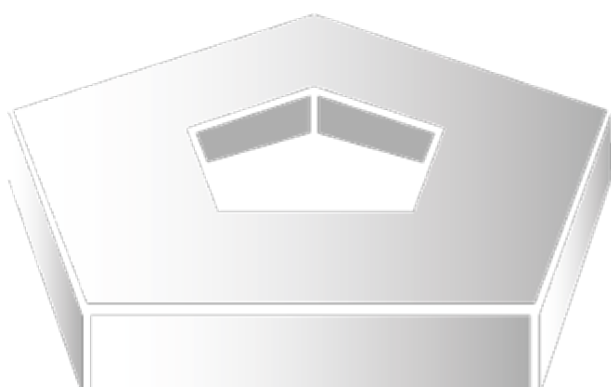


Joint Press Briefing by Secretary of Defense Esper and French Minister of Armed Forces Parly

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SECRETARY OF DEFENSE MARK T. ESPER: Well, good morning, everyone.

Minister Parly, it's a pleasure to meet with you again as we continue to strengthen our long-standing defense relationship and discuss the way forward on our shared priorities. For more than 200 years, the alliance between France and the United States has helped safeguard the values of liberty and the rule of law.

Today, France remains a vital partner in our efforts around the world. Our two countries recognize the threats posed by Russia and China in this era of great power competition, and we remain committed to addressing them together. French support to NATO is critical to our collective security. I'd like to thank the minister for her commitment to burden sharing as you work toward reaching the two percent of GDP spending target. We continue to encourage all NATO members to increase their contributions and to invest in the readiness of the alliance.

In the Middle East, both our countries are working to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS and supporting Iraq on its path to becoming a more secure, prosperous, and independent state.

Today, the minister and I discussed NATO's expanded role in the region as we continue to work together through the Defeat ISIS coalition. Ultimately, we recognize that alliance unity is the key to our success here and across the globe.

Meanwhile, the United States and France both recognize the dangers of Iran's aggression and agree that we must work together to get Iran to behave like a normal country. The United States' actions over the last several weeks were essential to restoring deterrence and making clear to the Iranian regime that threats to American forces, partners and interests will not be tolerated.

In closing, we hope to do more with France to strengthen NATO, to deepen the trans-Atlantic cooperation and ensure our collective security. Our two nations share a bond that spans centuries and is rooted in a mutual respect for the values of democracy, liberty and individual rights. Our cooperation will continue in this same spirit, and will help us overcome the threats of tomorrow.

Minister Parly, I look forward to working with you on our shared interests and priorities. Thank you very much for your partnership.

MINISTER OF ARMED FORCES FLORENCE PARLY: Thank you very much. Thank you for hosting me in D.C. today. We had, with Secretary Esper, an excellent discussion on a range of issues that reflects the depths of our partnership. The military relationship between our two countries is a -- is as solid as ever, and there is plenty of evidence of that. We have discussed the Middle East, and we share a sense of urgency in resuming the fight against Daesh. The politics of Iraq are complex, but our presence is necessary and we have agreed on the necessity to broaden the NATO -- these training operations. We have also agreed that our respective maritime missions in the Gulf should be closely-coordinated.

On the Sahel, I have updated Secretary Esper on the important decisions reached at the Pau Summit. The strategy is clear, demanding, result-driven, and not open-ended. Our friends in the Sahel are in a situation where our assistance is critical, and I have expressed the hope that both the United States and France will keep on supporting them. It's a classic case of burden sharing, where limited U.S. support leverages an immense effort carried out by France and Europe.

As both of us are preparing for the February NATO Ministerial, we agreed that the organization remains the cornerstone of our collective security. It needs reform though, and France strongly supports the forthcoming strategic review called for at the London Summit.

European security is a changing landscape. France fully supports America's insistence on the Europeans taking a larger share of the burden, spending more, committing more, fighting more. That's what my country does, and our recent casualties in the Sahel are the most painful, but also the most glaring evidence. Fighting more, yes. I would add negotiating more also, especially in the field of arms control where we are often on the menu, but rarely at the table.

If the first weeks are any guide, we have a tough year ahead of us, but each time I visit our forces and each time I visit D.C., I'm confident with the strengths of our partnership there is no challenge that we cannot meet together. Thank you.

SEC. ESPER: Thank you.

Q: You know, thank you. Mr. Secretary, in order to redirect U.S. effort toward the great power competitions, do you plan to reduce the military footprint -- U.S. military footprint in West Africa? And especially, do you plan to close the new U.S. drone base in Niger?

And, Madame Minister, did you receive the assurances that you were seeking about the continued support from the U.S. military to the Barkhane operation in Sahel?

SEC. ESPER: Well, I'll answer first. As you know, my top priority is to implement the National Defense Strategy. That means that we are focused on great power competition with China, then Russia.

As I look at that strategy, my aim is to free up time, money and manpower around the globe, where we currently are, so that I could direct it toward either that region or, secondly, return forces to the United States to prepare -- to become more ready, to improve their readiness.

As you know, we are in the middle of a review of AFRICOM. I started the SOUTHCOM review last week, when I was in Miami. That will continue. Reviews will commence soon with all of the other commands. And again, at the end of the day, my -- my aim is to adjust our footprint in many places so that I can accomplish those goals.

No decisions yet have been made. In due course, we will make them. I've been consulting now with Minister Parly for many months, and we will continue to do so and -- and as we make decisions and as we consult, going forward.

Q: And the drone base?

SEC. ESPER: No comments on anything because, first of all, no decisions have been made.

MIN. PARLY: So we -- we know perfectly, Washington's priorities, which are increasingly looking towards the Far East and we understand that. We actually thank the United States for all the support it has been providing to our operations for the past seven years. But I had the opportunity to -- to tell, again, to mention again that the U.S. support is critical to our operations and that its reduction would severely limit our effectiveness against terrorists.

But as it has been said, the decision is not yet made. And I see the opportunity to update Secretary Esper. The next -- the recent developments that happened in the Pau Summit, and I informed him about the road map we decided to implement in the coming months, and I'm sure that we will have a continuing dialogue on these issues.

STAFF: Barbara Starr, CNN.

Q: Secretary Esper, two questions, if I may. It appears the Air Force this morning is now confirming that they lost an EF-11A aircraft in Afghanistan. So what can you tell people about the circumstances or anything at all that you may have been briefed on about the loss of this aircraft in Ghazni?

And then, I did want to ask you, I know you don't often comment on the Ukraine aid question. But it is now out there that you did have a conversation -- yourself, Secretary

Pompeo, Ambassador Bolton -- about Ukraine's aid and I'm wondering if you can shed any light on the question of whether at any time you -- you were aware that it was being held up, other than for corruption review by OMB.

But the loss of aircraft question first, if I may.

SEC. ESPER: Since we're limited to one question per reporter, I'll take your first question.

(Laughter.)

I'm aware of the situation. I have nothing further to report at this time. As the matter develops and we develop it, we will update the media.

Q: Can I ask you to consider the second question?

SEC. ESPER: Thank you.

Q: Oh, OK. Good morning, thank you.

Minister, nice to see you again. France has been a leader in space technology and -- both for defensive measures in outer space as well as concerns about Chinese aggression in outer space. How do you foresee working with the new U.S. Space Force in cooperative measures in outer space, as well as would this be something that NATO would consider as a future mission?

MIN. PARLY: Should I start? OK. So space and outer space is a major concern and a new area of threats, and that's why we -- we felt the need to establish, in a formal way, what is France strategy in this new area.

And we have decided to invest strongly in space within the military programming law that has been voted, two years ago. So we will completely renew our satellites and equipment -- military equipment in space.

And more than that, we -- we feel the necessity to protect our assets in space. And this is something that we shared together. The cooperation between the United States and France is extremely strong and fruitful. The United States made important decisions in terms of organizing Space Force, a space force. And our space -- respective space commanders have a strong dialogue between each other.

We made exactly the same -- same move -- not at the same scale, of course, but the same move by creating a space command organization, located in Toulouse, where we -- we have all our assets. And there will be exercise, common exercise between each other. And so it's a very fruitful cooperation.

SEC. ESPER: Yeah, I would just -- I would just add that our -- our nations have been in space for many, many years. It's just been recently that both China and Russia pushed us to the point where it now became a warfighting domain.

As a result, the United States has stood up Space Command and just recently, Space Force, to make sure that we can preserve space as a global commons. It's important not just to our security, but to our commerce, our way of life, our understanding of the planet, weather, you name it. So it's very important that we -- we now treat it that way and make sure that we're prepared to defend ourselves and preserve space.

And as I've spoken with General Raymond, who is the commander of both Space Force and Space Command (inaudible), he understands the importance of advancing line-of-effort number two, and our National Defense Strategy when it comes to space. That is, strengthening our alliances and deepening our partnerships so we can work very cooperatively, collaboratively with other space-faring nations such as -- such as France.

Q: Thank you.

(CROSSTALK)

Q: Am I next? Matthew Mabin pour France 24. My question will be in English, but the answer can be in French, Madame, if you -- if you prefer.

SEC. ESPER: You don't want me to try.

(Laughter.)

Q: You also -- we -- we go with straight to the population in Sahel. According to you, Madame La Ministre, the threat of terrorism in Sahel, can it be maintained without the U.S. support?

MIN. PARLY: Well, as I said previously, the U.S. support in Sahel is really critical to our operations. So in this very particular moment, where the head of states, the G-5, Sahel and President Macron decided to increase the efforts not only on -- in the military field, but also on the -- on the political field. It seemed that it's even more necessary to keep this American support. But as I said, we fully understand the process the United States is in. Secretary Esper has a difficult job to -- to handle: how to reorganize the American footprint. So we understand the constraints, so we will try -- I'm sure we'll try to find the best decision to accommodate all the constraints, the one we have in Sahel and the one that the United States has worldwide.

SEC. ESPER: The other thing I'd add is -- is this: France has been a real leader in the Sahel. I give -- I -- I give France great credit for what they've done, their commitment, thousands of soldiers. And of course, we've -- we've mourned the loss alongside them, and when soldiers have been killed or wounded, and President Macron is taking a -- a very important leadership role there. So a great effort by France. I -- I -- I think they've -- France has reached out to other European allies. I think it's time for other European allies to assist, as well, in the region, and that could -- that could offset whatever changes we make as we consider next steps in Africa.

STAFF: Thank you all.

SEC. ESPER: Thank you all very much.

MIN. PARLY: Thank you.

SEC. ESPER: Florence, thank you.

MIN. PARLY: Thank you, so much.