

Revision of 31 May 2010

**Speech by the President of the
NATO Parliamentary Assembly,
Hon. John Tanner (United States)
to the Plenary of the Spring Session
to be held in
Riga, Latvia**

Tuesday, 1 June 2010

*Ministers,
Ambassadors,
Colleagues and Friends of the NATO Parliamentary
Assembly
Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,*

It is my great pleasure to welcome you here to the Spring Session in Riga, Latvia. It is a fitting place to hold a session for this Assembly. In the middle ages, Riga was a port that connected the Baltic to the Byzantine empire in what is now Turkey. Even then, Latvia was an important part of Europe and a link between the north and the south. The port of Riga was known even in the 13th century as “the old port”.

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Latvia is a small country, but it makes significant contributions to Alliance. This is especially true in Afghanistan, where Latvian troops continue to serve valiantly. In fact, the same can be said of Latvia's Baltic neighbours, both countries that have small populations, but contribute substantially in international affairs.

As a sports fan, I like to think of the Alliance and the importance of these contributions in terms of teamwork. We are "Team NATO," if you will. For the team to win, each individual team member must do his or her part, no matter how big or how small. In the end, it's not important how successful each of us is individually, but what each individual contributes to the success of the team.

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There are no doubt many issues I could address today, but there are several points I would like to underline in the next few minutes. I am pleased to say that NATO is making progress on a new Strategic Concept and I look forward to hearing the Secretary General's comments on this later in the morning. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly delivered its contribution to this project in early April and I would like to thank all of you, and particularly Special Rapporteur Sven Mikser, for your contributions. Two weeks ago the Group of Experts chaired by Madeleine Albright delivered their report to the Secretary General and I think the two reports are very complementary documents.

This demonstrates that there is a strong consensus on the critical points: reaffirming our commitment to Article 5; preparing for new threats; and strengthening our partnerships, to underline just a few. But I would like to highlight one of the recommendations in our report and offer some thoughts as to how we move forward.

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One issue that deserves particular attention is the reform of NATO structures. We need to streamline our decision-making process. This applies to both the civilian and the military side of NATO. On the civilian side, there are many committees at NATO headquarters that could be combined or rationalized in a way that would make NATO a leaner and more efficient institution. I believe that the Secretary General would be able to act more efficiently if we could reduce the bureaucratic burden on him.

But even more significant than rationalizing our headquarters, we need to rationalize the military side of NATO, particularly in its mission in Afghanistan.

Commanders on the ground need the ability to act quickly, get the materials they need, and respond to changing conditions on the ground.

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I believe that we are on the right track in Afghanistan and that recent operations demonstrate the evolution of a true partnership between ISAF and the Afghan security forces. I should stop here to thank Minister of Defence Wardak for travelling to Riga from Afghanistan to give us his expert perspective on this issue and others that affect the long-term future of his country's security. This is a critical time in Afghanistan and this Assembly appreciates the opportunity to exchange views with him and learn more about the situation on the ground.

Afghans are increasingly taking the lead in operations and the ultimate measure of success is that they can take on more and more, leaving the international forces increasingly in the background. But the effective use of our forces there depends on being able to react to the needs of the Afghan people.

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We need to introduce this same level of efficiency and coordination in our civil reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Right now, there are a wide range of agencies and non-governmental organizations working on the ground to improve the well-being of the Afghan people. But these do not always work together for maximum efficiency. They must do so. We owe that much to our taxpayers and to the people of Afghanistan.

Introducing greater efficiency is imperative for NATO and will bring obvious benefits to the organization, but for parliamentarians there is another benefit that deserves particular emphasis: streamlining NATO will also have a positive effect on our public diplomacy efforts at home.

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We may have turned a corner in some ways since the economic downturn began in 2008, but as recent events have demonstrated, we are nowhere near a complete recovery. There are still multiple problems in the international financial system that could affect all of our countries and our citizens feel the burden. Many are unemployed, others have seen their pay and benefits reduced, but all feel some uncertainty and anxiety about the future.

In this environment, we need to show the citizens of this Alliance that they are getting value for their investment. But to make the strongest case to them, we must economize and rationalize to demonstrate that NATO is a lean and efficient organization. That will underpin our public diplomacy and make it easier for us to explain why this Alliance exists and why it deserves the people's support.

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Here in Latvia, people can look around everyday and see the tremendous progress their country has made in its 20 years of true independence. They know that it is the result of a lot of hard work on their part, but it is also the result of the willingness of institutions like NATO to be open to them. NATO has never pushed itself anywhere it was not welcomed. Its enduring attractiveness is based on the fact that it remains open to all those European states that want to join, and are willing to make the necessary reforms to do so. It is a critical part of NATO's character and it must remain so.

So to conclude, I would like to thank once again our Latvian hosts, especially Vaira Paegle for her efforts to make this event possible. We have an outstanding range of speakers this morning who will no doubt be able to deepen our understanding of the challenges ahead.

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