North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Strong on Values, Strong on Defence: NATO's Role in Projecting Stability to the East and South

Speech by NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow at the Henry Jackson Society (UK Houses of Parliament)
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Thank you for that kind introduction. It’s a pleasure to be here and to speak not only in front of such a distinguished audience, but also in such an historic place.

The UK Houses of Parliament are famous throughout the world. “The mother of all parliaments”, they represent the enduring power of democracy – the ability of liberal, democratic states to serve the interests of their people immeasurably better than autocratic ones.

The United Kingdom has perhaps done more than any country to show how people’s lives are better when they embrace liberal values – individual liberty and human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

And the United Kingdom – often in concert with my own country – Henry Jackson’s country – has done more than almost any other country to promote those fundamental values across the globe. When nations of shared democratic values come together, the potential is limitless.

But when nations reject those values, the result can be disaster.

Henry Jackson saw for himself the terrible consequences of a rejection of those values. As a Congressman, in 1945 he was among the first to witness the horrors of the Buchenwald concentration camp. He knew first-hand about the vital importance of a strong defence to safeguard our freedoms.

So-called “Scoop Jackson Democrats” were at the forefront of our support for a muscular collective defence capability.

But “Scoop” Jackson was also a strong supporter of civil rights and environmental protection – long before those causes were popular.

In other words: strong on liberal, democratic values; and strong on defence and deterrence to protect those values.

If he were still with us today, he would see that those values are under threat once again.

Indeed our whole system of European security, built up since the Second World War, is under threat. The system, codified in the United Nations Charter and in later agreements like the Helsinki Accords, moved us away from the notion of “might makes right”, from a Europe in which the strong held sway over the weak within spheres of influence, to a time when independent, sovereign nations would respect each other’s borders and resolve their disputes peacefully.

This system seemed to be here to stay with the end of the Cold War 25 years ago. But it is now being challenged by a revisionist, revanchist Russia. A little over two years ago, in the wake of the Euromaidan protestsin Kyiv and the flight of Ukraine’s then-President, Viktor Yanukovych, Russia illegally annexed Crimea by force. Today, in Eastern Ukraine, Russia continues to support the so-called separatists with men, with arms – including heavy weaponry – and it provides effective command and control over the illegal insurgency. So far, that war has cost over 10,000 lives.

Crimea was the first time since World War II that one European country had taken part of another by force. However, it was not the first time that Russia had used its armed forces to further its interests. Its forces have long controlled territory in Georgia and in Moldova, exploiting separatist movements that appeared in the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and it waged war against Georgia in 2008. This is part of the new strategic reality that NATO must address.

Since NATO’s founding in 1949 – 67 years ago – the countries of the Alliance have gone to great lengths to increase the zone of security in and around our nations. We understand that a secure and stable neighbourhood increases our own security and provides tremendous opportunity for economic growth and development. Russia, however, has taken the opposite view, and has set about creating as much instability and chaos on its periphery as it can – be that in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, or in Syria, where it has been fighting on the side of the Assad regime.

President Putin has described NATO enlargement as, and I quote, “the cause of all crises ever since” the fall of the Berlin Wall. But while the countries of central and eastern Europe were forced to join the Warsaw Pact, these same countries voluntarily sought membership in NATO. And when they joined, we assured Russia that enlargement was not directed against them, that it would not lead to the deployment of substantial combat forces or nuclear weapons on Russia’s western borders. And we kept our word.

Let me be clear. NATO wants to avoid confrontation with Russia. We do not seek a new Cold War. However, just because we wish circumstances were otherwise, we cannot take lightly our responsibility to protect our citizens. The Alliance is already reinforcing our collective defence. We have increased our military activities in the eastern part of our Alliance, with more planes in the air, more ships at sea and more exercises on the ground – and I expect our leaders to take further steps at our Summit in Warsaw.

While we strengthen our defence, as our responsibilities require us to do, we will continue to strive for meaningful dialogue with Moscow. Since the peaceful break-up of the Soviet Union, NATO Allies have worked tirelessly with Russia to build an inclusive Euro-Atlantic security system and a close relationship of equal partners. We created the NATO-Russia Council, which gave Russia more influence and access than any other partner country at NATO, and we cooperated to mutual benefit in many areas, including joint peacekeeping operations in the former Yugoslavia and measures to counter terrorism. At the same time, the international community welcomed Russia into the G8 and the World Trade Organisation.

Russia can still be a constructive source of stability in the world. We have seen this on occasion with initiatives like the recent nuclear deal with Iran, and the agreement to destroy Syria's chemical weapons.

We continue to view Russia's full integration into the global community of sovereign nations as essential to our security. And we hope that one day that will be the case. But today, while Russia continues to violate the sovereignty of its neighbours, fulfilling that hope appears to be a very long way off.

As I said, NATO will continue to engage with Russia. We need to make sure that where our forces come into close contact, misunderstanding does not lead to an incident that could spiral out of control.

Last month, we held a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, the first in two years. As expected, we disagreed on pretty much everything. Allies made clear there can be no business as usual as long as Russia is flouting international law through its ongoing aggression against Ukraine. But the fact that we are talking, and making clear our expectations and our intentions, is positive.

As we move forward, we need to be patient. We need to be resolute. We need to uphold our values. And we need to recognise that history is on our side.

Dealing with Russia is a full-time job, but Russia is not the only challenge we face. Across North Africa and the Middle East, the initial promise and optimism of the Arab Spring has faded. Across the region, fragile states are on the brink of turning into failed states in the face of extreme pressure from within and without. In Syria, bloody civil war has fuelled the rise of the terrorist group ISIL – or Daesh – which has employed horrific brutality in an effort to create a supposed Islamic Caliphate.

These upheavals in Syria and Iraq have led to the death of hundreds of thousands of people and forced millions more to flee for their lives, prompting the greatest refugee and migrant crisis since the Second World War. While Turkey and Jordan are bearing the brunt of the refugees, tens of thousands of them have sought shelter on European shores. Many have died making the attempt.

This instability and violence on our southern flank has also encouraged citizens from across the Alliance to travel to Syria and elsewhere to fight, and it has inspired others to commit acts of terror at home. The attacks in Ankara, in Paris and in Brussels are clear reminders, if any were needed, of just how interconnected we are, and how our own security depends so much on the stability of others.

There is no one cause of the problems to our south, no one coherent enemy to defeat or single problem to solve. From Morocco to Afghanistan, we face a set of wide ranging, deep-seated problems that require nuance and patience as well as military strength.

The US-led Global Coalition to destroy ISIL is making real progress in rolling back the terrorists' gains in Iraq and Syria. Every member of NATO is also a member of the Coalition – whether they are contributing to airstrikes, to training or equipping Iraqi security forces, or to cutting off its finances. By weakening ISIL on the ground, we are also undermining its chief weapon, its narrative. People are attracted to ISIL because the organization has shown itself to be successful. We are challenging that success, and in time, this will undermine their appeal.

Long-term problems require long-term solutions. ISIL is a symptom of instability, so it is just as important to enhance and strengthen stability throughout the region.

NATO is ideally equipped to project stability beyond our borders, just as we are doing in Afghanistan. Whether it's in the south or in the east, NATO experts – both civilian and military – are working with partners to strengthen their security institutions and armed forces, helping them to better defend against attack, to counter terrorist movements, and to ensure the safety of their people.

We are already working with countries like Iraq and Jordan, and Georgia and Ukraine, using our extensive experience from the Balkans and Afghanistan to make those countries more secure. We have just started training Iraqi officers in Jordan, in areas such as countering Improvised Explosive Devices, military medicine and civil-military planning. By the end of the year, some 350 Iraqi officers will have completed their training and we are looking at extending that training into Iraq itself. We are working with Jordan on cyber defence and border security, with Tunisia on Special Forces training, and we are helping Ukraine with its ongoing security reforms.

So we are doing quite a bit, but not nearly enough. We need to expand our capacity building programs if we want to have a truly strategic impact on security on the ground. And to achieve that, we will need to put more political capital and more resources behind these programs.

This will be one of the themes of the next NATO Summit in Warsaw in July, what we call "projecting stability." The other will be going even further to strengthen our deterrence and defence.

At our last Summit, in Wales in 2014, NATO leaders recognised the changing nature of the world we live in. They all committed to spending 2% or more on defence, and to investing a fifth of that in new equipment. Since then, many countries have made progress. Last year, 16 nations increased their spending on defence, and overall, the cuts in defence spending almost came to a halt. We still have a very long way to go, but within the first year following the Wales Summit, and despite the continued pressure of economic austerity, we have begun to turn the corner.

The United Kingdom has always been one of the leading members of NATO, providing front-line forces wherever and whenever needed, upholding the great traditions of the British military, and spending more than the NATO target of 2% of GDP on defence. I am very glad that, despite tight budgets overall, the British government has decided to maintain spending at or above 2%.

I am also encouraged by the efforts in recent years to come to grips with the defence budget and to make the most of every penny spent. Large and strategically important projects like the two new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, underline the UK's long-term commitment to NATO and to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area.

At Wales, in response to Russia's actions, we also committed to increasing the readiness of the Alliance to deal with our new security environment. Since then, we have tripled the size of the NATO Response Force to over 40,000 troops; we now have a Spearhead Force that can be ready to deploy anywhere in the Alliance within 48 hours; we have opened a chain of new headquarters across the east of our Alliance to coordinate training, exercises and, if needed, reinforcements; and we have held hundreds of exercises, including our largest for over a decade.

The Wales Summit demonstrated that NATO can – and will – respond quickly to threats from any foe. But we will need to go further if we are to ensure the effectiveness of our deterrence. With Russia's increasing anti-aircraft and anti-ship capabilities, and with large numbers of combat forces able to move with great speed along its borders, it is no longer sufficient for NATO to rely exclusively on rapid reinforcements. We need to be there.

So I expect leaders to agree on an enhanced forward presence in the East of the Alliance, with contributions by the UK and other European allies. This will fit perfectly with the US decision to increase its European Reassurance Initiative to $3.4 billion next year, meaning there will be more US troops, more infrastructure and more pre-positioned equipment on European soil than there has been for a very long time.

Together, these steps will make it clear to any who would do us harm, from the east or south, that an attack against any Ally will be swiftly met by forces from across the Alliance. Let me stress, however, that this presence will be defensive, proportionate and in line with our international commitments. NATO does not seek confrontation but we will defend each and

every Ally against any attack. Our presence will be sufficiently robust that there will be no doubt about the strength of our collective resolve, but there will be no grounds to accuse NATO of posing an offensive threat to Russia or any other state.

At the same time, our partners – in the East and the South – will know that they can rely on us to support them, and that we will work closely with other regional organisations to do so, organisations such as the Arab League, the Africa Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council. And with the European Union too.

You may be surprised that I mentioned the European Union a month before the referendum. I know there are strongly held views on both sides of the debate, and that our esteemed Chair today is very clear in his views. Whether or not the United Kingdom stays within the EU is entirely a matter for the British people to decide. But I will say what matters for NATO.

NATO is founded on the idea that we can achieve more when we work together. That is also the basic principle of the EU. In many ways, NATO and the European Union complement each other. We see this in the way we responded to Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine. The European Union imposed economic sanctions, while NATO ramped up our deterrence and increased our collective defence. Both approaches are important, and neither would have been delivered nearly as effectively or as quickly without the institutions of NATO and the European Union.

The plain truth is that, by cooperating, NATO and the EU make each other stronger and more effective.

One example of the value of that cooperation is our maritime surveillance mission in the Aegean Sea, where we are working with the Greek and Turkish Coast Guards and the EU border agency to combat human trafficking. The number of migrants crossing the Aegean Sea has already declined significantly. Data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees shows that arrivals for April were down 86% from the month before. We can't attribute this success only to NATO's mission. But it shows that international efforts to respond to the refugee and migrant crisis are working.

Another key issue on which there's much to be gained is our response to so-called 'hybrid' warfare. Russia typically uses a range of hybrid tactics – from propaganda and cyber attacks to energy cut-offs and its infamous 'Little Green Men' – to achieve its objectives. Both NATO and the EU are already working to prepare for, deter, and defend against such tactics. But by combining NATO and EU efforts, and employing the full range of our civilian and military tools, we can better protect our member states against hybrid attack – and make our joint impact greater than the sum of its parts.

Today, NATO and the EU are cooperating more than ever before and we are trying to deepen that cooperation – to work not only side-by-side, but hand-in-hand. And having the United

Kingdom being so supportive both inside NATO and inside the European Union is a tremendous help in promoting increased cooperation between the two organizations.

As the NATO Secretary General said when he visited Downing Street last month, “a strong United Kingdom in Europe is good for our security and it’s good for NATO. And a more fragmented Europe is bad for our security and it’s bad for NATO.”

But whatever the outcome of the referendum, a strong United Kingdom is essential for NATO. And NATO counts on the UK’s leadership in addressing common challenges, whether from ISIL, nuclear proliferation or a more assertive Russia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Strong on liberal, democratic values, strong on defence and deterrence to defend those values. That was what Scoop Jackson believed in, and it encapsulates what we need today.

The challenges we face, from a resurgent Russia to the chaos and violence of the Middle East and North Africa, are in many ways quite different from each other. But in another sense, they are the same. They represent a rejection of the values and principles that we hold dear. That Henry Jackson held dear.

In July, at the NATO Summit, we will show those who oppose us that we stand united and that we stand strong in defending the international rules-based order; that we will do what is necessary to strengthen our partners and to project stability beyond our borders; and that we will do whatever it takes to protect our territory and our people.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2016/05/23/strong-on-values-strong-on-defence-natos-role-in-projecting-stability-to-the-east-and-south