

Press briefing

by NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at the level of Heads of State and Government

De Hoop De Hoop Scheffer: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

The NATO summit has come to an end with the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. I think it ended on an important note, with this meeting because... I think I am not exaggerating, if I say that the NATO-Russia Council has become... I think, an essential, strategic bridge across Europe.

And I think that today's summit meeting... and you know that it was the first one since Pratica di Mare, in Rome... in Italy, answered that thesis and was in line with that opinion.

We had three founding fathers of the NATO-Russia Council present, today. To be more specific: President Putin; President Bush and Prime Minister Rasmussen of Denmark. Prime Minister Juncker of Luxembourg is the fourth, but he could, unfortunately, not be here today.

And in the presence of those founding fathers, there was a good opportunity... I think, to look back; take stock of the present; and last, but not least, think constructively about the future. And I think this opportunity was grasped by the members of the NATO-Russia Council. The discussion was frank and open; there was no hiding of views but the spirit was positive.

I always say... and I saw that reconfirmed, this morning... of course, we use the NATO-Russia Council to discuss items and issues on which we agree to discuss; our practical cooperation. I'll give you an important example of that in just a moment.

But it's perhaps, to me, even more important that we use the NATO-Russia Council on the items where we do not agree; be it the enlargement of NATO; be it the adapted CFE Treaty; be it Kosovo.

I cannot report that, this morning, we saw stunning breakthroughs in this regard, but I think the NATO-Russia Council ended, as I said in my conclusions, with homework for the near and more-distant future.

Let me say that, in the framework of our practical cooperation, I think we saw an interesting example, in the sense that, Russia and NATO have embarked upon a common, joint effort to help Afghanistan.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavarov and I, early this morning, signed a transit agreement to transit arrangements, in support for the ISAF mission. And that means, as you might know, that non-lethal military goods for ISAF can be transported through Russian territory.

I could mention the important counter-narcotics training projects, the continued Russian participation in Operation Active Endeavour, in the Mediterranean. The cooperation on the Theatre Missile Defence; on counter terrorism; on civil emergency; on rescue at sea; on airspace data collection... a whole package of practical cooperation between NATO and Russia, as the one leg. The other leg is, of course, the ever-important political discussion; the political debate. And that will, as you'll agree with me, certainly continue.

I bid farewell to two of the founding fathers of the NATO-Russia Council. One, President Putin, who is continuing in another capacity, and whom we might meet again... I would hope so, I told him at the end of the meeting. And President Bush, who will end his presidential term in a few months' time. And I think they both have done extremely well in the NATO-Russia Council.

And it will come as no surprise to you that I also had some words of thanks... of big thanks to say to President Bush; not only for what he's done in the framework of the NATO-Russia Council, but also... given this was the last meeting at his last NATO summit, for the tremendous support President Bush has always given to NATO, as a staunch defender of freedom and democracy... as I said it in the meeting. And I ended, of course, with wishing him... President Bush and the first lady, Laura Bush, all the very best.

We'll miss them; we'll miss them definitely.

So, this is what I can tell you, this morning, about the NATO Russia Council. I'm open for your questions and comments.

Questions and answers

Q: Good morning, Secretary General. Konstantin Eggert BBC Russian Service.

Could you elaborate, please, on the discussions that the council members had with President Putin on the question of Georgia and the Ukraine? There is much speculation in the media.

What was the atmosphere? Was there really a clash of views on that?

Thank you.

De Hoop Scheffer: No; I think it would be wrong to describe it as "a clash of views."

It is clear that this is... NATO enlargement, more in general, is a contentious issue between Russia and NATO. You also know that we have seen many rounds of enlargement, and I'm also sure that we'll see further rounds of enlargement; you have seen two invitations yesterday. And I'm absolutely certain, 100 percent, that more are to follow.

And here, we... the minds do not exactly meet, to put it mildly... on NATO enlargement. So it's a contentious issue but you cannot... so you cannot describe the atmosphere that this was, this morning, in the meeting... a metaphor for confrontation. That is not the way I would describe it.

But like the other... can I call them "big ticket issues" which divide us, it was discussed. And on Kosovo, President Putin and his colleagues do not see eye-to-eye. The same is true... but President Putin made a number of remarks on this, only adapted CFE Treaty.

But, as long as the bottom line is that we both are of the opinion that the adapted CFE treaty is a cornerstone of European security, I'm not in panic. Let's continue the discussions.

APPATHURAI: Next question is there.

Q: Tomas, Mediarena, Swiss Radio Television.

Secretary General, could you expand on your discussion on Kosovo; and, in particular, after the Allies had shown a certain degree of understanding for Russia's concerns, when it comes to Ukraine (SIC) and Georgia? Do you think, after this meeting, that you can count on more cooperation from the Russian side, when it comes to allied concerns in Kosovo?

De Hoop Scheffer: I think the debate on Kosovo should continue, because there's a rather fundamental difference of opinion, here.

But the NATO role... and I think that is what President Putin realizes very well... the NATO role... the KFOR role in Kosovo, was, is and will remain, on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 unless, of course, the Security Council might decide otherwise.

I think there's no disagreement between NATO and Russia on the presence of KFOR. What does KFOR do? KFOR protects every Kosovo citizen; majority, minority.

In other words, that is not the issue; the issue is a more fundamental one. But the NATO issue and the KFOR issue... I mean, NATO is not in the recognition business. That is not a NATO responsibility; that's the responsibility of individual nations. In NATO, in the European Union and elsewhere.

The KFOR presence in Kosovo... which is, of course very important... KFOR of course, not as a first responder but behind the Kosovo Police Service and UNMIK... on the basis of 1244 is, in my... to the best of my knowledge, not disputed.

Q: (INAUDIBLE) News Agency, (INAUDIBLE).

I would like to ask you, if you touched the issue of the ratifying, by NATO states, the adapted CFE Treaty? And, can we hope that, one day, NATO, as organization, will ask its members to ratify it?

Thank you.

De Hoop Scheffer: Well, ratification of the adapted treaty is something the NATO Allies decide upon. I hope that, one day, that will happen. But you also know that there are some conditions relevant for the Allies which have not been fulfilled and not been met, yet.

You also know that, in the so-called Parallel Action Package on CFE... the Allies, I think, have shown themselves very, very flexible indeed to continue the discussion on CFE, and that the Allies are disappointed about the Russian suspension of the Treaty.

So I think the Allies have been very flexible. You might have seen the statement which came out... I think it was about a week ago on CFE.

So my answer to your question, "Do you hope that it will be signed?"... "ratified," I should say. I say "Yes." "Do you expect this to happen soon?" I don't know. It depends on the talks continuing... I hope, I expect between all the relevant parties.

Q: Nick Rijillo (?) from DPA.

Secretary General, you said there were no major breakthroughs, but we understand there was also a lack of unhelpful rhetoric.

So would it be fair to characterize NATO-Russia relations as enjoying a fresh start, perhaps?

De Hoop Scheffer: This morning, I'm not complaining about unhelpful rhetoric. No. Because, I think the meeting... as I answered your Russian colleague, the meeting had a constructive atmosphere, which is something else. To say that we agreed on everything... No, we did not.

But... you can expect me to criticize unhelpful rhetoric when it occurs, but it did not occur this morning.

Q: Adina Laguna (?) Radio Liberty, Russian Service.

I wanted a follow-up question, actually. To what extent...

De Hoop Scheffer: Could you please keep the mic...

Q: ...yeah.

De Hoop Scheffer: ...closer?

Q: To what extent the Russian anti-Western rhetoric influenced the practical work within the NATO-Russian Council? That's first. And second, you mention missile defence as an area of cooperation, but as we all understand it's also the area where there is a conflict of interest, to some extent.

Can you please describe what's the state of missile defence negotiations now?

De Hoop Scheffer: Thank you.

Q: ...in council?

De Hoop Scheffer: Yeah. If I talk about NATO-Russia cooperation... and that is what I said in my introductory statement, I'm talking about Theatre Missile Defence. Theatre Missile Defence. There, we have a cooperation.

You have seen the text on missile defence more, in general, in the NATO communiqué. I can tell you that this was not extensively discussed in the NATO-Russia Council.

And you know as well as I do that presidents Putin and Bush will meet in Sochi, and there, I could expect... and you could expect that one of the main topics would be missile defence.

In the NATO-Russia Council framework, it is a cooperation on Theatre Missile Defence.

Q: Denis Manarukov(?) (INAUBIDLE) Press Switzerland.
Mr. Secretary General, what future do you see for the missile defence?

Will there be a tri-party cooperation between NATO, USA and Russia? Because there were rumours about it.

Could you say what future do you see for the defence system?

De Hoop Scheffer: I'm, of course, not the only one to decide; I referred already to the bilateral meeting between the presidents of Russia and the United States of America in Sochi, in the coming days.

Missile defence... apart from the Theatre Missile Defence element, is discussed frequently being discussed in the framework of the NATO-Russia Council.

Also, in general terms... and I do not exclude that, in Brussels, the level of ambassadors... and we do that from time to time, as you know, in the presence of experts from the Russian Federation and from NATO; that discussion will continue.

I think the NATO Allies, yesterday... on missile defence, have taken a very important and very constructive decision.