Speech by Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, Deputy Secretary General of NATO. Seminar: NATO and the new arc of crisis

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here with you all tonight and to kick off this conference on NATO and the New Arc of Crisis. I would first like to thank our hosts this evening, Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, Chairman of the Real Instituto Elcano, Íñigo Sáenz de Miera, President of Fundación Botín, and our own team from NATO's Public Diplomacy Division. Also the Istituto Affari Internazionali and Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais.

It is apt that this NATO event comes to you with the help of organisations from Italy, Portugal and Spain, the three host nations for NATO's current exercise, Trident Juncture. This is the largest NATO exercise since 2002, with around 35,000 troops, over 140 aircraft and 60 ships from 30 countries taking part. We are also playing host to a number of observer countries from as far afield as Brazil, Mexico and even from Russia.

NATO and its Allies have not held exercises this regularly – with more than 300 this year – since the Cold War. These exercises are a powerful demonstration of NATO’s strength. Of the strength of our forces and the strength of our unity as an Alliance. This is more essential today than it has been for over a quarter of a century, because over the last couple of years, we have witnessed fundamental changes to European security.

At its closest point, the coast of Spain lies just 14 km from North Africa. So it’s not surprising that many minds here are focussed on the challenges to the south, although the definition of what we might call ‘the south’ is quite a loose one. From Afghanistan, through the Middle East and across North Africa, we see a pattern of violence and instability. Not of one threat, but many, with many different causes, from insurgencies to collapsing states, presenting many different challenges. And certainly with no one solution. Within those countries, this instability has led to untold human suffering, and to massive upheaval for their neighbours.

Here in Europe, that instability has inspired those who look to Europe as a beacon of hope and of peace to risk their lives in search of safety for their families. Prompting the largest flow of refugees since the Second World War. It has also inspired those who would do us harm to carry out acts of terror.

This alone would be enough of a challenge for NATO and her Allies, but it is only half of the picture. For to our east, we also face a newly assertive Russia. The world woke up to Russia’s actions when it took Crimea by force early last year, denying the actions of its ‘little green men’ every step of the way until the peninsula was firmly under its control. Since then, it has supported separatist fighters in the east of Ukraine with men and with
arms – including heavy weaponry – and now effectively controls those forces on the battlefield while implausibly denying that Russian forces are there, hiding in plain sight.

Ukraine may have been the wake-up call, but it was not Russia’s first such action. For today, Russia also has hostile forces controlling territory in Georgia and in Moldova. Moscow seems to think that Russia can only be secure if its neighbours are unstable, or even dismembered.

Now Russia has turned its attention to Syria. But rather than fighting ISIL alongside the US-led coalition of regional countries and NATO Allies, Russia is focussing its firepower on shoring up the position of its client, the regime of President Assad. In theory, Russia has an opportunity to help destroy ISIL and to end the war in Syria, bringing much needed stability to the region. But in reality, its actions are only prolonging the war and exacerbating the suffering of its people.

Now, Russia is not the Soviet Union, sealed off behind an Iron Curtain. The world is different now. More integrated and more interdependent. So the question is not whether we have a relationship with Russia. But what sort of relationship?

It is in our interest to engage with Russia if only to ensure that tensions are not needlessly heightened. We need to constantly encourage greater transparency and predictability in our relations, to avoid misunderstandings and to prevent avoidable accidents where our forces might come into contact – whether that is in the Baltics, the Black Sea, or over Syria. But there must be no doubt:

Engagement is not the same as accepting a new status quo or returning to business as usual. As we approach our next NATO Summit in Warsaw next July, we need to assess the long-term implications of the current crisis for our relations with Russia, and for the future of our Alliance. We need to be patient, stick to our principles, and recognize that time is on our side.

With so many diverse and contrasting threats, threats that are beginning to blur at the edges, the way that NATO Allies respond is vital to the future of our security and to the open societies we hold dear.

The most basic response and, in some respects, the most important, is to end the more than two decades of defence budget cuts. When the Soviet Union collapsed and our world became more secure, it was sensible to cut defence spending and to reap the peace dividend. But times have changed, and we are no longer as secure. So it is now sensible to reverse those cuts.

Last year at our NATO Summit in Wales, NATO leaders committed to increasing defence spending to 2% of GDP over the next decade. The deadline is still a long way off, but many countries are turning the corner and putting that pledge into practice. I hope our three co-sponsors, Spain, Italy and Portugal, will soon join them.

This is important for two reasons. For the additional resources it will provide to our militaries, increasing their ability to act quickly and decisively; and for the political
solidarity it will demonstrate to the outside world. NATO is an organisation based on unity of voice and solidarity of action. So that if one Ally is attacked, they do not have to fight alone, but can rely on the combined might of all 28 Allies, including the United States. This political commitment has ensured peace among Allies for more than six decades.

Greater defence spending at a time of heightened insecurity sends a message that NATO stands strong. It can also reassure my countrymen that our European allies understand that the days when Europe could over-rely on the United States are over, and that Europe is stepping up to its responsibilities.

But of course, our actions extend beyond the political and financial. The centrepiece of NATO's adaptation to this new environment is the Readiness Action Plan, the biggest increase in NATO's collective defence since the Cold War. The RAP is about making sure that we have the right forces in the right place and with the right equipment. That they are ready to move at very short notice to defend any Ally against any threat. Since Wales, we have made rapid progress.

We now have an operational Spearhead Force, able to deploy within a matter of days; we have more than doubled the size of the NATO Reaction Force to up to 40,000 troops, and we have opened six new headquarters, with two more on the way, in our Eastern Allies to provide command and control and logistical support to allied reinforcements. And we are also maintaining round-the-clock rotational deployments and exercises in the East – in the air, on land and at sea – to reassure allies and make clear to Russia that they shouldn't even think of messing around with NATO.

Nations are starting to address some of our priority capability needs, such as precision-guided munitions, air-to-air refuelling, drones, and aircraft for our Special Forces. Allies are addressing important issues such as Ballistic and Theatre Missile Defence and cyber threats, and they are doing it not just on an individual, ad hoc basis, but collectively, through NATO's Defence Planning Process. And we have made a good start in understanding the implications of “hybrid” warfare and in designing a comprehensive political as well as military response.

Together, this is a huge step forward, but it is only the first step. In the years ahead, if we are to be in competition with Russia for the long term, then we have to adapt our Alliance for the long term. We need to get better at sharing intelligence, at identifying potential vulnerabilities and at combating hybrid and cyber-attacks, including doing so with other international organisations, the European Union in particular.

NATO's primary aim is collective defence. But it is not our only aim. We also look beyond our borders, to manage crises and to help our partners to defend themselves. But these are not jobs for NATO alone. Every challenge we face – from east or south – requires the energy and efforts of the whole of the international community. Principally from the countries directly affected, and from international organisations, such as the EU and the UN, the League of Arab States and the Africa Union.
But even if NATO isn’t the main actor, the Alliance certainly has a role to play. The RAP demonstrates our ability to defend any ally and respond to crises on and beyond our borders. But an area where we can do more is to help strengthen the security of neighbouring countries – projecting stability without necessarily deploying our combat forces.

Our support for other countries has many names – Resolute Support, Defence Capacity Building, Partnerships – but it all boils down to NATO helping other countries to reform their security sectors, professionalize their armed forces, and improve their capacity to better defend themselves and stabilise their own neighbourhoods. For if our neighbours are more stable, then we are more secure.

Already, we provide practical support for Ukraine, through our five Trust Funds in areas like command-and-control, cyber defence and medical rehabilitation. We have substantial defence capacity building programs with Georgia and Moldova as well.

And in the south, NATO is helping to develop the defence sectors of countries across the region. We have new defence capacity building programs with Jordan and Iraq. In recent years, we have worked with the Egyptian military to introduce new mine detection and clearing technologies. Morocco has enhanced the capabilities of its Armed Forces to work with NATO by joining the Interoperability Platform. Tunisia has joined the Planning and Review Process, helping to modernise its armed forces and defence institutions, including their Special Operations Forces. In Mauritania, the linchpin between the Maghreb and the Sahel, a NATO Trust Fund has helped to build safe ammunition depots, to destroy obsolete ammunition stockpiles and to help train military personnel returning to civilian life.

NATO Allies also contribute a great deal. In the south, every NATO Ally is supporting the US-led operation against ISIL, whether as part of the air operations against ISIL targets or through training and equipping Iraqi security forces. Allies are supplying Ukraine with equipment, and military and police training to complement NATO’s Trust Funds.

But we can do much more, and more proactively, with our partnership tools. When the stakes are as high as they are, and the consequences so clear, it is right that we invest in our partners to keep ourselves secure.

Currently, our focus may well be on the challenges from Russia and the south, but that does not mean that we’re neglecting other threats. I would emphasize, in particular, Ballistic Missile Defence. As we are in Spain, I want to highlight the work that Spain is doing to help protect us from the threat of missile attack, by hosting the four US Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence ships at Rota. Together, they make up a key part of our protection of European territory and populations against ballistic missile threats from outside the Euro-Atlantic region. From our Summit in Chicago in 2012, the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review called for the appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear and missile defence. By hosting these assets, Spain is making a critical contribution.

Ladies and gentlemen,
With a resurgent Russia to one side and chaos to another, it would be easy to see the future as bleak. But that would be a mistake. And it would be a mistake because of NATO.

The challenges we face today may not be the same as those we faced during the Cold War or in the decades since, but NATO is not the same either. NATO evolves, as it always has. But what remains constant is our guiding vision: of a Europe that is whole, free and at peace within a safe and strong Euro-Atlantic community.

Through a combination of unity and strength, NATO has maintained our security for more than six decades. I believe it will continue to do so for many more decades to come.

Thank you.