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# Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council

*NATO*

26-33 minutes

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- English
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(As delivered)





Good afternoon.

I have just chaired a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council.

At a defining moment for European security.

This was not an easy discussion.

But that is exactly why this meeting was so important.

We had a very serious and direct exchange on the situation in and around Ukraine.

And the implications for European security.

There are significant differences between NATO Allies and Russia on these issues.

Our differences will not be easy to bridge.

But it is a positive sign that all NATO Allies and Russia sat down around the same table, and engaged on substantive topics.

After two years where such meetings were not possible to convene.

Today Russia raised the proposals that they published in December, aimed at addressing their security concerns.

These include demands to stop admitting any new members to NATO.

And to withdraw forces from eastern Allies.

Allies on their side reaffirmed NATO's Open Door policy.

And the right for each nation to choose its own security arrangements.

Allies made clear that they will not renounce their ability to protect

and defend each other.

Including with presence of troops in the eastern part of the Alliance.

At the same time, both Russia and NATO allies expressed the need to resume dialogue and to explore a schedule of future meetings.

NATO Allies are ready to meet again with Russia to have discussions in greater detail, to put concrete proposals on the table, and to seek constructive outcomes.

In particular, Allies would like to discuss concrete ways to increase the transparency of military exercises, to prevent dangerous military incidents, and reduce space and cyber threats.

Allies have also offered to look at arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Including to address reciprocal limitations on missiles, and to address nuclear policies.

On lines of communications, NATO Allies are interested in looking at ways to improve civil and military communications channels, and the possibility of re-establishing our respective offices in Moscow and Brussels.

NATO Allies are clear-eyed about the prospects for progress in these talks.

They expressed serious concern about the Russian military build-up in and around Ukraine.

And called on Russia to immediately de-escalate the situation,

And to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbours.

They also called on Russia to refrain from aggressive force posturing and malign activities directed against Allies, And abide by all its international obligations and commitments.

All this means that our dialogue is difficult, but even more necessary.

NATO Allies stressed that they will make every effort to find a political way forward.

I also welcome the bilateral consultations between the United States and Russia.

And tomorrow's meeting of the OSCE.

These are opportunities for constructive engagement which should not be missed, in the interest of security in Europe.

With that, I am ready to take your questions.

**NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu:** Ok, we'll go to CNN, in the third row, center.

**Alex Marquardt (CNN):** These talks did go a little bit longer today. Could you tell us what specific issues prolonged these talks? And NATO Allies have repeatedly rejected Russia's demand that Ukraine never join NATO, but do you acknowledge that there are divisions among the Allies over Ukraine's accession to NATO and that Ukraine likely will never... likely will not join NATO anytime soon? Thank you.

**NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg:** We had a frank and open discussion on a wide range of issues, of course, focusing on the tensions, the difficulties in and around Ukraine. And Allies also

of course again expressed a deep concern about the continued Russian military build-up along the borders of Ukraine. And combined with threatening rhetoric from the Russian side, and a Russian track record of willingness to use force against neighbours, of course, Allies are concerned. And we are clear-eyed about the challenges we face when we now sit down with Russia and try to find a political way forward. But the meeting was useful. And I think that, especially when tensions are high, it is even more important that we meet, and that all Allies and Russia meet and sit around the same table and address the issues that are of concern.

On membership and the NATO's open door all Allies are united on the core principle that each and every nation has the right to choose his own path. This is enshrined in a lot of fundamental documents, many different documents, which are the foundation for European security. And, therefore, also Allies totally agree that it is only Ukraine and 30 Allies that can decide when Ukraine is ready to become a NATO member. No one else has anything to say and of course Russia doesn't have a veto on whether Ukraine can become a NATO member. Allies are ready to support Ukraine on this path towards membership, helping to implement reforms, modernise the armed forces to meet NATO standards. And then, at the end of the day, it has to be NATO Allies and Ukraine that decides on membership.

**NATO Spokesperson:** We will go to TASS, second row.

**Denis Dubrovin (TASS News Agency):** Mr. Secretary General, it seems you have at least a slight progress on the issue of risk reduction. Do you consider that after this talks it may be feasible in the future to move towards new treaty limiting the use of missiles

in Europe - offensive missile system.

**NATO Secretary General:** NATO Allies made it clear in the meeting that we are ready to schedule a series of meetings addressing a wide range of different topics, including missiles and reciprocal, verifiable limits on missiles in Europe.

From the Russian side, they made it clear that they are not ready, they were not ready today to agree on such a schedule of meetings. I think you should ask them to explore or to explain their position more in detail. But at least I welcome that there is a general willingness and support of the idea of dialogue. And NATO Allies have also made it clear that we are ready to put concrete proposals on the table and to discuss risk reduction, transparency but also arms control, including reciprocal, verifiable limits on missiles.

But let me add that we are in this situation because Russia violated the INF Treaty. We had the treaty banning all intermediate range weapons, dual capable, conventional and nuclear. And it was really a cornerstone of arms control. And then Russia started to deploy missiles in Europe in violation of that treaty. So the reason why we are where we are, is that the treaty that banned missiles - all intermediate range missiles, conventional and nuclear - that treaty has collapsed. We have seen the demise because of extensive Russian violations, deployments of missiles in violation of the treaty. So we are ready to sit down. We support arms control. I know it's possible to reach agreements but then of course we need verifiable and balanced limitations, both on conventional and on nuclear forces.

**NATO Spokesperson:** Ok, we will go here to the National News

Agency of Ukraine. In the back.

**Dmytro Shkurko (National News Agency of Ukraine):** It looks like that the one of the aims of the new Russian threats for European security is to divert the attention from already existing violations of international law, including occupation of Crimea, including occupation of certain areas of Donbass, unauthorized presence also in Moldova, military presence in Moldova and Georgia. So my question is, if Allies preserve unity in that circumstances around those issues and are they going to continue to solve it? And one short follow up, if I may. Russia demands some kind of guarantees from NATO and USA, but what kind of guarantees NATO would like to see from the side of Russia in terms of security? Thank you.

**NATO Secretary General:** Russia has military forces in Georgia, in Ukraine, in Crimea, and also in Moldova. And these forces are there without the consent of the governments of these countries, they are uninvited and not welcomed. And NATO Allies also in the meeting today, called on Russia to withdraw those forces and to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia, of Ukraine, of Moldova.

And, again, these are fundamental principles to respect the borders of all countries for peace and security in Europe. And NATO Allies are ready to engage in dialogue with Russia, but we will not compromise on core principles. We will not compromise on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of every nation in Europe, and we will not compromise on the right for all countries to do, to choose their own path, including what kind of security arrangements they want to be part of, and will not compromise on the right for Allies to protect and defend each other.

Then, what Allies raised with Russia today was actually a wide range of different issues. The focus was on Ukraine and the implications for European security. But of course, it is of concern that, well, the military build-up we see in and around Ukraine, and that military build-up continues. And that is part of a pattern where Russia has used force against different countries, and where Russia has also used cyber against NATO Allies. We have seen the use of chemical weapons on European territory and we also see that Russia is also oppressive against democratic opposition at home.

So NATO engages in these talks, the dialogue, in good faith. We are ready to sit down and discuss substance. We are ready to put proposals on the table, concrete proposals. And then, at the same time we have to be prepared for that -- that Russia once again chooses confrontation. And therefore we also made it very clear that any use of force against Ukraine will be a severe and serious strategic mistake by Russia. And it will have severe consequences and Russia will have to pay a high price.

**NATO Spokesperson: We'll go to POLITICO.**

**David Herszenhorn (POLITICO):** I wonder if you can tell us if you or Allies responded to Russia's historic grievances about NATO's role, for example, in Yugoslavia or in Libya? And if you're able to reassure them that NATO in fact, is not a threat, given Russia's view that there are countries where leaders were removed from power, even killed, or that don't exist anymore, partly because of NATO's intervention.

**NATO Secretary General:** NATO is a defensive alliance. We have never forced or coerced any nation into our Alliance. So this idea

that, for instance, NATO enlargement is aggressive, is absolutely not true. NATO enlargement has been a cornerstone for the spread of democracy and freedom across Europe. Because countries that were formerly part of the Warsaw Pact of the Soviet Union, they have actually freely, through independent democratic processes, chosen to join NATO, and many of those Allies were in the room today, and stated exactly that. They went into NATO because they wanted to be part of a defensive military alliance that provides security.

Second, several countries which are part of former Yugoslavia stated very clearly that -- you know, Yugoslavia broke down, not because of NATO. There were internal reasons why Yugoslavia broke down. NATO came in much later, based on the UN mandate, to stop atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. So the whole idea that NATO used military force to change borders on the Balkans is wrong. The borders in former Yugoslavia changed because of internal reasons in former Yugoslavia. And actually we had several people from these countries, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, at the table telling that story, and they know that it was not NATO, but actually the internal conflicts within Yugoslavia that led to the demise of Yugoslavia. Yes, NATO went in but that was to stop atrocities, to protect people and to stop, for instance, what we saw taking place in Srebrenica.

Then on Libya. Well, it was a clear UN mandate. And let me also remind you that in the beginning, that was not... First it was a European initiative. And then, after some time, European Allies asked for help from NATO, and then NATO went in and supported European Allies in their efforts in Libya. But it was based on a UN mandate.

**NATO Spokesperson:** We'll go to Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

**Thomas Gutschker (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung):**

Secretary General, two questions both interrelated. First one, you said that today Russia did not agree on a schedule of... for further meetings. But did you get a commitment in principles that talks within this framework, the NATO-Russia Council, will be continued? Question number one. And question number two, to move from discussions and talks, as you have described today's meetings, to negotiations, would Russia have to de-escalate as a precondition from the perspective of the Allies - so draw back troops before real negotiations could begin? Thank you.

**NATO Secretary General:** I proposed, Allies supported, the idea of agreeing a series of meetings addressing a wide range of issues including arms control, reciprocal briefing, limitations on missiles and many other things.

Russia was not in a position to agree on that proposal. They didn't rejected it either. But the Russian representatives made it clear that they needed some time to come back to NATO with an answer. And of course, then we are ready to sit down. We are ready to sit down. And of course we hope that Russia is ready to meet us in a series of meetings addressing these issues. And I hope that the response from Russia will be positive because dialogue, talks is what we need in different formats. We welcomed bilateral talks between the United States and Russia on strategic issues. We welcome the meetings that will take place in the OSCE tomorrow and the NATO-Russia Council is also an important platform.

Let me also highlight that we are very grateful for the very close

consultation and coordination we see among Allies, and especially the fact that the United States consulted with Allies both before the bilateral talks with Russia in Geneva, but also afterwards, and that Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman has spent so much time with NATO Allies consulting closely. And that demonstrates that NATO is a unique platform to bring European Allies and North America together to address common security concerns. We are ready to sit down but of course to make any serious progress and to reach an agreement that really makes a difference we need to see de-escalation. But we have made it clear that it'd be better sit down now. We met today and we are ready to meet in the near future to continue and to address more specific and more in detail the different issues we have put on the table.

**NATO Spokesperson:** We will go to Rossiya 1, lady in red.

**Anastasia Popova (Rossiya 1):** You spoke about de-escalation and about Russian troops on the Russian territory. Do you really believe that new military exercises and sending weapons into Ukraine, which is foreign to the NATO Ally, Allies, for now, territory...do you really believe that this helps the de-escalation?

**NATO Secretary General:** Ukraine is a sovereign nation. Ukraine has the right to self-defence. Ukraine is not a threat to Russia. Russia has the biggest land power in Europe. They are one of two major nuclear powers. They have invested heavily in new, modern capabilities over the last years. But not only that, Russia has used military force against Ukraine before. In 2014, they occupied and took a part of Ukraine, Crimea. And they continue to illegally occupy Crimea and they control through the separatists in eastern Ukraine, Donbass. So the whole idea that, in a way, Ukraine threatens Russia is absolutely to put the whole thing upside down.

It is Russia that is the aggressor. It is Russia that has used force and continues to use force against Ukraine. And then, they are building up, with around 100,000 troops, artillery, armour, drones, tens of thousands of combat-ready troops and threatening rhetoric. So of course, that's the problem. This crisis is a making of Russia. And therefore it is important that they de-escalate. Ukraine has the right to self-defence. That's enshrined in the UN founding charter, and of course, some NATO Allies, NATO Allies and NATO help them to uphold that right to self-defence.

**NATO Spokesperson:** New York Times.

**Steven Erlanger (The New York Times):** Thank you Oana. Mr. Secretary General, question on the suggestion that at this point, NATO has prepared to reinforce Allied troops bordering Russia, whether Russia goes into Ukraine or not. Could you describe whether this came up in the meeting perhaps as a warning to the Russian delegation? And secondly, my memory may be failing, but I believe NATO went into Kosovo without a UN resolution but went in after the war with a UN resolution. Thank you.

**NATO Secretary General:** First of all, the whole idea that the breakdown of Yugoslavia was caused by NATO is wrong. You can study the history of Yugoslavia and it's obvious that there are no NATO soldiers there, before after many years. And then we went in to stop atrocities. That was the case, and end bloody wars. That was the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and also in Kosovo after years of failed attempts to find a negotiated solution. Then there was a need to go in - broad support to go in - and to stop atrocities, also in Kosovo.

But at that stage, Yugoslavia had already broken down. And the

first question was about... Well, we will always do what is necessary to protect and defend all Allies. And we are constantly assessing the need to adjust our presence in different parts of the Alliance. After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and continued destabilisation of eastern Ukraine, Donbass, we have implemented the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence in a generation, with battle groups in the eastern part of the Alliance, with high readiness of our forces, and with tripling the size for instance of the NATO Response Force, air policing, more naval presence. We do so to prevent any misunderstanding and not allow any room for miscalculation that NATO is there to protect and defend all Allies. And this is deterrence. This is defensive. And the purpose is to preserve peace. It's not to provoke conflict, but to preserve peace, prevent conflict. And in this way, and of course, we will...and if Russia once again uses force against Ukraine and further invades Ukraine then we have to seriously look into the need to further increase our presence in the eastern part of the Alliance.

**NATO Spokesperson:** Okay, we'll go to NRK. Higher up, higher up. Thank you.

**Simen Ekern (NRK):** Mr. Secretary General, I was wondering yesterday at the briefing, the American ambassador repeated what you said now that NATO's open door policy is not up for negotiation. In your sense, after the meeting today, that a possible avoiding an escalation is more or less probable, without assessing that question? After today's talks, is it at all possible to get any further?

**NATO Secretary General:** It is possible to get further and to reduce tensions if Russia is willing to engage, and if Russia is

willing to find a political way forward. And we are open to addressing and discussing a wide range of issues, including balanced arms control – conventional and nuclear, measures for risk reduction, more transparency, confidence building measures. And we have seen that these mechanisms have worked before. But we are not willing to compromise on the core principle, or one of the core principles of European security: that all countries have the right to choose their own path. And for me, it's interesting to note that, for instance, countries like Finland and Sweden, who have not applied for membership in NATO, they are very clear about this. Because they understand that as soon as you start to impose that kind of restrictions, that the right to choose your own path applies for some countries, but not for all countries, then you start to introduce some kind of first class and second class countries. Some have the right, because they are big or because of historical reasons are part of a military Alliance as NATO, to do what they want to choose their own path, but others don't have that right. And this whole idea that in a way you are close to me, so you cannot do what you want, is to re-introduce the thinking of spheres of influence. And especially those who are also coming from small countries, neighbouring Russia, should understand that that's a very dangerous path. And that's also the reason why, for instance, the Finish president, in a country that is not applying for membership, used this New Year's speech to underline the importance of that principle. And we have to distinguish between the principal, the international rule of law, and the concrete issue of whether Ukraine should join or not in the near future. That's an other thing. So well, if that was... I don't know exactly what the question was. But if the question was whether we're willing to compromise on core principles, the answer is no. If the question

was whether NATO is willing to sit down in good faith, discuss arms control, confidence building measures, transparency, listen to the Russian concerns, the answer is yes.

**NATO Spokesperson:** Okay, we'll try to take one question online from Washington Post. Perry Stein.

**Perry Stein (The Washington Post):** Thank you so much. With no country seeming to come, you know, with...it's continued to be... [inaudible] it seems, with some of these main arguments... with neither side budging, how do you kind of avoid this spiral of continuing crisis' of this nature in the future? I mean, do you see an end to these discussions?

**NATO Secretary General:** Yes, I see an end to these discussions. And that the easiest and the fastest way to get out of this crisis is for Russia to de-escalate. The reasons why we are here, the reason why we have the crisis now, is that we have seen a significant military build-up in and around Ukraine, combined with threatening rhetoric, saying that if you don't do this, and this, you will face severe consequences, and what they refer to as military-technical measures. So that's the easiest way to dissolve or to diffuse the tensions we are faced with now.

More in general, I strongly believe in NATO's approach to Russia, which is what we call the dual-track approach. We need to be firm, we need to be strong, we need to be united, and we are that as Allies. But at the same time, we are always willing to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Russia. Russia is our neighbour and we need to sit down and address common security concerns together. And we have done that before. It's possible. We have agreed arms control agreements after the end of the Cold War, we actually

made a lot of progress together. And of course, that's possible. That's another path. And we really call on Russia to choose that path of cooperation, of dialogue, of de-escalation instead of confrontation.

**NATO Spokesperson:** We'll go to RIA.

**Nadim Zuai (RIA Novosti):** I have a question about, when do you expect any progress in restoring of the Russian Mission here in the headquarters of NATO? And do you have any precondition for this?

**NATO Secretary General:** No, we have no precondition for that. So we regret that Russia closed the diplomatic mission to NATO, and we also regret that they closed down the NATO office in Moscow. But we have made it clear also in the meeting today that we [would like to] actually reopen, re-establish, both the NATO office in Moscow and also the Russia mission to NATO because we believe in dialogue. And we believe that these offices, these diplomatic personnel, they are part of the infrastructure we need to have a meaningful dialogue. What we have made clear is that regardless of whether these offices are reopened or not, we strongly believe that if Russia is willing to sit down in a series of meetings, addressing a wide range of issues, then we are of course ready to prepare those meetings with staff-to-staff civil and military interactions, preparations, to make these really substantive meetings. That will be easier if we have a Russian delegation to NATO and a NATO office in Moscow, but of course we can do that even without those offices.

**NATO Spokesperson:** Ok, we will go to FOX.

**Greg Palkot (FOX News):** Secretary General; Greg Talcott, FOX

News. You have said, and I quote: “if these talks fail, NATO would be ready for a new armed conflict”. You have been in the room with the Russians now for several hours. What is your feeling? What is your gut? How close are we to a new armed conflict?

**NATO Secretary General:** There is a real risk for a new armed conflict in Europe. But that's exactly why the meeting today, and the other meetings that take place this week, are so important. Because we will do what we can to prevent the new armed conflict. And that's the reason why we are so clearly, clear in our message to Russia that we are ready to sit down, list a long range of issues: arms control, reciprocal limits on missiles and many other issues to prevent a new armed conflict.

At the same time, we are clear-eyed. So we also convey a message to Russia that if they use military force, there will be severe consequences. Economic sanctions, political sanctions. We provide support, practical support to Ukraine to strengthen their ability to defend themselves. Allies do that in different ways.

Then, I think is important, in a way, to also understand that Ukraine is a partner. We provide them support: political, practical support, in many different ways. But Ukraine is not a NATO member. The security guarantees, what we call Article 5, “one for all and all for one” - that applies for NATO members. And that's also reason why we have so clearly stated that we will do what it takes to defend all NATO Allies. And attacking one Ally will trigger the response from the whole Alliance. And that is clearly conveyed.

Follow-up question: [inaudible]... more dangerous or less dangerous?

**NATO Secretary General:** I think it's very dangerous to start to

speculate too much about that. This is a real risk. And we relate to that possibility partly by engaging in dialogue in good faith, but also partly being clear-eyed about the risk for a breakdown all these talks.

**NATO Spokesperson:** I know that there are many questions. We'll end with The Associated Press.

**Lorne Cook (The Associated Press):** Secretary General, President Putin had an agreement, draft agreement that he wanted to discuss with NATO. Did the Russian delegation put that agreement on the table today? And you've rejected the core principles of that. So is it off the table completely now? Thank you.

**NATO Secretary General:** So Russia have put that, has put that proposal, that treaty on the table and sent it to the United States and to NATO. And of course, also went through those proposal, presented those proposals in the meeting today and argued in favour of these proposals. NATO Allies made it clear that, of course, we are open for dialogue, we can discuss many issues but we cannot discuss some core principles. Like, for instance, the freedom to choose your own path, including what kind of security arrangements each and every country in Europe wants to be part of, and our right to defend all Allies, including eastern Allies. But again, it's possible to agree on verifiable, reciprocal arms control, something that is balanced on conventional, nuclear missiles and other areas, and we stated that very clearly, too.

**NATO Spokesperson:** Thank you very much. This concludes this press conference.

**NATO Secretary General:** Thank you so much.

