North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of meetings of NATO Foreign Ministers and after a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council
2017-03-30

(As delivered)

Good afternoon.

Allied Foreign Ministers will meet tomorrow to address NATO's adaptation to a changing security environment. We will reaffirm the vital bond between Europe and North America, on which our security relies, and pave the way for the Brussels meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government on the 25th of May.

During tomorrow's first working session, we will look at how to further strengthen the transatlantic bond, with more and better defence spending and fairer burden-sharing across the Alliance.

NATO's role in fighting terrorism and projecting stability will also be on the agenda. We will take stock of our work with partners, including our efforts in Iraq, where our training will help the Iraqi forces fight ISIL and our counter-IED courses will help save lives.

We will also hold a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission. A strong sign of our continued commitment to Ukraine in the face of Russia's actions. We will review the security situation,

Ukraine's reform progress and NATO's political and practical support for Kiev. Just this week, our Science for Peace Program is responding to Ukraine's request for assistance. Following the explosion at the Balaklia arms depot, we are providing personal protection and demining equipment, as well as radio systems.

Tomorrow we will also assess the implications of Russia's military build-up in Europe and beyond with key partners – the EU High Representative, Finland and Sweden.

NATO has a united position on Russia: strong defence and deterrence combined with dialogue. We are delivering on both.

Then some words about the NATO-Russia Council which I just chaired. It was a long meeting, it was a frank meeting and the meeting was constructive. This is the first meeting of the NATO-Russia Council this year. Allies and Russia continue to have clear disagreements on the crisis in and around Ukraine. This was the first topic we addressed and the security

situation remains of deep concern. Ceasefire violations in eastern Ukraine have reached record levels, intense fighting continues and heavy weapons have not been withdrawn.

Earlier this week, the OSCE reported that prohibited weapons were being used “almost twice per minute” and OSCE monitors are not being allowed to do their job. They face restrictions on where they can go, and sometimes they even become targets themselves. The Minsk Agreements provide a plan for the settlement of the conflict in eastern Ukraine but most of their provisions are not being implemented. We call on all signatories to fully comply with their commitments. Today, Allies urged Russia to use its significant influence on the militants to meet their obligations in full. And raised serious concerns about Russia’s recognition of identity documents issued by the separatists, imposing the ruble, and seizure of companies. And all Allies reiterated their strong support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. We do not, and will not, recognise Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea.

We also discussed the challenging security situation in Afghanistan. It is in all our interests to continue helping the Afghan forces to provide for their own security. That is what NATO and our partners are doing, with training and with funding and it is important that all actors support Afghan owned reconciliation efforts.

Finally, we turned to address military activities, and improving transparency and risk reduction. At the NATO-Russia Council in December, we made progress. NATO provided a briefing on Exercise Trident Juncture 2016, and Russia provided a briefing on Exercise Kavkaz 2016. Today, we took another step, through an exchange on our respective military postures. Russia gave a briefing on the three new divisions in its Western Military District. And NATO provided a briefing on the four battlegroups we are deploying to Poland and the Baltic countries. I look forward to future briefings in the same spirit of transparency.

This was a substantial meeting on topics of common concern. It is not an easy dialogue, but it is a dialogue we are committed to. And when tensions run high, it is even more important to keep talking with each other. To increase predictability and reduce risks.

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

Oana Lungescu (Moderator): Wall Street Journal, third row.

Q: The NATO Russia Council meetings are becoming more regular; do you think that that will continue and what in the exchange you're having about military forces do you believe that there is a path forward to more transparency or do the hurdles remain in terms of modernizing the Vienna Document and other initiatives you've talked about in the past to boost Russian transparency?

Jens Stoltenberg: In 2014 NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia as reaction to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. But we decided to keep the channels for political dialogue open and keep military lines of communications open. And that's exactly what we do

now. So, it has always been clear that the NATO Russia Council has never been suspended. We were not able to convene any meetings from the summer 2014 to the summer 2016, but it was never suspended.

Now we have been able to convene three meetings in 2016 and the first meeting now in March 2017 this year. We want a more periodic dialogue more periodic meetings in the NATO Russia Council focused, meaningful dialogue and that's what we are working for with the NATO Russia Council. The idea is to use the Council as a platform for political dialogue for transparency and enabling more transparency and predictability in the relationship between Russia and NATO and we have made some progress. Partly by just the fact that we briefed on exercises last year, partly by the fact that in the meeting today Russia briefed on the three new divisions in the east in the western military district and NATO briefed NATO on the four new battle groups.

That in itself contributes to predictability and transparency so I think I welcome that as a step in the right direction. But we would like to see more, for instance more briefings and more transparency related to upcoming military exercises and of course these briefings in the NATO Russia Council do not substitute the mandatory transparency in, as part of the OC or the Vienna Document in Vienna. And we are still working for modernization of the Vienna Document, but there is no, not either modernizing the Vienna Document or using the NATO Russia Council we need both tools to improve transparency and predictability between NATO and Russia.

Oana Lungescu: Latvian Broadcaster, lady with glasses in the middle.

Q: Thank you very much. Ina (inaudible), Radio Latvia. I presume Secretary General that you spoke about Zapad exercises with Russian Ambassador and did you get also possibility to talk about invitation to see the exercises and from the information you got what can you tell to the Baltic States as it is quite a big matter of concern knowing that the exercises will be very close to the borders? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: Several allies raised the issue of the upcoming Zapad exercise and they argued in favour of an advanced briefing on the exercise in the NATO Russia Council. At the same time, several allies also underlined the importance of compliance with the Vienna Document which requires transparency, international observations of exercises. Its too early to say whether we will agree on advanced briefings on exercises. For instance, on Zapad 2017 but at least that's an issue we agreed to look we will look into and see whether its possible to find a way to brief in advance on that exercise. So yeah.

Oana Lungescu: Okay, we had Ria Novosti here in the middle.

Q: Vladimir (inaudible) Russian News Agency Ria Novosti. Secretary General as the meetings are becoming more and more frequent and the discussions are entering the working mode as Russian colleague said, do you think that its time to go to the Ministerial

level are you considering to have Ministerial meeting maybe between the Foreign Minister or Ministers of Defense between NATO and Russia in the future? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: When we decided to suspend practical cooperation in 2014 we as I said decided also to keep channels for political dialogue open including the NATO Russia Council. And then we decided to maintain a political dialogue at Ambassadorial level and above. So, meaning that we have in a way the possibility also of convening meetings at levels above the Ambassadorial level, that has taken place many times before. I have participated in that kind of meetings myself as Prime Minister of Norway when we had NATO Russia Council meetings at both the Ministerial level but also at the level of Heads of State and government. But it has not been in any discussions so far about doing that now. So, its not possible to speculate when that may happen.

Oana Lungescu: ITAR TASS. Second row.

Q: Thank you very much. Denis Dubrovin, ITAR TASS News Agency. Mr. Secretary General the NATO has changed the date of the Ministerial meeting from 5th and 6th of April to 31st of March. My question is that if it was done specifically to let United States Foreign Secretary to attend this meeting and wasn't it enough that his Deputy Tom Shannon would represent the United States in the schedule to meet him? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: You are right that we changed the date. The original plan was to have a Foreign Minister meeting on the 5th and 6th of April then it became obvious that that didn't work for Secretary Tillerson and then I think its a sign of the strong Trans-Atlantic unity and the flexibility of our Alliance that we were able to find a new date which fits all the 28 Foreign Ministers of the Alliance. They are all very busy but they agreed that we changed the date because to have Secretary Tillerson here as a new Secretary of State in United States to participate in a NATO meeting in Brussels sends a clear signal about Trans-Atlantic unity and also the importance that the United States attaches to the security guarantees for Europe and to NATO.

So, I'm looking forward to the meeting tomorrow and I'm absolutely certain that the message from that meeting will be the same message that we have received from Vice President Pence when he visited Brussels some weeks ago, from Secretary Mattis and also from other, from Secretary Kellogg and others who have visited Brussels, Europe and expressed very strong support to NATO and to the Trans-Atlantic bond and I'm looking forward to welcoming Secretary Tillerson here tomorrow.

Oana Lungescu: Lady in the front row.

Q: Andrea Mitchell, from NBC News. Good to see you. Thank you very much. To follow up on that and then ask you a question about Turkeys involvement in the fight on ISIS. Would you expect having gone to such lengths the other 27 countries to make this convenient for the scheduling of the U.S. Secretary of State so that he could attend the Chinese Summit next

week, would you expect that he would not be criticizing NATO members for their contributions and not making the case that they have been making that there needs to be a bigger contribution, they need to move faster to the 2 percent GDP? And in terms of his meetings today with President Erdogan focused on ISIS, how important is it for Turkey to remove its objections to the Kurdish fighters especially with the battle plan for Raqqa?

Jens Stoltenberg: On the meeting itself, I expect that Secretary Tillerson to say exactly the same as he would have said to the 5th and the 6th of April. And of course I think its easier to tell you exactly what he said after we have the meeting tomorrow, but it has been a very consistent message from President Trump. I've spoken with him twice on the phone and the meeting with Mattis, with Vice President Pence and many others it has been a very consistent message. And also, a message from Secretary Tillerson when I met him last week in Washington and that is the message about strong Trans-Atlantic unity, strong support for NATO but at the same expecting that all allies make good on the pledge we made together in 2014 and that was to stop the cuts in defense spending, gradual increase defense spending and a move towards spending 2 percent of GDP on defense within a decade.

So, that's the U.S. position but actually that's also the NATO position and I have been working very hard since I became Secretary General in 2014 to make sure that we implement the decision we made to stop the cuts, gradual increase and then move towards spending 2 percent of GDP on defense. So, that's the message from all U.S. officials, senior officials from the President, from the Secretary's and that's totally in line with my message since that's what we agreed in 2014. When it comes to the situation in Syria and Raqqa, NATO is not present on the ground in Northern Syria. NATO allies are in different ways contributing to the fight against ISIL or daesh, but NATO as an Alliance is not present.

What we do is that we provide support for the international coalition, we train Iraqi officers in Iraq, we are stepping up our efforts there and we also providing support with our surveillance planes AWACS surveillance planes, helping to improve the air picture of the, for the Alliance. I will not go into much as I say the operational aspects of the campaign which now takes place in Northern Syria. I just welcome that two allies the United States and Turkey sits together and discuss how to in the best possible way fight ISIL and make sure that they work together in the best possible way in Northern Syria.

Q: [inaudible away from microphone] Do you have any clarity on what happened in [inaudible]

Jens Stoltenberg: No and then again NATO is not present there on the ground. We supported the U.S. led coalition so I think we now have to wait and see what will be the outcome of the different reports and assessments that are ongoing and then wait to the outcome of those assessments.

Oana Lungescu: Rustavi TV, Georgia.

Q: Georgian TV Rustavi. Secretary General today in Moscow was signed agreement between Russian and occupied South Ossetia about integration. So South Ossetia armed forces in the armed forces of Russia. Also, last time we see militarization in this region, so how do you estimate this action? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: NATO fully supports the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of Georgia and South Ossetia is part of Georgia and therefore we will never recognize South Ossetia as anything else than a part of Georgia. And we have strongly conveyed this support to Georgia several times. We will continue to provide strong political support to Georgia but also practical support to Georgia. And we also think very much that what Russia now does is just undermining the efforts to try to find a peaceful and negotiated solution and a process which is going on in Geneva.

Oana Lungescu: Kabul Times.

Q: Thank you very much. (inaudible) from Kabul Times. Secretary General you mention that you are talking in the Council about Afghanistan could you please give more details about that and also because Russia lead, taken the lead for the peace negotiation with the Taliban and also with the five (sic) other countries they are not invited officially U.S. and the U.S. is a strong member of NATO what's your view about that? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: First of all, NATO continues to support the National Unity government. We continue to train, assist and advise the Afghan national forces and I think that of course there are still many problems and many challenges. There is violence, there are casualties in Afghanistan but at least we have been able to train and to support the Afghan national forces so they are now fully in charge of the security situation in their own country and we will continue to do that. We will continue to train, assist and advise them and we will also continue to fund them, provide financial support for the Afghan national army and security forces. We also support and we are in favour of a peace process a reconciliation process but it has to be Afghan led and Afghan owned but as long as this is an Afghan led and Afghan owned process we support initiatives to try to find a peaceful end and solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and to the violence in Afghanistan, but it has to be led by the Afghans themselves, that's the key message from NATO.

Oana Lungescu: Okay. Washington Post. Second row.

Q: Hi, Michael Burnbaum from the Washington Post. I just wanted to ask in the context of the NATO Russia Council today whether the INF Treaty came up and if Russia was in violation of the INF Treaty and if so where and how? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: That was not an issue in the NATO Russia Council today so I have nothing to report from the Council. But what I can say is that the United States has informed allies that they have come to the conclusion that Russia is in violation of the INF Treaty and the Treaty's important because it has abolished a whole category of nuclear weapons,

intermediate nuclear missiles in Europe and I think that everyone that remembers back to the 1980s understands the importance of abolishing this category of nuclear weapons which really increased tensions in Europe in the 1980s until we got an INF Treaty in 1987. So, NATO is favour of arms control, NATO is in favour of reducing the level or the numbers of nuclear weapons and of course we also support the INF Treaty but this was not an issue in the NATO Russia Council today.

Oana Lungescu: El Pais.

Q: Regarding the Ministerial what do you foresee on the issue of strengthening the role of NATO in the fight against terrorism? Do you maybe envisage making a bigger contribution to the coalition against ISIL different to the aspects you just mentioned?

Jens Stoltenberg: We will discuss NATOs role in fighting terrorism and we will do that with a view to the meeting of Heads of State and Government on the 25th of May. So, I think its important to understand this Foreign Ministerial meeting as a building block preparation for the meeting the 25th of May when President Trump will come to Brussels, meet all the other NATO leaders and then on that meeting of Heads of State and Government in Brussels in May, NATOs role in fighting terrorism will be a key issue. So, we will discuss it tomorrow with a view to try to prepare more for what NATO can do when we meet in May.

I also look forward to meet President Trump in Washington in the White House the 12th of April myself. I am going there to also then prepare for the meeting of Heads of State and Government in May in Brussels and I'm certain that the fight against terrorism and NATOs contribution to the fight against terrorism will be one of the key issues we will discuss. We are looking into what more we can do. W

e have trained Iraqi officers in Jordan for some time, we have now started to do the same inside Iraq. We provide support with our AWACS planes and we also of course what we do in Afghanistan is also about fighting terrorism. The reason why we are in Afghanistan is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for international terrorists again and we work with many partners in the whole region. We will discuss it tomorrow and then we will see to what extent we are able to announce any outcomes tomorrow but the view is to then prepare a meeting in May.

Oana Lungescu: Financial Times, third row.

Q: Thank you very much, Arthur Beasley. Secretary General is there a specific plan under discussion at this point in which the member States would agree to intensify military expenditure as sought by the new American administration? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: We are now looking into how we can keep up the momentum because actually we are seeing a very positive development when it comes to defense spending across Europe and Canada, meaning that after many years of cuts in defense spending we

stopped the cuts in 2015 the first year after we made the pledge in 2014. And then in 2016 we saw a significant increase in defense spending across Europe and Canada by 3.8 percent in real terms or $10 billion U.S. dollars. So, if we keep up that momentum then we are on track to reach the 2 percent within a decade.

But of course this is this is only the first step so we need to make sure that we continue and we are discussing how can we maximize what should I say the probability of that we are able to continue to keep up that pace. And one of the tools we are looking into is is national plans. That all allies have to develop national plans which they then in which they outline how they can reach the pledge we made or how they can implement the pledge we made in 2014 on in defense investment. Meaning that the plans need to address how to increase defense spending but also how to address the other elements of the decision made in 2014.

How to use those additional, how to use these additional fund or funds or international assets or funding for more capabilities and also how to contribute to NATO missions and operations. So, this is not only about defense spending it is also about capabilities, delivering of military capabilities and contributions to NATO operations and missions, and yes develop national plans so all nations describe how they can deliver.

Oana Lungescu: Okay, Politico last question in the back. No, its the gentleman behind with the glasses. Thank you.

Q: Thanks very much. David Herzinger (sic) with Politico. Two questions if you will. One is not to belabour the point but you've worked very hard to reach out to Washington but if we look at what the Trump Administration is doing rather than what they're saying the fact that there's still no one nominated as an Ambassador to NATO, that Secretary Tillerson was quite willing to skip this Ministerial, is there reason to doubt those professions of support for this Alliance, what do you think the Foreign Ministers coming here need to hear from Secretary Tillerson other than a demand for increased spending which you've already addressed?

And if you will on Ukraine, citing as you did the statistics, prohibited weapons being used twice a minute, at what point are you willing to declare that there really is no ceasefire or is there do the sides have to say you know they've abandoned it or what point do you say this is actually just a conflict in motion, a hot conflict and no longer a ceasefire at all?

Jens Stoltenberg: The ceasefire is not respected so therefore it is important to do everything we can to make sure that the ceasefire again is respected. So, we have a ceasefire on paper but it doesn't function in reality. For me that's not an argument against having a ceasefire but its an argument in favour of making sure that we do our utmost to make sure that the ceasefire is respected on the ground. And the best way to do that is to make sure that international observers have full access to the area partly to inspect the ceasefire but also partly to inspect that we that heavy weapons are withdrawn from the contact line.

So, its not easy and there have been many disappointments but at the same time I can't see any other way to a peaceful solution of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine than the full implementation of the Minsk Agreement. But you are right the ceasefire is not functioning and that's the reason why we have to support all efforts to try to make sure that it is respected and implemented not least by giving full access for the international observers. Then on the United States, so we, the message from the U.S. Administration, from the President; has been very consistent.

In the phone calls I had with the President, from Secretary Mattis, from Secretary Tillerson, from Vice President Pence they, it has been very consistent that they are strongly committed to NATO, to the Trans-Atlantic bond because they see of course the importance of NATO for Europe, but they also see the importance of NATO for the United States. Two World Wars and the Cold War have taught us all that stability in Europe is of course important for Europe, but its also important for the United States and the only time we have invoked Article 5 was after the attack on the United States and hundreds of thousands of European soldiers and other partner nations have served in Afghanistan alongside U.S. soldiers and more than a thousand have lost their lives in Afghanistan in an operation which was a direct response to an attack on the United States.

So, I'm absolutely convinced that the President, the U.S. Administration, they understand the importance of NATO for European security but also for the United States. Their commitment to NATO is not only in words but also in deeds. We have had the Vice President already here, the Secretary of Defense has already been in Brussels in NATO and the President will come in May, I will meet the President in April and not only meetings but also on the ground, meaning that they don't only express in words strong support to NATO but actually what we see on the ground in Europe is increased U.S. military presence for the first time in many years.

We have seen the deployment of a new armoured brigade, this is the first time in many years we see an increase not a decrease in U.S. military presence in Europe and the first time in many years we see an armoured brigade, U.S. armoured brigade in Europe. On top of that the U.S. has now increasing their investments in pre-positioned equipment, more exercises, more storage of fuels and ammunition. So, there's a strong U.S. commitment to the Trans-Atlantic bond not only words but also in deeds and we see that in Europe today with increased U.S. presence which is taking place as we speak.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much that's all we have time for today but hopefully well see you all tomorrow morning.

Jens Stoltenberg: Thank you see you tomorrow.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2017/03/30/press-conference