North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Pre-ministerial press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

2015-10-06

Good morning.

NATO Defence Ministers will meet this Thursday. Our meeting comes at a decisive time for our security. We see the Middle East and North Africa in turmoil. Russia's deployment of significant forces in Syria is of great concern.

Russian combat aircraft have violated Turkish airspace. This is unacceptable. That's why I yesterday convened a special meeting of the North Atlantic Council. NATO allies expressed strong solidarity with Turkey. They condemned the Russian violations of NATO's air space. I call on Russia to avoid escalating tensions with the Alliance. Russia must de-conflict its military activities in Syria.

I'm also concerned that Russia is not targeting ISIL, but instead attacking the Syrian opposition and civilians. I discussed the situation in Syria with Foreign Minister Lavrov in New York last week. I urge Russia to play a constructive and cooperative role in the fight against ISIL. And to strive for a negotiated political solution to the conflict in Syria.

In Ukraine, the situation remains fragile. But there are also signs of progress. I welcome the renewed efforts made by the leaders of the "Normandy Format" in Paris to fully implement the Minsk agreements.The understanding to postpone the elections planned by the separatists is a positive step. Any election must be held under Ukrainian law.

And the ceasefire is holding and is being strengthened. The parties have announced that they will pull back tanks and other weapons from the contact line. This creates hope and a momentum.

What is important now is the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. Russia has a special responsibility because Russia continues to support the separatists and to destabilize Eastern Ukraine.

The increased insecurity makes it even more important that we reinforce our collective defence.

Our Defence Ministers meeting will take three steps forward in this regard. First, to endorse the military concept for the enhanced NATO Response Force. This includes its land, sea and

air components, and the command and control arrangements. This will complete the changes that will double the size of the NATO Response Force to 40.000 troops. And will make this force stronger and more capable.

Second, I expect ministers to give the green light to stand up two new Force Integration Units. Small headquarters which will play a big role. One in Hungary and one in Slovakia. This will help bolster the defences of our Allies in Central and Eastern Europe.

And third, we will look at our long-term adaptation. Ministers will also discuss the implications of Russia's military activity, including its nuclear activities – and what it means for NATO. And we will look into how the Alliance should further adapt to the growing challenges and threats from the South.

Our enhanced NATO Response Force can already deploy to the South quickly.

But we will consider other capabilities needed to deal with the threats we face from the South.

It has been a year since I took up my post. We have made tremendous progress on putting our Readiness Action Plan into place. This is the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War. All Allies are making substantial contributions to strengthen our shared security.

I expect Defence Ministers also to address the situation in Syria and in Afghanistan. I'm following the security situation in Afghanistan closely. I am deeply saddened by the tragic incident involving the Doctors without Borders hospital in Kunduz. My thoughts are with all those affected. A full investigation has been launched. The security situation in Afghanistan remains challenging. But the Afghan Forces are rising to the challenge. And we continue to support them.

With that I am ready to take your questions.

MODERATOR: We start in the back, please identify yourself, Europa press.

Q: Thank you. Anna Pisanaro from the Spanish News Agency Europa Press. My first question is on the incidents in Kunduz, has NATO already been able to determine whether US Forces actually did bombard the hospital of Medecins Sans Frontieres and what kind of consequences would NATO anticipate that the US would take against its forces? Also if this will precipitate in any kind of way a decision by allies whether to continue presence of the ground after 2016 or not? And my second question is on Syria, is NATO already satisfied with the explanations that Russia has already given on the incidents of the violating the Turkish air space? And my quick final question if I may Secretary General, it's on the south, security on the south flank of the NATO, what other capabilities is NATO considering to deploy in the area? We understand that one of the options could be maritime assets in the Mediterranean but we also hear that this is a particularly challenging capacity to actually withhold and withstand in the south. Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG (NATO Secretary General): Thank you. Let me start by praising the extraordinary important work which Doctors Without Borders are doing many places in the world including in Afghanistan and in Kunduz. And the tragic incident, the loss of lives in the hospital is a very serious matter and therefore it is important that we now get all the facts on the table and that's the reason why we need a full, a thorough investigation and that this is done in an open and transparent way. And when we have the facts on the table then we have a much better foundation to draw conclusions and to look into how the different operations are conducted to make sure that we do everything possible to avoid something similar to happen again. So the important thing now is to get the facts, to conduct a thorough and full investigation and then start to draw conclusions. Then your second question was about the violation of the Turkish air space. This is a consequence of the increased Russian military presence in Syria and a minimum requirement is that Russia is able to de-conflict with the ongoing coalition fighting ISIL and also of course respect the borders of Turkey including of course the air space of Turkey which also is NATO air space. And for us this doesn't look as an accident, this is a serious violation of the air space and actually there were two violations during the weekend. So that just adds to the fact that this doesn't look like an accident, this, the, the violation lasted for, also for a long time compared to previous violations of air space we have seen other places in Europe and therefore we take this very serious. Anyway it's unacceptable to violate the air space of, of another country and this is exactly what we were afraid of, that incidents, accidents may create dangerous situations and therefore it is also important to make sure that this doesn't happen again and that's also the reason why we sent this very clear signal. We have lines of military to military communication between NATO and Russia and I think it will be natural that we use these lines also to communicate between the military authorities how serious we regard this violation of Turkish air space. The last question was on the south. First of all I would like to underline that the increased readiness, the increased preparedness, the doubling of the size of the NATO Response Force is not only a response to the challenges we see to the east with a more assertive Russia but it's also very relevant to the challenges we see to the south. So increased preparedness, increased readiness, the High Readiness Joint Task Force or the Spearhead Force is something we of course can also deploy, use in the south if and when, if needed. So that's also response to the south. Second we are now working on, as you mentioned, naval presence, naval forces because that's very relevant for the south. And third I think that better situational awareness, better surveillance is key especially when we speak about all the turmoil, all the uncertainty we see to the south of the alliance. So when we now are in the process of deploying new surveillance drones which are going to be based in Sigonella in Italy then that's very relevant for the south because new allied ground surveillance systems or the surveillance drones will increase very much our capability to understand, to see, to have situational awareness and that is of course important also for the south.

MODERATOR: AP? No, AP first and then you, AP? Yeah.

Q: I'm sorry. Secretary General I wondered, a follow up, yesterday in the statement from, that you had made there was a request for, that Russia immediately explain its violations. Have they come to you with anything further than we've heard publicly?

JENS STOLTENBERG: No, not any real explanation more than what we have seen, also in the media. But as I said I find it very natural, or for me it's very natural if that, that NATO uses the military to military lines of communications, which we have kept in place exactly to address incidents like this. And this was also discussed among the allies yesterday because we have kept in place direct lines of communication between NATO military authorities and their counterparts in Russia. And I think it's important that we use these lines to express our concern, to go through how we regard the seriousness of the violations of the Turkish air space and also to convey a very strong message also on the military level that this is something which should not happen again. And then we've also provided the Russians the opportunity to give an explanation directly to our military authorities.

MODERATOR: ITAR-TASS?

Q: Thank you. Denis Dubrovin, ITAR-TASS News Agency. Mr. Secretary General in 2012 there was a tragic incident when a Turkish air jet was shot down in the Syrian air space, during this incident I quote the President of Turkey Abdullah Gul has said, it is routine for jet fighter to sometimes fly in and over national borders. My question is, is it routine for NATO jets to fight, to fly in and over national borders and not to other countries air jets? And second question, we start to hear a lot about moderate Syrian opposition last days, could you please inform us who is the leader of this opposition? What are we talking about? Thank you very much.

JENS STOLTENBERG: It is not the routine of any NATO country to violate the air space of other countries and I think it's extremely important that all nations understand the importance of respecting borders and also of course air space of other countries. I think that the situation in Syria is very fragile, there are many different groups, the important thing for the coalition which is fighting ISIL is to attack ISIL. NATO is, all NATO allies participate in that coalition, contribute to the coalition in different ways and I am concerned about, that we see that the Russian air forces are not mainly attacking ISIL but other opposition groups including those who are fighting ISIL and, and also that many civilian lives have been lost.

MODERATOR: Wall Street Journal?

Q: Mr. Secretary General you said it, the Russian violation was not an accident, the statements from Moscow they try to portray it as incidental and accidental. What makes you sure that it wasn't an accident? Did the Russian planes lock their radar on Turkish planes?

JENS STOLTENBERG: What I said is that it doesn't look like an accident and that we have also have seen two of them, two violations of Turkish air space during the weekend. Whether the Russian planes locked their fire control radars on the Turkish planes is something I

cannot comment on. We base our assessment on the intelligence we receive, but the information, the intelligence we have received indicates or provides me with reasons to say that I, it doesn't look like an accident what we saw in Turkey during the weekend.

MODERATOR: Agence France Press?

Q: Can I ask you about the deployment of the patriot missiles please? They're being withdrawn at the moment, what is the position on the possible renewal of that deployment? Thank you very much.

JENS STOLTENBERG: We, we deployed the patriots to, to Turkey to augment their defences against possible missile attacks from Syria, and, and what we have seen now is something different. That's a violation of the Turkish air space. We are constantly reviewing the security situation and we will also take decisions accordingly. And of course the Russian actions in Syria and also the violations of Turkish air space will be part or will be factored into those assessments. The patriot mission is renewed on an annual basis, the current mandate runs until the end of this year and we are now in dialogue with Turkey and in dialogue with different allies to see what we will do, what kind of presence that may be there for the next year but no decision has been taken so far.

MODERATOR: Reuters?

Q: Secretary General, thank you. Two questions, one was I wondered if you had any sense of what Russia's motives might have been if this wasn't an accident? Could it just be to show NATO that, for instance Syrian air space belongs now to Russia? And secondly you've talked about the need for dialogue, is there any possibility of convening a council or enact with Russia to discuss this? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: I will not speculate on the motives. I would just reiterate or restate that this is a serious violation of Turkish air space, it should not happen again. And, and NATO has expressed strong solidarity with Turkey and it also underlines that the increased Russian presence in Syria gives reasons for concern, both because we have seen the violation of Turkish air space but also because we have seen that the planes and the air force of Russia has not mainly targeted ISIL but they have, they have attacked other opposition groups and also many civilians have lost their lives. The other was the NATO-Russia Council, there has been no decision to convene a new meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. There has been some meetings, I think it's two meetings, after the crisis in Ukraine started. There have been some meetings of other, after the crisis in Ukraine started. Whether there's going to be a meeting in the foreseeable future is not, no decision has been taken so far. But what, but as I already told you we have other ways of communicating with Russians. On the political level but also on the military level with the military lines of communications and these are lines we can use in connection with incidents like the one we saw in Turkey.

MODERATOR: NPR.

Q: Hi Terry Schultz with NPR and CBS. You keep saying that you can use these lines of communication, have you? Has there been any communication other than in the media at this point to the Russian Government to demand this explanation? And secondly on Kunduz, you say that you need to get all the facts on the table. From the facts that you know, what can, the US has already said it bombed the hospital, what conclusions can you draw from that about how this is going to affect the continuing mission in Afghanistan? And one final one, how does the Russian build up, you think, hinder the coalition, the counter ISIS coalition's actions on the ground? It seems to me there hasn't been a de-confliction, if that's a word? I don't know what the noun is for that, by Russia to this point, thanks.

JENS STOLTENBERG: I can start with the last one. I welcome that there has been contacts between the US and Russia trying to, because this is a US led coalition fighting ISIL, trying to establish means or mechanisms to de-conflict and the point with de-confliction is to avoid incidents, accidents between different planes from different nations operating in the same air space. I think the US has to answer how far they have been able to get in the dialogue with Russia, NATO is not part of that dialogue because this is not a NATO operation. But I very much understand the need for establishing systems, ways to communicate, to de-conflict, to avoid incidents and accidents. And the violation of the Turkish air space just illustrates the importance of de-conflicting, at the same time violation of the air space is not about de-conflicting because that's about actually moving into another air space. And so that's, that's about respecting borders and that should be something which is obvious, we don't need to establish new mechanisms to make sure or we should not be, there is no need to establish new mechanisms to make sure that countries should respect borders because that should be obvious. But we speak more about de-conflicting activity inside the Syrian air space. The second question was on, on Afghanistan. So we have already announced that we will assess, we will make decisions related to both the level of our presence in Afghanistan, the Resolute Support force level, and also the geographical outreach, whether it's going to be four regional spokes or bases in addition to what we have in Kabul or and whether this is going to be both a force level but also the, the numbers of bases outside Kabul whether that's going to be reduced is an issue which we're going to discuss and address and then make decisions later on. So that's on the table, both the duration of the whole mission, the level of forces, the number of forces but also the, the regional outreach of the mission. So all this is now something we are going to assess, partly based on the assessment of the, this year fighting season and then we will discuss with allies and with partners because Resolute Support has also a lot of contributions from different partners, and then we will make decisions later. I cannot tell you exactly when but it's something we constantly assess and we will make decisions when we have at least the assessment of this year fighting season. And the first question…

Q: [Inaudible] to Russia from any other means than the media?

JENS STOLTENBERG: First of all we, this happened during the weekend and today it's Tuesday, but what we have done is to convey a very strong message partly by, through my

statement and partly through the statement by the North Atlantic Council. I'm certain that the Russians have read that statement. Second I stated that I believe it's natural to use the military lines of communication and, and then this is an issue which we already discussed and then we have to understand that the lines of communications which we have established with the Russians are in place just, or exactly to address incidents like the one we saw in Turkey during the weekend.

MODERATOR: Excuse me…

Q: [Inaudible – speaking without microphone].

MODERATOR: Excuse me.

JENS STOLTENBERG: These lines have been there for years, so.

Q: Have you called them?

JENS STOLTENBERG: They haven't called today but, but we have discussed yesterday the possibility of using those lines.

MODERATOR: Georgian TV.

Q: Georgian Public TV, [Inaudible]. Mr. Secretary General this week you will meet with Georgian Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministers, it's for the first time you will meet them together. So what you want to hear from them and the plans for the nearest future for Georgia? Thank you very much.

JENS STOLTENBERG: So Georgia is a, is a highly valued partner of NATO and I just visited Georgia and I opened or inaugurated the new training centre there which is part of the substantial package which we have developed together with the Georgians. We will have a NATO-Georgia Commission meeting in connection with the NATO Defence Ministerial Meeting on Thursday and that's another element of the cooperation between, between NATO and Georgia. So I'm looking forward to meet the Defence Minister, I'm looking forward to the meeting on the NATO-Georgia Commission and this is something which is elements of the increased cooperation between NATO and Georgia.

MODERATOR: Next one.

Q: Anne Vestbakke, the Norwegian News Agency. Back to Kunduz, NATO has been training Afghan forces for years, so how ready where the Afghan forces to face the situation we now see regarding they still need American NATO support to cope?

JENS STOLTENBERG: The Afghan National Security Force and Army is a very capable army but they are facing great challenges and a lot of threats and challenges in Afghanistan. So they have proved that they are able to stand the ground, they have proved that they're able to take responsibility for the security in Afghanistan and we have ended our combat mission. So

they are now in full responsibility of the security in Afghanistan themselves. But what we have seen in Kunduz but also in other places is that they face challenges, they face a Taliban which is launching attacks on the government forces but they have been able to retake and to stand the ground again and again. So I think what we have seen is that they are capable but they are facing big challenges and we will continue to support them and no one thought that this was going to be an easy task for them but they are a big trained force supported by restive support. Let me also add that in the long run there is not a viable or sustainable solution to, to be totally dependent on foreign or NATO combat forces, a large number of combat forces deployed to Afghanistan. So in the long run it has, the Afghans has to be able to take care of their own security and that's the reason why we have moved from having the big combat mission to the restive support mission, training, assisting and advising them. And it's not easy but it's in the long run the only viable solution to enable them to take care of their own security.

MODERATOR: Last question, to El Pais, please.

Q: Mr. Secretary General, how significant is the presence of Russian forces inside Syria? Does NATO have estimations of the magnitude of this presence? Whether we are talking about hundred, thousand people inside the country? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: I will not go into any specific numbers but I can confirm that we have seen a substantial build-up of Russian forces in Syria. Air forces, air defences but also then ground troops in connection with the air base they have and we also see increased naval presence of Russian ships, naval capabilities outside Syria or the eastern part of the Mediterranean. So there has been a substantial military build-up of Russia with many different kinds of capabilities, forces, over the last weeks.

MODERATOR: Thank you for coming to this press conference, we are looking forward to seeing you on Thursday and our first appointment will be at 7:45 when the Secretary General will have the media doorstep of our Defence Ministers Meeting. So looking forward to seeing you all at 7:45 in the morning on Thursday, thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG: Thank you.

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