different area, and that political leaders could try to have some sort of dialogue. After your meeting today was there anything different would you say about Lavrov's approach to the discussion with the US, anything new that US leadership or NATO could see on as to pursue further dialogue?

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: Our focus was of course NATO-Russia dialogue, so we didn't go into details of the bilateral relationship US-NATO but of course US being the biggest NATO Ally of course the NATO-Russia relationship also has an impact on US-Russia relationships. And as you know what NATO has decided, and that includes the US, is to suspend all practical cooperation with Russia as a reaction to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. That decision still stands. But we have underlined that the suspension of practical cooperation does not mean that we suspend political dialogue. We were not successful, we didn't manage to convene a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council from the summer of 2014 to the spring of 2016, but now we have been able to convene 3 meetings after Lavrov and I met here last year. So we are strengthening our political dialogue with Russia, on a wide range of issues, Ukraine, military transparency, Afghanistan and today we discussed Libya and Syria and we are also looking into how we can strengthen our military alliance of communications. So there is room for dialogue and for engagement with Russia even though we continue to suspend our practical cooperation.

Q4: Wall Street Journal, Julian Barnes: Does the relationship between Russia and the West, NATO and US appear volatile to you right now, and is this sort of unpredictability where

Russia stands, where US stands, where NATO stands, is that undermining security or need it not unnecessarily.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: Before the annexation of Crimea the relationship between the West and Russia, NATO and Russia was better. We were actually developing a strategic partnership with Russia. We were for instance planning to destroy chemical weapons from Syria together. We worked together in many different areas and we had a lot of practical cooperation. After the illegal annexation of Crimea, the relationship between the West and Russia, ANTO and Russia has deteriorated and it hasn't recovered since then. And what we see is a more unpredictable more dangerous world and we see higher tensions and of course that is something that is of concern for all Allies, but that's exactly the reason why we continue to work for political dialogue, to de-escalate, to reduce tensions and to at least manage our relationship with Russia. So yes, there is more unpredictability, yes, there's more uncertainty, but that's exactly the reason why we are trying to improve our relationship with Russia and the reason why NAOT is responding with strengthening our collective defence, to make sure that NATO is ready and prepared to also respond to a more demanding security environment.

Q5: ARD, Bettina Scharkus: Just one question to something James Mattis said today, the reaching of the 2% global finance of NATO. He would like to reach this goal in one year, in this year, do you think that is realistic? Germany says it will take much more time.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: I didn't get that he said that all NATO Allies should reach it within one year, at least what NATO has agreed is to stop the cuts, to gradually increase defence spending and then to move towards the 2% within a decade. And different NATO Allies will reach that goal in different years but I expect all Allies to reach that goal within the decade, some Allies have already reached 2%, we have 5 Allies, US, UK, Poland, Estonia, Greece, that have reached the 2% target. Then Romania declared yesterday that they will meet the 2% this year and then we have countries like Lithuania, Latvia that will reach it most probably next year. So different Allies will not reach the target in the same year but I expect all Allies to move, to start to increase, to stop the cuts. And for instance Germany has first of all increased defence spending. This year defence spending in Germany has increasing by 8%,but second they have declared a willingness, I saw the Chancellor today, declared a willingness that Germany will honour its commitments, live up to the decision we had made in 2014. And on top of that the figures were presented just a couple of days ago showing the we had 3,8% real increase across Europe and Canada which is a significant increase for one year. We need of course more than one year, but we are moving in the right direction.

Q6: BILD, Hanno Kautz: There have been talks between Mr. Flynn and the Russian side, did these talks overshadow your talks to Mr. Lavrov today, did you talk about that, this context?

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: Not at all, and it's not an issue or NATO to have different positions in different NATO allied countries, we relate to those who are in charge, those who are responsible and I really appreciate the meeting with Secretary Mattis in Brussels on Wednesday and Thursday, two days this week with Defence Ministers meeting. I really thing that was an excellent meeting where Secretary Mattis expressed strong support to NATO, he was very much welcome, he's a very respected leader and we had an excellent meeting with him. Then I will meet with Vice-President Pence in Brussels at NATO on Monday and we are engaging with the new administration. I've also spoken twice with President Trump and they all convey the same message, that US remains committed to NATO, to the North Atlantic Alliance, because it is in the interest of the US to have a strong Trans-Atlantic partnership.

Q7: Al Arabiya, Noureddine Fridhi: In your discussion with Minister Lavrov, is there any room for cooperation between NATO and Russia in fighting Daesh in Iraq and Syria, as well as any kind of cooperation between Russia and NATO in Libya because as you know there is enough relation or let's say communication between Mr. Haftar and Russia without communication with Mr. Sarraj. So it's a bit complicated to understand, is it possible for you on both sides to work together towards the Libyan. And on Iraq: there is one AWACS flying since last October or November 25 flights, and there's a team of trainers inside Iraq but some are saying this is a limited role for NATO. Yesterday you spoke of an alliance against Daesh, not NATO but an alliance against Daesh, talk about a possible acceleration of this war against the organization.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: As I said we have suspended the practical cooperation with Russia but we support and NATO plays a role in the international efforts to fight terrorism. Our biggest military operation Afghanistan is about fighting terrorism, is about preventing Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for international terrorists and all NATO Allies participated in the coalition fighting Daesh, ISIL, and we have Turkey being a NATO Ally on the ground in northern Syria fighting Daesh and of course NATO provides some direct support to the coalition with AWACS and training of Iraqi officers. We train the Iraqi officers in Jordan but we have also started now to train Iraqi officers in Iraq. That's a modest scale but it's a scale of all activities, so we will now assess whether we will scale it up to training inside Iraq. But I also met today with Senator McCain and Secretary Kelly here at the MSC and one of the issues I discussed both with Senator McCain and Secretary Kelly is of course how NATO can do more in supporting the efforts to fight Daesh. That's on our agenda, part of our dialogue, and part of what we discussed with secretary Mattis but also with Secretary Kelly and McCain.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2017/02/17/nato-secretary-generals-roundtable-with-international-journalists