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Telephone Press Briefing

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Moderator: Hi everybody, and greetings from the U.S. Department of State. I would like to welcome all of you who have dialed in from across Europe this morning and for joining this discussion. I'd also like to give a special shout out to those of you who are joining us from our embassy in Budapest. We're glad that you have come together for this call and we're very much looking forward to your questions.

Today we are pleased to be joined by Robert Bell who is the Secretary of Defense Representative in Europe and also Defense Advisor for the U.S. Mission to NATO. I understand that many of you already know him and you do have his bio so I'll keep my introduction brief. But Mr. Bell is an expert on Department of Defense policies and programs and he has many years of experience both in Brussels and in Washington, so we're very much looking forward to his insights this morning as well.

We're going to begin today's call with very brief remarks from Mr. Bell and then we're going to open it up for your questions.

Today's call is on the record. With that, I will turn it over to you, Mr. Bell.

Mr. Bell: Thank you very much, Mireille. I'm happy to have a chance to talk with you journalists present on this phone line this morning and look forward to your questions. That's certainly the main business of the call and I won't delay in getting to that except to say that the occasion, of course, for the call is the arrival this week in Rota, Spain of the USS Carney, the fourth of the four Aegis-equipped destroyers that President Obama committed to send to Europe and to be available to be put under NATO command and control to deal with ballistic missile proliferation threats from the Middle East.

The ship is an extraordinary ship. I hope some of you will have the chance in time to go on it. I would just note that on May 29th, which was not that long ago, the ship was in its home port then of Mayport, Florida, just outside Jacksonville, Florida,

and the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and I had the pleasure of going through that ship and meeting the crew and getting briefed on all of its capabilities. There was quite a bit of public affairs done in connection with that visit. I know NATO put out information on it. Those of you that are doing stories on this, if you want to link that in to sort of the front end of this, just before the ship left the United States to come to Europe, there's probably quite a bit of material you can draw on from the Secretary General's visit to the ship on May 29th.

With that, I'll take your questions.

Moderator: Great. Thank you so much.

Why don't we go ahead and start with our colleagues that are in Embassy Budapest, so if you could open the line of Beth Webster, that would be great.

Over to you, Beth.

Operator: One moment, ma'am.

Moderator: If we're having technical difficulties we could go to another question.

Why don't we go ahead and start then with Michael Backfisch from FUNKE Radio in Germany. We'll start with him and then we'll circle back.

FUNKE Radio: Mr. Bell, you were mentioning the missile proliferation threat of the Middle East, and obviously you also think of Iran. How far does the ballistic missile system fit into the new political development where we have great diplomatic activities after the nuclear deal with Iran? And how far it might endanger the new political momentum in the Middle East?

Mr. Bell: My administration, the President on down, has been very clear in the wake of the conclusion of the agreement on the Iranian nuclear weapons program and of course his ability to get that through the Congress of the United States, that it does not change our plan or intention or schedule with regard to the establishment of the missile defense architecture for NATO in Europe. That capability to provide defense of European populations and territory and cities was declared in Chicago three years ago, back in 2012 and we've been enhancing it ever

since. So it's not a question about whether there will be something. There is a defense in place today and this ship adds to that defense.

In terms of their relation to the Iranian nuclear weapons agreement which we are very pleased to have achieved and very much welcome the strong support of Europe including your country to get that done, I would just point out first, the agreement itself is focused on Iran's previously illegal nuclear weapons activities. It does not bear on or restrict Iran's ballistic missile acquisition or deployment programs which are quite vast and are increasing in terms of capability and number.

The second point I would make is that we are in very early days of the implementation of this agreement. A considerable amount of time was spent not just by my government but among the European participating states as well, focusing on ways to make sure that there were strong disincentives for any temptation by the Iranian government to not comply with the agreement or to cheat or have some concept of a way to break out of the agreement.

In that regard, for example, the provision of snap-back sanctions was preserved as a disincentive. And the United States made clear that this doesn't necessarily change the equation in terms of our expectations of Iranian behavior in other domains. To that end we have reassured partners and allies in the region of our intent to maintain sort of a strong deterrent posture.

So in that sense I think you can look at the NATO ballistic missile program in effect as a kind of insurance policy in terms of the nuclear dimension of Iran's previous ambitions, that were they to cheat and break out with nuclear capability we would not be caught without a recourse.

And the fact of the program itself I would hope would increase the disincentives for Iran to be tempted to go that path were they to be so tempted.

Moderator: Thank you for that.

We're going to try to go back over to Embassy Budapest now.

Ms. Webster: Hi, good morning everyone. Thank you very much for including us in this call. I'm joined here by several

Hungarian journalists who are very eager to ask Mr. Bell some questions and I will turn it over to my first colleague.

Magyar Idok: Hello, Mr. Bell. My name is Peter Bakodi. I'm from Magyar Idok.

My question is, since Turkey joined the fight against the Islamic State, is there any possibility of a NATO mission in Syria? Thank you.

Mr. Bell: There is no consensus in NATO today for a mission in Syria as a collective security alliance. That said, I would point out that all NATO members in one way or another are supporting the coalition that is engaged in fighting with ISIL. That runs the range from those that are providing fighter aircraft for strikes to those that are providing money or those that are providing training or those that are providing weaponry. So in one sense each NATO member is engaged as they have determined most appropriate but there is not a collective NATO mission in Syria.

Now we have been maintaining for over two years now a deployment of Patriot theater ballistic missiles at three sites along the southern Turkish border. Those missile batteries have been oriented towards Syria and are there to provide a real time defense were Syria to attack Turkey with ballistic missiles. That has been an agreed NATO operation. But that is the one case I can point to where NATO has done something as an alliance collectively as opposed to the decisions of individual member states of NATO.

Moderator: Thank you. And while we've got Budapest on the line, let's go ahead and take another question from there if you've got one. Beth, are you still with us?

Operator: Ma'am --

Moderator: That's okay, we'll just go back to the question queue because it looks like we have some folks dialing in actually from USS Carney. We've got Pete Halvorsen on the line. Can we go ahead and open Pete's line, please?

If you're talking we can't actually hear you.

Voice: Okay, we are in the press delegation here at USS Carney. Can you hear me?

Moderator: We're going to need you to speak a little louder. It's very faint.

Voice: Okay, we are in the delegation here on the USS Carney. My name is Drago [inaudible], journalist from Romania.

[Inaudible].

Mr. Bell: Mireille, maybe you can relay that question to me because it was so faint I could not hear it.

Moderator: I'm sorry. Can you go ahead and please repeat that question? We are having difficulty hearing you.

Voice: Okay. I -- [inaudible].

Moderator: Okay, if I understand the question correctly you're asking about the importance of the four ships that were referenced earlier, the four ships that Mr. Bell referenced in his opening remarks?

Voice: Yes.

Moderator: Okay, sir if you could just maybe go ahead and speak to that broadly about what the importance of the four ships --

Mr. Bell: The importance of the four ships is, there are several points I would look to in terms of explaining the importance of the four ships.

The first is that four is a big number. This is a substantial capability. When NATO declared that it had an interim capability three years ago at the Chicago Summit we had one ship. It was not forward deployed in Europe, but came from the East Coast so its ability to be on station was quite limited.

With four ships and having all four permanently deployed at Rota in Europe, your ability to project defensive capability as required in Europe is substantially multiplied.

A second thing I would point to is that they are ships, which means they can go where they need to go. And if you have intelligence and warning that an adversary is intending to threaten a specific part of Europe you can optimize your defense of that part of Europe by sending one or more ships to that region.

The last thing I would point to is that these ships are enormously capable platforms, both in terms of the fire control systems and the standard missiles, interceptors that are being put on them. And they reflect the most recent upgrades in capability in the U.S. Navy.

So in every sense the United States is bringing the very best of its missile defense capability at sea to its European allies with this deployment and ensuring that that's providing effective deterrence and if need be defense against any missile attack that came from the Middle East.

Moderator: Thank you. And we have a follow-up question coming to us from Michael Backfisch of FUNKE Radio in Germany. Michael, go ahead.

FUNKE Radio: Mr. Bell, Germany's Defense Minister von der Leyen was offering that Germany could increase its contribution in Syria. So far they are supporting the Kurds with some light weapons. Would you say it's desirable that Germany offers more of its military expertise in fighting against ISIS?

And just very briefly, you said that the Iranians are increasing their ballistic missile deployment program in quality and numbers. Could you just give us a little bit of insight how far they are?

Mr. Bell: The most I can say, Michael, on the second question is that the inventory of Iranian medium range ballistic missiles, in other words ones that would go further than just being able to strike immediate neighbors but actually reach into Europe, particularly Southeast Europe, the number of missiles in that inventory is increasing and the range of those missiles is getting longer. Beyond that, I can't go into any details because of classification.

On your first question, the most important point of course it's fundamentally the German government's decision as a sovereign member of this alliance to decide whatever level and categories of assistance it gives in terms of the counter-ISIL effort. We have a coalition. Different members of that coalition bring different assets to it. The fact that Germany has been helping the Kurds with training and equipment has been enormously important. Germany, of course, is committing in so many areas of what NATO is doing in terms of threats to the East and threats to the South. So determining that balance of where the German defense budget is spent and German assistance funds are

spent is fundamentally a decision for your Chancellor on the advice of your Defense Minister and of course with the necessary parliamentary approval.

Moderator: Thank you.

Our next question is coming to us from Igor Ćuzović who is with Serbia's Telegraf. Igor, go ahead.

Telegraf: Thank you. Actually I have two questions for Mr. Bell. The first one being that Putin's press secretary, Mr. Peskov, said yesterday that the planned nuclear deployment at Buchel Air Base would disrupt with strategic balance in Europe. That is of course the reaction from Russia. What kind of reaction do you expect from Russia, Mr. Bell?

And my second question is about the rise of easily accessible inexpensive guided missiles throughout the Middle East. Is there a real potential ballistic threat from let's say ISIS or some other nation there? Thank you.

Mr. Bell: Taking your first question first, Igor, the NATO plan in terms of the architecture of this missile defense system that's being constructed has been well known for some years including the intention to put in effect a super structure of an Aegis destroyer such as the Carney that arrived at Rota this week on the ground at Deveselu in Romania and also at a site in Poland. That has been public knowledge and part of what we have explained going back quite a number of years, at least three or four. So this is not something new.

What's new is that the construction at the site in Romania is now approaching its completion. Indeed, the site will be completely constructed and capable of operations by the end of this year.

A second point I'd make is that Russia of course has a very active missile defense program, ABM system, around Moscow. It's had ballistic missile defense deployed around Moscow going back 50 years or more. And first the Soviets, then the Russians have gone through successive generations of new capabilities for that system.

We have not suggested that those deployments upset any strategic balance. They've been part of the strategic equation for decades.

The Russians and before them the Soviet Union have also had an extremely ambitious and quite large program of shorter range theater ballistic missile systems, most of which are mobile, and that is part of the military equation that has existed for decades as well. So there is nothing inherently upsetting in terms of the strategic balance with the fact that missile defenses are deployed by Russia and are deployed by the United States and NATO.

Each is doing this, of course, for their own purposes. In the case of NATO we are deploying the more wide area upper level systems like Aegis and the Aegis site in Romania to provide protection of the territory and people of all of Europe against threats from the Middle East. It's not aimed or in any way oriented or even capable of threatening Russia's strategic retaliatory capability, its deterrent force that's deployed on Russian soil.

The Russians have had their own reasons for having deployed over many decades and spent billions of rubles on missile defense of Moscow. I won't speculate on what their motivations are, but over the course of those decades they have often expressed their concern about some of their neighbors, more immediate neighbors in their part of the world who have offensive strategic nuclear capabilities that they do not want to be totally vulnerable or hostage to.

So countries within their own calculation see a purpose and a justification for missile defense system deployments that have nothing to do with the strategic balance between the super powers, if you will, and I think that's the case here.

So it's important in reacting to Russian claims about a particular missile defense capability in Europe to put it in the broader context that they themselves see value in having missile defense systems.

Moderator: Thank you.

Mr. Bell: I'm sorry, Igor had a second question.

Moderator: Go ahead, sorry.

Mr. Bell: Are we concerned that ballistic missile capability could be proliferated to ISIL. Obviously that has to be of concern because ISIL has shown itself capable of seizing all kinds of military capabilities including armored vehicles and

just to name one. They've also captured some air bases that were previously Iraqi. So it would be a major concern if ISIL were to succeed in capturing short range ballistic missiles from a partner, let's say, of the United States in the region and then taking that system and trying to turn it back to use against the coalition. That's one reason why we have to be prepared to defend ourselves with short range ballistic missile defenses and why we have to be extremely focused on our counter-proliferation objectives.

Moderator: Thank you for that.

We're going to go back over to Budapest for another question from one of the journalists in the embassy.

[hvg]: Good morning, Mr. Bell. I'm Arpad Tota from hvg.hu My question is, knowing that the USS Carney is not specifically a BMP ship but a well versatile platform capable of destroying enemy shipping and air forces as well, just like the Patriot systems which are air defense systems as well. The suspicion might rise, not only from the Russian side, that BMP in itself is a cover for a military buildup in Europe with a largescale exercise going on in Hungary. Please elaborate on the other capabilities of these ships and other systems deployed. Thank you.

Mr. Bell: NATO has a very broad range of missions that the 28 member states including Romania and Hungary have agreed to endorse from collective defense missions to cooperative security and crisis management missions. At one point just a few years ago NATO was conducting five or six operations simultaneously that had been approved by consensus by the 28 members of the alliance. That included counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, it included interdiction missions in the Mediterranean to make sure that weapons of mass destruction were not being proliferated across that regional sea. It included deployments of forces in Kosovo as part of KFOR. It included of course quite substantial at one point, 140,000 man deployment in Afghanistan as part of ISAF. It included a maritime blockade of Libya and air operations against Gaddafi. And last but not least, in peace time air policing operations being maintained in a number of countries throughout Europe.

So that's just one example of what NATO was doing on any given day three years ago. And many of those missions require naval or maritime support. So to have a ship like the Carney that is so versatile, as you point out, in terms of anti-submarine warfare, anti-air defense, surface-to-surface warfare,

inspecting ships, stopping them and inspecting them to see what's being transited, or missile defense is a real advantage. It's not part of a strategy by the United States for a massive buildup in Europe.

Most Europeans have been more concerned in the other direction, that because of the strategy the United States has to rebalance its global force to put more emphasis on Asia Pacific, that too much military power was departing Europe.

But the case of the Carney and its three sister ships at Rota is a case where the U.S. decided there was a very specific need and that was to have the capability to protect the populations and territories and cities of Europe against missile attack from the Middle East were that to be a reality. And since we have the only systems that could do that, none of our European allies have invested the money or developed the capability for high level upper tier or wide area missile defense, we volunteered that capability to NATO as sort of the backbone of a missile defense program, and it's in that context that those ships are there.

Of course day to day they're not sitting out like picket ships on duty waiting for a hypothetical missile attack. Those ships will be doing all sorts of other cruises, port visits, training exercises, interoperability, development demonstrations, and it would only be if we were in a real crisis, in this case with Iran and let's hope that's never the case, that those ships would then be assigned to NATO command and control and sent to their defensive positions to prepare to engage incoming missiles.

Moderator: Thank you.

For our next question we're going to go to the Netherlands and we have a question from Eric Vrijzen of Elsevier.

Elsevier: Thank you, good morning Mr. Bell. Good morning everybody.

I have a question concerning Dutch participation in missile defense and I have a question about Syria.

The first question, as I understood there's also a missile defense exercise next month just north of Scotland with Dutch naval participation in close coordination with the U.S.. Could you, Mr. Bell, explain a little bit what's the importance of this deployment in Spain and the exercise near Scotland?

And my second question, just last Sunday the Dutch Defense Minister explained that within, in a few weeks' time the Dutch will take a decision on whether the F-16s now based in the Middle East can not only join American forces in airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq but also in Syria. Could you please explain how important the Dutch F-16s could be in the operations in Syria to your country? Thank you.

Mr. Bell: Okay, I'm happy to talk to both of those questions.

The exercise that's going to take place in a couple of weeks off the coast of Scotland is a very interesting and important exercise. It's being conducted by a coalition of nations that's called the Maritime Theater Missile Defense Forum. MTMDF. Maritime Theater Missile Defense Forum. That is a group of about 10 or 11 nations, Western democracies, but it also includes Australia. It's not a NATO organization. It goes back seven, eight, nine years, pre-dates even the NATO missile defense decision that was taken at Lisbon in 2010.

The Maritime TMD Forum was initially an initiative of the United States but its chairmanship rotates among the participating countries. It has one purpose and that is to develop, demonstrate and validate through real exercises the ability of different ships if they're in the same formation to work together if they come under attack. Not just missile attack, but cruise missiles attack or other types of attack.

So if you have a naval flotilla out somewhere in the world in some operation against any adversary that has ballistic missiles and that adversary then decides to attack the flotilla. Let's say it's a blockade and they're trying to break the blockade, that adversary would attack the flotilla perhaps in different ways, with short range ballistic missiles, land launched cruise missiles, maybe ships that would try to run up and hit one of the ships or even submarines depending on who the adversary was.

So the maritime TMD forum is a long term standing grouping that has been working on this problem to make sure that all the different ships if deployed together can talk to each other, can share information, can agree on who's doing what, and divide up the responsibility for different kinds of defense.

So this exercise that will take place next month in Scotland, which by the way I'm going to go up and witness myself, is just such a program. It's one of a series that have been held. The

fact that it's being done off the coast of Scotland is because there's a lot of open ocean there that provides room to do this simulation which is good. This is not in any way aimed at Russia. It is not in any way acting out any scenario that involves Russia. It's a technical hardware demonstration and validation exercise to show that this group of nations are now at a point in terms of their interoperability and cooperation that they can deploy together and simultaneously defeat different threats to a naval formation.

We're delighted that a Dutch ship is involved in this but it's not, it's in the context of this coalition and grouping that's been underway for a number of years.

NATO will observe this because we are very interested in what capabilities they demonstrate, but this is not a NATO-led exercise in any way.

In terms Eric, of the announcement of your government about its review of the F-16 mission and counter-ISIL. Here too, as I said in response to the question from the German journalist, this is fundamentally a sovereign decision for the Dutch government to make of course in consultation with your Binnenhof and the parliamentary procedures that are required under the Dutch law.

The Dutch F-16s have been fantastic assets in all of the operations that I've seen them committed to in the five years that I've been here, and they're highly capable. Your pilots are highly proficient. It doesn't make too much difference whether it's a Dutch F-16 or an American F-16 or a Danish F-16 or a Belgian F-16. In air operations they're all extremely proficient in what they do.

I can't make a recommendation in terms of whether the Dutch contribution to targeting inside Syria as opposed to just inside Iraq, where that stands on a scale of significance. The coalition, of course, is U.S.-led. General Allen has been the head of that. We're kept briefed on it and informed of it, but that exchange of views between the United States and your government about where we think the Netherlands can best bring its assets to bear is simply not a discussion that I've been party to.

Moderator: Thank you.

We have one final question in the queue and that is again coming in from Hungary. If we could go back over to Embassy Budapest we'll take one final question.

Mandiner: Gergely Szilvay from Mandiner. I would like to ask you about U.S. defense policies [inaudible] because I have read an article in Foreign Policy about that. There are new plans about a possible war in the Baltic area against Russia. And that's something we knew from the communist era [inaudible]. And can you say something about that can be serious or not? That's my question. Thank you very much.

Mr. Bell: I'm sorry, I didn't quite get the very beginning of that. You're asking about contingency planning for possible conflicts in the Baltic?

Moderator: Could you repeat the first part of your question, please?

Mandiner: This, as I read an article in Foreign Policy that about new plans about the possible military actions in the Baltic area against Russia. And if you can say something, if it's serious or not, or what is your expectations about the possible military actions in this area? Thank you very much.

Mr. Bell: I'm happy to address that.

In the wake of Russia's aggression in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, the United States and its NATO partners, when they met in Wales in the United Kingdom just over a year ago, took some fundamental decisions about reinforcing the credibility of our deterrent posture in terms of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty and our commitment to all allies including Hungary and the three Baltic states. That commitment was ironclad.

As part of that the heads of state of government, all 28 of them including the Hungarian leader, announced something called the Readiness Action Plan, RAP, and there are two parts of that, two major parts of the RAP, that plan. One has to do with what are called assurance measures, and that is showing, if you will, with temporary rotational deployments of air, land and sea units on a pretty small scale individually but still significant in terms of the symbolism, that we are committed to our obligations under Article 5 to all allies.

So under that heading, if you will, not only the United States but quite a number of other NATO allies have rotated air, land

and sea units, like an Air Force squadron or an Army company or a ship or two here or there, through the Baltic Sea to one of the three Baltic states. So there has been an increase in the level of military activity by NATO member states including the United States in the Baltics in response to the Russian aggression of the last year and a half in Ukraine and it is under the auspices of this assurance part of the Readiness Action Plan.

The other half of that plan that heads of state agreed to at Wales, including the Hungarian leader, was that NATO would develop a new Rapid Reaction deployable force built around a land brigade. A brigade is roughly 4,000 troops, with air support and sea support. And that this brigade would be ready within say another year if required to be able to deploy anywhere in NATO including to one of the three Baltic states if there was a threat by anyone including Russia, to commit aggression against that state.

So we have been very hard at work since Wales in putting together this Rapid Reaction Plan and that could conceivably, if there were a crisis that required it, lead to a decision by the North Atlantic Council to deploy that brigade to one of the three Baltic states.

So it's in that context that there's a higher level of NATO military activity going on in the Baltic. It's in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Moderator: Thank you.

I'm sorry to say that we've come to the end of our time here today. I would like to thank you, Mr. Bell, for joining us and thank all of you for your questions. And Mr. Bell, did you have any parting words you'd like to share?

Mr. Bell: No. If the Carney is on the line I would just extend my greetings to Commander Halvorsen who has been coordinating some of these calls. He's the Executive Officer of the ship and was very kind to lead Secretary General Stoltenberg and I through that ship on our tour the end of May, and I would just say to Pete, welcome to Europe and go get some tapas at a nearby restaurant.

Moderator: I think that's excellent advice. Thank you.

For all of you who have joined us today we are going to prepare a transcript of today's call so we will share that with you a bit later. A digital recording is going to be available for the next 24 hours. Again, thank you all very much.

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