Standing Up for NATO

A Conversation with Jens Stoltenberg

Jens Stoltenberg became secretary general of NATO in 2014. Earlier, he served as prime minister of Norway, from 2005 until 2013. Earlier this week, Stoltenberg met at the White House with U.S. President Barack Obama to discuss, among other things, NATO’s role in the fight against ISIS and the alliance’s ongoing response to increased Russian assertiveness. For Stoltenberg, the timing of the meeting was propitious: intentionally or not, it served as a very public rebuke to Donald Trump, the front-runner in the Republican presidential campaign, who has recently begun to harshly criticize NATO, even suggesting that it might be best for the United States if the alliance were to break up. A few hours after meeting with Obama, Stoltenberg spoke with Foreign Affairs deputy managing editor Justin Vogt.

It's been a long time since NATO was a contentious issue in American politics—or in a U.S. presidential campaign, at least. But Donald Trump has made it one. Trump has claimed that NATO is “obsolete” and that the alliance represents a bad bargain for the United States. A few days ago, Trump said the following at a rally in Wisconsin: "We are protecting [the other alliance members] and they are getting all sorts of military protection and other things and they're ripping off the United States and they're ripping you off. I don't want to do that. Either they pay up, including for past deficiencies, or they have to get out. And if it breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO."

What’s your response to that line of criticism, and what do you make of the fact that NATO has become an issue in this campaign?

I cannot comment on the U.S. election campaign and I will not comment on any election campaign in any NATO allied country. It's up to the American people to decide who's going to be the next president. I will not be part of that decision. But I can tell you that NATO is as important and as vital for our security as ever, especially because we face a more dangerous road. So it is even more important that we stand together. NATO is important to European security, but NATO is also important for American security. We stand together in the fight against [the Islamic State, also known as ISIS]. Terrorism affects us all, from Brussels to San Bernardino. NATO is stepping up its efforts to support the coalition fighting ISIS. We have to remember that our biggest military operation ever—in Afghanistan—was a direct response to [the 9/11 attacks] on the United States. And the only time we have invoked Article V—NATO’s collective defense clause—was after that attack on the United States.

One third of the forces that have fought in Afghanistan are from Canada or Europe. More than 1,000 Canadian and European soldiers have lost their lives there. Many more have been wounded. This is just one example of Europeans and Canadians standing together with the United States, in making sure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for organizing attacks against the United States.
So, NATO is based on the idea of “one for all, all for one,” and we protect each other. And that's good for the United States, that's good for Europe, and we have to stand together because we live in a more dangerous world.

But Trump and other critics might reply that U.S. defense expenditures account for almost 75 percent of the total amount spent that NATO spends on defense, and that the United States pays about twice as much, per capita, as the other members. Moreover, aside from the United States, only four other NATO members spend the agreed-upon target amount—two percent of GDP—on defense. Could that explain, in part, why fewer than half of Americans now view NATO favorably, and why the number of Americans who view the alliance unfavorably has risen pretty significantly—from around 20 percent to around 30 percent—in the past five years?

It is in the interest of the United States to have a safe and secure Europe. Two world wars have taught us all the lesson that the security of Europe is also important for the security of the United States. And many European allies are now stepping up [in terms of defense spending]. We are implementing the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense since the end of the Cold War. We have tripled the size of NATO's response force. We have established a new high readiness force in Europe. We are establishing new command structures in the eastern part of the alliance, and the European allies are in the lead on this, providing most of the forces.

Five NATO allies are already spending more than two percent of GDP on defense. That's not enough. But 16 European NATO allies increased their defense spending, in real terms, last year. I will continue to work with European NATO allies to make sure that they make good on the pledge they made in 2014 to stop cutting and to then gradually increase defense spending towards two percent of GDP. We still have a long way to go, but we have seen some progress. After a steady decline over several years in European defense spending, in 2015, the cuts stopped, which is the first step towards an increase. So, yes, European defense spending has to increase. But the answer to a more dangerous world is not to [downgrade] the strongest and most successful military alliance in history. The answer is to make that alliance stronger. The promise is to meet the target [of all allies spending at least two percent of GDP on defense] during the next ten years. There's no way we can have our freedom for free, as President Obama has stated.

Obama has complained, in a different context, about “free riders”—countries that benefit from U.S. military strength but don’t contribute enough to their own security. You met with him this morning. Did he bring that up during your conversation?

First of all, his message was that we need a strong NATO and that the answer to a more dangerous world is not less NATO, it's more NATO. The second message was that NATO is playing a big, important role in the fight against terrorism and we stand together. From Afghanistan through Iraq, the Middle East, and North Africa, NATO supports the efforts to fight ISIS. And that is something which is important for Europe but also important for the United States. Then, of course, [Obama] reiterated the message about the importance of European defense spending, and I absolutely agree with him. The picture is mixed but it is better than it was a year ago. We have a long way to go but we have started to push.
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Since the Ukraine crisis and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, there has been a great deal of discussion about how NATO can protect its Baltic members—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—against potential Russian aggression. Can you explain NATO’s strategy for deterring a Russian incursion into the Baltics and for defending the Baltic members? What does the strategy actually look like?

Our message to any country that would consider violating the territorial integrity of any NATO ally is that we stand together. And what we have done over the last few years is that we have increased our presence in the eastern part of the alliance. And we agreed at our defense minister meeting in February to step up and increase the presence of multinational forces. And we will decide at our summit in Warsaw in July on the size and the composition [of those forces], but it's all declared that this will be a multinational force. And the important thing with a multinational force is that it will send a clear signal that an attack on one ally will be an attack on all allies.

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So then, the plan is to increase the size of that force enough so that it would constitute a direct defense of the Baltics, which would mean that NATO’s Baltic strategy won’t rely on merely retaliating in the event of a Russian incursion?

We are, in a way, doing two things at the same time. We are increasing our forward presence in the eastern part of the alliance. At the same time, we are significantly increasing our ability to reinforce if needed. We are tripling the size of the NATO response force and establishing a new high readiness force, which will enable us to deploy forces on a short notice. [And we are] strengthening the home defenses, the national forces in each country. And then add to that increased or new investments in infrastructure, in prepositioning of equipment, ammunition, fuel, and also more [military] exercises—all of that together is a very strong reinforcement of our collective defense.

But we do not seek a new Cold War. We don't seek a new arms race. Everything we do is defensive and proportionate and we continue to strive for a more constructive and cooperative relationship with Russia. There is no contradiction between strength and political dialogue. We are strong and firm and also engaged in political dialogue with Russia, addressing the need for transparency, risk reductions, avoiding incidents and accidents that can become dangerous.

Two Nordic countries that border the Baltics—Sweden and Finland—are not NATO members. But does NATO need access to Finnish and Swedish airspace and maritime territory to truly defend the Baltic members of NATO?

After a steady decline over several years in European defense spending, in 2015, the cuts stopped.
First of all, we don't see an imminent threat against any NATO ally. We see a more challenging security environment and we are responding to that with our assurance measures, with our increased presence and increased readiness. Sweden and Finland are two very close NATO [partners]. We are ready to work together with them. But they are not members of the alliance, and therefore they are in a different position than NATO allies.

In Sweden, there’s been an increase in support for the idea of joining NATO. Recent polls have shown that, for the first time, a majority of Swedes favor that move. Are there discussions going on about how a NATO expansion into the Nordics would work?

It is up to the people of Sweden to decide whether they want to become members of NATO or not. And, again, I think that it would be counterproductive if I started to try to be part of that Swedish debate. As the secretary general of NATO and especially as a Norwegian neighbor of Sweden, I think I should stay away from that debate. But we welcome very much the close cooperation we have with Sweden and we will enhance and develop that cooperation. And then it's up to Sweden to decide whether they're going to apply for membership.

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We spoke earlier about the value of NATO. And today you discussed the fight against ISIS and the refugee crisis with President Obama. Perhaps one way to assess NATO’s contribution to global security would be to imagine what the fight against ISIS and the response to the refugee crisis would look like if NATO were not involved or did not exist. What would be missing?

What NATO has developed over many, many years is what we call interoperability. The experience, the skills to make sure that forces from many different countries—NATO ally countries but also NATO partners—are able to work together and to operate together. We have achieved that through training, through exercises, but also through military operations like Afghanistan. These skills, this interoperability, are of great value for the coalition fighting ISIS. So the first thing that would be missing is the coherence, the interoperability of the forces—or at least it would have been reduced or less present.

Then, of course, NATO provides training and capacity building. I would like to do more of that. We do it in Jordan. We have started the training of Iraqi officers. We work with partner countries like Tunisia, and all of this is important, because I very much believe that we should enable local forces to fight ISIS, to stabilize their own countries. Of course we have to be ready to deploy NATO combat forces. But in the long run, it's most sustainable if we're able to train local forces to fight ISIS and to stabilize their own countries.

What NATO is doing when it comes to the migrant crisis is that we are in a way creating a platform for close cooperation with Turkey, which is a NATO ally but not an EU member—a platform for cooperation between Turkey and Greece, and between Turkey and the EU. That’s been part of our contribution to assisting Europe with tackling the migrant and refugee crisis. And we have also deployed ships to the Aegean Sea, helping the Greek coast guard, the Turkish
coast guard, and the EU border agency, Frontex, to cope with and handle the migrant crisis. But NATO also offers a framework for close cooperation between the EU and Turkey.

NATO is a bridge.

Yes.

Have the criticisms directed at Turkey by other countries in NATO—on human rights, on political rights—made it harder to play that role? Has it complicated that mission at all?

NATO is based on some core values: human rights, individual liberty, and democracy. I expect all NATO allies to adhere to those values.