North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Monthly press conference

by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen
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Good afternoon.

Today, I would like to talk not just about NATO, but about NATO and the European Union. And about what we Europeans can and should do to ensure that Europe is a powerful global actor, not a global spectator.

Later today, I will go to the European Parliament to address a joint meeting of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Security and Defence, together with the chairpersons of defence and foreign affairs committees of national parliaments.

L'une de mes priorités en tant que secrétaire général est de renforcer les relations avec l'Union européenne. Je dialogue donc activement avec nos collègues de ce côté-ci de Bruxelles. Car l'OTAN et l'Union européenne sont des partenaires stratégiques.

La sécurité européenne ne peut pas, et ne doit pas, être limitée à un cadre unique. Depuis plus de soixante ans, nous voyons que la sécurité de l'Europe dépend de l'action de l'OTAN comme de l'Union européenne. Nous n'avons qu'à regarder en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient pour voir que nous sommes confrontés à un environnement de sécurité international de plus en plus complexe et exigeant. À l'avenir, nous devons donc faire davantage ensemble, sûrement pas moins.

Nous devons rester déterminés et aptes à relever les défis de sécurité auxquels nous sommes confrontés collectivement. Nous devons tirer des enseignements de nos opérations, qu'elles soient menées sous commandement OTAN, européen ou national. En Afghanistan, en Libye et au Mali.

We all know those lessons. European nations still don't have enough of the capabilities that are key to modern missions and operations. Transport planes, air-to-air refuelling, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets. We are making some progress, but we need to go further. All our nations face declining defence budgets. So we can only be effective if we work together and coordinate our efforts.

This is not a competition. We are complementary. And there is ample scope for cooperation between our two organisations.

NATO and the European Union have already shown how effectively we can work together to bring freedom and security to our continent. In Central and Eastern Europe. And in the Balkans. NATO has shown its capacity to act quickly and in high intensity crises, while the European Union is able to deploy a wide range of civilian and military expertise to help rebuild nations.

The most recent example is Kosovo. NATO has ensured a safe and secure environment for over a decade, allowing the European Union to use its diplomatic and economic tools to consolidate institutions and the local economy. I welcomed the historic agreement reached between Belgrade and Pristina. I commended Cathy Ashton when she came to NATO Headquarters the very same day, together with Mr. Dacic and Mr. Thaci. They both made clear that, as they work for the implementation of the agreement, they see NATO as the guarantor of peace and security for all the people of Kosovo.

It has been a long and difficult process. NATO, and KFOR, have supported the European Union's efforts from the very beginning, and all along the way. We have seen over the years that close cooperation between NATO and the European Union, here in Brussels, as well as on the ground, has produced tangible progress.

NATO's commitment to support the implementation of the agreement remains key for success. And I hope it will soon translate into further improvements of the security situation on the ground in northern Kosovo.

This agreement represents a big step forward for regional peace and security. And it should give new momentum to our shared vision, the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans.

So NATO and the European Union have to be more ambitious to complement and reinforce each other. We must seize the opportunity of December's European Council meeting to do just that.

In December, European leaders will focus on security and defence for the first time since the start of the financial crisis. I hope they will take clear steps towards a Europe that is both able to act and willing to act. I also hope they will encourage the European Union and NATO to coordinate and cooperate more.

Security is a team effort. The agreement between Belgrade and Pristina shows that NATO and the European Union can work together and must work together for our common security. And I am confident that we will.

With that I am ready to take your questions.

OANA LUNGESCU (NATO Spokesperson): And we'll go to Kuna and over here.

Q: Nawab Khan from Kuwait News Agency. Sir, I would like to ask a question on recent developments in Syria. There have been reports of two Israeli strikes in recent days in Syria. And also reports on the use of chemical weapons. I would like to ask your comments on these developments. Are you concerned that the conflict is now spreading? Thanks.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First, on Israeli strikes. I'm aware of the press reports. I have no indication of such activity in the area relevant to the deployment of NATO Patriots. Of course, NATO Allies continue to monitor developments closely. As you know, we are focussed on our defensive deployment to protect the population and territory of Turkey.

As regards chemical weapons, yes, we do have indications that chemical weapons may have been used. However, we don't have consolidated information as regards more detailed circumstances including who have actually used chemical weapons.

But of course, these developments remain of grave concern and emphasizes how urgent it is that the international community should redouble its efforts to find a political solution to this crisis so that we can see an end to the bloodshed and the start of a general transition that accommodates the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

OANA LUNGESCU: NPR.

Q: Thank you, Teri Schultz with National Public Radio and CBS News. Mister Secretary General, even if you don't have yet consolidated our firm evidence of who is using the chemical weapons, how much more does it concern you to hear that the opposition, the sort of side of the war that most of the world would be supporting, may have been the ones to use sarin gas in this instance? Doesn't this just raise the stakes that much higher that perhaps both sides are in possession and willingness to use these weapons?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Let me emphasize once again we do not have confirmed and consolidated information as to who might have used chemical weapons. But I would like to stress that any use... any use of chemical weapons, whoever might have used chemical weapons, any such use is a breach of international law and of course a matter of grave concern. So we remain concerned about the situation in Syria and we urge the international community to redouble its efforts to find a political solution.

OANA LUNGESCU:Al Arabiya.

Q: Mister Secretary General, I'm here, back in the room. Noureddine Fridhi from Al Arabiya News. ...General, the Israeli officials must recognize that they bombed two times in Syria in these two or three days, this is... I would like to ask you if you are seriously concerned about the more and more Israeli involvement in this internal conflict? And a question... a follow-up to the first question: Madame Carla Del Ponte who is a member of the inquiry... international inquiry committee said that she saw reports suggesting that the opposition used the chemical weapons in last March incident. I would like to ask you: Do you support this Israeli

involvement in the Syrian internal conflict? What is your comment? Like Madame Carla Del Ponte is let's say a credible source. It's an international commission investigation member who is suggesting that she saw reports accusing the opposition. Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: As regards to the Israeli strike, as I said I'm aware of the press report. But I don't have further information. We remain concerned about the situation in and around Syria. It's... For us, I mean... it's not a new concern that for quite some time we have expressed concerns about the risk of a spillover of this conflict. So we remain concerned as we have been for quite some time. And as regards chemical weapons, I don't know on which basis Carla Del Ponte has made her statements. What I would like to stress is that the possible use of chemical weapons is a breach of international law whoever might have used chemical weapons. So also in that regard, we remain concerned. And I think the development we have witnessed also recently just stressed how important it is that we find political solution sooner rather than later. And it is, indeed, a great responsibility for the international community to find a solution as soon as possible. I really urge... and in particular I urge the permanent members of the UN Security Council to find each other to reach an agreement to send a strong and unified message to the regime in Damascus that time has come to initiate a transition that can lead to a political solution that accommodates the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

And I think we have a framework on which a political solution could be found on the 30th of June 2012, the so-called Action Group on Syria, published a declaration from the meeting in Geneva. The strength of that declaration is that it's signed by all five members of the UN Security Council. In my opinion, it should be possible to find a political solution within that framework.

OANA LUNGESCU:We had Ritzau over there ...

Q: (Inaudible) Minna Skau of the Danish newspaper. Sorry, not the Danish newspaper. We are the Danish News Agency Ritzau. In a recent interview with the Danish newspaper Politiken under the headline: Mistakes in Iraq Hinder Military Intervention Into..., you're talking about some of the experiences from Iraq. I would like you to elaborate a little bit on what you think those mistakes were, what you're learning from them and how that makes you... tries to be more clear in defining what the red line in Syria.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Well, I hinted at the very fact it's understandable that political leaders want a clear evidence when it comes to the possession of... and possible use of chemical weapons.

Taking into the account the experience from Iraq, I was asked about the indications that chemical weapons may have been used in Syria and I share the view that it is of utmost importance to get consolidated information to get clear evidence.

And this is also a reason why it is of the utmost importance that United Nations inspectors get full and free access to Syria to investigate what has actually happened. And it's regrettable that so far the Syrian authorities have denied the United Nations such access.

OANA LUNGESCU:Jane's?

Q: Yes, Brooks Tigner, Jane's Defence. Mister Rasmussen, I have a question about the upcoming December council and your desire that the two work more closely together. I have some problems. I mean... I don't see how... Really, there's nothing the two can do officially other than issue political declarations for one; and unofficially the two sides are already informally coordinating their respective PNS and Smart Defence initiatives. The real challenge, really, to Europe CSD place in the world is this shrinking defence industrial base, lower R&D spending, etc., etc. So what it is the two sides can do together officially? I really don't see it. Please tell us.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Yes, but... I mean to repeat what you said, the answer is very clear: to invest more in defence and I can preview what I'm going to tell parliamentarians later this afternoon. If Europeans are not willing to invest a sufficient amount of money in defence, then all talk about a strengthened European defence will just be hot air.

OANA LUNGESCU:Reuters.

Q: Adrian Croft from Reuters. Secretary General, just following on from what you've just said, in the French defence white paper last week, it calls for French spending on defence to fall to 1.5% of GDP in 2014, do you think that this is setting a bad example that one of your largest most powerful military member is cutting military spending to that extent?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: As you know, we do not, as an Alliance, interfere with national decisions on the level of defence spending. We do have Alliance benchmarks. But we leave it to each individual nation to make her decision as regards to the level of defence spending. Furthermore, it's also a question about how you spend your defence expenditure.

And actually, France is an|Ally that has demonstrated not only military capability to deploy beyond French borders and participate in international... or to take the lead of international military operations. But France has also demonstrated a political will to actually use her military capabilities.

All in all, I welcome the French White Paper. I've studied it. I have seen that France is strongly committed to working within NATO; strongly committed to the Transatlantic Defence Alliance. And I've also take a note of the fact that compared to previous plans it seems that France will so to speak hold the line when it comes to defence investments. So I appreciate those strong commitments.

OANA LUNGESCU:Le Monde.

Q: Monsieur le Secrétaire général, une question en français. Mais vous pouvez répondre en anglais, si vous le préférez bien sûr. À propos de votre plaidoyer pour le rapprochement entre l'Union européenne et l'OTAN, est-ce que vous entrevoyez une solution politique aux problèmes qui bloquent cette collaboration depuis très longtemps, à savoir le problème de Chypre? Et deuxième question, ce plaidoyer, votre présence au Parlement européen va sans doute renforcer la rumeur selon laquelle vous envisageriez une fonction, une haute fonction européenne à l'avenir. Est-ce que ça se place dans ce cadre-là?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First of all, as you know, to fundamentally solve the problems in the relationship between NATO and the European Union, we need a solution to the Cyprus problem.

And I really urge all parties in Cyprus to move forward; find a solution; reunify the island. A lot is at stake also economically. And I think both parts of the island would profit from a reunification. There are natural resources that could be exploited if they find each other. And on top of that, we could also move forward politically when it comes the partnership between NATO and the European Union.

And as regards future plans, I have my hands full. I'm 100% occupied. So I haven’t started reflections on what’s next.

OANA LUNGESCU:AP.

Q: Mister Secretary General, I'd like to just return to the question of the alleged Israeli strikes in Syria. It's hard to understand how NATO a global military player could have no idea whether Israel was responsible or not for these strikes. I wonder has anyone at NATO, or you personally perhaps been in touch with Israeli officials? Have they confirmed that they're responsible; denied it; or told you that it's none of your business?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: I can just repeat what I said that, of course, I'm aware of press reports. On intelligence reports, we don't comment as a matter of principle obviously. And as I also stated, we have no indications of such activity in the area relevant to the deployment of NATO Patriots. And that's actually what I'm able to say about that.

Q: (Inaudible)... actually Israeli officials though?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: We don't comment on that.

OANA LUNGESCU:Albanian Media.

Q: Yes, NBC News. On Serbia and Kosovo agreement, just some days ago, the president of Kosovo said that NATO's role for the implementation of this agreement is more than necessary. What kind of guarantees NATO gives that this agreement will be properly implemented on the ground? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: I can assure you that we will do all week can to assist in the implementation of this political agreement. As I said in my introduction we commend the European Union for facilitating this process. We also commend political leaders in both Belgrade and Pristina for their strong determination to find a political solution.

What we have seen is that both parties consider NATO as an impartial guarantor of peace and stability. And the assurance we have given is that we will continue to fully implement the United Nations mandate. That is to ensure a safe and secure environment and free movement for all people in Kosovo.

And I'm very pleased to see that all parties involved trust NATO and KFOR and consider us an impartial guarantor of that peace and stability. And we will continue our work and help implementing this agreement.

OANA LUNGESCU:Japanese Media (inaudible).

Q: Hi, my name is Takashi. I'm with NHK Broadcasting Corporation. I'd like to come back to the topic of Syria. Now, you have repeatedly expressed concern about the spillover effect of the fighting inside of Syria. And it obviously now... it seems to be obvious that the ... well Israeli and other parties are involved. And it's obvious we have seen so many spillover effects. So do you think that this Israel attack might be helpful to end the bloodshed in that country? And in that regard, are there any possibilities that NATO may change the course to intervene militarily in that area? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: There's no change of NATO's position. As I said, we remain concerned... we remain concerned about the humanitarian situation. It's a... I mean more than 70,000 people killed; more than one million refugees. It's outrageous what we are witnessing. We remain concerned about the risk of a regional spillover. We remain concerned about the risk of the use of chemical weapons. We consider it a responsibility for the whole of the international community to find a solution to this.

NATO, as an alliance, is focused on the defence and protection of our Allies, in this case Turkey. And this is the reason why we have deployed the Patriot missiles. And I can assure you we have all plans in place to defend and protect Turkey against any kind of attack. That's our obligation as a military alliance to defend our member states and their populations. That's our focal point. But no reason to hide that we are deeply concerned about the situation and the development in Syria. And that's why we call on all parties and we call on the international community to find a political solution as soon as possible.

OANA LUNGESCU:Last question. Bosnian Media, at the back, Ines.

Q: It's (inaudible) in Montenegro Media now. OK, I wonder there are some renewed allegations recently... international... in the international press that Croatia was selling arms to

Syrian rebels. Do you have some knowledge on this? Or do you have some comment on this? How would you...? What do you know about this?

And my second question is related to Kosovo. You said that NATO will do all you can in implementation of the agreement. But does it mean...did I understand correctly that it means that you are going to go on with everything which is under your mandate? Or is it perhaps something else that you envisage? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: On Croatia, and on alleged arms delivery, I don't have any information and no comments.

On Kosovo, we have a mandate. We will fully implement that mandate. And this is the assurance we have given the parties involved in the political agreement.

OANA LUNGESCU:Thank you very much indeed!

Q: Yes, Brooks Tigner, Jane's Defence. Mister Rasmussen, I have a question about the upcoming December council and your desire that the two work more closely together. I have some problems. I mean... I don't see how... Really, there's nothing the two can do officially other than issue political declarations for one; and unofficially the two sides are already informally coordinating their respective PNS and Smart Defence initiatives. The real challenge, really, to Europe CSD place in the world is this shrinking defence industrial base, lower R&D spending, etc., etc. So what it is the two sides can do together officially? I really don't see it. Please tell us.

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