North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

"Meeting Today's Security Challenges"

Introductory remarks by Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, NATO Deputy Secretary General at the ‘Munich Security Conference Kick-Off' - Berlin Germany
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Thank you, Wolfgang (Ischinger) and State Minister Mueller, for that kind introduction. And thanks to the Deutsche Bahn for getting me here despite the snowy weather. I didn’t want to miss this kick-off event given the importance of the Munich Security Conference. Let me add that It’s an honour to share the podium with such eminent political figures from Germany and from Egypt.

In Washington, just a few minutes ago, President Obama was inaugurated for his second term in office. Being an American, and indeed the first American Deputy Secretary General of NATO, I thought it would be opportune to focus my remarks on the importance of the transatlantic relationship for dealing with many of today’s security challenges. Because, despite all the changes and upheavals of recent years, the transatlantic community remains essential to sustaining our own security and stability, and for addressing new challenges and opportunities around the world.

Let me start with a few comments about NATO’s number one priority: ensuring that Afghanistan can provide for its own security and never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists. Without transatlantic cooperation, that task would be impossible. With transatlantic cooperation, it is not only possible, it is already producing results.

Some 100,000 troops, mostly from North America and Europe, are working together to help the Afghan government take the lead for security across the country. Last month, President Karzai announced that a fourth tranche of Afghan provinces, cities and districts will undergo transition to Afghan security lead in the coming months. This is a significant step towards our shared goal of seeing Afghans fully in charge of their own security by the end of 2014, and towards concluding the NATO-led ISAF mission.

But that will not be the end of NATO’s commitment to Afghanistan. We are already planning a post-ISAF mission that will focus on training, advising and assisting, the Afghan National Security Forces beyond 2014.

However, as we look to the future, Afghanistan will need more than just NATO’s help. It needs the broader international community – the United Nations, the European Union, and individual nations – to step up its assistance. Last July, in Tokyo, countries around the world

pledged their help well into the next decade. We need those nations to meet those pledges so they do not become hollow words.

At the same time, closer cooperation with Afghanistan's neighbours is needed to help prevent the re-creation of havens for terrorist training and other illegal activities such as narcotics production. Last June's Kabul Conference and the Heart of Asia process represent important steps towards greater cooperation, understanding and stability in the region. It is also significant that, at last month's Ministerial meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, Allies agreed to deepen cooperation with Russia in support of Afghanistan's long-term stability.

As we look to the evolution of our commitment to Afghanistan, we must not forget other changes in the strategic landscape – both outside our Alliance and within it, including the Arab Awakening and the growing importance of the Asia-Pacific region.

In the coming years, the United States will continue its strategic pivot towards the Pacific. Given that North America and Europe share the same goals of open markets, open seas, and open political dialogue, there is every reason for Europe to support that pivot – and even to be part of it. A coordinated, transatlantic approach can help encourage China to remain a responsible stakeholder in the region and beyond, while consolidating positive changes as we have seen in Burma.

At the same time, the U.S. pivot will require European nations to be better able to address security challenges in and around Europe – and in the process, to help create a fairer sharing of the burdens within NATO. This is a real challenge at a time of financial pressures and deep cuts in defence spending in most European countries. But there has been progress in some areas.

For example, fifteen years ago, during the Kosovo conflict, the United States dropped 90% of the precision-guided munitions, and the other Allies dropped only 10%. Two years ago, during our mission to protect civilians in Libya, it was the other way around.

Today, European Allies are involved in each of the 24 multinational 'Smart Defence' projects that we have agreed in NATO to improve our capabilities while getting "more bang for the Euro." Europeans, in fact, are leading two-thirds of these projects. European Allies are also making important contributions to NATO's fledgling missile defence system – and we expect to see further contributions in the future. At the same time, European nations are also making progress in the EU framework with complementary pooling-and-sharing initiatives.

I am confident that we can continue to build on that progress in the coming years – so that Europe will be better able to meet its security responsibilities; and so that we can achieve greater cooperation between NATO and the European Union in developing capabilities, in engaging North Africa and the Middle East, and in tackling cyber threats and other new and emerging challenges.

One very urgent challenge is the crisis on our south-eastern border. The Alliance remains deeply concerned by the situation in Syria, and continues to fully support the efforts of the international community to find a political solution.

As we saw last year, the escalating violence, including the regime's use of ballistic missiles against its own people, has the potential to threaten the population and territory of our ally Turkey. For this reason, we are currently deploying Patriot missiles to augment Turkey's air defence capabilities. This decision demonstrates our solidarity as an Alliance. But it also shows the ability of European Allies to deliver real security. And I want to use this opportunity to thank the German Government for the determination it has shown on this issue.

It is increasingly clear that President Assad's days are numbered. Within our transatlantic community, I think we must begin to consider how we might help a post-Assad Syria make the transition to a normal, stable, peaceful society, and avoid the worst-case scenarios of sectarian conflict, civil war or partition.

NATO has considerable experience, including with disarming militias, securing military sites, and assisting security sector reform. We have also helped other international organizations and NGOs in the provision of humanitarian relief and disaster assistance. We must be ready to make that expertise available if it is requested by the Syrians, in concert with the United Nations and regional organizations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

NATO had the foresight, beginning in the mid-90s, to establish partnerships with several of the nations of North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf region through our Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. These partnerships provided the basis for four of our Middle Eastern partners to contribute military forces to our Libya operations. They could serve as the framework for NATO to help countries seeking to reshape their societies following the Arab Awakening.

But let me add that, although I'm proud to be called NATO-centric, I realise that NATO doesn't have all the answers. In the case of Mali, for example, it makes sense for the European Union, led by France and working with African nations and regional organisations, to take the lead in managing the crisis. But as we have seen in recent days, the ongoing efforts to defeat the extremists who have seized control in Northern Mali, and who now threaten the south, have received tangible assistance from Europe's North American partners in the form of intelligence, airlift and other logistical support. That's because we have a shared interest in preventing Al Qaida from deepening its foothold in the Maghreb.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Transatlantic cooperation has been the dominant theme of my professional life. It has been the driving force for peace and security in the past, and I am convinced it will remain the key to our security in the future. I hope my remarks have given you food for thought and for debate.

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