

Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good afternoon. Let me begin by thanking my great friend, Prime Minister Cameron -- and his entire team -- for hosting this NATO Summit and making it such a success. And I want to thank the people of Newport and Cardiff and the people of Wales for welcoming me and my delegation so warmly. It's a great honor to be the first sitting U.S. President to visit Wales.

We've met at a time of transition and a time of testing. After more than a decade, NATO's combat mission in Afghanistan is coming to an end. Russia's aggression against Ukraine threatens our vision of a Europe that is whole, free and at peace. In the Middle East, the terrorist threat from ISIL poses a growing danger. Here at this summit, our Alliance has summoned the will, the resources and the capabilities to meet all of these challenges.

First and foremost, we have reaffirmed the central mission of the Alliance. Article 5 enshrines our solemn duty to each other -- "an armed attack against one...shall be considered an attack against them all." This is a binding, treaty obligation. It is non-negotiable. And here in Wales, we've left absolutely no doubt -- we will defend every Ally.

Second, we agreed to be resolute in reassuring our Allies in Eastern Europe. Increased NATO air patrols over the Baltics will continue. Rotations of additional forces throughout Eastern Europe for training and exercises will continue. Naval patrols in the Black Sea will continue. And all 28 NATO nations agreed to contribute to all of these measures -- for as long as necessary.

Third, to ensure that NATO remains prepared for any contingency, we agreed to a new Readiness Action Plan. The Alliance will update its defense planning. We will create a new highly ready Rapid Response Force that can be deployed on very short notice. We'll

increase NATO's presence in Central and Eastern Europe with additional equipment, training, exercises and troop rotations. And the \$1 billion initiative that I announced in Warsaw will be a strong and ongoing U.S. contribution to this plan.

Fourth, all 28 NATO nations have pledged to increase their investments in defense and to move toward investing 2 percent of their GDP in our collective security. These resources will help NATO invest in critical capabilities, including intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and missile defense. And this commitment makes clear that NATO will not be complacent. Our Alliance will reverse the decline in defense spending and rise to meet the challenges that we face in the 21st century.

Fifth, our Alliance is fully united in support of Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and its right to defend itself. To back up this commitment, all 28 NATO Allies will now provide security assistance to Ukraine. This includes non-lethal support to the Ukrainian military -- like body armor, fuel and medical care for wounded Ukrainian troops -- as well as assistance to help modernize Ukrainian forces, including logistics and command and control.

Here in Wales, we also sent a strong message to Russia that actions have consequences. Today, the United States and Europe are finalizing measures to deepen and broaden our sanctions across Russia's financial, energy and defense sectors. At the same time, we strongly support President Poroshenko's efforts to pursue a peaceful resolution to the conflict in his country. The cease-fire announced today can advance that goal, but only if there is follow-through on the ground. Pro-Russian separatists must keep their commitments and Russia must stop its violations of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Beyond Europe, we pay tribute to all those from our ISAF mission, including more than 2,200 Americans, who have given their lives for our security in Afghanistan. NATO's combat mission ends in three months, and we are prepared to transition to a new mission focused on training, advising and assisting Afghan security forces. Both presidential candidates have pledged to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement that would be the foundation of our continued cooperation. But, as we all know, the outcome of the recent election must be resolved. And so we continue to urge the two presidential candidates to make the compromises that are necessary so Afghans can move forward together and form a sovereign, united and democratic nation.

Finally, we reaffirmed that the door to NATO membership remains open to nations that can meet our high standards. We agreed to expand the partnership that makes NATO the hub of global security. We're launching a new effort with our closest partners -- including many that have served with us in Afghanistan -- to make sure our forces continue to operate together. And we'll create a new initiative to help countries build their defense capabilities -- starting with Georgia, Moldova, Jordan and Libya.

I also leave here confident that NATO Allies and partners are prepared to join in a broad, international effort to combat the threat posed by ISIL. Already, Allies have joined us in Iraq, where we have stopped ISIL's advances; we've equipped our Iraqi partners, and

helped them go on offense. NATO has agreed to play a role in providing security and humanitarian assistance to those who are on the front lines. Key NATO Allies stand ready to confront this terrorist threat through military, intelligence and law enforcement, as well as diplomatic efforts. And Secretary Kerry will now travel to the region to continue building the broad-based coalition that will enable us to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

So, taken together, I think the progress we've achieved in Wales makes it clear that our Alliance will continue to do whatever is necessary to ensure our collective defense and to protect our citizens.

So with that, let me take a few questions. I'll start with Julie Pace of the Associated Press.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I wanted to go back to the situation in Ukraine. If this cease-fire does take effect and appears to be holding, would you and your European counterparts back away from these sanctions that you say you've prepared? Or do you feel that it's important to levy these sanctions regardless of this cease-fire agreement? And if I could go back to the Rapid Response Force, can you say specifically what U.S. contributions will be in terms of troop numbers and equipment? Is it beyond the agreement that you announced -- or the proposal you announced in Warsaw?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: With respect to the cease-fire agreement, obviously we are hopeful, but based on past experience also skeptical that, in fact, the separatists will follow through and the Russians will stop violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. So it has to be tested.

And I know that the Europeans are discussing at this point the final shape of their sanctions measures. It's my view that if you look at President Poroshenko's plan, it is going to take some time to implement. And as a consequence, for us to move forward based on what is currently happening on the ground with sanctions -- while acknowledging that if, in fact, the elements of the plan that has been signed are implemented -- then those sanctions could be lifted is a more likely way for us to ensure that there's follow-through. But that's something that obviously we'll consult closely with our European partners to determine.

I do want to point out, though, that the only reason that we're seeing this cease-fire at this moment is because of both the sanctions that have already been applied and the threat of further sanctions, which are having a real impact on the Russian economy and have isolated Russia in a way that we have not seen in a very long time.

The path for Russia to rejoin the community of nations that respects international law is still there, and we encourage President Putin to take it. But the unity and the firmness that we've seen in the Transatlantic Alliance in supporting Ukraine and applying sanctions has been I think a testimony to how seriously people take the basic principle that big countries can just stomp on little countries, or force them to change their policies and give up their sovereignty.

So I'm very pleased with the kind of work that's been done throughout this crisis in Ukraine, and I think U.S. leadership has been critical throughout that process.

With respect to the Rapid Response Force and the Readiness Action Plan that we've put forward, in Warsaw I announced \$1 billion in our initiative. A sizeable portion of that will be devoted to implementing various aspects of this Readiness Action Plan.

We've already increased obviously rotations of personnel in the Baltic states, for example. We have the air policing. We have the activities that are taking place in the Baltic and the Black Sea. But this allows us to supplement it. It allows us to coordinate it and integrate it further with additional contributions from other partners. And what it signifies is NATO's recognition that, in light of recent Russian actions as well as rhetoric, we want to make it crystal clear: We mean what we say when we're talking about our Article 5 commitments. And an increased presence serves as the most effective deterrent to any additional Russian aggression that we might see.

Angela Keane, Bloomberg.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. What are your specific expectations for what regional actors like Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Jordan can legitimately provide to a coalition against Islamic State? Is there a role there for Iran, as well? As you know, Secretary Kerry today said that he expects the Allied countries to coalesce around a specific plan by the end of September. Do you agree with the timeline that he set out? And what concrete commitments, if any, are you leaving this summit with from the other nations that were here?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Let me start with a general point. There was unanimity over the last two days that ISIL poses a significant threat to NATO members. And there was a recognition that we have to take action. I did not get any resistance or pushback to the basic notion that we have a critical role to play in rolling back this savage organization that is causing so much chaos in the region and is harming so many people, and poses a long-term threat to the safety and security of NATO members. So there's great conviction that we have to act as part of the international community to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And that was extremely encouraging.

Beyond that, what we have already seen is significant support from a variety of member states for specific actions that we've been taking in Iraq. Keep in mind, we've taken already 100 strikes in Iraq that have had a significant impact on degrading their capabilities, and making sure that we're protecting U.S. citizens, critical infrastructure, providing the space for the Iraqi government to form. Our hope is that the Iraqi government is actually formed and finalized next week. That, then, allows us to work with them on a broader strategy.

And some of the assistance has been in the form of airlift or humanitarian assistance. Much of it has been providing additional arms to the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces. There's been logistical support, intelligence and surveillance and reconnaissance support. And so a variety of folks with different capabilities have already made a

contribution. I'm confident that we're going to be able to build on that strong foundation and the clear commitment, and have the kind of coalition that will be required for the sustained effort we need to push ISIL back.

Now, John Kerry is going to be traveling to the region to have further consultations with the regional actors and the regional players. And I think it is absolutely critical that we have Arab states, and specifically Sunni majority states, that are rejecting the kind of extremist nihilism that we're seeing out of ISIL that say that is not what Islam is about, and are prepared to join us actively in the fight. And my expectation is, is that we will see friends and allies and partners of ours in the region prepared to take action, as well, as part of a coalition.

One of our tasks, though, is also going to be to build capability. What we've learned in Iraq is, yes, ISIL has significant capabilities, and they combine terrorist tactics with traditional military tactics to significant effect, but part of the problem also is, is that we haven't seen as effective a fighting force on the part of the Iraqi Security Forces as we need. And we're going to have to focus on the capable units that are already there, bolster them, bolster the work that the Peshmerga has done. We can support them from the air, but ultimately we're going to need a strong ground game, and we're also going to need the Sunni tribes in many of these areas to recognize that their future is not with the kind of fanaticism that ISIL represents so that they start taking the fight to ISIL, as well. And that's going to require the sort of regional partnerships that we're talking about.

In terms of timetable, we are working deliberately. If you look at what we've done over the last several months, we've taken this in stages. The first stage is to make sure that we were encouraging Iraqi government formation. Second stage was making sure that, building on the intelligence assessments that we have done, that we were in a position to conduct limited airstrikes to protect our personnel, critical infrastructure and engage in humanitarian activities.

The third phase will allow us to take the fight to ISIL, broaden the effort. And our goal is to act with urgency, but also to make sure that we're doing it right -- that we have the right targets; that there's support on the ground if we take an airstrike; that we have a strong political coalition, diplomatic effort that is matching it; a strong strategic communications effort so that we are discouraging people from thinking somehow that ISIL represents a state, much less a caliphate. So all those things are going to have to be combined.

And as I said, it's not going to happen overnight, but we are steadily moving in the right direction. And we are going to achieve our goal. We are going to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL, the same way that we have gone after al Qaeda, and the same way that we have gone after the al Qaeda affiliate in Somalia where we released today the fact that we had killed the leader of al-Shabaab in Somalia, and have consistently worked to degrade their operations.

We have been very systematic and methodical in going after these kinds of organizations that may threaten U.S. personnel and the homeland. And that deliberation allows us to do it right. But have no doubt, we will continue and I will continue to do what is

necessary to protect the American people. And ISIL poses a real threat, and I'm encouraged by the fact that our friends and allies recognize that same threat.

Julie Davis.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I want to follow up on what you were saying about ISIL and ask, if you think that the objective here is to destroy and degrade them, are those the same thing in your mind? Is the goal to ultimately -- Secretary Kerry said that there's no containing them, so is the goal to ultimately annihilate them? And also, you talked about the importance of expertise on the ground and building up capacity on the ground. Do you think since airstrikes are not going to do it here, if ultimately action is needed in Syria, can you realistically expect the Free Syrian Army to do what's needed on the ground to really destroy, not just push back, ISIL?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: You can't contain an organization that is running roughshod through that much territory, causing that much havoc, displacing that many people, killing that many innocents, enslaving that many women. The goal has to be to dismantle them.

And if you look at what happened with al Qaeda in the FATA, where their primary base was, you initially push them back. You systematically degrade their capabilities. You narrow their scope of action. You slowly shrink the space, the territory that they may control. You take out their leadership. And over time, they are not able to conduct the same kinds of terrorist attacks as they once could.

As I said I think in my last press conference, given the nature of these organizations, are there potentially remnants of an organization that are still running around and hiding and still potentially plotting? Absolutely. And we will continue to hunt them down the same way we're doing with remnants of al Qaeda in the FATA or elements of al-Shabaab in Somalia, or terrorists who operate anywhere around the world.

But what we can accomplish is to dismantle this network, this force that has claimed to control this much territory, so that they can't do us harm. And that's going to be our objective. And as I said before, I'm pleased to see that there's unanimity among our friends and allies that that is a worthy goal and they are prepared to work with us in accomplishing that goal.

With respect to the situation on the ground in Syria, we will not be placing U.S. ground troops to try to control the areas that are part of the conflict inside of Syria. I don't think that's necessary for us to accomplish our goal. We are going to have to find effective partners on the ground to push back against ISIL. And the moderate coalition there is one that we can work with. We have experience working with many of them. They have been, to some degree, outgunned and outmanned, and that's why it's important for us to work with our friends and allies to support them more effectively.

But keep in mind that when you have U.S. forces, other advanced nations going after ISIL and putting them on the defensive and putting them on the run, it's pretty remarkable what then ground forces can do, even if initially they were on the defensive against ISIL.

So that is a developing strategy that we are going to be consulting with our friends, our allies, our regional partners. But the bottom line is, we will do what is necessary in order to make sure that ISIL does not threaten the United States or our friends and partners.

One last question. Colleen Nelson, Wall Street Journal.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Some say that Democrats who are facing tough races in November have asked you to delay action on immigration. How have the concerns of other Democrats influenced your thinking? And do you see any downside at this point to delaying until after the election?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I have to tell you that this week I've been pretty busy, focused on Ukraine and focused on ISIL and focused on making sure that NATO is boosting its commitments, and following through on what's necessary to meet 21st century challenges.

Jeh Johnson and Eric Holder have begun to provide me some of their proposals and recommendations. I'll be reviewing them. And my expectation is that fairly soon I'll be considering what the next steps are.

What I'm unequivocal about is that we need immigration reform; that my overriding preference is to see Congress act. We had bipartisan action in the Senate. The House Republicans have sat on it for over a year. That has damaged the economy, it has held America back. It is a mistake. And in the absence of congressional action, I intend to take action to make sure that we're putting more resources on the border, that we're upgrading how we process these cases, and that we find a way to encourage legal immigration and give people some path so that they can start paying taxes and pay a fine and learn English and be able to not look over their shoulder but be legal, since they've been living here for quite some time.

So I suspect that on my flight back this will be part of my reading, taking a look at some of the specifics that we've looked at. And I'll be making an announcement soon.

But I want to be very clear: My intention is, in the absence of action by Congress, I'm going to do what I can do within the legal constraints of my office -- because it's the right thing to do for the country.

Thank you very much, people of Wales. I had a wonderful time.

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5:15 P.M. BST