North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

A Strong NATO for a New Strategic Reality

Keynote address by NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow at the Foundation Institute for Strategic Studies, Krakow (Annual Conference: ‘NATO as an Active Guardian - Expectations Before the Warsaw NATO Summit’)
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Thank you for that kind introduction. I’m very happy to be back in the beautiful city of Krakow. I’d like to thank Anna Szymanska-Klich and the Foundation Institute for Strategic Studies for inviting me to open your conference.

I last spoke at this conference two years ago, shortly after Russia had illegally annexed Crimea and at the beginning of its on-going campaign to destabilize Ukraine. That moment marked the end of a period of more than twenty years when the countries of the West looked to Russia as a partner. Of course, even by then, Russia had demonstrated a pattern of destabilizing countries in its neighbourhood, particularly Moldova and Georgia. But Russia’s aggression against Ukraine – including the first changing of borders by force in Europe since World War II – represented what I called a “new strategic reality,” one that is even starker today.

Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, Russia has continued to undermine the post-War and post-Cold War international order, an order based on respect for the sovereignty of nations, for the rule of law, and for human rights. Russia is trying to turn back the clock to a time when it dominated countries within its sphere of influence through force and intimidation. Yalta, not Helsinki, is held up as the model for European security in the 21st century. That can never be our vision.

Moscow’s challenge to the international rules-based order now extends to Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. As Russia has provided greater levels of military support for President Assad – including bombing moderate opposition groups, and driving tens of thousands of civilians from Aleppo and other cities – it has made it even more difficult to find a long-term end to the violence and a negotiated peace and political transition .

NATO supports all efforts for a peaceful settlement. I hope the current cessation of hostilities can be developed into something much longer lasting, that can form the basis of a sustainable, negotiated political and peaceful solution for Syria.

Russia could still use its influence over Assad to be a force for peace in the Middle East. But it is still unclear whether this is Moscow’s ultimate aim. In the meantime, the flow of refugees

continues, increasing the pressure on the countries of the region and of Europe. The main losers in this are the Syrian people themselves.

Not that long ago, our relationship with Russia centred on ever closer cooperation and partnership, on building an integrated European security system based on transparency, arms reductions and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Since 2014, however, it has been about securing the east of our Alliance and reinforcing deterrence. And now our relationship with Russia is directly tied to the refugee and migrant crisis.

But despite this, we cannot completely turn our backs on Russia. Our world is more interconnected today than ever before. We need to maintain an open and honest dialogue with Russia. We need dialogue to maintain transparency as to our own actions and intentions; to reduce the risk of further incidents, such as the downing of the Russian jet that entered Turkish airspace last year; and, if such incidents do happen, we need dialogue to prevent them from escalating out of control.

Engaging with Russia is not to accept the status quo. We do not accept Russia's aggressive actions, whether in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova or elsewhere. To do so would undermine the security of our Allies, our partners, and our values. Instead, we will stick to those values and be patient. For time is on our side.

Being patient is not the only thing that NATO is doing. Far from it. To ensure stable relations with Russia for the long term, we must speak with Russia from a position of strength.

In the 1960s and 70s, a strong deterrence paved the way for détente, for arms control agreements, and for our relatively predictable and stable relationship with the Soviet Union. Our situation today is different, but it requires a similar approach.

A combination of strength and dialogue is the best way to bring Russia back to compliance with international law and with Helsinki principles. The first litmus test will be for Russia to fully implement its obligations under the Minsk Accords. Until then, we must remain firm in maintaining economic sanctions and rejecting any return to business as usual.

The Alliance today is in a much stronger position than it was two years ago. Since 2014, we have carried out the most significant increase in our collective defence for a generation. The Readiness Action Plan (or RAP) is being implemented. The rapid-reaction Spearhead Force is operational; the NATO Response Force has more than tripled to over 40,000 troops, and we have held hundreds of exercises, including the largest military exercise for over a decade at the end of last year, Trident Juncture.

An increased capacity for rapid reinforcement is important, but it is not enough. Russia has embraced the promotion of insecurity, and withdrawn from all manner of military transparency agreements. Russian combat forces can move along the full length of its border with great speed and stealth. It also has considerable anti-ship and anti-aircraft weapons that could

impede NATO reinforcements (its so-called anti-access/area denial capability). And it has shown in Ukraine that it can combine military power with unconventional “hybrid” methods – cyberattacks, subversion, disinformation – to destabilize its neighbours.

So we need to balance our reinforcements with an enhanced forward presence in the Eastern Allied countries. This is what NATO Defence Ministers agreed in principle last month. When Allied leaders meet here in Poland in July, they will agree the details.

A modern, effective deterrence means having the resources – and the political resolve – to convince an adversary that the costs of an attack are disproportionately high, and that such action would be a mistake. Deterrence will only come from a sufficiently robust and multinational forward presence, backed up by swift reinforcements. We must make it plain that crossing NATO’s borders is not an option, whether it’s with tanks or with ‘Little Green Men’. Any such action will be countered not just by national forces, but by Allies from across Europe and North America.

The United States has demonstrated its commitment to European security through its billion-dollar European Reassurance Initiative – an initiative that will be nearly quadrupled in 2017. This will mean more troops, more exercises and more forward-positioned equipment and infrastructure in countries like Poland and the Baltic States. These increased US contributions provide a foundation on which, I hope, European Allies – including Poland – will build to generate a truly multinational forward presence along NATO’s eastern flank.

European nations are already showing their commitment to our collective defence in implementing the RAP. European allies will serve as the backbone of the Spearhead Force on a rotating basis, and they are contributing to the continuous assurance measures. They have also begun to carry out the other important Wales Summit decision: to stop the cuts in defence budgets and gradually increase spending to 2% of GDP over a decade. A year after Wales, the overall fall in defence spending has effectively stopped. Five nations, including Poland, now spend 2% or more, and in 2015, sixteen Allies spent more in real terms on defence than they did in 2014. Eight Allies now spend the agreed 20% of their budgets on new equipment.

But simply spending more on defence is not enough. Russia exploits the weakness of its neighbours and uses propaganda to turn a country’s citizens against their own government and towards Russia.

Our first line of defence is not troops or heavy weapons, but effective governance: institutions that are – and that are seen to be – on the side of the citizen. Every member of the NATO Alliance is committed to our values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights. We must all continue to invest in those values every day, including in meeting the refugee and migrant challenge. We cannot allow this crisis to become one in which our solidarity and humanity give way to division and insularity.

We must also strengthen our resilience in key practical areas. Governments must ensure that their cyber defences are strong, that they have a high degree of civil preparedness, and that their critical national infrastructure is protected. Resilience is the essential first rung of the deterrence ladder.

NATO Allies have taken decisive action to strengthen our defence and deterrence, not just in the east, but in the south as well, where the chaos and violence that followed the failure of the Arab Spring has led to a humanitarian crisis.

Across the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel, state structures have come under increasing pressure and in some cases have collapsed. The Syrian civil war has been an ongoing tragedy for the last five years. More than a quarter of a million people have been killed and millions more have been forced to flee to surrounding countries and to Europe.

In many cases, the space once occupied by states has been filled by terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and ISIL – groups that commit the most heinous crimes against humanity and present a serious terrorist threat to Europe and the rest of the world.

There is no one cause of the unrest, and no one solution. There is no single enemy to defeat, no one clear ideology to oppose. The situation is complex, constantly evolving, and is sure to be with us for many years to come. This is a situation where it is not enough to increase spending on defence at home and be done with it. If we are to be secure, then our neighbours must be stable. The consequences of when they are not are now clear for all to see.

The most high-profile aspect of the challenge from the south centres around Iraq and Syria. While NATO as such is not a part of the US-led Coalition to destroy ISIL, every single NATO Ally is a part of the Coalition.

NATO’s role in the region – one it has played to some degree for many years – is to support our partners and to help them strengthen their defence and security sectors.

We have new Defence Capacity Building programmes with Iraq and Jordan. We are starting to train Iraqi officers in areas such as countering improvised explosive devices, de-mining, planning, cyber defence, military medicine, and security sector reform.

We have worked with Egypt’s military to introduce new mine detection and clearing technology. Morocco has joined our Interoperability Platform so that its armed forces can better operate with NATO forces. We are working closely with Tunisia on Special Forces and intelligence. And in Mauritania, the linchpin between the Maghreb and the Sahel, NATO is supporting the construction of safe munitions depots and training military personnel as they return to civilian life.

These programs show that NATO is doing a lot. But I believe we are not doing enough to have a real strategic impact. Only with a greater allocation of energy and resources can this

work begin to affect the security of the wider Middle East and North Africa. This will be high on the agenda at Warsaw.

As well as working with individual nations, there is ample scope to increase our cooperation with other regional organizations – the European Union, first and foremost, but also the Gulf Cooperation Council and the African Union. Cooperation and coordination with other organizations and nations will be vital if we are to return long-term stability to the south.

The old saying goes, that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This is never more so than in conflict. The more we can invest in our partners, the greater stability we can create in our neighbourhood, the lower the costs in blood and treasure we will eventually have to bear.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the coming months, as we prepare for our Summit, Allies will continue to adapt our Alliance to our new realities. We will build on the Readiness Action Plan. We will increase the amount of pre-positioned equipment, enablers and combat forces on our Eastern flank on a rotational basis, to ensure we have the right balance between our forward presence and our capacity for rapid reinforcement. We will continue to deepen our military and political cooperation with key partners, from Finland and Sweden in the north, Ukraine, to Moldova and Georgia in the east, and to Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia and others in the south.

The NATO Alliance faces a more complex and fluid set of challenges than it has for a generation. But while some may look at the world and fear the future, I do not. Because of NATO.

For almost seven decades, the NATO Alliance has protected its Allies from every challenge they have encountered. It stood strong in the face of the Soviet threat. It has helped to keep the longest period of peace in Europe in the history of the continent, extending the zone of peace and security to the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. And it continues to ensure the safety and security of our people, our territory and our values.

No matter what the challenge, NATO and its Allies find a way. They always have and, I believe, they always will. The challenges we face today are not easy. But together, through NATO, we will find a way to maintain our peace and security for generations to come.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2016/03/04/a-strong-nato-for-a-new-strategic-reality