

Draft Plenary Speech
By
Hon Michael R Turner (United States)
President, NATO Parliamentary Assembly
61st Annual Session
Monday 12 October, Stavanger Norway

Mr President,
Prime Minister,
Colleagues,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

NATO took a leap forward just over one year ago at the Summit of Allied Heads of State and Government in Wales. Faced with Russia's renewed aggressiveness and growing instability across the Middle East and North Africa, the Alliance put in place new measures and made new commitments to ensure that it can deter and defend against external threats, and meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

This ensured that the Alliance remains the cornerstone of security for all its members and that it will not leave any of its members to face today's challenges alone. In other words, the Wales Summit reaffirmed the central feature of our Alliance: collective defense. A threat to one is a threat to all.

Less than one year from now, Alliance leaders will meet again, this time in Warsaw. That will be an opportunity to review the implementation of decisions taken in Wales. But, also to ask what more needs to be done.

Are we on track with our efforts to reverse the overall decline in defense budgets, and are the Wales commitments sufficient?

There is no doubt that a lot of important work has already been done. NATO has strengthened its presence in Eastern Allies, created a new rapid response force, and adopted an intensive exercise schedule. All this will enhance both our deterrence and preparedness.

However, the world has moved on, and we must adapt our response accordingly.

First, in Ukraine: Weapons have been temporarily silenced and some are being withdrawn, and that is certainly a welcome development. However, we have not been able to address the fundamental challenge that Russia has posed. As we speak, Russia continues to illegally occupy Crimea, and it continues to support so-called separatists in Eastern Ukraine, both politically and militarily. This is an attack not just on Ukraine's territorial integrity but on international norms and principles – the norms and principles that all of us uphold.

Meanwhile, Russia has intensified its pressure on its other neighbors. It continues to illegally occupy Georgia's provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and through the so-called "borderization", it is actively seeking to expand its reach deeper into Georgian-administered territory. Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Central Asia are all targets of Moscow's efforts to reestablish control over its neighborhood.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Second, with its reckless military activism in Syria, Moscow is playing a very dangerous game. The violation of Turkish airspace by Russian planes earlier this week is unacceptable and irresponsible.

Instead of assisting international efforts to combat ISIS, Russia is propping up the murderous regime that created this crisis in the first place, and whose actions have forced millions of people out of their homes. Worse, Russia's support for Bashar Assad has been giving ISIS breathing space and allowed it to seize new ground. In other words, by supporting Bashar, Russia is in fact also supporting the terrorists of ISIS.

Third, in the North, Russia is expanding its claims and military presence. Its investment in Arctic capabilities already surpasses some of ours. As we heard during this session, this is a direct concern for Norway. But it should be a concern for all of us.

Meanwhile, Russia is modernizing its nuclear arsenal, and developing a more aggressive and forward posture. Moscow has already violated its commitments under the INF Treaty, and is talking about deploying nuclear weapons in Crimea.

On this issue as on others, we should take Russia's threats seriously. And respond appropriately. Part of the reason we have failed to prevent Russia's renewed aggressiveness is that we have for too long been looking at Russia's actions as separate and unrelated developments. We must put together the pieces of the puzzle and look at the whole picture.

And this picture tells me that Russia is implementing a global strategy that is destabilizing and dangerous.

In this context, any talk of lifting or relaxing sanctions would be not only premature but also dangerous. We must step up – not step down – the pressure on Russia and President Putin.

And we must intensify our own efforts too.

Defense budgets are a particular concern for me. In my own country, our electorate is acutely aware that the United States continues to pay a disproportionately high share into NATO. Sadly, this is not a question of perception, but a reflection of the reality: we must have a more equitable division of labor and effort within our Alliance to ensure its long-term health and to ensure that we have the necessary public and political support on both sides of the Atlantic. I am a staunch supporter of NATO and have done my utmost to make the case for continued US engagement and for recognizing the many aspects of Europe's contribution to NATO. But the issue will not die unless we can continue to point at concrete achievements.

This discussion on burden-sharing is an excellent example of what our Assembly's role can be. Though this organization, I and my colleagues on the US delegation are able to share our concerns with all of you. Conversely, several of you have joined me on Capitol Hill to explain NATO's ongoing relevance and Europe's contribution to the Alliance to more skeptical members of Congress. This type of parliamentary diplomacy is fundamental.

The bottom line is that in the face of the serious challenges we face today in the East, in the North and in the South, we must be guided not by what divides us - fear or national egoism -, but by what unites us: our commitment to common values, to the collective defense of the transatlantic region, and to global peace and security. And we should embrace those who share this vision.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

It is good to say our door is open. But what use is that to aspirants if we jam the corridor with obstacles? The time has come to clear those obstacles and let Montenegro actually pass through that door.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords. It is remarkable how far the region has come in those past 20 years. And Montenegro's membership in NATO will be another milestone in that impressive transformation. It will also show others in the region and beyond that we are serious about the open door, that it is a real prospect, and that it is within the reach of those who apply themselves to it. So I hope that later today, we can adopt an unambiguous call for NATO governments to invite Montenegro to join without further delay.

It was NATO's intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina that made the Dayton Peace Accords possible. It was because Europeans and North Americans joined forces in the face of genocide that we could put an end to the deadly war in the former Yugoslavia and open the way for peace and reconciliation in the region.

The same is true in Afghanistan. Our forces – US, Canadian and European forces – stood side by side to defeat Al Qaeda and help the Afghan people lay the bases for their new state. I would like to pay tribute to all the men and women of our armed forces for their service and sacrifice.

NATO's combat mission ended in December last year. However, we continue to support Afghanistan both militarily and economically. Just before we left for Stavanger, the Commander of NATO and US forces in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, briefed Congress on his assessment of the situation. I strongly agree with General Campbell that we should base our decisions on the level and form of our support on a realistic assessment of developments in Afghanistan and the region. In fact, the United States government is expected to make its assessment in the coming month.

There are important lessons to be learnt from our experiences in the Western Balkans and in Afghanistan: Europe and North America are strongest when they act together; and with NATO, we have a unique instrument which can support peace through credible strength and solidarity. Our transatlantic link, our great Alliance, are precious assets. We should cherish them and give ourselves the means that will enable us to continue to be a force for good, a force for peace and security for our own citizens, but also for the world.

Thank you