North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Pre-ministerial press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg
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(As delivered)

Good morning.

Over the next two days, NATO Foreign Ministers will meet and address the most pressing security challenges we are facing and how we are responding.

And first, they will discuss NATO/EU cooperation because stronger cooperation between NATO and EU is one key way to strengthen our response to a more challenging security environment. At a time when the peaceful order is being challenged in new ways, NATO and the EU need to work closer than ever before. Over the last couple of years, we have been able to create new momentum in our partnership and reach a new understanding of the importance of our cooperation. At all levels, from staff-to-staff talks, to my regular meetings with Presidents Tusk and Juncker, High Representative Federica Mogherini, and our participation at each other's ministerials and summits. We have moved step by step, in a pragmatic way which benefits all our nations, and this week, I expect we will take a significant step forward: by endorsing a package of more than 40 measures to implement the Joint Declaration which I signed together with President Tusk and President Juncker in July in Warsaw. This aims to deepen our cooperation in seven areas. Including countering hybrid and cyber threats, working together in maritime operations, and on capability development. Cooperation with the European Union is also an important way in which NATO projects stability beyond our borders.

Tomorrow we will discuss the progress we've made in boosting the capacity of our neighbours to the east and to the south, including our support to the Counter-ISIL Coalition, our training of Iraqi officers, and our new Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean.

NATO has many years of experience in projecting stability in the Western Balkans and in Afghanistan.

On Wednesday, we will meet with Afghan Foreign Minister Rabbani, to reaffirm our commitment to supporting Afghans to secure their own country, and to review Afghanistan's reforms, which are linked to continued international support. NATO's presence in Afghanistan demonstrates our long-term commitment to the fight against terrorism. It is helping to stabilise the region and stem the flow of migrants and refugees.

On Wednesday we will also hold a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission. The security situation in eastern Ukraine remains extremely serious. The ceasefire is being violated every day, sometimes hundreds of times, with explosions from equipment banned under the Minsk Agreements. That is because heavy weaponry has not been withdrawn and only 13 percent of the equipment registered with the OSCE can currently be traced. As Ukraine continues to face Russia's aggressive actions, NATO stands by Ukraine with strong political and strong practical support.

This week's meeting of foreign ministers is an important building block for our summit next year, here in Brussels. I look forward to welcoming the new US President Donald Trump to the summit, and to working with him and his national security team as NATO continues to adapt to the challenges we face.

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

Moderator: We will start Ansa over there.

Q: Good morning Mister Secretary General. You spoke about cooperation between the EU and NATO and the changing of scenario in this last two years. Today we have a major changes with Premier Renzi's resignation after he lost the referendum on constitutional reform. What are the implications of this and do you think that Italy can face a switch in its' posture towards NATO since the opposition have a different approach and social network today in Russia already claim Putin's victory on Italian referendum.

Jens Stoltenberg (NATO Secretary General): The outcome of the referendum in Italy is, the decision of the Italian people, NATO is the alliance of 28 democracies and the referendum in Italy is part of the democratic process. The outcome of the referendum will not in any way change Italy's position in NATO. NATO will remain a committed and key ally for the alliance and, and ah, Italy plays a key role in many different ways in NATO and I look forward to continuing to work with Italy also in the future. I also appreciated very much to work with Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and it has been a good thing to work with him addressing both the challenges NATO faces to the South, addressing the challenges we see in North Africa and the Middle East, but also in adapting to the way NATO responds to a more assertive Russia in the East. But this is an Italian decision, part of the democratic process and it will not change Italy's position in NATO.

Moderator: Europa Press over there.

Europa Press Reporter: Thank you Secretary General. Do we have any more clarity when we will finally have the Summit, the President-Elect Trump's first Summit with NATO? Was it more thinking of March or May? Is there any more clarity and we hear that maybe the Summit as such doesn't take place in NATO premises that it might take place in downtown Brussels? Is there any clarity on this thank you?

Jens Stoltenberg: At our Summit in Warsaw in July of this year we decided to hold a new Summit 2017. Then Allies, the nations are now discussing the exact date and the topics that are going to be addressed and discussed at the Summit. So it's too early to say anything in detail when it comes to the date and the topics, that's something we will come back to when we have more conclusions to share with you. But the important thing is that we are going to have a Summit and especially in times with more uncertainty and more unpredictable security environment, I think it is important that we have Summits where we gather all the heads of state and government from the whole Alliance, from Europe and from North America to use the Summits to, to show the strength of the Trans-Atlantic bond and of the Alliance and I look forward to welcome the new U.S. President Donald Trump to the Summit here in Brussels and to address with him and the other leaders, how NATO respond, how NATO in the best way responds, to the new more security and more challenging security environment.

Moderator: The lady over here second row.

Q: Hello from Montenegro. (Inaudible). Do you expect that the new Montenegrin government will stay on course on NATO accession process and do you expect that NATO, that Montenegro will be a member of Alliance, maybe early spring of next year thanks?

Jens Stoltenberg: I expect and I count on the new government in Montenegro will stay on course and I have met the new Prime Minister in his previous position. So I am absolutely certain that he will continue to make sure that Montenegro stay on course and continue to be committed to joining NATO. I am not able to tell you exactly when Montenegro will become a full member. As you know at our last foreign ministerial meeting we signed the accession protocol with Montenegro and the time that has passed since then we have started the process of ratifying the accession protocol in the different parliaments of the 28 NATO Allies. So far 14 Allies ratified the, the access protocol and we expect other allies to ratify it soon and I expect all allies to ratify not within too long a time, but with respect to all the different parliaments, I think it's not right if I give you an exact date because this is up to the different national parliaments to make the final decision of them to ratify.

Moderator: Okay. We will go over there. Please go to the microphone.

Q: The past season was one of the deadliest seasons for the Afghan security forces and the number of attacks actually at this point, the Taliban are taking more territory under their control and the big attack on the German Consulate in Mazar actually shows the extent of their reach to main cities in Afghanistan. So if NATO is not going to change its combat role on Afghanistan how do you see the Afghan security forces coping with the challenges when the Taliban carry out their Spring offences in the coming year?

Jens Stoltenberg: I would like to commend the Afghan Forces for their courage and their professionalism they have showed. We have to remember that, ah, since 2015 they have been in full responsibility for the security in Afghanistan themselves. NATO has ended our combat operations, what we do now is to help support, to train and to advise the Afghan

Forces, but they are on the front line, they are responsible for security in their own country and it is actually quite impressive that together we have been able to build up an Afghan National Army and Security Forces, so around 350,000 troops and personnel and that they have been able to take over the responsibility.

And I think that is one of the great successes of the NATO presence in Afghanistan is that we have been able to build local forces so they can take over and we then can end our combat operation but we never thought that this was going to be an easy task. I think we all knew that this was going to be a demanding task, that violence would continue and that we will continue to face the attacks from Taliban and from all the terrorist, or from Taliban and from terrorists groups.

So that's the reason why we will continue to support the Afghan national security forces, both with training, advice and assistance, but also with funding, and some weeks ago I attended a Brussels conference where the international community decided to continue to fund Afghanistan with development aid but also support for their armed forces and police and NATO decided at our Warsaw Summit that we will both continue our presence, we will remain with around 13,000 troops in Afghanistan and we will continue to fund the Afghan National Army and Security Forces. So we are aware that it is a challenging and very difficult security environment in Afghanistan but we also see the courage and the professionalism of the Afghan forces and we are impressed by the way they are handling a difficult task.

Moderator: Radio Free Europe

Radio Free Europe: Thanks you. Mister Secretary General, U.S. President-Elect Trump has previously called Afghanistan a total and complete disaster and called for a troop pull-out from the country. Now he might have changed his mind or he mind not have done so. My question to you is that how will such remarks impact the overall NATO commitments towards Afghanistan under Mr. Trump's presidency next year, thank you?

Jens Stoltenberg: As I said we will have a Summit next year, here, in Brussels. I am looking forward to meet the new President Donald Trump here to discuss a wide range of issues. I guess we will also have ample opportunity to discuss Afghanistan which is NATO's biggest military operation. We have been there for many, many years. So I think it will be an issue which will, in one way or another, will also be addressed at the upcoming Summit with then the new President Trump being part of that discussion. We have seen reports from the phone call that took place between President-Elect Trump and President Ghani, some days ago and according to those reports President-Elect Trump expressed his commitment to Afghanistan and to continue support for Afghanistan. So I am confident that also the new administration, the new U.S. administration will continue to support Afghanistan and continue to be part of the NATO efforts to provide practical and political support, train, assist and advice the Afghan Forces.

Moderator: Aviation Weekly first row here.

Nick Fiorenza (Aviation Weekly): Nick Fiorenza. On this Summit, a timing question. The EU wants to meet Trump as soon as possible. Do you foresee the possibility that the EU might have a Summit before NATO and wouldn't it be better in fact that, there be a meeting with NATO, maybe even a back-to-back meeting with EU, wouldn't that be better for Trans-Atlantic bond and then as far as the ministerial is concerned are you actually discussing the Summit timing or is it not on the agenda yet?

Jens Stoltenberg: The most important outcome of the foreign ministerial meeting that starts tomorrow, will be the package on stronger NATO- EU cooperation because we strongly believe that stronger NATO-EU cooperation is key for addressing many different challenges. So, I am absolutely certain that we will also find a way to coordinate a NATO Summit, with a US-EU meeting, when President, the new President Trump arrives in Europe. Exactly how that is going to be done, whether it's going to be back-to-back or whatever, that's too early. So I am not really concerned about, as you say the challenge related to the scheduling. We will find ways to sort that. So, so we just have to wait a bit because we have also to remember, we have to remember that he is still President-Elect and it's the 20th of January when he takes over and then the new administration is in place. So we will continue work with, or to have contacts with, the transition team but I guess that final decision and so on has to wait until we have a new administration in place.

Moderator: The Ukrainian News Agency Union.

Ukrainian News Agency Union: Here. (Inaudible), Ukrainian News Agency Union. Secretary General last week we had here in HQ, a Ukrainian delegation from the Verkhovna Rada (sp?) who said that Ukraine need deeper and more cooperation with NATO, like for example, in the frame of enhanced cooperation program. What will be your reaction on this and will this issue be on the agenda of NATO Ukraine Commission and what exactly you would like to discuss at the meeting in Wednesday thank you?

Jens Stoltenberg: We are in the process of strengthening the cooperation with Ukraine because we have agreed on an extensive package which includes many different kinds of measures and efforts to strengthen the political and the practical support for Ukraine. We will have a NATO Ukraine Commission meeting on Wednesday, and their Foreign Minister Klimlin will update us on the situation, on the security challenges and I also expect many Allies and also the reform efforts, and I also expect many Allies to focus on the importance of reform in the Ukraine because to reform and to modernize government institutions in general but for NATO defense institutions in particular, is of great importance for Ukraine to fight corruption, it's important and NATO's support for Ukraine is very much focused on reform, enabling them to strengthen their own institutions and their different defense and security institutions.

We, we are, we have the different trust funds working on everything from cyber command and control and reform, but in addition to the trust funds and the NATO presence in Kiev and Ukraine, we also urge NATO Allies to provide direct support on a bilateral basis to Ukraine

and several NATO Allies provide different kinds of support including training. So we will continue to support Ukraine, political support, practical support and we will continue to be extremely focused on the importance of full implementation of the Minsk Agreements and of course there are it is of great concern that we see so many violations of the ceasefire and of the Minsk Agreements, including that so much heavy weapon is not possible to trace and that we have seen that heavy weapons have been used in violations of the ceasefire.

Moderator: TV 2.

TV 2 Reporter: Yes Secretary General it's a question about Turkey. Erdogan has signalled that he wants to make an ever closer alliance with China and Russia instead of Europe and you have the figures saying now that more than 110,000 people have either been arrested or suspended from their jobs after the fatal coup and the latest you have more and more media reports talking about Turkey's NATO officers, that are called back to an unsecure future, and some of them are trying to seek asylum in Belgium and also in other countries. Could you please comment on those issues and tell us what kind of problems do you see in those issues regarding the NATO, to the NATO, you know, traditional values.

Jens Stoltenberg: Turkey is a key ally for different reasons but not of least because of its strategic geographical location, bordering Iraq and Syria, but also Russia and Ukraine in the North in the Black Sea and Turkey holds around 3 million refugees. So Turkey is key, both when it comes to NATO's response to a more assertive Russia but, also in managing and tackling the migrant and refugee crisis; and Turkey is key in our fight against ISIL. So, eh, Turkey is important for NATO and it's important for Europe in addressing different, different kinds of challenges and security threats and challenges.

I have visited Turkey several times also after the failed coup attempt and we have to remember that Turkey has not only suffered many terrorists attacks, but Turkey has also suffered a serious coup attempt where hundreds of people were killed and it was shocking to visit the National Assembly in Ankara, where I saw the damage caused by bombs from F-16s, bombing the National Assembly during the night of the coup with many parliamentarians inside the building and, of course, Turkey has the right to prosecute those behind the failed coup attempt. It is important that this is done in a way which is in accordance with the due rule of law.

This is something that is important for NATO, not the least because the rule of law is one of NATO's core values, and I also welcome the contact between the Council of Europe and Turkey on this issue and we have discussed the importance of the rule of law and the contact between Turkey and the European Union during my visits to Ankara and also now recently to Istanbul where the issue was also raised and in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly the importance of democracy and the rule of law being respected in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt. Regarding the Turkish officers, I can confirm that some Turkish officers have applied for asylum in some NATO countries. We have to remember that it is up to the nations

to assess and to make decisions on requests for asylum. That's not a NATO decision, but it's a decision that will be taken by the different countries where the Turkish officers have applied for asylum. Eh, yes.

Moderator: Second row.

Kuwait News Agency Reporter: (Inaudible) Kuwait News Agency. Sir will there be any discussion on possible initiatives to stop the bloodshed in Syria, especially what is happening in Aleppo, thank you?

Jens Stoltenberg: We have seen appalling, eh, human suffering in Aleppo. We have seen renewed air strikes. We have seen, eh, that civilian infrastructure, including humanitarian aid and hospitals, have been attacked and this just underlines the importance of continued efforts to try to find a political solution. That's not easy. There has been many attempts and they have not delivered peace and a cessation of hostilities in Syria but NATO will continue to support all efforts to try and find a political solution and to do that by, the first step will then have to be a ceasefire and the safe access of humanitarian aid to Aleppo and to all cities in Syria where many people are suffering. NATO is not present inside Syria. What NATO does is that we provide support for the coalition fighting ISIL and we will continue to provide support to the coalition fighting ISIL and of course Turkey, a NATO Ally bordering Syria, is also very much affected by the violence, by the fight and the migration and refugee crisis which is caused by the instability and the fight and the violence in Syria.

Moderator: Russian News Agency.

Russian News Agency Reporter: (Inaudible), Russian News Agency. Secretary General should we expect a meeting of the NATO Russia Council before the end of the year and according to the Russian site, NATO rejected its proposal to have concrete consultation on military arrangements on the flights over the Baltic Sea, if this arrangements will not be, if there will be no arrangements in this part, what other arrangements could be done in the framework of risk reductions measures that you was talking about the other day, thank you?

Jens Stoltenberg: We continue to strive for a more constructive relationship with Russia and we strongly believe that in times when tensions run high it's even more important to have dialogue, to have a change for political dialogue open, and we continue to pursue our dual track approach, with a strong defense combined with a, a dialogue and open lines of political communication with Russia. We have held two meetings of the NATO Russia Council so far this year. We are exploring with our Russian counterparts when the next meeting of the NATO Russia Council will take place and what we will discuss at such a meeting.

We look forward to continuing the important work of the NATO Russia Council, including addressing risk reduction transparency, because with more military activity and with higher tensions it's even more important to have transparency and to have mechanisms in place to avoid incidents and accidents. We saw the downing of the Russian plane over Turkey last

year and we have to do whatever we can to avoid that kind of incident and accident from happening again if they happen make sure that they don't spiral out of control. We are in dialogue with Russia also on issues related to the Baltic Sea. I would like to underline that air safety is not only about transponders and technical measures but it's also about airmanship, responsible behaviour and one of the reasons why we are exploring the possibilities for a new meeting with the NATO Russia Council is exactly to take that dialogue forward with Russia on risk reduction and transparency related to military activities.

Moderator: NPR.

NPR Reporter: Thank you Mister Secretary General. [Coughs] When we ask you about the human rights and values situation in Turkey you respond that the Council of Europe is looking into it and that Turkey is a key ally, but, given that it's such a key ally are you not concerns about the stability of the country, the fact that the officers NATO knew and worked with our now gone , except for maybe seven I think, does this not concern you also and also my colleague also asked about asked the turn of President Erdogan towards Russia and China, are you concerned that as Russia becomes more and more a concern for NATO that one of your key allies may be warming up to Moscow even more, thank you?

Jens Stoltenberg: The issue of the rule of law democracy was discussed during my last visit to Turkey, as it was also during my previous visit to Ankara. This time we met in Istanbul in connection with the meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and also during that meeting the question of rule and law and democracy was discussed and raised. So, these are issues which we discuss regularly with our Turkish counterparts and I have discussed it with President Erdogan, with Foreign Minister Cavusoglu and other political leaders but in addition to that, the direct dialogue we have also appreciate that the Council of Europe has established with Turkey because the Council of Europe is responsible for the European Convention on Human Rights and the Council of Europe has tools and mechanisms to address exactly issues related to the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights.

So I, I think that that work of the Council of Europe is important but of course it doesn't replace also the direct dialogue that we have on these issues and we saw that for instance during the meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Istanbul just a couple of weeks ago where this was discussed and raised. Then I think we have to understand that Turkey has expressed, again and again and, most recently in my meeting with President Erdogan, that they are, they are continuing, or they will continue to be a committed NATO Ally and they contribute to NATO operations and NATO missions in many different ways; in Afghanistan, but also now addressing some of the challenges that we see in the Black Sea region which was one of the topics that I discussed with President Erdogan during my visit there and also of course in, in, in, in our efforts to fight, or to provide support to the counter-ISIL coalition and to fight ISIL.

The fact that Turkey is talking to Russia it not contradicting that Turkey is committed and a key NATO Ally. Actually, for NATO, it is part of our approach to Russia that we talk to them, that we dialogue with them and I remember that after the downing of the Russian plane last fall, one of the messages that I conveyed was that we should direct contact Ankara-Moscow and then I welcome the fact that Moscow and Ankara are speaking directly with each other. I think that's part of the message from NATO about dialogue with Russia, not to isolate Russia. Regarding the officers, eh, we have to remember that, it's up to every nation to decide who they send to the NATO Command structure. There has been some withdrawals of Turkey's officers but during my visit to Istanbul it was stated very clearly that these officers would be replaced and, and when it comes to those officers that have requested asylum that's not for NATO to decide, that's for the different nations to decide to assess and to make decisions on asylum at every request.

Moderator: Wall Street Journal. No just behind.

Wall Street Journal Reporter: On the NATO Russia Council meeting. How much has disagreement over the agenda delayed that meeting and could NATO agree to a more limited agenda that just dealt with the transparency and air safety matters or is it critical for the alliance to have Ukraine on the agenda of that meeting?

Jens Stoltenberg: As we decided in Warsaw at the Summit we, ah, agreed to have a focused and meaningful dialogue with Russia. We stated also that Ukraine is an essential part of that dialogue and that's still the case. So Ukraine is an essential part of our dialogue with Russia, so one of the reasons why we think it is important to have a dialogue with Russia is also to raise those issues where we disagree and Ukraine has been discussed at the two previous meetings, and eh, and eh, we discussed different items, different issues, risk reduction, transparency but Ukraine has also been one of the issues that we have discussed. We think of course this kind of dialogue is also an opportunity to exchange views on issues where we disagree. When it comes to the work on the upcoming meeting of the NATO Russia Council, I am not going into details. I will just confirm that we are in contact with our Russian counterparts and that we are looking into when to convene the meeting and what to discuss and I will not comment on the details of that process.

Moderator: Last question to Reuters.

Reuters Reporter: Secretary General back to Turkey. When you met President Erdogan in Istanbul did you receive any reassurances whatsoever that the five Turkish officers can have anything more than just indefinite custody which is the case. Could you, did you receive any reassurances that they at least will face a fair trial, thank you?

Jens Stoltenberg: The Turkish leadership has stated several times that they will respect the rule of law. I have started clearly that the rule of law is important for me personally, I attach great importance to NATO's core values and one of those core values is exactly the rule of law, democracy and I also welcomed that, in addition to the direct dialogue that we have with

Turkey on this issue, and I have visited Turkey several times, just both before and after the failed coup, and I also welcome the fact that there are contacts between the Council of Europe and of course, the need and importance of respecting the rule of law also applies for officers, it applies for everyone who are in different ways, prosecuted after the failed coup attempt. Yes.

Moderator: Thank you very much. That’s all we have time for right now but of course we will see you tomorrow and the day after tomorrow at the meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: Thank you.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2016/12/05/pre-ministerial-press-conference