

**Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg
following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council with Resolute Support
operational partner nations at the level of Defence Ministers**

09 November 2017

Good afternoon.

We have just had a productive meeting with our Resolute Support partners, together with Afghanistan's Acting Minister of Defence Bahrami. We reviewed the security situation. Afghan forces are making progress, even though the situation remains very challenging. I saw both the progress and the challenges during my recent visit to Afghanistan with US Defense Secretary Mattis.

This year, the Afghan security forces have denied the Taliban their strategic objective of capturing a provincial capital. They have kept up the pressure on insurgents across the country and NATO remains committed to supporting them, as they develop their capabilities, strengthen command and control, and prepare the next generation of military leaders.

Today, we addressed four key issues: the troop level of our mission, funding for the Afghan forces, progress on reforms and reconciliation, and continued engagement with Pakistan. Currently, around 13,000 troops from 39 different countries serve in our Resolute Support Mission. Allies welcomed the United States briefing on the implications of the new South Asia Strategy on our mission. This has already led to an increase in the US troop contribution. 27 other nations have also committed to increase troop numbers in the coming months. So the size of our Resolute Support Mission will increase, from around 13,000 to around 16,000 troops.

I strongly welcome the strengthened commitment and support demonstrated by all Allies and partners. This remains critical to our progress. We also continue to support the financial sustainment of the Afghan security forces. We are committed to funding the Afghan security forces until at least 2020. In addition to the significant US contribution, other NATO Allies and partners will continue to provide almost a billion US dollars each year to the Afghan defence and security forces.

At our meeting today, Minister Bahrami expressed Afghanistan's appreciation for our continued support. He also made clear the Afghan government's intention is to make good on its commitments to make key reforms. For good governance, the rule of law, fighting corruption, and protecting the rights of all Afghans, including women and girls. Today, we reaffirmed the importance of finding a lasting, negotiated political solution in Afghanistan.

NATO will continue to support a peace and reconciliation process that is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. We welcome the Kabul Process initiative launched by President Ghani earlier this year. We urge the government to do all it can to ensure the conditions for peace on the ground. And we urge all regional and international actors to support this process.

Pakistan has a key role to play in ensuring the Taliban find no safe havens. And Afghanistan needs the constructive engagement of all its neighbours. Because peace and stability in Afghanistan means peace and stability in the whole region.

Finally, let me note that the ministers from the United Arab Emirates and Qatar joined us today.

They are seeking to contribute to the Resolute Support Mission.

And their presence was a strong symbol of global support to the government and the people of Afghanistan.

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

Moderator: Okay, we'll go to the first row, TOLO, red scarf.

Parvesh Hamal (TOLOnews): Thank you very much. I'm Parvesh Hamal from TOLOnews. I will ask how long NATO will stay in Afghanistan, and also, was it difficult to get troops for Afghanistan? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: This is now a condition-based mission, meaning that we stay there as long as we deem it necessary to stay there. But of course it's not a totally open-ended mission, the aim is to enable the Afghans to take full responsibility for their own security without NATO troops present on the ground, but as the conditions are now we see that it's an obvious need for NATO presence and not only NATO presence but also some increased NATO presence.

We are not going back to a combat operation or a combat mission. What we do is to strengthen the training and the assistance and the advice to the Afghan troops. I think it's actually quite strong or quite impressive to see how committed NATO allies and partners are after 16 years. We have been there for 16 years and NATO allies and partners continue to provide troops and funding for the Afghan forces. They do so because they see that stability in Afghanistan is important for their own security. They understand that by fighting terrorists in Afghanistan we also make our own countries more secure, and by the fact that we have moved from a combat mission to a train, assist, and advice mission, I think there is strong support for this and we have many countries contributing with forces.

Moderator: Ariana.

Sharif Hassanyar (Ariana News): Yeah, thank you very much. Sharif Hassanyar, from Ariana News. The Afghan government committed to apply bold reforms in election commission and security sectors. Back in the country, Afghans are not satisfied. What more condition will you put on Afghan government to deliver its promises?

Jens Stoltenberg: So we are sending a very clear message to Afghanistan and to the government of Afghanistan and that is that the reform is extremely important. We need to strengthen the democratic institutions, we need Afghanistan to fight corruption, and we need of course elections because elections are important for the credibility of all the democratic reforms and it is also in the long run important for the development of the whole Afghan society. So we continue to raise the importance of reform, including elections, in all our engagements with Afghanistan, and it was stressed by many allies during the meeting today.

Moderator: We have VG over here, third row.

Q: Thank you. My question is in regards to the coalition meeting later today and the news this morning that the Islamic State are defeated from most of their strongholds in Iraq and Syria, so I wonder how would you view NATO's role in the time to come and on the further stabilization of Iraq? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg: NATO is already supporting Iraq and helping to stabilize Iraq. We do that partly because NATO allies through the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS contribute to that already through different training and capacity building activities. But in addition to that, we have also now started some training activities and capacity building activities in the NATO framework.

We have a core team in place, it arrived in Baghdad in January, and we have started different training activities with the Iraqi forces on countering IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, on maintenance of equipment, on military medicine, and we also help them with modernizing their security and defence institutions. Many allies argued during the meeting today and yesterday, sorry, during the meeting yesterday, in favour of stepping up and increasing those training and capacity-building activities.

NATO's presence in Iraq is based on a request or a wish from the Iraqi government, from Prime Minister Abadi. I've spoken to him many times, both in Baghdad and outside Iraq, and he has expressed strong support for increased NATO presence in Iraq. And the important reason to be there is of course to enable the Iraqis to stabilize their own country, to enable the Iraqis to make sure that the gains and achievements we have achieved in the fight against ISIL are lasting gains, and therefore we need to enable them to have a strong and reliable security forces and army.

Moderator: Wall Street Journal, in the middle. No, over there, fourth row. Thank you.

Q (Wall Street Journal): Mr. Secretary General, a while back we were talking about maybe as many as 1,500 additional non-U.S. European allies and partners for the Afghanistan mission. It seems like we have fewer than half of that for the pledge today. Are you at all disappointed with the early number? Do you expect that the number of non-U.S. allies contributing to the Afghanistan mission will grow next year? And do you anticipate some pushback from the White House given that Mr. Trump has called on NATO to do more in counterterrorism and more to support defence spending?

Jens Stoltenberg: In 2017, then the number of troops in the Resolute Support Mission have been roughly 50% U.S. troops and the rest non-U.S. troops, meaning other NATO allies and partner countries. We are now in the process of increasing the troop level and we are in the process of force generation, and we haven't finalized that so it's not possible to provide any final figures when it comes to how much different countries are going to contribute. But I hope and I expect that it will be roughly also 50-50 within the Resolute Support Mission also next year, but we have not finalized the force generation process so it's not possible to say that with certainty.

But if we look at the broader picture, I think it's important to understand that Afghanistan is an example of how we do burden sharing, how NATO is important not only for Europe but also how NATO is important for the United States, because Afghanistan is about how NATO invoked Article 5 after an attack on the United States.

That's the only time we have invoked Article 5, and that was after an attack on the United States, and hundreds of thousands of European, Canadian soldiers have served shoulder to shoulder with U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan for many, many years, and more than thousands have paid the ultimate price, so if we look at the bigger picture Afghanistan is really about that we stand together, that also European allies and Canada contribute in missions and operations which are important for Europe, but not least for the United States and this was triggered by an attack on the United States.

Moderator: Salam Watandar, second row.

Nasir Maimanagy (Salam Watandar): Hi, this is Nasir Maimanagy from Salam Watandar. My question is with regards to joining of Qatar and UAE in the RSM mission, could you please elaborate how big, or the significance of their joining, and also if they're going to be contributing troops and funding as well? Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg: I'll be careful being too precise on behalf of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates because I think they have to elaborate or to be more specific on what kind of contributions they foresee, but they expressed their willingness, their readiness to provide support and also capabilities to the Resolute Support Mission, but exactly what kind of support I think they have to tell themselves. I would very much welcome support from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. They were part of the ISAF mission, the previous NATO mission in Afghanistan, and I would very much welcome that they also now support and become part of the Resolute Support Mission because they have capabilities, they have knowledge which will be highly valued by the Resolute Support Mission.

Moderator: BBC, fourth row.

Jonathan Marcus (BBC): Yes, good afternoon Secretary General. Jonathan Marcus, BBC. Two questions. Just following on from troop numbers, is it correct that even with the existing mission you are several hundred posts short of being filled in key specialities, and isn't this going to be a problem going forward? And more fundamentally, if you compare your assessment of the situation in Afghanistan with the regular American SIGAR reports, I'd put it

to you that your characterization that it remains very challenging but the Afghans are making progress is being unduly optimistic; things are actually not going very well on the ground.

Jens Stoltenberg: So we are now in the process of filling the force or meeting the force requirements which our military commanders have developed and we have reached very far but we haven't filled all the positions or the posts that are asked for. So that's exactly what we are addressing now. We got some new announcements from some nations during the meeting today but we still have some gaps that we will continue to work on and which we are going to then address with allies and partners to fill so we have a troop level and also not only the number of troops but also the types of troops we need to have a mission in Afghanistan next year which is able to do the job we would like to do.

When it comes to the situation in Afghanistan, the security situation in Afghanistan, I think it is a very mixed picture because on the one hand we have seen violence, we have seen horrendous attacks, terrorist attacks against civilians, against Mosques, against the international community and innocent people in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan is still very volatile and there is a lot of insurgents in large parts of the country.

Having said that, there are also some signs that are going in the right direction, some positive signs. First of all: the fact that the Afghan National Army and Security Forces are now responsible for the security in Afghanistan themselves. We have to remember that until 2015 NATO troops were engaged in combat operations, now the Afghans are responsible for security themselves. That's a big achievement. The other thing is that the main strategic goal, which was stated by the Taliban for this year's fighting season was to take control of provincial capitals. They have not been able to do that because the Afghan forces have proven capable, they have been professional, and they have been able to then repel every time the insurgents have tried to attack.

So, yes, there are many reasons for concern, but there are also some reasons for optimism and I think we need to understand this nuanced picture to be able to understand the challenges in Afghanistan.

Moderator: NHK at the back.

Q (NHK): Thank you very much. Yasushi Kudo from NHK, Japan news, Japan broadcasting corporation. My question is about North Korea. In yesterday's dinner you talked about North Korea inviting Ms. Mogherini and could you explain us the result? And in China, Mr. Trump talked with Xi Jinping, urging China to use its influence on DPRK, but DPRK is now getting closer to Russia, so how do you see this tie between them much closer than before? Is it alarming for NATO and what role do you demand to Russia on this issue?

Jens Stoltenberg: Russia has a special responsibility when it comes to North Korea, and we discussed the challenges and the threats posed by North Korea during our dinner yesterday because we are deeply concerned and all NATO allies strongly condemn the development of missiles and nuclear weapons, and also the fact that North Korea are now developing missiles which can reach both North American and Europe, and we have to remember that Secretary

Mattis stated yesterday that European capitals are closer to North Korea than for instance Washington.

So the North Korean missile and nuclear program is of course a threat to NATO's partners in the region, Japan and South Korea, but it's also a threat to global peace and security and therefore we have to put maximum pressure on North Korea. Pressure is the path to peace. Pressure is the way we can reach a negotiated political solution where North Korea stops its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Russia has a special role to play, together with China, because Russia and China are permanent members of the Security Council, which has adopted the sanctions against North Korea, but Russia and China are also neighbours and that gives them a special role to make sure that sanctions are fully implemented. I welcome the fact that the U.N. Security Council agreed stronger sanctions in September, and that it looks like the sanctions are more implemented, implemented to a higher degree now than before, and that increases the pressure on North Korea, which is the way to achieve a peaceful solution to the crisis on the peninsula.

Moderator: Thank you very much. This concludes this press point. I'm sorry we couldn't take all the questions but we will see you again soon. Thank you.

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