North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Joint press briefing

by NATO Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen and new SACEUR General Breedlove at the change of command ceremony (followed by Q&A session)
2013-05-13

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN (NATO Secretary General): Good afternoon. I am honoured to be here today for this handover ceremony, to thank Admiral Stavridis for his outstanding contribution to transatlantic security and wish him a happy voyage home, and to welcome our new Supreme Allied Commander, General Breedlove, to the Alliance.

General Breedlove, you bring to SHAPE great leadership, vast experience, and a collaborative approach. You have a strong basis to build on. Our mission in Afghanistan will soon pass an important milestone, marking the progress we have made. As Afghan Security Forces take the lead for security across the country, ISAF is shifting from a combat to a support role. With this milestone our goal is within reach.

I appreciate the work by the NATO military authorities to plan the new mission, to train, advise, and assist Afghan forces after 2014. You will play a decisive role in preparing this deployment. Our new mission will send a clear signal that 2014 is not the end of NATO's commitment to Afghanistan, but the start of a new and different chapter.

In Kosovo we must remain vigilant. NATO has ensured a safe and secure environment for over a decade and KFOR is seen as the guarantor of peace and security for all the people as Belgrade and Pristina are working to implement their historic agreement.

NATO's commitment to support the implementation of the agreement remains key for success, and I hope that it will soon translate into further improvements of the security situation on the ground in northern Kosovo.

Our patrol mission in the Mediterranean, our anti-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia and our Patriot deployment in Turkey will also require your utmost attention. And we must continue to enhance NATO's ability to address cross-border threats such as missiles, terrorism and cyber-attacks.

We face these tasks and challenges amid tough economic times. And amid an increasingly complex security situation around the world. But I know you come well prepared. You are an experienced leader and I'm looking very much forward to working with you in the years ahead.

GENERAL PHILIP BREEDLOVE (SACEUR): Thank you, Mr. Secretary. And I look forward to being on this great team that you lead. I look forward to some tough years of work, but fruitful years of work.

To the members of the press assembled, thank you for being here. I look forward to a long relationship with you across the next few years as we communicate together to get the message of this great command out.

I do look forward to this great job that I have taken a hold of today. My wife and I, as you have heard, have served seven times and now this will be our eighth time in Europe. I've been on the NATO team since the early eighties. I've served alongside many of the men and women of your nations as I served with our U.S. Army and later then, as I served in the U.S. Air Force. And I know the great strength of this team. I know the great cooperation of this team. And I think that is what we need to look forward to in the future as we face our challenges; that we do fall together rather than apart as we face these challenges.

I'm really pleased to be here, and I look forward to taking your questions. Mr. Secretary, thank you one more time for your confidence.

Q: Adrian Croft from Reuters. A question about Syria following this... the weekend car bomb attacks in Syria. Firstly, for the Secretary General, has Turkey asked for consultations with NATO or made any requests for additional NATO support? And for General Breedlove, can I ask whether the car bombings of the weekend will prompt any more NATO action in support of Turkey, or any more involvement by NATO in the Syrian conflict?

Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: No, Turkey has not requested meetings or consultations. Obviously, we strongly condemn the attacks and we follow the situation closely, but so far Turkey has not requested consultations or any further support.

GENERAL PHILIP BREEDLOVE: The Secretary has got it right. Turkey hasn't asked for any further support at this time and so we are, as always, concerned about the defence of a great Ally like Turkey, but at this time we have no request.

Q: Teri Schultz with National Public Radio and CBS News. Welcome, sir. And now the harder part, Secretary General, and also General, if you'd like to comment, the Patriots are near the border with Syria to protect against airborne threats to an Ally. Now you've got threats coming in on the ground, possibly. I understand we don't know the source, perhaps, of the car bombs yet, but what can NATO do about that? If you're there to protect the populations don't you also have a responsibility on the ground as well as possible missiles?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: I think we should all recall that Turkey has a very strong defence herself. But obviously if Turkey requests consultations and further support that will be

considered within the Alliance, but as I stated, so far, we have not received any new request from Turkey.

Q: Sonomut(ph) from NTV Turkey. I know that in the past you have prepared some contingency plan with regard the possible escalation between Turkey and Syria, and therefore, I was wondering whether you still continue to update it, and whether you expect from Turkey in the near future any additional requests, or at least an initiative coming from either SHAPE or either the NAC? Thank you.

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: As a matter of principle we never comment on contingency plans, but I can assure you that we have all plans in place, and we have all updated plans in place to ensure effective defence and protection of Turkey.

Q: To the General... (inaudible...) from AFP. What's your biggest priority and maybe the biggest challenge you face as SACEUR?

GENERAL PHILIP BREEDLOVE: Okay, I'm going to not answer the question you asked. I'm going to give you two big priorities, because I think the first priority is the cohesion of this great Alliance. As we change the way we are doing business in Afghanistan we need to fight to continue to hang on to all of the gains that we have made across the last ten years.

NATO forces have become so much more interoperable, so much more capable together because we have been in this great conflict together for almost 12 years. And what we can't afford to do is to relax as our posture changes in Afghanistan and to lose that great cohesion.

And then secondarily, we have to get the transition in Afghanistan right. We simply have to make sure that we are handing over to a capable force that can keep Afghanistan secure and prepare for a great future in that nation.

Q: I'm from Belgium. I have a question about Belgium and this Headquarters. Can you assure us that SHAPE won't move? There has been many fears a few years ago. In the next future will this Headquarters stay here?

GENERAL PHILIP BREEDLOVE: Ma'am, I've been in the job for about 12 minutes I think, maybe 15 minutes, and I am aware of no plans to change where this Headquarters is. But this is something that we will review in the future.

I will say this to you, from Belgium. I've served in Spain, I've served in Italy and I've served in Germany many times. I'm really looking forward to now serving in Belgium and getting to know the people and the culture here.

Q: Adrian Croft again. For General Breedlove, could we ask you if you have any more precise date as to when the final tranche of the handover in Afghanistan will happen? I know we're expecting that to happen in the spring, but will that be towards the end of June, do you think?

And also, do you have any... can you give us any thoughts about how big the post-2014 mission will have to be?

GENERAL PHILIP BREEDLOVE: I can't really satisfy with either. I know that the consultations are going on now for the handover at the last tranche. I think it will be sooner, rather than later, but this is something that we'll talk to General Dunford, and obviously the government of Afghanistan about that decision.

MODERATOR: Okay, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much, we appreciate your time this afternoon. Thank you.

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