North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the release of his Annual Report 2019
2020-03-19

(As delivered)

Good morning.

And welcome to this virtual launch of the 2019 Annual Report.

Let me start by addressing the COVID-19.

This is a global pandemic which affects us all.

I express my condolences to those who have lost loved ones;

my solidarity with all those who suffer from the virus;

and my gratitude to the health workers and all those on the front line, who are fighting this crisis day and night,

often in very difficult conditions.

I also pay tribute to the military personnel in Allied countries, who are supporting efforts to combat the virus.

This is a trying time for all of us – as individuals, communities and nations.

A time when our resilience is tested to the limit.

And when many NATO Allies are having to take unprecedented decisions.

With tough social and economic consequences.

From the beginning, NATO has been implementing robust measures.

To limit the spread of the virus.

To reduce the risks to our soldiers and civilians,

and the communities they serve.

And to ensure that our essential work continues.

To maintain deterrence and defence for our nations.

The health and the safety of our personnel is paramount.

And it is vital to maintaining our readiness.

Just yesterday, we assessed the situation with our Supreme Commander, General Wolters.

As in the rest of the society, some of our people have been tested positive.

Some have been quarantined.

And some of our exercises have been modified or cancelled.

But NATO's ability to conduct operations has not been undermined.

Our forces remain ready.

And our work goes on.

Including in our multinational battlegroups in the east of our Alliance.

NATO Air Policing.

Our maritime deployments.

And our missions from Afghanistan to Kosovo.

Here at the NATO Headquarters, we have also taken preventative measures based on guidance from the World Health Organization.

And in close contact with the Belgian authorities.

These include limiting the number of staff and visitors coming into the building.

Increasing teleworking and health screening.

And ensuring social distancing.

This is also why I am holding this press conference virtually.

So we have prudent measures in place.

To ensure the safety of our staff.

And the continuity of our critical work.

NATO has also been working for many years to strengthen the resilience of our Allies.

And help them enhance preparedness across the whole of government, including in the health sector.

We will continue to consult, monitor the situation and take all necessary measures.

This is an unprecedented crisis.

But we have overcome crises before.

And together, we will overcome the coronavirus crisis.

***

As you can see from my Annual Report,

2019 was a year when we took big strides in further adapting NATO.

It was also the year when we marked our 70th anniversary.

Last year, we commissioned a survey, of almost 29,000 citizens across all 29 NATO Allies and North Macedonia.

The most comprehensive polling about NATO ever conducted.

The survey was conducted by Populus, an independent research and strategy consultancy.

And we are publishing the results for the first time in this Annual Report.

Let me set out the main results.

81% of the people across the Alliance believe that the collaboration between North America and Europe on safety and security is important.

Allied citizens strongly agree with the core principle of collective defence.

76% agree that other NATO Allies should defend them if attacked.

71% agree that their own country should act in defence of another Ally.

And 60% believe that their country's membership in NATO makes them less likely to be attacked.

If a vote was held, a clear majority – 64% - would vote to remain in NATO.

And only 9% would vote against.

So while results naturally vary across different countries, overall support for the NATO Alliance is strong.

This strong support for NATO shows that we are delivering.

In 2019, we further boosted our investment in defence.

Spending across the Alliance has increased in real terms by 4.6%.

We continued to strengthen our deterrence and defence.

Delivering on our Readiness Initiative.

And increasing our ability to move our forces across the Atlantic and in Europe.

We stood united faced with Russia's violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

We remained committed in the fight against terrorism, with our training missions in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

We enhanced our resilience by updating the baseline requirements for telecommunications infrastructure, including 5G.

And we declared space as our fifth operational domain.

Alongside land, air, sea and cyber.

At the meeting of NATO Leaders last December, we initiated a reflection process to further strengthen the political dimension of NATO.

And make a strong Alliance even stronger.

And we signed the accession protocol with North Macedonia.

Now that parliaments in all NATO countries have completed this ratification, we look forward to welcoming North Macedonia as NATO's thirtieth Ally very soon.

We live in an uncertain world.

The coronavirus outbreak has made clear that many of the challenges we face are too great for any one nation or organisation to face alone.

It is more important than ever that we stand together, work together, and support each other.

That is what NATO is all about.

The simple and powerful idea that we are stronger together than alone.

And NATO remains absolutely committed to its mission of providing peace and security for our nearly one billion citizens.

And with that, I'm ready to take your questions.

Thank you so much. We come to the end of this press conference.
Thank you to everyone for adapting to this virtual format.

And please all continue to apply the necessary measures to stay safe and healthy.

Keep a social distance, wash your hands.

And all those of you who can, stay at home.

Small steps can make a major difference.

Thank you.

Oana Lungescu [NATO spokesperson]: And the first question goes to Nick Fiorenza, from Jane's Defence, in London.

Nick Fiorenza [Jane's Defence Weekly]: Hello, my question is actually relat— . . . hmm, an echo here. And … [inaudible] how do you expect the COVID virus to affect Allies' aim to reach the 2 per cent of GDP spending? And also can . . . excuse me. Your … [inaudible] the increased defence spending, I think you were predicting that $400 billion more be spent by the mid-20s.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: It is clear that there will be severe economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis. And at least in the short term, there will also be severe consequences, not only for the total economy, but also for government budgets. When we speak about the long-term consequences, that is too early to say anything with certainty about what the long-term consequences will be.

We have to remember that when NATO Allies decided to invest more in defence, they did so because we live in a more uncertain, more unpredictable world, and therefore we need to invest more in defence. This has not changed. So I expect Allies to stay committed to investing more in our security. And we also have to remember that by investing more in our security, and in our armed forces, we're also providing surge capacity for all our societies to deal with unforeseen events, crises, natural disasters, as we, for instance, see now. Because we see that in many NATO Allied countries, the armed forces are actually providing support to the civilian society, with logistics, with military hospitals, military medical capabilities, providing support to the civilian society, dealing with the corona crisis. We have seen examples of military personnel being responsible for the disinfection of public places and also helping to control the borders.

So, by investing in our military, we also provide a capacity which has proven useful in supporting the civil society, dealing with crises like the corona crisis.

The 400 billion reflects the fact that NATO Allies already have increased defence spending significantly. And it is based on the national plans the Allies have submitted to NATO. And as I said, I expect them to stay committed, knowing that they are faced with a very difficult situation, including with the, at least short-term, severe economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you. The next question on Skype comes from Michael Birnbaum, Washington Post, speaking from Brussels.

Michael Birnbaum [Washington Post]: Hello. Hello from Brussels, hello from … [inaudible]. Mr Secretary General . . . sorry, I'm getting an echo. Belgium has advised against gathering in large groups; the White House says people shouldn't gather in groups of more than ten. I just heard you talk about measures that NATO is taking to protect itself against the threat of coronavirus, but I still have a question. You know, why are NATO's senior leadership and ambassadors holding meetings, … [inaudible] people in the same room, or doing some … [inaudible] distancing? What plan do have if you all are exposed to coronavirus, have to self-quarantine, or, worse, you're hospitalised? And why are you still … [inaudible] hold the meeting of foreign ministers in April, when the EU and others are holding video conferences? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: So we started to implement measures already in January, when we got the first reports about the spread of the coronavirus, and we have gradually stepped up those measures. And now we have reduced significantly the number of people working in these headquarters. And hardly visitors are coming to the building anymore. And we have also reduced, dramatically, the number of meetings.

At the same time, we think it is important that NATO can deliver on our core responsibility: to make sure that we deliver credible deterrence and defence every day and that our forces stay ready and that we are able to act if needed. And that's the reason why NATO continues to work and NATO continues to deliver on our core responsibilities.

We will, of course, constantly assess whether we should implement further measures. We have, you know, checks, medical checks on everyone that enters this building. We are conveying a clear message about the importance of social distancing and other measures, according . . . or in line with the recommendations from the World Health Organization.

So we started early and we have a dedicated task force dealing with handling the consequences of the coronavirus crisis. And we will monitor and are ready to step up our measures if needed.

When it comes to meetings in the future, we have not made any final decisions on how to organise or how to convene those meetings, but we will make sure that we are responsible in the way we conduct meetings, also in the future. And that includes, of course, also ministerial meetings.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. We now go to Julian Barnes from The New York Times, who's calling from Washington, DC.

Julian Barnes [New York Times]: Thanks for the question. I wanted to ask about Afghanistan. I want to ask, the Taliban's continued violence, the political questions of leadership in the outbreak of the coronavirus, is going to impact the drawdown, … [inaudible] impacting NATO operations there, from your perspective?

Jens Stoltenberg: We have no reported cases of coronavirus among the personnel we have in Afghanistan, and we continue to implement the decision to reduce the number of NATO personnel in Afghanistan. At the same time, we will make sure that we do that in a way which is responsible and which protects the health and the safety of our personnel, which is always our top priority.

But I believe it's absolutely possible to continue the drawdown, but do that in a responsible way. And we had General Wolters, Supreme Allied Commander Europe in NATO yesterday, and he updated us on the different NATO missions and operations, including the mission in Afghanistan and the ongoing drawdown.

We are going to reduce the number of troops, NATO troops in the NATO Train, Assist and Advise Mission from around 16,000 soldiers, personnel, to around 12,000. With that level of troops in the mission, we will be able to maintain the mission as it is today, meaning the same structure and continue to provide training, assistance and advice to the Afghan security forces.

It actually brings us roughly back to the same level we had in the NATO Training Mission before we started to increase the number of troops, personnel, in the mission in 2016.

We, of course, call on the Taliban and we have stated again and again that our reduction in Afghanistan is conditions-based. And we call on the Taliban to live up to their part of the agreement. We will stay committed to Afghanistan. We will continue to train, assist and advise the Afghan security forces and also provide funding, because it is important that Taliban understands that they will never win on the battlefield. They have to make real compromises on the negotiating table. And perhaps the most important element, or at least one of the most important elements, of the agreement between the Taliban and the United States is the agreement to initiate intra,-Afghan dialogue intra-Afghan negotiations, because we need an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned political process to find a lasting, peaceful solution to Afghanistan.

The last thing I would say about Afghanistan is that the situation in Afghanistan is difficult and there are many challenges. And of course, we also see political challenges, which those who are part of the political . . . how should I say, environment in Afghanistan should address in a way that reduces tensions and make sure that they can engage in real political negotiations, or in real political negotiations with the Taliban. But we believe that the only way forward is

through a peaceful negotiated solution. And NATO's best contribution to that is to stay committed and continue to provide support to the Afghan security forces.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. We now go to Lailuma Sadid from Afghanistan Voice, who's calling us by Skype from Brussels.

Lailuma Sadid [Afghanistan Voice]: Thank you very much, Secretary General. I would like to ask: are you concerned about the current political crisis in Afghanistan? And do you think it's going to lead to violence? And second, when are you going to take out your troops from Afghanistan, and do have a plan for … [inaudible]?

Jens Stoltenberg: We are, of course, concerned about the political turmoil we see in Afghanistan today. I was in Kabul a couple of weeks ago when the deal was signed and we had the announcement of the deal between Taliban and the United States. And of course, to make sure that that deal is implemented, we need a united Afghan government that can be part of a political negotiating process. And that can make sure that we have an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process.

So, we urge all political forces in Afghanistan to find a solution, an inclusive solution, and to make sure that we are able, or that they are able to implement the agreement with Taliban.

I'm afraid I didn't hear the rest of your question, but if that was about when we are going to leave, well, the plan is to . . . this is not about leaving. This is about reducing our presence. And the plan is to go from roughly 16,000 to around 12,000 within 135 days. And we are implementing that plan in line with the US reduction. NATO Allies are also reducing their forces. But as I said, with 12,000 troops in the NATO Mission in Afghanistan, we will be able to continue to provide support, training and maintain the same structure of the Training Mission as today, with also presence outside Kabul.

And again, we believe that the best way for NATO to support the peace process is to make sure that Taliban understands that they will not win on the battlefield. They have to not only make compromises at the negotiating table, but have to implement and live up to their commitments they make in the different deals.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. We'll now go to Fredrik Holst from NTB, please.

Fredrik Holst [NTB]: Thank you. I'd like go to back to the survey briefly, if I may. So, while 81 per cent view collaboration across the Atlantic as important, only 65 per cent, which is less than two-thirds, say they would vote for membership, in some countries, only half of … [inaudible]. And how do you reconcile those numbers? What can . . . what can you and NATO do to convince more people that being a member is … [inaudible]? Especially about roughly one in six who believe in cooperation … [inaudible] think NATO is the answer?

Jens Stoltenberg: First of all, I think these numbers reflect a very strong support for NATO, regardless of how you ask the question. There is always strong support for NATO. Whether

it's about they trust NATO, they believe that NATO reduces the risks for being attacked, or whether they will vote for NATO, or whether they will be willing to be part of a military operation supporting, helping another country. So, it's a strong support to the idea of NATO: one for all, all for one. And strong support for the idea that by standing together, we are all safer.

Of course, it varies a bit between different countries. And it's not a hundred per cent in all countries. That will be very strange if that was the case, because we are 29 different Allies with different political parties, with different political history and geography, and therefore also the support for NATO varies. But the main message is strong support for NATO, regardless of how you ask the question.

Then I think that we have to understand that when you say that it's only two-thirds that will vote in favour of staying in NATO, that's actually a very strong number. Because that's two-thirds of the whole population. You have compare the 64 per cent that will vote in favour of staying in NATO to the 9 per cent that will vote against. And if you then exclude those who don't have an opinion, then you have, actually, extreme high support for NATO - I think it's roughly up to 90 per cent or something, in a real referendum.

So the reality is that 64 per cent out of the total population is a very strong support and has to be compared with 9 per cent voting against.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you. We'll now go to Teri Schultz from NPR/Deutsche Welle.

Teri Schultz [NPR]: Hi Sec Gen. … [inaudible]. I would like to ask the fact that Defender 20 was cancelled, or at least … [inaudible] curtailed, and … [inaudible] about the fact that there's already a lot of worry about readiness, about military mobility, and now the largest … [inaudible] that would have tested this, help figure out where the big … [inaudible] is not to be … [inaudible]. And at the same time, could you also address the fact that the European Union … [inaudible] next seven-year budget has zeroed the military … [inaudible] budget, [inaudible] that seemed to be working quite well, as NATO-EU cooperative fields and that doesn't seem to be important … [inaudible] anymore. Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg: First on the exercise. Well, as I said, we have adapted some exercises, modified some exercises and also cancelled some exercises. Defender 20, that's actually an exercise that was not cancelled, but it was modified, meaning that the full exercise was not implemented as planned. But we saw and SACEUR also briefed the NATO Council yesterday on . . . we saw how that exercise actually demonstrated how the US exercised the capability of moving equipment across the Atlantic, thousands of different pieces of equipment, and also exercising many US troops in Europe. So, yes, it was a bit smaller than planned, but at the same time, the exercise demonstrated the US commitment to European defence and the ability of moving forces and moving them around in Europe.

But the reality is, of course, that the corona crisis has implications also for our exercises. But what we know is that despite the fact that we have modified some exercises and this has not undermined NATO's ability to act if needed. Our forces are ready, NATO is working and, if needed, we are able to react.

So, our operational readiness is intact, is there, despite the fact that we have modified some exercises.

On military mobility, I think it's a bit early to comment on the EU budget, until we have seen a final agreement on the budget. But I would like to highlight that military mobility is partly about regulations, which have to be in place to make it easy to move forces, if needed, in times of crisis, but it's also about . . . not only about EU investments, but also national investments in infrastructure. And I'm confident that EU members understand the importance of investing in infrastructure in a way that also enables military mobility, because most of the . . . more than 90 per cent of the people living in the EU, they live in a NATO country. So this is also about protecting EU members, it's also very much about protecting NATO members.

On top of that, we have also NATO-financed investments in military infrastructure, airfields, harbours and other types of infrastructure. So investing in infrastructure, military mobility, is something which is not only dependent on EU budgets, it's also NATO budgets and national budgets.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you. The next question on Skype comes from Gjeraqina Tuhina from RFE/RL.

Gjeraqina Tuhina [RFE/RL]: Yes, Secretary General, has NATO HQ had any kind of indication or information about the possible withdrawal of US troops from KFOR in Kosovo?

Jens Stoltenberg: NATO stands committed to our KFOR mission in Kosovo. It has a clear UN mandate and it helps to create a safe and secure environment for all people living in Kosovo.

At the same time, we strongly support the resumption of the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue. We are calling for restraint and calm to address the tensions we see in Kosovo. And we . . . and I have also expressed many times that the hundred per cent tariffs, the very high tariffs, which Kosovo imposed on goods from Serbia, are . . . or is not helpful. So, we support all efforts to try to start again the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, because that's the only way towards a lasting solution for the conflict in the region.

And then, I would also like to add that NATO is also playing a key role in addressing, for instance, the issues related to air-traffic and the lower airspace over Kosovo. And we have seen some steps forward in that process lately and we continue to work hard to try to find a way to normalise the airspace over Kosovo as part of the efforts to normalise the situation in the region.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. We have the next question from Damon Wake from Agence France-Press.

Damon Wake [Agence France-Press]: Hello, sorry, I lost the connection there. I want to ask about the upcoming Foreign Ministerial. Is the plan for this still to go ahead with ministers … [inaudible]? And on the … [inaudible] corona . . . coronavirus budget issue. Is it the case that there will be … [inaudible] any flexibility around the 2 per cent targets … [inaudible] to that rigidly?

Jens Stoltenberg: I'm sorry, I wasn't able to hear all the . . . or everything you said, but I think I got the main question. The first was about the Foreign Ministerial, and the second was about defence spending.

First, on the Foreign Ministerial. So, we are not . . . the plan is to have a Foreign Ministerial Meeting early April, but we have not made any final decision on how to conduct that meeting, because, of course, we have to take into account that the coronavirus has consequences for travelling and for the possibility of gathering many people in the same room. So we are now assessing whether we will organise that as a physical meeting, as we normally do, or whether we will find other ways to conduct the meeting. No final decision has been made today, or at this moment.

And let me just add a more general reflection on that. The balance for NATO and for many other institutions, critical institutions, is that we need to find a balance between protecting our staffs, our people, help to prevent the spread of the virus, but at the same time, making sure that NATO is functioning in a critical time, where we have more uncertainties and more challenges than we have seen for many, many years. So, for us, it is a question of finding the right way to balance those two considerations: implementing measures to prevent the spread of the virus, but at the same time, making sure that NATO is delivering our core responsibility: credible deterrence and defence also in difficult times.

On defence spending, what we know is that the coronavirus crisis will have severe economic consequences, at least on the short term. It will also have consequences and significant consequences for government budgets. Having said that, I also know that NATO Allies all agreed to invest more in our security, because they see that we live in a more uncertain world, with new threats and new challenges. And this has not changed, unfortunately.

And we also see how military action now provides an extra capacity, surge capacity for the civilian society to deal with crisis, as the corona crisis. All over NATO Allied countries, we see how military personnel are helping the health sector to deal with the crisis, but also helping to control borders, field hospitals, logistics and so on. So, enlisting in the military provides also a capacity which has proven extremely useful in dealing with surprises, crises, natural disasters or health crises as the coronavirus.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you. We have time for two or three more questions and we now go to Thomas Gutschker from Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Thomas Gutschker [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]: Secretary General, thank you very much. When you say that all NATO troops maintain readiness, what exactly does that mean in practice for the troops that are in operations, be it in Afghanistan or in the Baltic states? Which practical measures have been taken to prevent the spread of infections among these troops that certainly do not do telework from their homes? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: First of all, I think we have to understand that this is difficult for all of us, but especially those who are living far away from their loved ones. And NATO personnel, in NATO mission and operations, be it in Afghanistan or Iraq or in Kosovo, or German troops that maybe deployed . . . or are deployed in Lithuania, they are far from home. They are far from their loved ones. And I believe that many of them would have liked to be much closer to home, much, much closer to their family and loved ones.

So, therefore, I actually express my gratitude to all those people that continue to serve in a difficult time. We have no reported cases of coronavirus in . . . also from, for instance, our missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo. But of course, they have implemented measures, they have taken preventive measures to deal with the threat of the corona . . . the spread of the coronavirus.

Military personnel in military operations, of course, they stay, they live close. They live in the barracks. They have some special challenges related to how they actually live their lives. But I also think they have some advantages, because they are used to discipline. They're used to very strict routines. So, for instance, routines related to, you know, washing your hands or social distancing and that kind of thing are now strictly implemented in all our missions and operations.

And again, our Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Wolters, briefed Allies on these measures which are now implemented in all our missions and operations, to make sure that the battlegroups in the Baltic countries and Poland, or the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan, or our naval presence. The Standing Maritime Groups are operational, even in times where we see the coronavirus as a global pandemic.

And the message is that our forces are ready. Our operations are working. And we are ready to react if there is a need, regardless of where the threat is coming from.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you. Next question to Güldener Sonomut from NTV, please.

Güldener Sonomut [NTV]: Yes, Secretary General, good morning. I have a question with regard to Article 4 and … [inaudible] that has been … [inaudible] for years, for NATO to reinforce the southern border of Turkey, which is the … [inaudible] of NATO. There are still … [inaudible] on this topic, and it is not new … [inaudible] since 2014-15 has been … [inaudible]

meeting about two weeks ago, apparently there are still a lot of … [inaudible] to that end. Could you reassure that in one way or the other, this … [inaudible] appetite by member states to … [inaudible] or not? Thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg: I had really some problems with hearing the full question, but my understanding is that it was about Article 4 and the consultations with Turkey after the attack in the Idlib province and also the assurance measures, which NATO has provided, or is providing to Turkey. So, I will at least reflect or respond to that.

So, first, we had a meeting which Turkey called for, a couple of weeks ago, after the attacks on Turkish forces in Idlib. NATO Allies condemn the attack. The indiscriminate bombing of targets in the Idlib province has caused enormous suffering and killed a lot of people, including also then, Turkish soldiers. Therefore, we strongly also welcome the ceasefire. And now we need to do whatever we can to make sure that the ceasefire in the implement . . . in the Idlib province holds, because that's the first step towards a more lasting political, negotiated solution to the crisis in Idlib and in Syria. And we support the UN-led efforts. And we also call on both Russia and the Assad regime, who are responsible for these attacks, to fully engage in a constructive way in UN-led efforts to find a political solution.

No other NATO Ally is more affected by the crisis, the violence, the turmoil in Syria than Turkey. Turkey hosts close to 4 million refugees. They have suffered more terrorist attacks than no other NATO Ally and NATO provides support to Turkey. We have agreed some assurance measures. Meaning that we have AWACS planes. We have had some more naval presence and NATO, or NATO Ally, Spain, is also delivering capabilities to augment the Turkish air defences with the Patriot battery.

We are looking into what more we can do to provide assurance, support, to Turkey because, as I said, no other Ally is more affected by the violence, the turmoil in Syria than Turkey.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. We now have time for the very last question, which goes to Ketevan Kardava from Imedi-TV, Georgia.

Ketevan Kardava [Imedi-TV]: Good morning Secretary General, Oana. Hello to everyone. Is this a new reality when we, everyone are dealing with this unprecedented virus? We would like to know if ongoing situation and our fight against COVID-19 influence our plans, NATO-Georgia plans for 2020 … [inaudible]. And also … [inaudible] what we have done together, … [inaudible] before COVID-19. Thank you so much, take care, and hope to see you very, very soon.

Jens Stoltenberg: First of all, NATO very much appreciate and value the close and strong partnership with Georgia. Georgia is an important partner for NATO and NATO provides, also, support to Georgia – practical support, political support.

And last year, we had the North Atlantic Council visiting Georgia. We had several meetings with the Georgian leadership, both in Tbilisi, but also here in Brussels. And we continue to support Georgia, not least by helping Georgia to implement reform of their security and defence sector. And also to move towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

Georgia is a highly-valued partner, because also Georgia contributes to NATO missions and operations. Georgia has, for many years, been one of the partners, or actually one of the countries that provides the highest number of troops to our Mission in Afghanistan. And we are extremely grateful. And we know that many Georgian soldiers have paid the ultimate price in the operation in Afghanistan, fighting international terrorism.

We will continue to work closely with Georgia. We have a programme which has agreed on how to continue to provide support. We, for instance, have also now started to work with the Coast Guard, we had some exercises and we have plans in place to continue that support.

When it comes to meetings and visits, of course, that has to be decided when we see how the coronavirus crisis develops or evolves, because we have been forced to cancel so many things, some visits, both incoming visits, but also travel from NATO Headquarters to other countries, including partner countries, to reduce the likelihood of any spread of the coronavirus.

So it is a bit early to say what the consequences will be, but regardless of whether there will be some cancellations, NATO Allies will stay committed. NATO will continue to provide support, but perhaps with some fewer meetings and visits than originally planned.

Oana Lungescu: And this is our last question. Thank you very much. Secretary General, you have the last word.

Jens Stoltenberg: Thank you so much. We have come to the end of this press conference. And thank you everyone for adapting to this virtual format.

And please all continue to apply the necessary measures to stay safe and healthy. Keep a social distance. Wash your hands. And all of those of you who can, stay at home. Small steps can make a major difference. Thank you.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2020/03/19/press-conference