



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE L'OTAN

Address by the President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly
Gerald. E. Conolly (United States)

At the Opening Ceremony of the NATO PA

Spring Session Online 2021

Minister,

Dear colleagues,

Let me start by thanking Karin Enström and the Swedish delegation for inviting the Assembly. We were all very much looking forward to meeting in Stockholm. And I do hope we can pay you a visit very soon.

I am glad that, even in a virtual setting, we can cast a spotlight on Sweden's major contribution to Euro-Atlantic security and its valued partnership with NATO and the Assembly.

Importantly, we will hear about Sweden's leadership and innovative approaches to promoting democratic and societal resilience - a topic at the center of the Assembly's agenda.

Friends and colleagues, we find ourselves at a key junction for our Alliance and, indeed, the international order.

In exactly a month from today, Allied leaders will gather for the NATO Summit.

This meeting offers an important opportunity to demonstrate how NATO stands strong and united in confronting today's challenges – as a transatlantic alliance of democracies, bound by our commitment to collective defense.

For over seven decades, Europe and North America, through NATO, have sought to safeguard an international order based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

This order has come under persistent pressure from many fronts.

Most importantly, competition between great powers has returned to the world stage. Russia, China and others are modernizing their military arsenals in ways that threaten strategic stability.

But this is no mere contest of military might. Let's be clear: we are also in the middle of a contest of values. Authoritarians in Moscow, Beijing and elsewhere are seeking to promote an alternative model of governance which we must vehemently reject.

Our Alliance has the resources and tradition to face this new global competition of values.



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But to persevere, we must rededicate ourselves to our democratic foundations. We must invigorate the transatlantic relationship. And we must demonstrate why this alliance, more than 70 years strong, continues to play a vital role in global security.

I made it my top priority, when you elected me last November, to ensure our Assembly takes the lead on all three fronts. And we have taken important steps on each of these.

First, on democratic resilience.

Our aim must be to strengthen NATO politically by reaffirming our commitment to shared democratic values.

This commitment distinguishes us from other alliances. Without it, we would be just another military block.

Democracy unites us. It makes us stronger, and it makes us safer.

As our democracies face increasing challenges from within as well as from without, our Assembly has become a leading voice on democratic resilience, putting forward concrete proposals. Importantly, we have called for the establishment of a Center for Democratic Resilience within NATO – an idea I presented on the occasion of NATO's 70th anniversary in 2019.

A Center within NATO would send a strong signal: the Alliance is equally committed to defending our democratic values as it is to collective security.

Our new Working Group is working hard to elaborate a solid concept for the Center, drawing on relevant expertise, and to build support. I am encouraged that our ideas are gaining traction, and I count on your continued active support.

On Monday, I also hope we can rename our Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security to Committee on Democracy and Security. This will help demonstrate the clear and direct link between democracy and security and our readiness to lead.

Second, on transatlantic relations.

Our Assembly has played its part in keeping our unique transatlantic link strong throughout turbulent times.

We have an opportunity to open a new chapter in transatlantic relations and reinforce NATO as the enduring embodiment of the bond between Europe and North America. I and the whole US delegation remain committed to working with all of you to solidify this new positive momentum.

We demonstrated this renewed commitment with the difficult decision our countries took *together* to begin drawing down our troops from Afghanistan.

Invoking Article 5 on 12 September 2001 – for the first and only time in NATO's history – was the ultimate act of solidarity. And we have borne the costs and sacrifices together ever since. It is only appropriate that we leave *together* before we mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11.



The drawdown in Afghanistan does not mean lowering our guard against the scourge of terrorism. On the contrary, it will allow us to refocus on the evolving terrorist threat and other challenges.

The 20th anniversary of 9/11 will be a solemn opportunity to honor the memory of all those who lost their lives on that dreadful morning, but also to remember the remarkable demonstration of solidarity and sacrifice from our friends and allies.

My third priority was to ensure that our Assembly is fully engaged in helping shape NATO's adaptation for the next decade. And we are.

The NATO Summit will flesh out recommendations for NATO 2030 and launch an update of the Strategic Concept.

With Declaration 460 on NATO 2030, adopted last November, our Assembly has identified the challenges and begun outlining a vision for NATO's adaptation, rooted in democratic values and transatlantic unity.

During the session, our Committees will expand on these proposals, based on their outstanding reports. And we will meet again on the eve of the NATO Summit to further refine our contribution and convey our messages directly to leading Allied officials.

After the Summit, our parliaments and the Assembly must be fully engaged in the revision of NATO's Strategic Concept to address our challenges and priorities of today and tomorrow.

Let me highlight in particular two challenges and two priorities where our Assembly should continue to lead.

The first challenge is Russia.

Later this afternoon, our Political Committee will discuss the excellent report by my colleague Brendan Boyle, which shows how a revisionist Russia continues to test our resolve and unity.

Moscow has violated a long list of international commitments. It is investing heavily in military modernization. And it is probing our defenses through dangerous behavior.

This includes ever-more brazen political interference, disinformation campaigns, and hybrid operations against Allied countries. In the last few weeks alone, we learned they were responsible for the Solar Winds hack and engineered ammunition blasts in the Czech Republic and perhaps other countries.

We must maintain a united posture that imposes costs and consequences for Russia's aggressive behavior. At the same time, we must engage Russia in credible, serious and clear-eyed dialogue, when it is in our interest to do so.

The poisoning, arrest and persecution of Alexey Navalny is a tragic illustration of the Kremlin's need to crush any dissent to ensure the regime's survival. Autocracies are weak because they rely on fear rather than free will, trust and belonging.

To distract from domestic unpopularity and economic malaise, Moscow's tactics also involve aggression against our partners and denying them the right to define their course as free and independent nations.

I have firmly condemned Russia's massive military build-up in and around Ukraine as reckless, irresponsible and unjustified. Moscow must bring its troops back to their barracks. We will never remain silent or passive in the face of naked intimidation.

Crimea in particular is the ultimate test of our collective resolve and commitment to defend the rules-based international order.

If we accept Russia's illegal and forcible annexation and occupation, then we are really only quibbling over territory.

We must repeat time and again, for however long it takes, that we will never recognize Russia's forcible and illegal annexation of Crimea.

I am proud that our Assembly established an informal support group for the Crimea Platform, and I know that its members will do their utmost to ensure we keep a firm stance on Crimea.

Similarly, we must stand together with our Georgian friends, denounce Russia's ongoing occupation and affirm our support for their independence and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's aggression.

The second challenge I would like to address is China.

Many of us assumed that when China moved towards market capitalism, the ideals of liberalism and enlightenment would follow.

Yet, rather than opening up, the last years have seen the Chinese government asserting deeper control using the Internet and artificial intelligence, trampling democratic rights in Hong Kong and oppressing minorities in Xinjiang.

It develops novel and destabilizing military capabilities, seeks to construct alternative international norms and institutions, interferes in our democracies, and bullies entire countries into submission.

We must speak with one voice and confront the challenge of China's rise together, as an alliance of democracies.

As I have called for in my report last year: we must compete to preserve our edge, counter where we must and engage where we can and where it is in our interest to do so. We must also reinvigorate NATO's regional partnerships with like-minded democracies.

The increasing challenge Russia and China pose to our security and democracy highlights the importance of continued defense investment.

We must hold the line on defense spending, live up to the Wales Defense Investment Pledge and better share the burden for our common security. We cannot let China and Russia take the lead in today's technological race and let them define the future of warfare.

Lastly, we must keep our door open for those countries wishing to join our unique community. Our Assembly has been a stalwart supporter of NATO enlargement.

It is a testament to the strength of our alliance and what it represents that countries want to join us.

We must ensure the Summit and Strategic Concept reaffirm NATO's Open Door policy. NATO membership is a sovereign decision by the 30 Allies – and only them – and any country, which feels it satisfies the criteria, is free to seek membership.



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But we must continue to be frank when candidates stray away from the path of reform and democratic consolidation. In this context, I welcome the important progress on ending Georgia's political crisis and urge our Georgian friends to fully implement agreed upon next steps.

I know that Georgia and Ukraine have high expectations for the Summit. And I am certain Allied leaders will recognize their commitment and achievements. By demonstrating that they share our democratic values and actively contributing to our common security, Georgia and Ukraine will eventually walk through NATO's door.

We should also refocus our efforts to complete the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans. Their security and prosperity is inextricably linked to ours.

Dear colleagues,

I hope my remarks today help frame our debates over the next few days, which must tackle pressing challenges as well as chart a long-term course for our Alliance based upon solidarity and unity and grounded in our common values.

I certainly look forward to our discussions.

And now, let me hand over to Karin Enström, our host, the head of the Swedish delegation.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY