Questions and answers at the joint press point following the 171st NATO Chiefs of Defence meeting at the joint press point following the 171st NATO Chiefs of Defence meeting

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CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: We now have time for questions. First question, Madame?

QUESTION: News Agency Interfax-Ukraine, (Iryna Somer). I have a question regarding meeting with Ukrainian Chief of Defence. What exactly did you discuss and what is outcome of this discussion? Thank you.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: Thank you. Indeed we had a meeting with the new Ukrainian Chief of Defence who gave us an overview of events as they have been unfolding. He also gave us an understanding of the way the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian Armed Forces were reacting to the use of military power in Crimea and in other places in vicinity of Ukraine or in Ukraine itself.

And we also talked about the upcoming elections here on the 25th, the importance of those elections and the democratic process in Ukraine.

We also had the opportunity to review our military to military cooperation and to see how we could extend it within the agreement which exists between Ukraine and the Alliance and we are ready to reconvene with our Ukrainian colleague when necessary to address whatever issues will pop up in the future.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: A question over there.

QUESTION: Yes, Adrian Croft, from Reuters. I have a question for General Breedlove, please, if possible. After what the Secretary General said today, that some Russian troops may be withdrawing from the Ukraine border, could you tell us what your assessment is please of what the Russian military is doing? How many Russian troops you estimate are still in the vicinity of the Ukraine border and what their intentions are now? Thank you.

GENERAL PHILIP M. BREEDLOVE: Thank you, Adrian. For several days now, there has been claims that the troops are departing the border and for several days we saw no

evidence of movement at all. We are now seeing some movement of troops. It is far too early to classify the size or what is the effect of the troops. It is interesting that we note that most of the movement is in one particular area and there remains a large formation, a very capable formation in several concerning avenues of approach.

So what we, to put it very sharply, we have seen some movement. It's too early to know where they're moving to or how many of them are moving. But what we do know is that the force that remains on the border is very large and it's very capable and remains in a very coercive posture.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: Thank you. Next question over there, please.

QUESTION: Okay, I want to move for another issue. My name is Waseem Ibrahim from As-Safir Newspaper, Lebanese newspaper. You mentioned Syria and I want to ask you a specific question as professionals because the politicians all the time they are speaking about Syria, especially in Europe, as specially the foreign fighters as a main threat to Europe.

So we didn't hear that much as you are a security organization. So, what's your real assessment in the first place? And the second place, what are you doing in this contest? Do you think that the politicians, they are kidding with us when they are talking about a real threat or not? Thank you.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: First of all, the civil war unfolding now over a number of years in Syria is foremost a tragedy for Syria and its population. Secondly, there's no doubt that the events in Syria have a substantial de-stabilizing effect on the whole region of the Middle East, particularly a number of neighbours are becoming fragilized by events in Syria. Let me just highlight Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon who share borders with Syria. And of course then indirectly involved in having to guard their borders, make sure that the threat doesn't expand, etc.

The whole region is thus influenced by the events in Syria and it has substantial repercussions in general. We did not touch upon some of the details of the issues which you have just mentioned, but Syria is a very serious concern for all because it is in nobody's interest in having the Middle East de-stabilized with that conflict.

QUESTION: So why you are not talking about this as a main security threat while the European politicians, they are talking about this issue all the time? So are they kidding or exaggerating or not? What's your assessment? Sorry.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: I fail to see the disagreement in what you are expressing and what I said. We do consider Syria, the Syria issue to be a very serious issue which has repercussion for the Alliance security. And that's why we highlighted it.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: Next question.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: So we are not… as far as I know, nobody is kidding anybody.

QUESTION: Yes, Brooks Tigner, Jane's Defence. I have two questions for all three of you. Any can take it. First, how will the NATO Response Force fit into NATO's, as you see it, NATO's strategic adaptation to this changed security environment and Russia's tactics? And do you envision it to be used beyond training and interoperability in this new environment? Secondly, are you encouraging the national CHODS to further develop their special forces for this changed security environment? Thank you.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: Let me just start my chapeau on this issue. We in the light of unfolding events in Ukraine we have considered of course all possible venues to make sure that we adapt accordingly. And indeed the NRF is one of those issues which has been discussed and also the use of Special Operation Forces as such. But I will let SACEUR touch upon those operational matters.

GENERAL PHILIP M. BREEDLOVE: So certainly the NRF is a part of our considerations as to what we do next. We have to now look at this practice that Russia has of amassing large forces on borders in the name of exercises. Sometimes they exercise, sometimes they go across a sovereign border, as you heard me describe earlier.

And how do we adapt to that? We talked and I believe that in NATO we have all the right tools. We may just need to adapt those tools.

Right now the NRF does a superb job of doing exactly what we ask it to do. Are we asking it to do the right things in face of the new threats? That is part of the discussion that I believe we need to have.

And this relates primarily to the responsiveness of those forces. Right now my organization, and Jean-Paul's organization, trains, exercises and I evaluate the NRF to meet its stated goals and objectives and it does a magnificent job. But the question is, are we asking it to do the right things?

Is it responsive enough to meet the new threat? And that's what we'll be discussing over the next weeks.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: Right. Next question, in the front row.

QUESTION: (Associated Press) The Secretary General on Monday said that he expected that we'd now see Russian pressure brought to bear against Moldova and Georgia as the deadline for signature with agreement, of an agreement with the European Union approaches.

Have you gentlemen observed anything on the military realm in that area? Thank you.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: Generally speaking, and then I will hand over to SACEUR, generally speaking we are well aware of that dimension, the possibility of that dimension and indeed this has been addressed also during our discussions. As to details of it, Phil?

GENERAL PHILIP M. BREEDLOVE: So obviously we will not go into classified details here, but what you have seen in your own press is that some of the narrative that first played out in Crimea and then the narrative that started playing out in Eastern Ukraine, some of that now is playing out in Transnistria and Moldova.

So this is concerning and we need to keep our eye on it. I think it's too early to say that anything definitive is happening, but some of the circumstances that we saw play out in these two most recent issues we now see playing out to some degree in Transnistria.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: Thank you. Madam?

QUESTION: Terri Schultz, with National Public Radio and CBS News. General Breedlove or anyone else who'd care to take this question, what would constitute a meaningful pullback of Russian forces? I mean, you say you see some movement. How many would have to move and how far back would they have to pull into Russia for you to consider that a meaningful pullback?

And how many would it take before you would deem the situation safe again, and would that affect your future planning because now that you know they can do this, nothing's ever the same again?

GENERAL PHILIP M. BREEDLOVE: I'm happy to take that, and my answer may sound glib, but it's not. One hundred per cent pullback would be the right answer. These forces were brought to the border in the name of an exercise. They should return to their pre-exercise stationing areas.

As long as they remain in the area of the border or nearby the border, they remain a coercive force. And I don't think that that is the appropriate answer for a long-term position of the troops.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: I would just like to reinforce exactly what General Breedlove has said. It's 100 per cent, it's back to the garrisons where they belong, and not along the borders of Ukraine.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B TERMANSEN: Right we have a question over there, in the back.

QUESTION: (Inaudible), Czech News Agency. Do you gentlemen envisage any worsening of situation with ISAF because of the worse, because of the bad relations with Russia, I mean over flights and this kind of thing? Thank you.

GENERAL KNUD BARTELS: I do not see any reason why there should be any negative impact on our conduct of operations in Afghanistan. In as much as the operations, the ongoing operations are unfolding in quite satisfactory way and the plans for the future are in place, pending decisions to be made politically. But as to details I will refer to SACEUR.

GENERAL PHILIP M. BREEDLOVE: So some detailed answers. No. The return routes that we use which involve Russian would see no change in and there are areas in ISAF where it is very much in Russia's interest to cooperate with us.

As you know the poppy crop and the flow of drugs out of Afghanistan affects Russia far more than the NATO nations. And so there are places where it is to our mutual benefit – theirs and ours – to continue to cooperate.

So the short answer is I see no worsening of the situation in ISAF right now as it relates to the current situation in Ukraine.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B TERMANSEN: Right. Next question, over there.

QUESTION: Jim Neuger, from Bloomberg. If I could just follow up the question of the Russian purported withdrawal, are you still working with a number of 40,000 Russian troops massed in forward position near the border, or are you able already to reduce that estimate? And what sort of emplacements or hardware have these initially withdrawn troops left behind? In other words, how quickly could they move back into an aggressive stance on the border?

GENERAL PHILIP M. BREEDLOVE: Again, the answer hasn't changed much from before. I don't mean to be glib again, but we have seen movement. It is I think too early to classify the size and nature of it. We have seen some loading of mechanized vehicles, etc, etc. We have seen some contonement areas that are not… there is no leave behind. So it's just too early to know.

But the scope of the movement that we have seen so far is… is not going to affect the capability of the very large force that's there now.

When we do get better indications of the actual sizes of the movements, I think we will be able to report better to you.

And remember that they have been claiming that there's movements for three days. We have finally just begun to see a little. So it's just too early to sort of be clear about what those numbers are.

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: We have time for two more questions. Next question.

QUESTION: Bonjour, Ian Cordisse, Agence Europe. J'ai une question pour le Général Paloméros. (Simultaneous translation)

I have a question for General Paloméros, please. It is bit of a follow up question, following up from what my colleague Brooks said. You all talked about the adaptation, the necessary adaptation given the changing security environment. Can you say how the ETEE programme is going to be modified in the coming years because this is a programme you've been working on for several years?

Now the context has changed. Is the nature of the exercises going to change in the geographical space, for example?

GENERAL JEAN-PAUL PALOMÉROS: In fact, I'll answer in French, the Connected Forces Initiative programme which was launched two years ago now and that we have developed and which is now a complete programme, it's already been implemented, we had Steadfast Jazz, which was the first manifestation of it, and this was a collective defence exercise in Poland quite recently ending in 2013. And this year we have other exercises. You may have followed the exercise with the NATO naval forces and the Spanish rapid reaction force. So you may have followed this.

So we have exercises that are very dynamic. They bring together all the components, national, multinational and NATO components involved. And we try to answer the requirements of training force availability on a permanent basis to try and enhance interoperability. But of course this programme must be adapted to a new environment. And this is what we're trying to do.

As Phil said, SACEUR, we're trying to do this. We've made proposals but it doesn't actually change the nature of the training programme itself because the programme is very comprehensive. It's just a question of readjusting the programme and it requires additional national resources to complement exercises.

We had the Estonian exercise, for example, which was re-oriented to some extent and came under the NATO banner. So this is part of the dynamics of the Connected Forces Initiative which I think is very promising to increase interoperability availability of NATO forces. (end of translation)

CAPTAIN (N) DAN B. TERMANSEN: Thank you. And the final question? Right. Madam?

QUESTION: News Agency Interfax Ukraine. I would like to repeat the question of my colleague because if earlier we heard that after Russian troops will receive an order to move to cross a border with Ukraine it will take 48 hours. What it will take now when they will have this order to withdraw? How many hours?

GENERAL PHILIP M. BREEDLOVE: Nothing has changed. As I said before, we've only seen a small movement of forces. The force that remains behind on the Ukrainian border right now is able to do exactly what it could do a week ago or two weeks ago.

So nothing has changed.

CAPTAIN DAN B. TERMANSEN: Right, that concludes the press conference. Thank you for coming. The video and transcripts will be available at the IMS website via the front page of NATO in a short while. Thank you.

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