

Press Conference

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following a North Atlantic Council (NAC) working session on Open Door and Western Balkans at the level of Foreign Ministers

27 April 2018

Good evening.

We have just finished two productive sessions of the meeting of Foreign Ministers of NATO this afternoon. We had a strategic discussion on Afghanistan. Including the Afghan peace process. Progress on the country's reform agenda. And the regional context. Last weekend's horrendous attack at a voter registration centre in Kabul was a stark reminder of the security challenges that Afghanistan still faces. At the same time, there has been progress. Thanks to our efforts over the years, the Afghans are fully in charge of their security and lead military operations.

Just a few years ago, NATO had over 100,000 combat troops in the country. We now have around 16,000 in a training role. NATO's continued presence creates the conditions for peace and reconciliation. We have welcomed President Ghani's unprecedented offer of peace talks to the Taliban. A step he took on the confidence provided by NATO's support. Despite the fact that they have not yet taken up the President's offer, we urge the Taliban to take part in an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process.

Pakistan's role will be essential. We encourage Pakistan to take additional steps. To close all terrorist sanctuaries and prevent terrorist financial flows and cross-border attacks. We also encourage Iran and Russia to contribute to regional stability. Fair, inclusive and timely elections are also essential for Afghanistan's progress. We welcome the announcement that parliamentary elections will take place in October. And we encourage Afghanistan to continue on the path to reform. Including the promotion of human rights, good governance, and fighting corruption.

Today, we also held a discussion on our Open Door policy. We discussed the progress of Bosnia Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹ and Georgia. Ukraine has also expressed its aspiration to join NATO, and ministers also addressed that. Our Open Door policy is a historic success. It has brought stability, peace and prosperity to millions across the Euro-Atlantic region. And built greater cooperation. As demonstrated by the accession of Montenegro to NATO last year, NATO's door remains open. For a country to join NATO it takes one country to apply. And 29 Allies to agree. Nobody else has a say, or a veto.

We have just held our last Council meeting in this headquarters. After more than half-a-century in this building, we are moving into our new headquarters across the street. The new headquarters embodies NATO's transformation for the 21st century. As one chapter in NATO's history comes to a close, another one opens. I want to express our gratitude to the government and the people of Belgium. For their continued hospitality to our Alliance.

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

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: OK, we'll go to Georgian TV in the front row.

Question [Georgian Public Broadcast]: Thank you very much. Georgian Public Broadcast. Mr Secretary General, as we are waiting for NATO Summit in July, we have such question: how the progress made by Georgia will be reflected? Will Georgia receive, as ministers said today, so called positive feedback? And what Georgia should do to convince member states that we really deserve the membership of this organisation? And also about NATO-Georgia Commission, what can you tell us, which will be held during the Summit in July? Thank you very much.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: We have not decided the formats of the Summit in July, but I can tell you that all Allies I suspect have expressed strong support to Georgia, to Georgia's aspirations to move towards membership, and we will continue to provide practical support and political support, including with a Joint Training and Evaluation Centre, with helping with reforms and with many other tools, where we provide support for Georgia. And also many Allies express their gratitude to Georgia for Georgia's contributions to different NATO missions and operations. Georgia is on top when it comes to, for instance contributions to our mission in Afghanistan.

I am also absolutely certain that, at the Summit, the progress Georgia has made will be recognised and we'll find ways to express that. Exactly in what form has not been decided because we haven't decided the detailed programme and formats of the Summit.

Question [Georgian Public Broadcast]: But what else for Georgia?

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Well, Georgia shall... should continue to implement reforms and to modernise its armed forces to meet NATO standards and to continue to strengthen the rule of law, independent judiciary, and also to fight corruption. This is good for Georgia regardless of the question of membership, but of course it also helps Georgia moving towards membership.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: OK, lady in the first row again.

Question: Yesterday, you had met with visiting Hungarian Foreign Minister. Was Ukraine discussed at that meeting and what are the perspectives of the NATO-Ukraine Commission meeting at the Summit?

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Yes, I met the Hungarian Foreign Minister yesterday. We discussed different issues, but including also the possibility of having a NATO-Ukraine Commission meeting at the Summit. It's well known that there are some differences between Hungary and Ukraine, which has made it not possible to have a meeting at ministerial level, but we still believe it... we are still urging Ukraine and Hungary to try to find a solution to the differences as quickly as possible. Hungary is a highly valued Ally. Hungary contributes to NATO's collective defence and our shared security in many different ways. And Hungary has also started to increase defence spending. And we welcome of course also that. Ukraine is a partner, a close partner of NATO, and Ukraine is also a victim of Russian aggression and illegal annexation of Crimea and the efforts of Russia to destabilise eastern Ukraine. All of that makes it important for Allies also to find a way to express continued solidarity with Ukraine.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: OK, we go to the first row here. Yeah?

Question: You just mentioned and highlighted the important role of regional players in helping Afghanistan achieve peace and stabilisation. And the usual names of Pakistan, Iran and Russia appear. What kind of role could Saudi Arabia and India play, given the fact that the Taliban has asked Saudi Arabia to play an important and leading role in peace negotiations with the Taliban? Also, how could NATO's decisions vis-a-vis Iran and Russia affect their response to Afghan cause? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: The main message from NATO is that we are supporting an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. So, it's not for NATO to decide exactly how that process is organised and how Afghanistan work with other countries in the region and with other countries in general. We support efforts of the National Unity Government. We welcome the unprecedented offer to invite Taliban to the negotiating table without preconditions. It's obvious that this needs also support from countries in the region and all countries in the region should support an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. But it's not for NATO to decide exactly how that process is going to be organised, because it's going to be led and owned by the Afghan National Unity Government.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: OK, we've... second row, Wall Street Journal?

Question [Wall Street Journal]: Julian Barnes, Wall Street Journal. On Afghanistan, will stepped-up military pressure by the Afghan security forces help with the peace process this summer? And are you on the right track in terms of securing forces from Allies, to sort of meet the force level that the Alliance would like to see by the summertime?

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: It's obviously that if the Taliban believes that it's possible to win on the battlefield, they will be less inclined to sit down at the negotiating table and really engage in a real peace process. So therefore it is a close link between NATO's message on security, on support for the Afghan national security forces and army, and the possibility for President Ghani to invite the Taliban to peace talks, to negotiations. And therefore we have now made it clear that we have a conditions-based presence in Afghanistan. We will continue to stay. We will continue to provide support. Not in the combat role, but continue to train, enable and to fund the Afghan forces, so they can respond, so they can take full security, be fully in charge of security in Afghanistan. But by doing that, we are also creating the conditions for a peace process.

So yes, I believe that NATO's increased efforts when it comes to training, assistance, advice for the Afghans - for instance, they are not developing their own air forces, their own special operation forces - is contributing to the possibility to have a negotiated peaceful solution. The last question I've forgotten.

Question [Wall Street Journal]: Force levels.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Well, we have... how shall I say... come a long way and we also had heard some new announcements at the meeting today. I will not go into detailed numbers, but as I said we are around 15,000 to 16,000 and we continue to expect some more announcements from some other Allies.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: OK. Gentleman in the second row. With glasses.

Question: Thank you. Today, I would like to echo my colleague's question regarding Georgia. You mentioned... you underlined the roadmap that we have to follow, but I would like to once again ask what do you think is the biggest obstacle left on Georgia's path towards getting the membership action plan and consequently the full membership? And also, this month it's been ten years since Bucharest Summit, since the 2008 August War in Georgia. And from purely real politics and geopolitical perspective, judging the political climate in the world now, do you think we are closer to membership action plan, to becoming a member of Alliance now or we were back then? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Georgia will become a member of NATO provided it meets the necessary requirements. And Georgia has all the practical tools necessary to prepare for membership. The membership action plan map is an integral part of Georgia's membership process. Therefore, before Georgia can join NATO, there must be a consensus decision by Allies about map. At the same time, we recognise that Georgia is making progress in many different areas, including on defence reform, in the fight against terrorism... sorry, against corruption, but also when it comes to modernising its different security institutions and when it comes to, for instance, the rule of law and independent judiciary. So, we will continue to provide support. There is a NATO presence in Georgia, both in the NATO framework, but also some bilateral presence of NATO Allies. So, we will continue to work closely with Georgia and the Allies have expressed strong support to Georgia.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: OK. NPR

Question: Thank you. As I understand it, Secretary Pompeo is urging NATO to do yet more to fight terrorism and I would imagine that you will probably want to have something to present at the Summit when President Trump shows up. What kind of things do you... are you looking at, given that you've already got the AWACS flight, you're participating in the Counter-ISIL Coalition? What kind of measures could we expect to see between now and July, if any? Thanks.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: So, we are working on many different areas or possible measures to step up NATO's contribution to the fight against terrorism. But let me also highlight or underline that NATO has been a key contributor to the fight against terrorism for many, many years. Our biggest military operation in Afghanistan is about fighting terrorism. We went in to Afghanistan as a direct response to a terrorist attack against United States, 9/11 2001. And the main purpose for our presence in Afghanistan is to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorists. So everything we do in Afghanistan is very much about fighting terrorism. And we have just decided and we are in the process of increasing our presence there, with more training and more advice. We will also discuss, of course, the future of our Afghan mission, our mission in Afghanistan, at the Summit.

Then we are now in the process of deciding and planning, scaling up training in Iraq. I met with King Abdullah in Jordan recently and we have just agreed a package... a capacity-building package for Jordan. This is also very much about fighting terrorism, because to help Jordan remain an island of stability, in a region with a lot of instability, is extremely important also when it comes to the fight against terrorism.

We are working with Tunisia on a defence-capacity building package and this includes, for instance support both for Jordan and Tunisia for the development of special operation forces,

intelligence, but we are also looking into other areas, like for instance border control and other areas which are relevant for the fight against terrorism.

Then there are also other areas where we now are looking into what more we can do, working with partners. The whole idea is that the best tool, or one of the best weapons we have against terrorism is to train local forces, to enable local governments to stabilise their own countries and to fight terrorism themselves. And therefore, the whole idea of projecting stability, stabilising our neighbourhood by training local forces, is one of the most important weapons we have against terrorism.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: DPA at the very back?

Question [DPA]: Secretary General, I would like to know if Secretary Pompeo raised the issue of defence expenditures. Did he ask member states like Germany to do more? And I would also like to know if you are satisfied with the plans that were provided by member states like Germany in January.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: So, I will leave it to Secretary Pompeo to tell you what he said. But what I can say is that I expect all Allies, and of course including Germany, to deliver on the pledge we all made back in 2014. And that was to stop the cuts in defence spending, gradually increase and then start to move towards 2%. And the good story is that... and the good news is that European Allies and Canada have started to do exactly that. The cuts have stopped. All Allies having stopped cutting defence budgets since 2014 and all Allies have started to increase defence spending in real terms. So, after years of decline, we have really turned a corner. We now see an increased investment in our defence budget for the first time in many years, all over the Alliance, Europe and Canada, and that is important.

Then, also more nations meet the 2% target. When we made the decision in 2014, it was only three countries that invested 2% of GDP on defence. This year we expect eight nations to meet the 2% goal, and the majority of the Allies have already put forward plans on how to reach the 2% goal within 2024. So, this is a good start. We have turned a corner, stopped the cuts, started to increase, and more and more Allies reached the 2% goal. But we still have a long way to go and that... and therefore we have to continue to stay focused on burden-sharing investment in defence. And I discussed this also when I met the German government recently and I welcome the progress Germany has made, but I also highlighted the need to do more.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: OK, lady over there in the middle?

Question [Kosovo Television]: On open-door policy, can you explain us what's the state of play with membership action plan with Bosnia and Herzegovina and do you envisage a possibility of invitation to Macedonia, in the light of intensified talks between Skopje and Athens on the name dispute?

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: When it comes to the name issue, I would just welcome the fact that we now have talks between Athens and Skopje, to try to find a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue. And the Greek Foreign Minister briefed us on those efforts during the meeting. And NATO's position is clear, as soon as the name issue is resolved then we are ready to invite the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹ to become a member of NATO. So, this very much depends on the name issue. It has been an unsolved and difficult

issue for many years, but now there's a new momentum, there is a real effort from Skopje and from Athens, and I just hope that they will succeed and find a way to solve that issue.

When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the issue is still what we call a Tallinn Criteria or Conditions, meaning that we expect Bosnia and Herzegovina to be able to register immovable defence properties. This may sound like... what shall I say... a practical bureaucratic issue, but it reflects in a way to what extent the state is able to have full control of the armed forces and therefore this is still an issue which is addressed by NATO Allies.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: And final question, lady over here, third row.

Question: Tomorrow is one year anniversary of Montenegro voting in parliament to join NATO. How would you evaluate Montenegro progress and do you have some suggestion for future work? Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: It is a great thing to have Montenegro as a member of NATO. I was very proud when we were able to welcome Montenegro as the 29th member of the Alliance. And it shows that NATO's door is open. Montenegro's accession to NATO has contributed to stability in the Western Balkans. Montenegro contributes to NATO missions and operations. Montenegro has announced now that they will increase their presence in Afghanistan, in our Resolute Support mission. And Montenegro has also put forward a clear plan to meet the 2% target. So, it is great to have Montenegro as a member and it shows that we are an Alliance of 29 nations which stands together and protect each other.

Oana Lungescu [NATO Spokesperson]: Thank you very much. This concludes this press conference. Thank you.

Jens Stoltenberg [NATO Secretary General]: Thank you.

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1. *Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.*

Source: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_154090.htm?selectedLocale=en