



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE L'OTAN

SPEECH BY ATTILA MESTERHAZY
NATO PA OPENING CEREMONY
66th ANNUAL SESSION ONLINE

Wednesday 18 November 2020

Ministers,

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

2020 has been a year like no other before it. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken the lives of too many of our citizens, ground to a halt our economies and our societies, and forced us to reconsider essential elements of our way of life: the freedom of our movement, the freedom to meet with and see our loved ones, the freedom to eat out with friends, go to the movies or to the theatre. All our countries are now in the middle of the second wave of this pandemic. We can finally see some light at the end of this tunnel, thanks to the remarkable speed of vaccine development. But we must deal with this pandemic for many more months. And its impact will be felt for many years.

Friends and colleagues, this situation has meant that we have been unable to meet in person since March. However, from the beginning, I have been determined to ensure that we could continue to exchange. Because none of our nations can address this crisis alone. Only together can we overcome it. And because the threats and challenges we faced before this pandemic have not gone away. To the contrary.

Since April, we have held some 30 online meetings on the broad range of challenges our countries face. We have adapted our communications and launched new initiatives to allow delegations to stay in touch and share best practices and lessons learned.

This online annual session is a first for our Assembly. It will provide a unique opportunity for all of us: to look back at a truly exceptional year and to look forward to our future priorities and challenges on the horizon.

On behalf of all of us, I want to thank the Greek delegation for doing their very best, up until the last minute, to create the conditions to hold our session in Athens, as planned. Unfortunately, this prove impossible. I am glad, however, that we can exchange with several government ministers over the course of this session, including this afternoon.

I also want to thank the delegations of Luxembourg and Ukraine. Both would have been gracious hosts for the Standing Committee and the Spring Session respectively. I am glad we will soon again meet in Luxembourg city and Kyiv.

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Starting this afternoon and over the next five days, we will review our responses to COVID-19 and the wide-ranging impact of the crisis on our societies, our economies, as well as on global and transatlantic security. Our Committees have drawn up six excellent special reports on the different dimensions of this crisis.



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We will also discuss the many security challenges we must continue to face:

- Russia's aggressive actions and ambitious military modernisation;
- the ongoing threat of terrorism;
- instability in our neighbourhood from the Black Sea to the Gulf;
- the unfinished Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans; and
- the disruptive impact of emerging technologies.

The challenges posed by China's rise and global ambitions feature prominently on our agenda. Last December, for the first time, NATO leaders decided we need to address China's growing influence and international policies together – as an Alliance. They called China “an opportunity and a challenge”. To be honest, I see it as more of challenge than an opportunity. China has similar geopolitical ambitions as Russia but a smarter and more effective approach. It uses tanks *and* banks. So, without losing sight of the opportunities, we must better identify the direct challenges China's global ambitions and actions, as well as its cooperation with Russia, pose to NATO and the Allies. And we must learn the lessons from the COVID-19 crisis in terms of China's disinformation and propaganda campaign and the risks stemming from our dependence on China in some strategic sectors. I regret that Europe has not yet developed a common approach to Huawei's access to 5G infrastructure.

In short, China must start acting as a responsible global player. But we can no longer afford to be naïve about its ambitions and role.

Over the course of our Session, we will also have an opportunity to discuss NATO operations, and particularly the situation in Afghanistan.

Our nations went into Afghanistan together. And, together with our Afghan friends, we have made enormous sacrifices since 2001 to lastingly root out terrorism and bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. We should leave together when we all agree the time is right. Any premature withdrawal risks encouraging international terrorist groups who want to cause harm to our Alliance and might flock to Afghanistan to, once again, rebuild what they have lost.

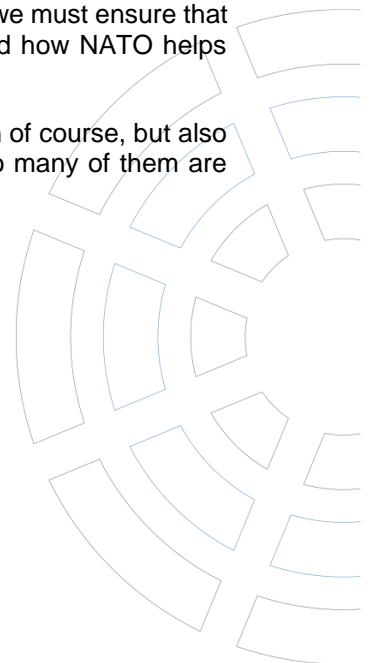
I am reassured by the steadfast, bipartisan US Congressional support of NATO's mission in Afghanistan, which I see demonstrated every time I exchange with the US Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

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So the list of the challenges we face is long. And to address them, we must continue to invest in our defence, and invest in innovation, despite the dire economic impact of the pandemic. Otherwise, NATO risks losing its technological edge and unsurpassed military power. As importantly, we must ensure that our citizens understand the threats we face, understand why defence matters, and how NATO helps protect them.

And on many of these challenges, we must work with partners: the European Union of course, but also our expanding network of like-minded partners, from Europe to Asia. I am glad so many of them are joining us over the next few days.

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During this session, we will also adopt our contribution to the *NATO2030* reflection process. I will speak more about this on Monday when we welcome the NATO Secretary General. Throughout this year, it has been one of my main priorities to ensure our Assembly makes its voice heard in this discussion and helps shape a vision for NATO's future.

We have engaged with the Group of Experts, appointed by the NATO Secretary General to support the process, and with the Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General themselves. On Monday, I will present a draft declaration with recommendations on the three strands of work of NATO 2030: how to make NATO more united politically, keep it strong militarily, and develop a more global approach.

All three are important, of course. But we can add particular value to the first strand. We are an eminently political organisation. And we are therefore often better able to address issues frankly and openly – without being bound by the constraints of governmental diplomacy. We also represent the diverse political spectrum in our countries and the diversity of our citizens.

For these reasons, as the parliamentary assembly of NATO, we must embody the shared values which form the foundation of our unique Alliance. We must make sure it not just a political-military organisation, but also an alliance of democracies.

First, we must do all we can to preserve and strengthen the special bond uniting Europe and North America. I want to recognise and thank our colleagues from Canada and the United States for their unwavering commitment to NATO and to our Assembly and for all they do to build support for the Alliance in their parliaments and among their constituents. We all must continue to do the same in our own countries and play our part in ensuring that Europe pulls its full weight in support of our shared security.

Second, we must be true to our values and lead by example. Again, our Assembly is well placed to raise any concerns and address any differences between us. I will not hide we have seen serious differences among some Allies this year. I have done my utmost to provide a forum where these could be discussed openly. Only in dialogue can we make progress.

Leading by example also means playing our part in supporting gender equality and mainstreaming. This year, we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Our work throughout 2020 has been a useful reminder of how far we have gone, but also of how much we still have to do.

Third, we must speak out when the values we stand for are trampled upon, even more so when this happens in our close neighbourhood. This is why our Assembly has been vocal on Belarus. And we will continue to condemn the regime for as long as it seeks to suppress the free expression of its people's will.

Fourth, we must do more to protect the rules-based international order against those who seek to undermine it. Russia regularly demonstrates its disregard for international law and, of course, continues to illegally occupy parts of Georgia and Ukraine's sovereign territory. But China, too, seeks to impose its own vision and values within existing institutions and through parallel institutions.

Fifth, we must keep our door open to those who share our values and want to join our unique community of nations. I was truly honoured to address the historic session of the parliament of North Macedonia when they ratified the North Atlantic Treaty. But Skopje is not the end of the road. We must anchor the Western Balkans region firmly in our Euro-Atlantic and European community. Our indecision creates a vacuum others will happily fill. This is why last week's exchange with EU Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi and NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General James Appathurai was so important.

But we must also continue to support Georgia and Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Georgia is in the midst of a delicate election, with the second round of the parliamentary elections in just a few days. So, I will refrain from commenting. I will just stress this: a NATO PA delegation travelled to



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Georgia to observe the first round of the election, making this our only in-person visit since March. This is clear evidence of our Assembly's commitment to support Georgia's democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Similarly, we must keep our door open to Ukraine. Countries must be free to decide their own fate without any third party holding a veto. My very first meeting after my nomination as President was with our Ukrainian delegation in the framework of our Ukraine-NATO Interparliamentary Council. And, after we had to cancel our Spring Session, we held a second meeting online, symbolically scheduled on the day we should have met in Kyiv.

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Dear colleagues,

Throughout this pandemic parliaments have continued to play their essential roles safeguarding democratic values and freedoms at home.

With this session, we demonstrate that, no matter the setting, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly provides an essential forum for open and frank political dialogue on transatlantic security.

Together we remain committed to protecting our citizens and defending the values for which the NATO Alliance stands.

I look forward to seeing you online throughout the coming days.

Thank you

