Monthly press conference by the NATO Secretary General

2013-09-02

Good afternoon.

Let me begin with the situation in Syria.

NATO's position is clear. The chemical weapons attack that took place on 21 August around Damascus were appalling and inexcusable.

We believe that these unspeakable actions, which claimed the lives of hundreds of men, women, and children cannot be ignored.

There is a reason that chemical weapons are banned across the civilised world. They are horrific and barbaric arms that have no place in the twenty-first century. And NATO Allies consider the use of chemical weapons as a threat to international peace and security.

NATO is playing its part in this crisis.

At this time, close consultations among Allies continue. We continue to stand in strong solidarity with our Ally Turkey. And we remain determined to protect the Alliance's south-eastern border.

Speaking as a former prime minister, I fully understand and support the decisions of individual allies as they consider the way ahead.

Make no mistake. NATO is an alliance of democracies.

And our democracy does not make us weaker. On the contrary. It is the essential source of our strength.

But as the situation in Syria demonstrates, we continue to face significant security challenges. And it is vital that we are prepared to meet them.

Cette semaine, je prendrai part à une réunion des ministres de la Défense de l'Union européenne, qui se tiendra en Lituanie. J'ai l'intention d'y aborder la question de la coopération entre l'OTAN et l'Union européenne en matière de défense, ainsi que la nécessité pour l'Europe d'intensifier ses efforts en matière de développement capacitaire et d'investir davantage dans la sécurité.

C’est important pour l’Europe. Et c’est important pour l’alliance transatlantique. Car une Europe forte, c’est aussi une Alliance forte.

Les Européens ont accompli de réels progrès dans le développement de nouvelles capacités, notamment en matière de transport aérien lourd.

We have also started to address critical shortfalls, such as drones for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Within NATO and in the European Union.

For all of us, the key is cooperation. To work together to make us all stronger. Not to duplicate each other’s efforts, and thereby make us weaker.

And to develop effective and modern capabilities, Europe needs effective and modern defence industries. Where competition drives innovation. Where national borders are no barrier to international cooperation. And where effective equipment is developed in a cost-effective way.

This is a vital part of Europe’s ability to ensure its future security. So it is very timely that the European Council at the end of this year will address the issue. And I trust that it will make the defence industry in Europe stronger, more sustainable, and more streamlined.

In our unpredictable world, this is an opportunity not to be missed.

With that, I am ready to take your questions.

Moderator: We'll go to NPR, Teri.

Q: Teri Schultz – NPR …

Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Secretary General of NATO): Likewise.

Q: (Inaudible)… secrets were sent to Turkey when there was merely the threat of possible chemical weapons inside of Syria. Now you and others have been saying that you're convinced that the regime has used those weapons on some people.

Are you… does that make it more urgent or more difficult, more (inaudible)… planning on NATO's part for the possible spread of the conflict?

And do the revelations by Secretary Kerry over the weekend that he does have some proof of a sarin gas attack by the regime again add pressure to NATO to (inaudible)…? Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: As I said, NATO is playing its part already, partly as a forum for consultation among Allies and partly through the deployment of Patriot missiles to Turkey in defence of the Turkish population and Turkish territory.

I can assure you that we have all plans in place already to ensure effective defence and protection of Turkey. So at this stage I don't see a need for further contingency planning.

Moderator: Turkish News Agency over there.

Q: Secretary General, my first question is that does the US share the intelligence information about the chemicals with NATO, or does NATO have its own intelligences about the situation? That's one.

Second thing, the United States seem to have their own mindset on the operation (inaudible) dealing with all of them. What is your personal… as the Secretary General, what is your personal view? Do you favour a military action on Syria?

My third question will be when… if Syria retaliates against an operation, and it includes its retaliation also Turkey, who might provide bases and logistics, technically would that fall into Article 5? Because in that case Syria will not be the first aggressor but it will be retaliating, but it will be retaliating to a country which didn't join the operation. Would that still fall into Article 5? Thank you very much.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: Thank you. On the first question on intelligence, first of all, let me express that, as a matter of principle, we never comment on intelligence information received. But in general, I can tell you that NATO, as an organization, relies on intelligence provided by individual Allies. And such intelligence reports have been shared with NATO.

Secondly, as regards the response, no decision has been made yet. Allies consult with each other. As I said, I think there is an agreement that we need a firm international response in order to avoid that chemical attacks take place in the future. It would send a very, I would say, dangerous signal to dictators all over the world if we stand idle by and don't react.

The question is how to react and when to react. And in democracies, you have to respect and accept discussions and democratic procedures. But it's my firm position that the international community should react in such a situation. Otherwise, we would send the very dangerous signal to dictators all over the world that they can use chemical weapons without any reaction from the international community.

And finally, your third question as regards a possible attack on Turkey, first of all, I would say it is of course a highly hypothetical question. I think the fact that we have deployed Patriot missiles to Turkey to ensure effective protection and defence of Turkey also has a deterrent effect.

But in the case that Turkey is attacked, of course in general, you know our principle that we consider an attack on one Ally an attack on all. And if it were to happen that Turkey would be attacked, definitely Allies would gather and consult with each other how to respond appropriately.

Moderator: Kuwaiti News Agency.

Q: Mr. Secretary General, you said just now that the international community should react. Does this mean that you are in support of a military strike to deter the use of chemical weapons in Syria? Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: As I said, to my mind, no doubt that the international community should react firmly in such a situation in order to avoid chemical attacks in the future.

As I also stressed, no decision has been made yet as to how the international community should react. As regards NATO, I don't envisage any further NATO role. I have already stressed that NATO play its part in the crisis. At this stage Allies are consulting with each other and we are prepared to defend Turkey effectively.

So I don't foresee any further NATO role. It is for individual nations to decide how to react to what has happened in Syria.

Moderator: The Italian News Agency.

Q: Marco Tutrilla - La Stampa (ph). Good morning, Secretary. There are some reports on the wire. An international agency says that there are sources from the rebel front that say that it was them to use the chemical weapons. I wonder whether you're aware of this, if there is any evidence, and if you consider this a possible game changer. Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: I'm not aware of such information. I think many facts in this case point to the regime as responsible for the chemical attacks. The way these chemical attacks were conducted point to regime responsibility. Let me also point to the fact that the Arab League has issued a statement that clearly places responsibility at the Syrian regime.

Moderator: We'll go to the back. We have Al-Arabiya.

Q: Noureddine Fridhi from al-Arabiya. Mr. Secretary General, on the 28th of August, based on a variety of sources, you stated in your communiqué that the regime is responsible for the use of chemical attacks of the 21 of August.

My question is did you have at that time enough evidence which can allow the international community to act even without waiting the assessment of the United Nation experts and without UN Security Council? This is my question.

And NATO has its own bases in Greece, in Turkey, and the Patriot missiles in Turkey also. One, it's very difficult to imagine that, if the United States and its allies will start a military action, it's unbelievable that NATO cannot be involved in one way or another. Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: As I said, I think it is necessary for the international community to react in such a situation. Let me remind you that chemical weapons are something very special. I understand very well that people ask why is it that the use of chemical weapons is a

decisive factor. Didn't we see tens of thousands, maybe 100,000 people killed by the use of conventional weapons?

And of course the answer is yes, it's horrendous that so many people have been killed also by the use of conventional weapons. But the use of chemical weapons is something very special. A chemical weapon can of course be used in a very limited way, but chemical weapons can, by nature, easily be turned into a weapon of mass destruction.

So it's a very, very, very dangerous weapon, and this is of course also reason why the use of chemical weapons is banned in international conventions. There are very, very strict regulation of that.

And this is of course the reason why I think the international community can't just stand idle by, seeing hundreds of people being killed by the use of chemical weapons, seeing a clear breach of international norms and practices in a clear contradiction with what is written in international conventions. And this is the reason why I think the international community as such has a responsibility in this case.

As regards the use of NATO facilities, as I said, NATO plays its part through consultations and the deployment of Patriot missiles in Turkey focused on the defence of Turkey. It's for individual Allies to decide how they will respond to the use of chemical weapons in Syria and which military facilities they might decide to use if they were to decide on such a military response.

Moderator: (Inaudible)… Radio France International.

Q: (Speaks in French without interpretation.)

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: I would expect… first of all, let me stress that of course it's not for me, in my capacity as NATO Secretary General, to interfere with the decision-making processes in the European Union. It's for European ministers to decide how they will react.

But obviously I would expect EU ministers to condemn in the strongest possible terms the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Moderator: Cadena Ser at the back.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: As I have said repeatedly, I don't foresee any further NATO role. It's for individual Allies to decide how they will respond and which military facilities they might use if they were to respond militarily to what has happened in Syria.

And let me stress that obviously I fully respect the democratic processes in each individual Allied nation. That's part of the way we work. I understand very well that a lot of questions are raised: why can't you just go ahead; why can't you take quick decisions. But let me be very

open and frank with you. This is a very, very complicated situation. And tough decisions have to be made.

In democracies, this is a complicated process. And it's also… I mean, when you respond, if you were to respond militarily, it's not easy for democracies to do that. And it's also important to build a broad public and political support for that, to make the case, and it takes time.

It may be frustrating, but that's how democracies work. And fortunately, we do live in democracies.

Moderator: Jane's.

Q: Yes, Brookes Tigner – Jane's Defence. Just for the record, Mr. Rasmussen, a yes or no question. Have you and the other Allied leaders been shown incontrovertible evidence about the chemical attacks that establishes the chain of custody leading back to the Syrian regime and which leaves no doubt about that chain of custody? Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: As I have said on several occasions, obviously I do not comment on intelligence reports. But in general terms, I can tell you that I have been presented with concrete information. And without going into details, I can tell you that personally I'm convinced not only that a chemical attack has taken place -- I think everybody has seen the horrendous images from Syria -- but I'm also convinced that the Syrian regime is responsible.

Moderator: Lady over here.

Q: Yes, hello, sir, Mr. Secretary General. Yashni Gupli (ph) from Europolitique. You said that NATO should… it would be fine if NATO could respond. If it's a military response, what would it be, what it will be… what would be the aim of this response? And if it's just for punishment, doesn't it give the impression that the civilians can be slaughtered with conventional arms but not with chemical weapons? Or would it be a response to put the Syrian regime out of the country or put them down?

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: First of all, let me stress once again that I have not spoken about a NATO military role. I have spoken of individual Allies responding to what has happened in Syria. I have stressed that NATO already plays its part as a forum for consultation among Allies, and through the deployment of Patriot missiles to Turkey to ensure effective protection and defence of Turkey. I don't foresee a further role for NATO.

But I have spoken of the need for the international community to take action in such a situation. And you ask me what should be the aim of that. The aim of that response, whatever response it might be, the aim of that response should be to send a very clear message not only to the regime in Damascus but to all potential users of chemical weapons in the future that you can't do that without a firm international reaction.

And the aim of that should be to prevent such chemical attacks in the future, to avoid such chemical attacks in the future.

Personally, I think the international community can't just stand idle by, witnessing hundreds of people being killed in the most barbaric way through the use of chemical weapons. I have stressed that it's also horrendous to see mass killing of people by the use of conventional weapons. Obviously it is. But chemical weapons constitute a particular threat to mankind because chemical weapons can easily be transferred to a weapon of mass destruction.

And that's why the international community has adopted international conventions that ban the use of chemical weapons, and that's why the international community also has a responsibility to protect and to enforce those international conventions. That's my firm belief.

But having said that, I would also stress that I don't see a long-term, sustainable military solution to the conflict in Syria. I strongly believe that a firm response to the use of chemical weapons is needed. But speaking about the long-term solution, it's also my firm belief that we need a political process to settle the conflict, the problems in Syria.

Moderator: Stuttgarter Zeitung.

Q: (Inaudible)… Could you say something… you spoke of a forum for consultation, but (inaudible)…

Moderator: Christophe, can you use the microphone, please? It's in your seat, next to you.

Q: Sorry.

Moderator: Thank you.

Q: Sorry. Here we go. Sorry about that. You spoke about a forum of consultation, but of course that's not NATO's main aim. So could you perhaps say if you find it at all worrying that an organization like NATO is sort of on the sidelines of this major world conflict at the moment, and why? And if it's a no, I'd like to know why. Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: But NATO is not sidelined because NATO has not been seeking a role in Syria. Our main focus is effective defence and protection of our Ally, Turkey.

Let me add to that that, if a response to what has happened in Syria were to be a military operation, I would envisage a very short, measured, targeted operation. And you don't need the NATO command and control system to conduct such a short, measured, tailored, military operation.

Moderator: Thank you very much indeed. That's all we have time for.

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