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Keynote address by the President of Latvia Raimonds Vējonis at the opening of the Conference “NATO in 2018: Limits and Opportunities in Responding to Existing and Emerging Challenges”

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We have come to talk about existing and emerging challenges and the limits and opportunities of our response.

It is important to face facts. The challenges are all too clear. On our Southern flank there is conflict in the Middle East and instability in North Africa. The use of chemical weapons against civilians horrifies us all.

To the East, a resurgent Russia is flexing her military muscles and disinformation capabilities. Military aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 show that Russia wants to undermine existing agreements and conventions in order to weaken the international rules-based order.

In the Far East, China is growing in importance. Her huge economic and military power is beginning to be felt internationally. We all hope for a peaceful solution to the North Korean nuclear weapons issue, but that is still far from certain.

The world in general, and what we call “the West” in particular, is facing a growing terrorism problem. Added to this is the issue of migration, a challenge which is sure to increase with the effects of global warming.

Perhaps even more serious is the challenge our democratic systems face. This comes not only from external interference in free and fair elections. Its root cause is a lack of trust in the political class and those in positions of authority. This is multiplied by the social media bubbles in which most of us live. In this environment populist political parties thrive.

Belief and trust in the values which have guided us since the Enlightenment are under threat. The unity of the West is undermined by the possibility of tariff wars and disagreements over such different issues as the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal.

So, what should we do? I have already outlined some of the limitations on our action. But let us also touch on the positive.

In terms of hard security, NATO remains the most successful alliance in history. NATO's eFP has added substance to the words of deterrence. President Trump has endorsed Article 5. At the Brussels Summit we hope to enhance eFP with an air, sea, and reinforcement credibility it still lacks.

Europe has begun to realise that we must pull our weight in defence without always relying on America. This means both together and as individual countries. President Macron has proposed a new European Intervention Force to add teeth to PESCO. There is a growing recognition on both sides of the Atlantic that we need to look beyond our borders in order to guarantee our own security.

Soft security is the area where the EU is placing the most emphasis. The European Agenda on Security for the next 5 years prioritises terrorism, organised crime, and cybercrime as areas where EU action can make a real difference. The threats posed by hybrid attacks are increasingly recognised. Counter measures are being developed.

It is clear that the use of little green men will not work again. We know what they are, and therefore – how to deal with them.

Then there is fake news and information warfare. But people do not like to be deceived, not in person nor on social media. The deception called “alternative facts” must be resisted. Therefore, the importance of STRATCOM and the Riga Centre of Excellence is again underlined.

There is also a growing recognition that deterrence can apply to hybrid threats. For instance, with elections, the more we prepare to prevent interference, the greater the costs to hostile actors, with less likelihood of their success. Deterrence against hybrid threats is an area where opportunities should be sought. Too long we have been reactive. Now it is time to take action.

Finally, let us remember that we are in a battle for hearts and minds. That is, the hearts and minds of our own populations first. Those who envy our success and unity are trying to divide us. We must remain faithful to our shared values and principles. It is time to wake up, to be more proactive and, most of all, to stay united.

I hope you will enjoy today's discussions.