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## James Mattis

### *NATO Press Conference After Defense Ministerial*

delivered 15 February 2017, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium



**AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED:** Text version below transcribed directly from audio

**Moderator:** Ladies and gentlemen, Secretary Mattis will make a statement and then take two questions.

**SecDef Mattis:** Yes, ma'am.

Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentleman.

I just completed the defense ministerial, where I had the opportunity to engage in a bilateral discussion as well with a number of our fellow ministers, in there. We all took part in a dinner last night, reaffirming our strong transatlantic bond, and it's as strong as I have ever seen it. I have some experience here at NATO, and I was impressed by how strong the bond is.

My intent was to affirm the full U.S. commitment to NATO and to gain an updated appreciation of the situation facing our alliance. The burden-sharing message I delivered was expected, and it was very well received. And I depart confident that the alliance will be unified in meeting today's security challenges. I especially appreciate the leadership of Secretary General Stoltenberg and the clear alignment of our messages, as well as the messages delivered by so many of the unified alliance member nations and their ministers of defense.



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As I noted yesterday, NATO is the fundamental bedrock for keeping the peace and defending the freedoms we enjoy today. To quote Minister Le Drian of France, "NATO is a peerless alliance. It is a manifestation of our principles and shared values, and the U.S. commitment to Article 5 and our mutual defense is rock solid."<sup>1</sup>

In our meetings we discussed in detail the strategic situation facing the alliance. Many allies, including Minister von der Leyen of Germany, recognized 2014 as a watershed year that awakened allies to a new reality.

My message to my fellow ministers was simple: NATO arose out of strategic necessity, and NATO must evolve in response to the new strategic reality. Our community of nations is under threat on multiple fronts, as the *arc of insecurity* builds on NATO's periphery and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

We thoroughly discussed the increased threats facing our alliance. And unified by the threats to our democracies, I found strong alliance resolve to address these growing threats. Russia's aggressive actions have violated international law and are destabilizing.

Terrorism emanating from the Middle East and North Africa is a direct and immediate threat to Europe and to us all. I am mindful of the tragic attacks on our European allies and what they have suffered in Paris, Nice, Berlin, Istanbul, and right here in Brussels. And the list, as you know, goes on.

We recognize as well that the imposition of instability has taken on new forms that we must now address, for example, in the cyber domain. In response to these threats, NATO is reinforcing deterrence and defense, and adapting to more directly address terrorist threats along our southern flank from the Mediterranean to Turkey; and in the words of the Turkish MOD, a seamless defense from the Kola Peninsula all the way down to the Mideast and across the Mediterranean.

We also met with one of NATO's closest partners, Georgia. And I expressed appreciation and respect for Georgia's contributions and sacrifices on NATO's battlefields in Afghanistan.



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The alliance faces not only these strategic realities, but also political realities. I depart here confident that we have an appreciation of the burden sharing that we must all sustain for deterrence, peace, and prosperity. I am optimistic the alliance will adopt a plan this year, including milestone dates to make steady progress toward meeting defense commitments in light of the increased threats that we all agree that we face.

It is imperative that we do so to confront the threats as outlined by the ministers of defense over the last two days. Those means -- Those nations already committing two percent of GDP for defense, and the commitments other allies have made to commit the two percent, give me the confidence that nothing can shake our unity and our commitment to defend our way of life.

We specifically appreciate Estonia, Greece, Poland, and the United Kingdom, who have already met the two percent defense spending commitment. These countries are leading by example, making real sacrifices. All allies recognize that they are benefiting from the best defense in the world, so I'm optimistic that all nations are on a steady path to reach the level of commitments made at the Wales and Warsaw summits.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Trans-Atlantic bond built on common values remains very, very strong. I see here in Brussels a quickened purpose in this alliance and a profound determination to stand together and honor our commitments to each other. I have confidence that we will sustain the legacy we've inherited and do what is necessary to defend our freedoms. So, thank you very much. I'm happy to take your questions.



**Moderator:** Jennifer Griffin, Fox News.

**Question:** Thank you, sir.

What does Russia need to stop doing in order for the U.S. to work with it? The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is meeting with his Russian counterpart for the first time since Russia invaded Ukraine. Can you trust the Russians?



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**SecDef Mattis:** Jennifer, I think the -- the point about Russia is they have to live by international law just like we expect all mature nations on this planet to do. And what we will do is we will engage politically. We do not -- or, are not in a position right now to collaborate on a military level, but our political leaders will engage and try to find common ground or a way forward where Russia, living up to its commitments, will return to a -- a partnership of sorts here with NATO. But Russia is going to have to prove itself first and live up the commitments they have made in the Russia-NATO agreement.

**Question:** And just to clarify, do you believe that the Russians interfered in the U.S. elections?

**SecDef Mattis:** Right now I would just say there's very little doubt that they have either interfered or they have attempted to interfere in a number of elections in the democracies.

**Moderator:** Okay. Heidi Jensen, from Jyllands-Posten.

**Question:** Heidi Jensen, Jyllands-Posten, Denmark.

You said yesterday that the U.S. would think about moderating its commitment to NATO if the European members of the alliance didn't increase its defense budgets. What -- What does that mean, exactly? Does that mean that the rock solid support for the Article 5 doesn't necessarily stand? Or that you will withdraw troops from Europe or -- could you elaborate on that? Thank you.

**SecDef Mattis:** The commitment to Article 5 remains rock solid. The message that I brought here about everyone carrying their fair share of the burden, the sacrifice to maintain the best defense in the world, was very well received. It was -- It was not contentious. There was no argument. There was simply discussion about how best and how fast can each nation with its own particular circumstance reach it. I leave here very optimistic.

We'll take one more question, just to show that I'm boss [sportively delivered].

**Moderator:** Okay.

**SecDef Mattis:** Go ahead.



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**Moderator:** Helene, from New York Times.

**Question:** Can we have a question here?

**Moderator:** Sorry.

**Question:** Thank you, sir. Russian Defense Minister Shoygu took issue with your remarks yesterday and said that if the -- NATO wants to deal with Russia from a position of strength then...there's nothing to talk about. Could you respond to that? And, separately, have you requested help from allies for the counter-ISIL fight? And do you think that you need to send additional American troops to Syria?

**SecDef Mattis:** I have no need to respond to the Russian statement at all. NATO has always stood for military strength in protection of the democracies and the freedoms we intend to pass on to our children. But you asked two questions, you know. You just can't -- You just can't keep you journalists down, can we?

I don't know. I -- I think -- I think you'd have to ask that question of some others in order to get a full answer. It's just not one that I'd be comfortable answering on my own at this point.

**Question:** Meaning that --

**Moderator:** Okay.

**Question:** -- you're considering it but you haven't decided?

**SecDef Mattis:** Right now, I first want to talk to the other allies and we'll decide where we're going. I'm going to fly from here into the Middle East, and I'm not comfortable answering it yet. Once we know what we have for a mutual appreciation of the situation, then we'll go [forward]. But I'm not comfortable answering it yet.

Again, I -- I consider myself a couple weeks into office. First I need to get current, Helene. And once I get current, and once I get allies' assumptions, appreciations for the situation, we'll carve out where we want to go. And at that point I can give you a much more studied answer. Right now I'd -- I'd be concerned with giving you a kind of a half-baked one.



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We -- We got to take at least one more non-American now, because we've got two -- we need to have -- yes, ma'am.

**Moderator:** The woman in the fourth row, please.

**Question:** Yes, this is from Danish Television. Sir, could you please elaborate a little more about the word *moderate*?

**SecDef Mattis:** Yeah, no, I'd -- I'd prefer not to, ma'am, because basically that is the headline I do not anticipate ever seeing. By putting it out there, by being very honest among friends, we say this is a -- a burden that we all have to carry equally; and by being persuasive there, you write -- we will write our own headlines as a unified alliance that will stand up for each other. And I'm very confident that we will not have to have that. And sometimes you say the things you don't want to have happen so that you head them off. But thank you.

**Moderator:** And thank --

**SecDef Mattis:** Thank you, ladies and gentleman. I don't think I'm going to get ahead of these ladies here, so I'm going to give up while I'm only somewhat behind. But thank you very much.

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<sup>1</sup> Unverified as delivered

<sup>2</sup> This language and associated concepts were invoked in the *Warsaw Summit Communiqué* (issued 9 July 2016), the official record of a watershed joint security agreement among NATO and The European Commission (EC) and Presidents of the European Council, pursuant to the Warsaw Summit.