Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Speech to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly

2014-09-02

I am delighted to welcome everybody this morning to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for what I hope will be an interesting and productive day.

As we approach the NATO Summit, the scale and breadth of the threats to our collective security from the rise of the barbaric Islamist terrorist organisation ISIL in Syria and Iraq and the wave of militant Islamism across North and parts of West Africa through to Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe is such that tackling them is going to require sustained and concerted political will and that is a challenge not just for governments, but for parliaments, for parliamentarians, legislatures and, of course the general public.

So I am particularly pleased that the NATO Parliamentary Assembly is meeting here – I understand for the first time meeting ahead of a NATO Summit and I hope that becomes a regular feature of future NATO Summits.

And I would like to thank Tobias Ellwood, now a Foreign Office Minister – who was originally tasked by the Prime Minister to ensure that there was a parliamentary strand to this NATO Summit.

I also thank my colleagues Hugh Bayley and Sir Menzies Campbell for pulling this event together. And I am delighted that the Parliaments of so many of our NATO Allies are represented here today.

Because the role that you and your colleagues play in holding national governments to account for their defence policies, in shaping and leading public opinion in all of your countries, and standing up for the principles of democracy, liberty and the rule of law that lie at the heart of NATO as we confront these threats – this role is and will remain hugely important.

So I want to take the opportunity to explain to you why I believe that this Summit will be one of the most important in NATO's history.

Like the last Summit held in the UK, in 1990, it comes at a turning point for our Alliance.

That Summit, which took place just a short distance from here, across St James' Park, came at the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era in which NATO extended the hand

of friendship across the Iron Curtain and played a remarkable role in supporting and then embracing the fledgling democracies of Eastern Europe.

This Summit signals the end of NATO's most extensive and hard-fought mission of recent decades – the combat mission in Afghanistan.

But like the 1990 Summit, it should also mark a new beginning for NATO – this time, to reform and refocus to tackle the multiple threats and increasing instability that we face in a great arc around NATO's southern and eastern borders, from West Africa to the Arctic.

Let me start with the draw-down of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

After more than a decade of combat operations, during which thousands of ISAF personnel have given their lives, the Wales Summit marks an important moment for NATO.

Having invested so much 'blood and treasure' into driving out Al-Qaida, building up the indigenous security forces and supporting the development of Afghanistan's institutions, economy, and civil society, we must use the Summit to reflect on what we have achieved, what we have learned, and to ensure we maintain the progress we have made together in the years to come.

Now Afghanistan today is not perfect and that was never the expectation.

But thanks to the courage and the sacrifice of ISAF forces, their civilian counterparts and the Afghans themselves, it has come a very long way since it was the launch pad for Bin Laden and the Al-Qaida terrorists who plotted the September 11th attacks.

Most importantly, the Afghans are now delivering their own security.

350,000 strong, the Afghan National Security Forces did not even exist when ISAF was first conceived.

But from a standing start, they are now leading operations, protecting the Afghan people and population centres and taking on the insurgency.

And they are increasingly effective – and proved themselves capable (against the expectations of some) during both rounds of the recent Presidential elections with minimal assistance from ISAF forces on the ground.

And the progress we have achieved is much broader than security alone. Over two million girls now attend school compared to almost none under the Taliban government; there are proportionally more women in parliament in Afghanistan than in either the UK or the US; and Afghanistan's GDP is seven times higher now than it was a decade ago.

But, as the current negotiations over the outcome of the Presidential elections demonstrate, this progress remains fragile.

So, we must use the Summit to confirm our collective commitment to providing the necessary financial, development and security resources – through the Resolute Support mission – to ensure that these hard won gains are not reversed.

And as the combat mission ends, we must also ensure that the major gains in interoperability between Allied forces are sustained, and that we maintain the close ties forged between the Alliance and the 33 non-NATO ISAF nations, to ensure that the Alliance itself emerges stronger and more capable from this difficult, but successful, mission.

Those gains are likely to be crucial as we shift focus to deal with the new security challenges: the instability running from North Africa and the Sahel to Iraq and Syria with militant Islamist terrorist groups and militias seeking to take advantage of weak governance to impose their twisted ideology on millions of people living along NATO's Southern and South-Eastern flanks; and the renewed threat from Russian aggression on our Eastern border.

It is clear that we are, as the British Prime Minister has said, in the midst of a generational struggle with a poisonous and extremist ideology.

ISIL and other Islamist terrorist groups are amorphous, mobile and highly dangerous.

They are threatening the foundations of sovereign states and unleashing huge movements of refugees fleeing their brutality, with serious consequences for our Allies and friends in the region.

As the UK Home Secretary made clear last week in announcing the raised UK threat level, not only do groups like ISIL threaten our interests in stability overseas; they also pose a serious threat to our domestic security in the UK, across the West, and in the Arab world.

Sooner or later – probably sooner – they will seek to strike us at home.

The threat on our Eastern flank is superficially more familiar.

But in some ways it also represents a break with the past.

After two decades, since the end of the Cold War, of seeking to draw Russia into the rules based international system, we have to accept that that effort, for now, has failed. Russia has chosen the role of pariah, rather than partner.

Our differences are not with the Russian people, but with the Russian leadership who have decided that their interest lies in instability and conflict, and that Europe and the West are once again their adversaries.

However, the nature of the threat Russia poses has changed – and with it the challenge to NATO. For months we have seen in Ukraine a broad range of low level, and deniable, interventions: cyber attacks, economic warfare, propaganda campaigns, disinformation, subversive action led by proxy groups, “veterans” and special operations teams the new reality of Kremlin doctrine.

We are facing an adversary who is relatively unencumbered by the constraints faced by open and accountable Western democracies.

Strategic decision-making in Russia is concentrated, to an ever-increasing degree, in the hands of one man – Putin.

And with that concentration of power come the “advantages” of speed of decision-making, a lack of accountability and public opinion that can be manipulated by a state-run media.

This asymmetry of command and control represents a strategic challenge for NATO, in which decisions have to be taken routinely at 28, after each of us has formed consensus in our own country, through public and parliamentary opinion, and through the medium of a free press.

And, as we have seen over the last few days, this new, subtle and deniable approach does not mean that the crude sledgehammer of conventional Russian formal military power cannot be rolled out when it proves necessary.

The question is then: how must NATO respond?

How can we ensure that the world’s most successful military alliance retains the ability to protect the security of its member states and peoples in the years and decades to come?

And what must we achieve in the next few days at the Wales Summit to deliver that security?

We answer this first by exploiting our, Western comparative advantage – particularly our relative economic strength against a Russian economy that is fundamentally and structurally weak, with a huge dependence on the export of Russian energy.

Secondly, we must clearly reject the defeatist argument that NATO somehow has to choose between responding to the traditional threat from the East and the newer, asymmetric threats from the South. We do this by ensuring that NATO has sufficient bandwidth simultaneously to respond to these two very different types of security challenges.

That means NATO must have the right capabilities, in the right quantities and places, at the right state of readiness.

Russia’s actions underline the need for NATO to possess a full-spectrum capability; crucially, with the command and control functions that mean it is ready to respond rapidly and flexibly

to any threat to our interests and security – at whatever level.

A response that can counter the kind of hybrid and asymmetric tactics Russia has been engaging in that can defend our territorial integrity and the security of our populations against attack – from enemies old and new, state or non-state actors and a response that can go beyond our borders – projecting power and building the capabilities of like-minded states to improve their own security and defeat threats before they can reach us.

That means that we need the right partners around the world, acting as force multipliers, broadening our security network, increasing our situational awareness and giving NATO global reach.

Those partners add critical capabilities, they enhance our political and diplomatic legitimacy and they can help us increase our powers of deterrence.

In turn, for them, partnership with NATO makes them stronger and safer.

But we must not take our partnerships with more than forty countries for granted. As ISAF draws down in Afghanistan, we have to create the structures to preserve, and grow, those important relationships.

At the Wales Summit, NATO Allies will agree two steps to invest in our partnerships for the long term. The Interoperability platform will maintain dialogue, training and exercises with those partners who join us on operations. And NATO will offer “enhanced opportunities” to some of those partners who are closest to us: Sweden, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Australia, to deepen the valuable cooperation that we have with those partners in particular. Together, these steps will sustain NATO as the world’s largest collaborative security network, protecting our societies and helping to project our values.

But we will only ever have the necessary bandwidth and capabilities if we are prepared to invest properly in our collective defence.

Currently, there are just four member states – the UK, US, Estonia and Greece – which meet the NATO commitment to spend 2 per cent or more of their GDP on defence, although I should say, in fairness, that a number of Eastern European countries have already committed to do so over the next few years.

But that, frankly, is nowhere near good enough.

As US Secretary Bob Gates put it in his speech three years ago, “there will be [a] dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.”

European NATO Allies cannot expect the US to continue to carry the burden of defending Europe if European taxpayers are not willing to invest in their own security.

Bluntly, there is no more important task than protecting our security and all NATO member countries now have to quit prevaricating, and put their money where their mouths are.

This is a challenge to which we must respond.

So, with the Prime Minister, President Obama and others, I will be pressing all our Allies to make a meaningful commitment this week to reaching that 2 per cent commitment within a reasonable timescale.

We cannot be serious about delivering security unless we are also serious about financing it.

Third, and finally, for NATO to maintain its credibility in the future, we have to demonstrate that we maintain the political will to act to defend ourselves and our interests.

After a decade or more of enduring military campaigns in Afghanistan and – for some of us – in Iraq, our public's threshold for supporting new military action is high.

Consider that in 2008 an opinion poll showed that fewer than 50% of people in the largest NATO states – including, I regret to say, the UK – would have supported military action to defend the Baltic states against attack from Russia.

And yet that is precisely what their NATO membership and our commitment to collective self defence under Article V commits us to do.

We have to be clear that we have not lost the appetite to intervene when our interests or our obligations require us to do so.

If we lack, or are perceived to lack, the political will to respond – and to do so quickly – the credibility of that commitment to collective defence will be undermined, and the very fabric of this, most successful of Alliances, will unravel.

So we have to be clear with Russia, in particular, that while we support a political resolution to the situation in Eastern Ukraine, there is a red line around NATO member states themselves that cannot be crossed.

And, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, we need to show the resolve to defeat the Islamist terrorist threat at source using all the resources at our disposal, including a firm security response.

All our nations, and our Alliance, face significant security challenges.

As parliamentarians, you have an important role to play in responding to them.

You can help to make the case for NATO, the case for maintaining its capabilities. You can play a role in supporting defence spending so that we have the resources we need to remain the world's most formidable military alliance. And you can help lead and form public opinion to summon the resolve we need to be ready to deploy our forces when the situation demands.

I look forward to taking some questions in a moment.

But first, to conclude, I hope that you came here enthusiastic about the Welsh Summit, and that you leave this evening committed to building on its outcomes, strengthening our Alliance and defending our shared security at a time of multiple and rapidly changing threats.

This is a time of great challenges for NATO, but this organisation has transformed and adapted before, and it must and can do so again.

Sixty five years after this organisation was founded, we face a crucial challenge to ensure that NATO remains the bedrock of our security for the years to come – as we face old and new threats alike.

For the sake of all our people, we must show this week that we have the will and the determination to rise to that challenge. And that we are prepared to commit the resource that will be needed to do so.

At Newport, we celebrate sixty five years as the world's most powerful and effective military-political alliance.

Sixty five years in which we have kept our citizens safe through the dangers of the Cold War.

And we signal now the next phase, when we will be equally determined and equally resolute to maintain NATO as the most powerful and effective Alliance the world has ever known to protect our nations and our peoples against the diverse and fast-changing threats of the 21st Century.

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