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### **Annual session of NATO Parliamentary Assembly focuses on next Strategic Concept and lessons learnt in Afghanistan**

**By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch**

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly (PA), which is institutionally separate from NATO (see Box1), met in Lisbon on 8-11 October for its 67th annual session and brought together some 250 parliamentarians from NATO member states and partners to discuss a range of issues related to the development of a revised Strategic Concept, which is due to be adopted at a NATO summit in Spain in June next year. “As consultations on the revised Strategic Concept begin, our Assembly will play its full part,” [said](#) NATO PA President Gerald E. Connolly. “With our discussions here in Lisbon, we have laid the foundation of the Assembly’s contribution to this critical process”. The current concept – developed 10 years ago – still refers to Russia as a partner, does not mention China at all and barely refers to climate change.

The 2021 Annual Session was the first in-person sitting in almost two years, as the pandemic forced almost all Assembly meetings online. Due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, some participants unable to join in person took part remotely.

NATO’s ongoing discussions to update its Strategic Concept must consider changed geopolitical realities, including the rise of China, Russia’s aggressive behaviour and cyber threats to undermine Western democracies, Connolly [said](#). Reiterating the language used at the NATO summit in June this year, Connolly added “We must recognize that China and Russia do not

share the same values as NATO Allies and seek to undermine the international rules-based order”.

#### ***Box 1: The NATO Parliamentary Assembly – A Primer***

Since being formed in 1965, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has provided a forum for parliamentarians from the NATO member states to promote debate on key security challenges, facilitate mutual understanding and support national parliamentary oversight of defence matters. However, its policy recommendations have little more than an advisory status within NATO, and it has no formal mechanism for holding NATO accountable.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly consists of 269 delegates from the 30 NATO member states. Each delegation is based on the country’s size. In addition to delegations from NATO member states, delegates from associate countries and parliamentary observer delegations take part in Assembly activities and bring the total number of delegates to approximately 360.

The Assembly has five Committees: the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security; Defence and Security Committee; Economics and Security Committee; Political Committee; and the Science and Technology Committee; and eight sub-committees. The Assembly’s [Declaration 460](#), adopted in November 2020, laid out the Assembly’s main recommendations on how to adapt NATO for the next decade.

In a [speech](#) to the Assembly NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said he was looking forward to a "robust engagement" with the PA on the Strategic Concept in the coming months. NATO's next Strategic Concept "will give us an opportunity to chart the way ahead for the Alliance, and reaffirm the centrality of the transatlantic bond to our security and our defence", the Secretary General stressed.

***Box 2: Resolutions adopted by the Plenary Assembly of the NATO PA in Lisbon, Portugal on 11 October 2021***

[RESOLUTION 466](#) - DEVELOPING A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY, INTEGRATED AND COORDINATED APPROACH TO RESILIENCE FOR ALLIED DEMOCRACIES - presented by the Committee on Democracy and Security

[RESOLUTION 467](#) - SUPPORTING NATO'S COMMITMENT TO STRONGER DEFENCE AND DETERRENCE TOWARDS 2030 - presented by the Defence and Security Committee

[RESOLUTION 468](#) - LEARNING THE LESSONS OF NATO'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN - presented by the Defence and Security Committee

[RESOLUTION 469](#) - ALLIED DEFENCE SPENDING AND CAPABILITIES DEVELOPMENT - presented by the Economics and Security Committee

[RESOLUTION 470](#) - MAINTAINING NATO'S FOCUS ON THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE - presented by the Political Committee

[RESOLUTION 471](#) - REAFFIRMING TRANSATLANTIC COHESION AND IMPLEMENTING 2021 NATO BRUSSELS SUMMIT DECISIONS - presented by the Political Committee

[RESOLUTION 472](#) - REVIVING ARMS CONTROL IN A DYNAMIC STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT - presented by the Science and Technology Committee

"In looking at today's evolving security environment, we will need to better understand the drivers of conflict and adapt swiftly," [said](#) Jean-Pierre Lacroix, UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations,

who also addressed the parliamentarians in Lisbon. "I know that NATO is reflecting on such matters in the context of NATO 2030. Within the UN peacekeeping family, we are also reflecting internally on what the future may hold".

The Assembly adopted seven resolutions (see Box 2) with policy recommendations for NATO governments on several areas related the Strategic Concept review and the wider NATO2030 modernisation drive, as well as other issues including lessons from this summer's withdrawal from Afghanistan, defence budgets, arms control and the challenge from Russia and China. The Assembly also debated two reports looking at the legacy of the Arab Spring events of 2011 and the security agenda in the Mediterranean region. Other topics discussed with politicians, experts and military officers included the Iran nuclear programme, developments in the Middle East and North Africa, challenges in Belarus, security in space, climate change and disinformation and bolstering the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Key recommendations in the resolutions and reports included:

- strengthening resilience against a wide range of risks by boosting cooperation between the armed forces, public authorities, the private sector, and citizens in crisis preparedness and response; improving communication and education on resilience for civil sector actors and the general public; and creating a Centre for Democratic Resilience within NATO to support Allies in strengthening democratic systems and institutions. The Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, [said](#) that such a centre at NATO is "necessary because of autocracy raising its head and challenging democracy in many places, as well as the corruption that frequently goes with autocratic rule". Pelosi was [awarded](#) NATO PA's first-ever 'Women for Peace and Security' prize in Lisbon.

- for NATO “to conduct a thorough, clear-eyed, and comprehensive assessment” of its security efforts in Afghanistan over the last two decades, notably on “political consultation, threat assessment, in-operation decision making and adaptation processes, intelligence, counterterrorism, partner training and capacity-building, anti-corruption, and counter-narcotics”. According to a NATO PA [news release](#), NATO experts are already preparing initial findings for allies to examine in the coming weeks and it is expected that these findings will feed into the Strategic Concept. The Commander of NATO’s Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC), Brigadier General Bogdan Cernat, told the PA that three reports on lessons from Afghanistan are being drawn up, one from the military perspective requested by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, one on the Resolute Support Mission to train and advise the Afghan security forces, and a third on the impact of anti-corruption measures. ***NATO parliamentarians need to press for these reports to be made public. Otherwise, how can the public have faith in a lessons learnt process in which the exact terms of reference, timeline and structure remain secret.***
- building a united approach on outreach to the Middle East and North Africa, with the aim of boosting security and backing efforts to consolidate democracy. “Challenges emanating from the South are just as formidable as those from the East, however, the Allies have yet to demonstrate the same level of strategic focus on their southern periphery,” [said](#) a report drafted by French deputy Sonia Krimi for the NATO PA. The report proposed strengthening the Alliance’s collective defence and crisis management capabilities in the region; securing adequate funding for projects with Mediterranean partners; bolstering the

political dimension of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue; expanding contacts with regional organisations; and deeper coordination with the European Union on regional issues.

- better use NATO as a platform for debate and consultation on arms control, to ramp up spending on research and development, and encourage public debate on the benefits of non-proliferation. “We should be especially concerned by the behaviour of Russia and China, both of whom are aggressively developing new military technologies behind a veil of secrecy,” [said](#) U.K. parliamentarian Nusrat Ghani.
- NATO governments must stick to defence spending targets to match the unpredictable range of threats facing them, despite budgetary pressures stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The way disinformation undermines democracies was addressed in a report by Congresswoman Linda Sanchez, acting head of the US delegation. It notes that propaganda and fake news can only be fought on a united front. “No one actor or measure can solve the problem entirely, but together they can create a sound basis to reinforce the resilience of our democratic societies to hostile information activities,” it said.

The parliamentarians also held an in-depth debate on the ethical and scientific challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence and autonomous systems that learn fast and can be difficult to interact with, understand and control should they go wrong.