North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Questions and answers

at the joint press point with General Petr Pavel, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee and General Mirko Šundov, Chief of Defence of Croatia
2016-09-17

Question: Phil Stewart from Reuters, a question for General Pavel. To what extent did Syria come up in the meetings at all and do you believe that the Alliance can approach Russia from a position of strength even as its largest military works/cooperates with, on the battlefield with Russia or do you think that would be a case of mixed messages? Thank-you

General Pavel: The fact that we have different foundations with Russia, we have different views on many things, doesn't mean that we can entirely exclude any cooperation with Russia. There are obviously issues where we have a common interest and one of them is the fight against terrorism. It is as painful to Russia as it is to any of our countries, so to exchange at the first stage intelligence with Russia, to de-conflict our activities in Syria serves not just to all of us but also to the populations as we can avoid more damages on civilian population.

You know that all NATO countries are part of the Coalition against ISIL in Syria and Iraq but NATO as an institution has n't been involved. This will change based on the decisions made by Heads of State and Government in Wales (Warsaw) and the decision was that NATO should take greater part in counter terrorism, not in direct combat but rather in supporting all activities in building local capacities to deal with the problem of terrorism. So we are now working on establishing a NATO mission or activity in Iraq focused on institution building at ministerial level and focused on training at the troop level to assist Iraq in dealing with the problem of terrorism with their own resources.

Question: (Croatian Journalist – not audible) KFOR, the situation in the Western Balkans with a particular emphasis on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

General Pavel: The situation in the Balkans in general, not only in Kosovo, is far from being absolutely stable so we are all aware and it was clearly stated by our Heads of State and Government in Warsaw that Western Balkans especially is still is a potential source of tensions and that we need to pay great attention to the situation there.

Some of the leaders have even expressed that Western Balkans and especially Bosnia-Herzegovina might be the next frontier for not only for Islamic extremism but for Russia and Russian influence in the region. So we pay great attention to all the developments in the region, we deal with all the countries in the region, we stay committed to the Partner cooperation and of course the CHoDs, the Chiefs of Defence today they have expressed their

view that the mission in Kosovo should be and should remain conditions-based. That means that before the conditions are met, not only in Kosovo itself but in the region that the mission should continue as it is today.

General Sundov: I would say that the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian Armed Forces will remain in the KFOR Operation and Kosovo with all the capabilities that we have there already. As far as Bosnia and Herzegovina is concerned, we have expressed our support to its approach to NATO as well as our support to all the activities the Alliance is undertaking in that sense. Regarding the region, we continue our activities within the framework of the US – Adriatic Charter – A5, a regional initiative supported by the United States, where Croatia and Albania as NATO members assist B&H, Macedonia and Kosovo to prepare as best as they can for future membership. Montenegro is a great example of this cooperation as it participated in the A5 exercises and cooperation and now is on the verge of becoming a full member of NATO.

Question: (Croatian Journalist – Translation not available) Regional security issues and terrorism.

General Pavel: Many regional issues have global implications and especially terrorism is a global phenomenon and we cannot limit it to one region only. So when we talk about potential extension of influence Islamic extremism through Bosnia-Herzegovina that means it is a concern of the whole Europe because not just the Balkans will be affected by that and by extension if Bosnia becomes a safe haven for extremists then even other continents including North America will be concerned. So it is in all our interest that Bosnia will remain safe and will not become such a haven so we really pay a lot of attention to the development of the situation, how the moves of extremists are changing and we'll obviously take necessary measures to prevent such a development.

Question: Jim Michaels, USA Today. General Pavel I just wanted to follow on the Iraq, excuse me, the Syria-Russia agreement. Are you concerned that that agreement may confer a level of legitimacy on Russia that may then raise concerns among European countries that would prefer to confront Russia on a number of other issues, in other words will it raise the level of legitimacy and perhaps undermine the cohesion in the NATO Alliance. Thank-you

General Pavel: It is interesting that you say some European Nations may be concerned more about confronting Russia than the US (laughter from room and General) but I would say we simply cannot talk about and think about Russia in black and white format. If we say that whatever sign of cooperation could be translated as a meltdown or some rapprochment with Russia or sign of legitimisation of Russia, then of course we will have to exclude all cooperation, all de-confliction.

I believe we have to stay pragmatic however stay also firm in our principles so wherever we identify there is a common interest we have to exploit it in a reasonable way. An agreement on ceasefire in Syria will probably be explained by Russian propaganda as a sign of

legitimisation but from our side it is clearly a necessity to facilitate the situation of civil population in Syria that is desperately in need of humanitarian assistance so in that sense I believe such a behaviour, such an agreement, is well justified and it needs to be taken in context.

Question: (Sandra Preljukic (NOVA TV) – Translation not available) Migration and Refugee issue.

General Pavel: I believe that Europe is now probably over sensitive to refugee issue. Some Nations have good reasons to be very sensitive because they were subject of significant flow of migrants last year. Some of the countries are facing reduced but still significant number of refugees even today but at the same time there is no imminent threat of huge wave of migrants coming from Middle East or from North Africa which would create similar wave as the last year. Not only that many measures have already been taken in Turkey, in Syria that allow a lot of people to come back or to change their mind to go to Europe. The flow will continue from North Africa until this security situation is unstable there but a number of measures have been taken by the European Union to put some regulatory measures on this migration so I do not expect any major wave coming though Balkan route and it if happens, then the migration flow is primarily the responsibility of the European Union rather than NATO. And it is not denouncing the responsibility by NATO, it's simply saying NATO has different tools at its disposal and it is difficult to imagine the use of combat ships, tanks or aircraft to stop unarmed refugees. Unlike NATO the EU is equipped with all the necessary tools, with proper facilities and organisations and NATO, if asked, by the EU can be in assistance.

Question: (Sandra Preljukic (NOVA TV) – Translation not available) Question about deployment of Croatian troops to the NATO eastern borders

General Pavel: I believe that question is to General Shundov, not to me.

General Sundov:

In any case, we have decided to employ one enhanced mechanized company to be engaged within the German-led battle group and deployed to Lithuania, at the beginning of 2018.

Question: (Sandra Preljukic (NOVA TV) – Translation not available) Question about the session of the National Security Council – whether any topics of greater interest to Croatian public were discussed and whether the safety of Croatian citizen is in any way endangered:

General Sundov: It was a regular session of the National Security Council. We talked about the migrant crisis and the HRV commitments resulting from the Warsaw Summit. That was all.

General Sundov: I would say that the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian Armed Forces will remain in the KFOR Operation and Kosovo with all the capabilities that we have there

already. As far as Bosnia and Herzegovina is concerned, we have expressed our support to its approach to NATO as well as our support to all the activities the Alliance is undertaking in that sense. Regarding the region, we continue our activities within the framework of the US – Adriatic Charter – A5, a regional initiative supported by the United States, where Croatia and Albania as NATO members assist B&H, Macedonia and Kosovo to prepare as best as they can for future membership. Montenegro is a great example of this cooperation as it participated in the A5 exercises and cooperation and now is on the verge of becoming a full member of NATO.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2016/09/17/questions-and-answers