



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

20th ONLINE PARLIAMENTARY TRANSATLANTIC FORUM – PART II

Online Meeting
Friday 26 March 2021

SUMMARY*

066 FOR 21 E | Original: English | 23 April 2021

* This Mission Report is presented for information only and does not represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Paul Cook, Director of the Economics and Security Committee.

1. On 26 March 2021, the second session of the Annual Parliamentary Trans-Atlantic Forum was held online. Because of the pandemic, the Assembly could not gather in Washington D.C. in December 2020. The online meeting provided an opportunity for members to explore the Biden Administration's key foreign policy priorities both with Administration officials and experts. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and this report will only attribute the institutional introductions.

I. OPENING REMARKS

2. The NATO PA President, Congressman **Gerald E. Connolly** (US) greeted members and thanked both the National Defence University (NDU) and the Atlantic Council for their strong support for this annual event.

3. The President noted that the 6 January assault on the US Capitol provided yet another demonstration that democracy, while resilient, can be vulnerable. Recently released evidence of Russia's interference in elections in several countries is emblematic of the challenge posed by autocracies to democracies. Allied countries endeavour to protect and renew democracy and members both individually and collectively strive to resist attempts to undermine democratic governance. Indeed, shared democratic values are an essential element of collective security as NATO defines it; yet there is no body within the Alliance focused directly on defending these values. For precisely this reason, the President said, the Alliance should establish a democratic resilience centre hosted at NATO headquarters. Such a centre would monitor and identify challenges to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law confronted by member states. It could also provide specific governance assistance when requested. The independent group of experts appointed by the NATO Secretary General for the NATO 2030 reflection process had endorsed this idea.

4. **Major General William Seely, III**, Commandant of the NDU's Joint Forces Staff College (JFSC) told members that the institution focuses on a range of issues of direct relevance to the Alliance. NDU, he said, represents a strategic investment in collective security by forging relationships throughout the government through its education programmes, research, and networking capacities. It helps develop national security leaders prepared to tackle increasingly complex strategic challenges.

5. The national security environment is increasingly defined by rapidly changing conditions, emerging disruptive technologies, and shifting political landscapes. Complex challenges span geographic borders and all domains of warfare, including land, sea, air, space and cyber. At no other time in history have leaders been required to navigate such a complex and challenging environment. In the past, governments relied on professional military forces that were better prepared and equipped than their adversaries. The belief was that technological superiority would provide a competitive edge, but this is no longer the case. International partnership has always been important. Now more than ever the United States depends on the strength of its allies and partners to enable leaders to outthink their adversaries.

6. In subsequent remarks, **Damon Wilson**, the Executive Vice President of the Atlantic Council greeted the members and welcomed the ongoing collaboration of the Atlantic Council with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. He suggested that this is a historic moment in which the trans-Atlantic community of nations can once again serve as the backbone of the free world and help tackle a range of generational challenges. He noted that Europe and North America are stronger when they act together, and added that solidifying those ties is precisely the purpose of the Atlantic Council.

II. A RENEWED AGENDA FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS AND FOR NATO

7. Since taking office, President Joe Biden has communicated that American leadership and engagement will remain a bedrock of global security. The President fully intends to consult with Allies and partners and seek solutions to shared challenges. The Biden Administration is clearly committed to rebuilding and revitalising America's alliances, especially NATO. At the February 2021 Munich Security Conference, the President emphasised that the US commitment to Article 5 constitutes an "unshakable vow" to NATO Allies.

8. A renewed trans-Atlantic partnership requires a sustained effort to revitalise NATO while ensuring that it can manage the systemic challenges and proliferating transnational threats to North America and Europe. The Alliance must adapt to a world that is more complex than at any time in its history. The NATO 2030 process recognises these new strategic challenges and lays out an agenda for ensuring that NATO can navigate the next decade with confidence. President Biden and Secretary General Stoltenberg have together emphasised the need for an ambitious and timely agenda that builds back NATO better.

A. NEXT STEPS AND DIRECTIONS FOR NATO

9. It will be essential to revise NATO's Strategic Concept so that it accurately accounts for the current and projected threat environment. The three core tasks identified in 2010 (collective defence; crisis management; and cooperative security) remain valid. But the world has changed in fundamental ways since then, and a new strategic concept should consider how NATO advances its security interests in the current environment. A revised Strategic Concept must recognise both the enduring systemic challenges posed by rivals Russia and China while accounting for an array of other transnational threats. It must also stress NATO's roles and responsibilities to address threats that fall below the threshold of military operations while supporting the development of societal resilience.

10. Allies need to ensure that they have the capabilities, readiness, and forces needed to conduct core missions. Article 3 commitments require all Allies to maintain adequately sized and ready military forces, to meet NATO Capability Targets, and to fulfil force generation requirements for NATO missions and operations. Over the last few years, the Alliance has made progress developing strategies and plans that enhance collective defence. Credibility and effectiveness depend upon each Ally making the necessary investments in capabilities, readiness, and force generation.

11. Allied governments must also strive to enhance political consultation and cohesion. Allies should renew their commitment to use NATO to consult on matters relevant to national and collective security. This may mean broadening NATO's agenda while utilising the Alliance more systematically to coordinate non-military responses to security threats. NATO should remain a platform for hammering out collective approaches to critical challenges.

12. NATO should advance political dialogue and practical cooperation with a range of partners to enhance stability and security in regions that directly impact allied security. Allies with partner countries especially in the Asia-Pacific can work to defend and shape the rules-based international order. The Alliance should conduct a broad range of dialogues with regional partners, and, where appropriate, establish formal partnerships with other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Formulating innovative partnership activities can help the foster common security goals. In short, NATO should position itself to move from a demand-driven to an interest-driven approach to its partnerships.

13. NATO-EU cooperation needs to be deepened. When the democracies that make up NATO and the EU work together, they constitute a formidable force for a stable and open international order. The EU and NATO essentially see the international order and the threats to it in a similar fashion and should not allow institutional rivalries to undermine the unity that arises out of that shared vision. NATO has a role to play on a range of issues important to the Alliance's collective defence, including critical infrastructure protection, energy security, and coping with cyber and hybrid threats. These are all in the EU interests and this shared interest should be the foundation for cooperation. The US government welcomes EU efforts to enhance its defence capacity and believes that the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence can contribute to greater transatlantic security. US officials argue that these efforts should be complementary and not duplicative. EU defence initiatives should be open to the broadest possible participation of non-EU NATO allies. This point was recently reaffirmed by Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in a joint statement with US Secretary of State Tony Blinken.

14. Efforts are needed to ensure a stronger level of national resilience. Potential adversaries employ a full spectrum of military, political, economic, and other tools to challenge democratic institutions, economies, and societies. NATO's military forces are increasingly dependent on civilian services and infrastructure, particularly in transportation, telecommunications, information technology services, energy supply, and the medical field. As these trends accelerate, NATO requires a broader, more integrated, and better coordinated approach to meet this challenge. The Alliance should adopt clearer and more measurable national resilience targets to ensure a minimum standard among all Allies. This is also an area where greater NATO-EU cooperation would be welcome.

15. Allies also need to preserve their technological edge. Potential adversaries are racing to develop and deploy new technologies like artificial intelligence and quantum computing with important strategic implications. Safeguarding national security means, in part, requires investing in universities and advanced industries and recognising that meeting critical technological challenges must remain both an allied priority and one of many reasons for cooperating with the EU.

16. Finally, Allies must ensure that NATO is properly resourced. How NATO is led, staffed, and resourced will have a direct bearing on its capacity to support political objectives. NATO's common budgets are currently not sufficient to meet the priorities as set by Allies. NATO has persistently kept its Civil Budget artificially low, and NATO's partnerships rely too heavily on ad hoc Trust Funds and Voluntary National Contributions. NATO's cyber defence for its internal networks is also woefully inadequate for today's technological challenges.

B. DEMOCRATIC VALUES

17. NATO is inherently a community of democracies and political cohesion is greatest when democratic principles are at stake. President Biden has been clear about the importance he places on these values and sees this as an essential foundation for rebuilding US alliances. He intends to host a summit on this subject later in the year. An interagency discussion is underway in the United States about how best to embed democratic values in the NATO context.

C. NATO DECISION MAKING

18. NATO needs to improve decision-making processes. Some decisions ought to be made at lower levels within the Alliance rather than pushing everything up to the level of the North Atlantic Council. The Secretary General could be given authority to make decisions about resources and people to ensure NATO can facilitate its responses to emerging challenges and priorities. The

Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) would also benefit from increased decision-making autonomy.

III. A LOOK AT THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES

A. IRAN

19. Some in Washington have expressed concern that the Biden Administration has not moved more quickly to re-join the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The United States withdrew from that agreement at a time when Iran was essentially in compliance with its terms, although some in Washington would challenge that idea. In any case, the Biden Administration will now participate in talks in Vienna to explore the conditions for a return to the strictures of that agreement. Europe is essentially waiting to see what the new Biden Administration will do. It too will engage in the Vienna talks and will seek to revive the agreement before it is too late to do so. The European Union foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell has offered the EU as a potential intermediary between the U.S. and Iran to facilitate this important dialogue.

20. There are complications when it comes to domestic politics both in the United States and in Iran. The Biden Administration has a very narrow majority in Congress and some Congressional Democrats initially opposed the JCPOA. The Administration is thus playing its hand in a very cautious fashion. One way the United States might show a degree of humanitarian goodwill might be to help Iran cope with the COVID pandemic. There will be Presidential elections in Iran during the summer 2021, and reports indicate the Supreme Leader may not want a return to the JCPOA before the elections. However, many officials in Iran recognise that sanctions relief is needed, and reform-minded politicians will push for progress on the JCPOA.

21. Iran could be inclined to play a China card to increase its own leverage. China is now Iran's largest trading partner. Iranians, however, are not naturally oriented toward China; indeed, the diaspora is heavily Western oriented. Iranians want a better relationship with the West, and the United States and its European allies and partners should consider this aspiration as a diplomatic asset. The E3 leaders are in the position to lead on this front as their relationship with Iran has not worsened to the degree that U.S-Iranian relations have.

B. CHINA & RUSSIA

22. Russia and China are the state actors that pose the most significant challenges to the Alliance. Allied governments need to cope with both, but the policy requirements differ in important ways. Russia is particularly aggressive within the transatlantic space and NATO needs to have the capacity to deter Russia from further adventurism. China poses a different set of challenges. In this case, NATO nations need to position themselves to assure control of critical infrastructure while enhancing their capacity to cope with cyber threats emanating from China. Briefers noted that though there is much discussion about China-Russia cooperation, there are natural limitations to this partnership. For example, China is making investments in the Arctic in oil, natural gas and other resources, and Russia is willing to accept these capital inflows. That said, the Kremlin is actively resisting Chinese involvement in the northern sea route and does not recognise China as an Arctic governance authority. Russia will not sacrifice its position on these matters for the sake of engaging China. Briefers emphasised that NATO must consider the potential for deeper Russian-Chinese cooperation, but there are clear limits given the natural rivalries of these two powers across a spectrum of issues. The Russia-China partnership is simply not as robust as the two parties sometimes imply.

23. The West may be entering a moment of Great Power competition, and the Administration wants more predictable relations with China and Russia that might best be characterised as “managed strategic competition”. This approach seeks to push back against China and Russia but is also open to dialogue on matters of shared strategic interest like climate change, arms control, and global public health challenges. The Biden Administration has also signalled that it will seek to work in concert with allies to convince China and Russia to abandon their revisionist ambitions and abide by the customs that underpin the rules based international order. Forging a common strategy with Europe will be at the top of Biden’s agenda.

24. Since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has focused on deterrence against Russian conventional aggression, while increasing support for Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries under threat from Russia. NATO is not aiming at a long-term confrontation with Russia but has rather employed a two-track approach, combining deterrence with dialogue. But this approach has its limits. NATO has done well to deter Russia in military terms, but Russian political warfare, including cyber-attacks or other hybrid tools against the West, has increased. NATO remains in a static/reactive mode as Russia adopts an increasingly aggressive posture. It is actively subverting arms control regimes, engages in unchecked adventurism in the Middle East, conducts provocative exercises in NATO’s air and sea space, and has potentially lowered the nuclear threshold with the deployment of hypersonic weapons while adopting an escalate to de-escalate strategy. The NATO-Russia Council has not met in almost two years.

25. NATO has a strategy on Russia, but this strategy needs to be both more muscular and dynamic. NATO should actively seek to alter Putin’s calculations and convince him to pull back from confrontation. At the Munich conference, President Biden talked about working with allies to push back against Russian aggression while encouraging the Kremlin to deescalate tensions. Russia has a zero-sum view of world politics, and it may take time for Putin to change course as he is convinced that the West’s strategy is to use democracy to promote regime change in Russia. The West needs to be patient and take the long view while also upholding its core values. Accordingly, it should take pains never to appear to be sacrificing the interests of other countries as part of a strategy to reset relations with Russia. To do so would only embolden Putin. At the same time, it should work to reach out to the younger generation of Russians.

26. The struggle with China will have a different cast than the one against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. China is an economic competitor, a geopolitical adversary, and a potential partner on dealing with global issues. The West needs a multi-pronged approach involving democratic partners across the globe. Many NATO partners have been grappling in their own ways with the Chinese challenge. China is now brushing up against European strategic, economic, and political interests and this demands a more coherent and thought-out strategic European response.

27. For some analysts in the United States, China is emerging as the primary geopolitical challenger to the United States. Washington will inevitably need to shift additional resources. As the United States focuses more on the Far East, European allies will need to assume greater responsibility for security and defence in and around Europe. China does not pose a direct military threat to Europe, but its military presence is quickly expanding in the neighbourhood, and it is developing a military presence in critical regions including Djibouti and the Arctic. It is also building an economic presence in Europe, in part, through large infrastructure investments.

28. NATO will not be the first responder to Chinese actions across the globe and needs to establish links with other stakeholders. The British Prime Minister recently invited Australia, Korea, and India to attend a G7 summit. The idea is that a gathering of the world’s leading democracies, the so-called D10, could help formulate collective approaches to China. NATO could facilitate classified

intelligence-sharing and could help define technical standards in areas such as telecommunications and transportation infrastructure security. Eventually it might also contribute to supporting collective approaches to disinformation, the Arctic, and China's Belt & Road Initiative.

29. NATO and the EU should also work on these issues and both should help structure a wider framework engaging like-minded democracies from the Asia-Pacific region. At some point, it might be worthwhile to explore the potential for a NATO-Pacific Partnership Council. None of this should rule out the conduct of a dialogue with Beijing. NATO and China already conduct staff talks and these talks could eventually be raised to a higher level.
