North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Defence Ministers
2019-10-25

(As delivered)

Good afternoon.

We have just finished a meeting on Afghanistan, with all our operational partners in the Resolute Support Mission. NATO remains committed.And we continue to support the Afghan security forces with training and funding. This helps make the Afghan forces stronger, so they can fight international terrorism and create the conditions for peace. We discussed last month's presidential election. And I welcome that the Afghan forces played a key role in providing security for the vote.

All parties should now exercise calm and restraint, as the electoral bodies work to determine the result. We also discussed prospects for the peace process in Afghanistan. NATO supported the peace talks earlier this year. And I would welcome them being resumed.

But in order to make that possible, the Taliban need to demonstrate real willingness to make real compromises. To reach a credible peace deal.Over the past two days, Defence Ministers have addressed a number of other issues for our shared security. This includes the situation in northeast Syria.

We had an in-depth discussion yesterday.While Allies have different views, we agree that we must build on the significant reduction in violence to make progress in our efforts to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria.That we need to maintain commitment to our missions and operations in the region.

And that we must safeguard the gains we have made in the fight against our common enemy, ISIS.

It is important that we continue exploring all means to achieve a sustainable solution on the ground. In this respect I welcome the proposal from the German defence minister for a safe zone and increased international involvement.

We also discussed, together with our partners, the European Union, Finland and Sweden, NATO's response to hybrid threats, and our work to increase national resilience.

Allies agreed an update to our baseline requirement for civilian telecommunications, including 5G.

These requirements include the need for thorough risk and vulnerability assessments.

Including to identify and mitigate cyber threats.

As well as the consequences of foreign ownership, control or direct investment.

This is important, because next generation telecommunications will affect every aspect of our society.

From transportation to healthcare to education.

As well as our military operations.

We also addressed NATO's missions and operations, from the Western Balkans to the Middle East. And we assessed our progress in increasing the readiness of our forces.

To keep our people safe, we need to be able to move our forces quickly, whenever required.

So today, ministers welcomed that we are now able to move planes across Europe with priority handling – something we call Rapid Air Mobility.

Allied aircraft supporting NATO missions will be given a NATO Call Sign.

And they will receive priority handling by Air Traffic Control in Europe.

This was made possible thanks to close cooperation with EUROCONTROL, which handles the flow of all air traffic over Europe.

Today we also discussed the progress the Alliance is making on burden sharing. We see a clear positive trend. This is the fifth consecutive year of increased defence spending across European Allies and Canada. By the end of next year, those Allies will have added a cumulative total of one hundred billion US dollars. But we still need to do more and this will be one of the main issues we address as we prepare for the Leaders Meeting in London.

This Ministerial has helped lay the ground for the meeting of NATO leaders in London in December.

Together, we are working to keep our Alliance strong and secure.

And with that, I am ready to take your questions.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: Okay, we'll start with Hürriyet, second row.

Question [Hürriyet Daily News]: Thank you, Secretary General, this is from Serkan Demirtas, Hürriyet Daily News, Turkey. And my question will be on the future of the Active Fence operation, especially after the Italian government has decided to end the deployment of their batteries on Turkish soils. And we are also hearing reports that a similar decision may also be taken from the Spanish government, who has a Patriot battery on Turkey and on the Incirlik base. So, did you hear any pledge from any Allied country yesterday or today, for the substitution of the departure of the Italian batteries or potential departure of the Spanish batteries? Thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: NATO Allies have, for several years now, provided Turkey with what we call assurance measures, different kinds of support, more naval presence, port visits, presence on land and also augmented Turkish air defences. This has been done by rotation between Allies, so different Allies have provided different capabilities over several years, back to 2013, 2014.

So the Italian decision is something they made this spring, is as a result of the fact that they have been there for a long time. And it's a decision which has been taken several months ago, as part of the fact that they have been there for a long time and their mandate is ending by the end of the year.

Spain provides Patriot batteries. Italy has provided SAMP/T batteries. I expect that any extension of the Spanish presence will be taken in consultation with Allies, and this is part of the normal rotation of Allies providing different kinds of assurance measures and augmentation of the Turkish air defences.

Oana Lungescu: Okay, we'll go to Salam Watandar.

Question [Radio Salam Watandar]: Thank you. Yesterday, you mentioned that this ministerial will set grounds for the summit on recommitment on Afghanistan. Will there be any changes to the scope and scale of NATO's commitment to Afghanistan, with a potential peace deal with the Taliban on the horizon?

Jens Stoltenberg: So what we have seen is that NATO Allies and partners are committed to our mission in Afghanistan. And in one way, that's quite impressive, that after 18 years, 29 Allies and many partners stay committed to the train, assist and advise mission in Afghanistan. We do so because we stand in solidarity with Afghanistan, with the people of Afghanistan, but also because it is in our interest to make sure that Afghanistan doesn't become, once again, a platform, a country where international terrorist groups can train, prepare, plan, terrorist attacks on our own countries. So we are in Afghanistan to protect ourselves, to make sure that we don't see anything similar to what happened back 9/11 against the United States. And that's the reason why we are committed. And that's the reason why heads of state reconfirmed that commitment at the summit last year. Why? Actually, all Allies and partners did that today in the meeting. And not only did they say that they are committed, but Allies and partners, committed forces, troops, trainers, advisers to the Afghan

security forces to help them fight international terrorism, fight Taliban and to stabilise their own country.

Having said all that, of course, we have constantly adjusted the size and the exact numbers of troops we have in Afghanistan. And that's part of the constant work we have to do to optimise the mission. And we will continue to do that. Also to make sure that we have a sustainable mission. So numbers may go a bit up and a bit down, as they have done before, but there is a very strong commitment across the Alliance and from partners to continue to support Afghanistan, because we also strongly believe that the only way to reach a credible peace deal is to send a very clear message to Taliban that they will not win on the battlefield. They have to sit down and not only talk, but actually make real compromises for a real and credible peace deal.

Oana Lungescu: Okay. 1TV.

Question [1TV]: Thank you so much, Mr Secretary General. I am Hamid from 1TV. How might that ISIS is trading in Afghanistan, it is serious, because yesterday you also mentioned about that . . . that NATO will not let Daesh to become power in Afghanistan and take safe havens. And how … [inaudible] serious in Afghanistan after the peace process, when the NATO and US and Afghan reach an agreement with the Taliban?

Jens Stoltenberg: If I understood your question right, it was about ISIS in Afghanistan? Yeah, yeah. No, that just underpins or underscores the importance of the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Because we have successfully been able to fight and defeat Daesh, or the physical caliphate, in Iraq and Syria. And of course, we don't want that caliphate to be re-established in Afghanistan. We see that ISIS is really trying to get a foothold in Afghanistan. They have been responsible for some horrendous attacks and violence against civilians in Afghanistan. And of course, we don't want them to really get a platform in Afghanistan. So that just adds to the reason why it is important that we continue and why we are committed to our mission in Afghanistan, to help the Afghan security forces fight ISIS in Afghanistan and make sure they don't establish a caliphate in Afghanistan.

Oana Lungescu: TOLO?

Question [TOLO News]: Thank you very much. Mir Aqa Popal from TOLO News, Afghanistan. How much is the problem of corruption is serious in Afghanistan? About two months ago, US upheld about $160 million to Afghan government. And also, there are serious allegation against the President Ghani's team; they have misused some funds received from world community in the election campaign. How much is this of a problem, a serious?

Jens Stoltenberg: Corruption is a serious problem in Afghanistan. And that's also the reason why we have raised that issue again and again. And also why we are providing support to Afghanistan, partly by providing trainers, and we have made a lot of progress in building the Afghan army and security forces. We have to remember that not so long ago, NATO had over

140,000 combat troops in the combat operation in Afghanistan. Now we have roughly 16,000 in the train, assist and advise mission, and it's the Afghan forces who are now responsible for security in their own country. So we have made a lot of progress in modernising, training, helping the Afghans to take responsibility for their own country.

So we provide support with trainers, but we also provide support with funding. And of course, therefore, it's extremely important to fight corruption. And we do that, apparently, by always insisting on transparency, by making sure that we always do whatever we can to make sure that the money and the funding is really allocated to the purposes they're meant to finance. And also by working together, for instance, with the World Bank and other international institutions - they also participated in the meeting today, to make sure that we do this in the best possible way in a country which struggles with corruption.

We also work with Afghanistan to modernise the defence and security institutions. And of course, by doing that, we also helped to establish procedures, mechanisms, to fight corruption.

Oana Lungescu: Okay. Guardian please.

Dan Sabbagh [The Guardian]: Hi, I'm Dan Sabbagh from The Guardian. You referred earlier in your remarks, you're welcoming the German proposal, the initiative for, perhaps, an international deployment of some sort in Syria. Is there enough detail on that, do you think, for that to be sort of practical? I don't know, you were in the discussion, do you feel that that proposal is going to progress?

Jens Stoltenberg: I discussed this proposal with the German Defence Minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, and she also discussed that with other Allies during the meeting. I think we all welcome and I welcome proposals that can help us make progress on the ground in northern Syria. And we welcome the fact that we have seen a decrease in violence. But we need to build on that to create a more lasting and sustainable solution for Syria and the northeast of Syria. And therefore, I welcome her proposal to look into possibilities of an international safe zone and also for increased international engagement.

Then it still remains some works to be done on the many different details, and of course, to garner or to collect the necessary political support. But again, the present situation in northern Syria is not sustainable. And the international community has a responsibility to try to address all the challenges, the threats we see in northern Syria. And therefore, I welcome initiatives and ideas on how we can do that in a coordinated way as an international community.

Oana Lungescu: Washington Post, at the back.

Michael Birnbaum [The Washington Post]: Hi, thank you. Michael Birnbaum from The Washington Post. Secretary General, the Pentagon is considering a plan to send tanks and

troops back into Syria to help secure oil fields and potentially help the Kurdish forces there. Would you consider that to be a positive step? And how would it affect Alliance security interests for the US to go back and forth on its Syria strategy in this way? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: NATO is part of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh. We work with our Ally, Turkey, in that operation. And Turkey has been extremely important in fighting Daesh and enabling the progress we have made, defeating, or liberating, the territory that Daesh controlled, both in Syria and Iraq. We provide support to the Coalition also with our AWACS planes and we are on the ground in Iraq with a training mission.

We are not on the ground in northern Syria. And therefore, I've always been careful about commenting exactly on how different Allies are operating on the ground in northern Syria. I can just reconfirm that NATO is committed to fight our common enemy, ISIS. We will continue to play an active role, NATO and NATO Allies in the Global Coalition. We will provide trainers to our training mission in Iraq as well as Afghanistan, which is also relevant, because that's also about fighting ISIS. And we work for a political solution in northern Syria. But NATO will not . . . there has been no call for a NATO deployment of troops in northern Syria. And therefore, I will refrain from commenting on how different NATO Allies, or the United States, are conducting their activities in northern Syria.

Question: Thank you. The NATO operation in . . . in Afghanistan, as well as the NATO-supported operation in Syria, is about fighting terrorism and projecting stability. Now the United States have withdrawn the forces from Syria. Are you worried that the same thing will happen in Afghanistan, that the United States will withdraw forces and leaving the responsibility to the European Allies or . . . and what will the consequences be if that will be the case?

Jens Stoltenberg: The situation in northern Syria and the situation in Afghanistan are very different, because there has never been a NATO mandate or a NATO mission in northern Syria.

But that's a totally different thing when it comes to Afghanistan, because we are in Afghanistan as a direct result of 9/11. We have been there because we agreed also to invoke Article 5 after the attack on NATO on the United States in 2001. And we are there as a result of an attack on the United States.

So I think to compare the NATO mission in Afghanistan with the presence of some Allies, but not many, in northern Syria, that's two totally different things. And the United States has reiterated again and again that they stay committed to the mission in Afghanistan. But, at the same time, it was stated by ministers in this meeting again and again that we went into Afghanistan together, we make decisions on our presence there together and, when the time is right, we will leave together. We don't want to stay in Afghanistan longer than necessary. But at the same time, if we leave too early, the price can be very high, because then, first of

all, it will . . . the people of Afghanistan will suffer if we have a new Taliban, Shariah regime in Afghanistan.

Second, we will suffer, because it will weaken us in our common fight against a common enemy: international terrorism, ISIS. And, therefore, that's a totally different thing.

We will continue to adjust, to assess the mission and make necessary adjustments, but we are very committed. And the United States has restated again, again that they are, of course, also committed to a mission which was actually triggered by an attack on the United States.

Oana Lungescu: Deutsche Welle, second row please.

Iurri Sheiko [Deutsche Welle]: Thank you very much. Iurri Sheiko, Deutsche Welle. Secretary General, you said that ministers today updated these requirements for their civil preparedness, for their civil infrastructure in telecommunications. So could you please explain what . . . what is new in those baseline requirements? And the second part to it: are there any concrete companies mentioned there like Huawei? Thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg: NATO decided a few years ago to have what we call . . . or to step up our effort to make sure that all Allies are resilient, because Article 3 of our founding treaty states clearly that Allies have to be resilient. It's partly about having the necessary military forces, but it is also about being resilient and protecting civilian infrastructure. Based on that, we developed, some years ago, baseline requirements, seven different baseline requirements for different kinds of civilian infrastructure, including energy, transportation and so on.

What we have done today is to agree revised and updated baseline requirements for telecommunications, including 5G. And what is new is that since that the technological development is moving so fast, just to update them, these guidelines or requirements, to reflect that technological change is a major undertaking. And we have had some of our best experts working on this for some time. And based on their advice, their recommendations, the ministers agreed updated guidelines. They are quite detailed and quite technical. But the main message is that . . . and the old guidelines didn't address 5G at all. Because that was in a way before 5G was so much a part of our modern societies. Now, 5G is part of this. And the main message is that all Allies need to have further risk assessments, including the necessary mitigation measures, procedures in place to protect against cyber-attacks and also assessments of the risks related to foreign ownership, control and many other aspects of potential vulnerabilities related to telecommunications in general and 5G networks in particular.

These guidelines are not about a specific country or a specific company, but they establish some requirements which we expect all Allies to meet, because we all dependent, as a military alliance, that civilian infrastructure, including 5G, is working in peace time, in crisis and in conflict.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. This concludes his press point. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: Thank you.

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