North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Video address

by NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow to the Conference on International Organisations and the National Security of Ukraine (Kyiv, Ukraine)
2013-09-17

Minister Kozhara,

Mr. Chalyi,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning and greetings from NATO HQ in Brussels. I apologise for not being able to attend in person, but I'm grateful to the Razumkov Centre for allowing me to contribute to your discussion via Video Tele-Conference.

The topic of Ukraine's national security and its relations with international organizations is important, and recent developments in your country as well as in Russia, Republic of Moldova and Armenia have made it even more urgent.

As the Vilnius Summit of the Eastern Partnership approaches, we are reminded of a fundamental principle of the Helsinki Final Act that is a key element of national security and sovereignty. That any nation is free to build relations with partners of its choice.

We at NATO were reminded of this principle back in 2010, when the democratically elected government of Ukraine decided that it would no longer seek to join NATO. NATO respects Ukraine's decision because we respect every country's sovereign choices.

But not only that. The Allies also agreed to maintain the same, intensive level of practical cooperation with Ukraine that was agreed at our Bucharest Summit in 2008. This meant continuing the Annual National Programme, with all its practical advice and assistance, that's aimed at helping Ukraine to develop into a democratic, prosperous and free country.

For its part, Ukraine has not only maintained its constructive cooperation with NATO. Over the past three years, our cooperation has become arguably more intensive and productive than ever before.

Ukraine boosted its sizable contribution to the NATO-led operation in Kosovo. Ukraine increased its standing contribution to the NATO-led ISAF operation in Afghanistan. And it was among the first nations to pledge to contribute to our new, post-2014 mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces.

And let me also highlight Ukraine's active participation in the NATO Response Force. As the Alliance winds down its combat operations in Afghanistan, the NRF is taking on a more prominent role as a high-readiness multinational force and a key instrument for maintaining and strengthening the interoperability of our forces.

Ukraine was not only the first NATO partner to join the NRF. It was also the first Partner to contribute to our anti-piracy operation off the Horn of Africa, Operation Ocean Shield, with the deployment later this fall of the Hetman Sahaidachny, the flagship of the Ukrainian Navy.

Of course, Ukraine contributes not only to NATO operations. It is also a major contributor to crisis response operations led by the United Nations, the European Union and the OSCE.

Ukraine is an active contributor to the EU's Battle Groups, and is developing closer relations with the EU in the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy. This follows naturally from the long-standing policy of successive Ukrainian governments to seek Association with and ultimately membership in the European Union.

In fact, as soon as the Hetman Sahaidachny completes its rotation with Operation Ocean Shield at the end of December, it will immediately begin to participate in the EU's anti-piracy operation in the same theatre.

This transition from Operation Ocean Shield to Operation Atalanta says a lot about the nature of international security and how it is maintained in today's world.

This shift will be possible because the Ukrainian flagship achieved the level of interoperability necessary to work seamlessly with both NATO and EU forces. This was based on a common set of standards developed by NATO. And it demonstrates how Ukraine's cooperation with NATO has contributed directly to its aspirations for EU membership.

So here we see the fruits of our efforts to develop closer and more effective relations with other international organisations – not just with the EU, but also with the UN and the OSCE.

Ukraine has made a historic choice to join the European family of nations. It has proven its reliability as a partner that is fully prepared to shoulder its share of the burden of maintaining international security, including through its skilful chairmanship this past year of the OSCE.

As I look to the future, I see great potential for closer cooperation between Ukraine and NATO in a number of areas. One particularly promising area is defence reform and military transformation. And I note that a NATO expert team on these issues has arrived in Kyiv just yesterday for consultations with Ukrainian experts.

Ukraine has also expressed interest in working with us on several multinational, "Smart Defence" projects, where we encourage countries to pool their resources to develop military capabilities. One of these projects is on harbour protection, and another on capabilities-based defence planning.

Finally, military training and education is another promising area for cooperation. Indeed, this is an area where Ukraine itself has considerable expertise and assets to offer, including the International Security and Peacekeeping Centre at Yavoriv.

So, in conclusion, the future of NATO-Ukraine cooperation looks very promising. Ukraine may not be seeking to join NATO, but its intensive cooperation with NATO has advanced its top foreign policy priority of integration with the European Union. For my part, I am very proud of the role that NATO is playing to help Ukraine achieve this goal.

Before I close, allow me to say a few words about the crisis in Syria, which is, of course, dominating the news these days.

We welcome the agreement reached between the United States and Russia on the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons. We feel that this is an important step towards ensuring a swift, secure and verifiable elimination of Syria's chemical weapons. Full and unreserved compliance on the Syrian side is key.

NATO's position is clear. The chemical weapons attacks that took place on 21 August around Damascus were appalling and cannot go unanswered.

The international community has a responsibility to make sure that the long-standing norm and practice against the use of chemical weapons is maintained and that violators are held accountable.

We hope that the agreement reached on Saturday will also give momentum to a political solution that can put an end to bloodshed in Syria.

NATO Allies continue to consult closely, and the Alliance stands in strong solidarity with its Ally, Turkey. We remain determined to protect the Alliance's south-eastern border.

With that, I thank you very much for your attention and I am happy to take some questions.

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