

"Everything we are doing has a 360-degree scope. We do not have the luxury of choosing between different challenges."

# ALEXANDER VERSHBOW

Interview by Inci Kucukaksoy, JWC PAO  
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**AMBASSADOR ALEXANDER VERSHBOW** served in U.S. Government and NATO appointments for almost four decades. In 2012, he became the first American to hold the position of NATO Deputy Secretary General—the Alliance's second most senior international civil servant—a post from which he retired on 17 October 2016, handing over to Ms Rose Gottemoeller of the United States. A long-time student of Russian Affairs and international relations, Ambassador Vershbow received a B.A. in Russian and East European Studies from Yale University and a Master's Degree in International Relations and Certificate of the Russian Institute from Columbia University. During his career, he has held a series of key assignments, including that of U.S. Ambassador to NATO from 1998 to 2001; "one of the most difficult periods on the international arena since the Cold War," Polish President Andrzej Duda said as he honoured Ambassador Vershbow with Poland's highest distinction of its kind, the Grand Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, at Warsaw's Belweder Palace, on the eve of the Warsaw Summit.

*The Three Swords* magazine has quoted Ambassador Vershbow consistently in every issue since 2012 via NATO's online "Newsroom", where one can check out the full rundown of everything about our Alliance. In our fast-changing world it is important to document NATO's unique story; and, unbeknownst to Ambassador Vershbow, he has always inspired us in producing this magazine and charting a course; his opinion pieces rank among our most influential ones. We are honoured to have the opportunity to interview him.





Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and/or Government during NATO Summit in Warsaw, from left, NATO's Deputy Secretary General at the time of the Summit, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, Secretary of the Council Ms Csilla Wurtz, and the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. Photo by NATO.

**Ambassador Vershbow, thank you for giving us this interview opportunity for the Joint Warfare Centre's *The Three Swords*. Your distinguished career and service to the U.S. and NATO spans close to 40 years, dating back to the latter half of the Cold War including the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Warsaw Pact. If we could go back to the very beginning of your government career in 1977, what do you remember the most from those early days? What experiences and events most shaped your perspectives and had the biggest influence on you?**

— I started my career shortly after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act on August 1, 1975. This far-reaching agreement marked a major turning point in the Cold War and shaped my outlook. It represented a sharp break from the concept of an ideologically divided Europe and served as the foundation for East-West détente and reconciliation. Most importantly, Helsinki committed all signatory nations to re-

spect important values like the peaceful resolution of disputes, human rights and the rule of law—many of the same values, in fact, that have animated the NATO Alliance since our founding in 1949. The early years of my career, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were dominated by the challenges in overcoming Cold War divisions. One of the first issues I worked on as a junior diplomat was the 1979 NATO Dual-Track Decision on the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF)—a response to the destabilizing Soviet build-up of nuclear weapons represented by the SS-20 missile. The initial year of my first assignment to Moscow (1979-81) was focused on efforts to counter the suppression of human rights. The second year was dominated by the Soviet suppression of the Solidarity movement in Poland, inspired in part by the Helsinki Final Act. But in later years, I was proud to be able to contribute to a more positive, stable and predictable relationship with Russia: I participated in the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START) and

helped shape the U.S. response to Glasnost and Perestroika—which opened the way to the historic changes in East-West relations of the late 1980s and 1990s, and seemed to bring closer to the realization the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. My first assignment to NATO as U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative began in August 1991, just days after the attempted coup d'etat in Moscow. The failure of the coup, and the peaceful dissolution of the USSR a few months later, created an opportunity to build an integrated European security system including a democratic Russia and the newly independent states of Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.

**Since the very beginning you have been centrally involved in improving relations with the former Soviet Union, and now you have led NATO as it has responded to the resurgence of Russia under President Putin. How have your views changed as a diplomat in the 80s and early 90s, compared to now with the**



## "I believe strongly in NATO's policy of strong defence coupled with meaningful dialogue with Russia."

### **ongoing tensions with Russia and the current crisis in and around Ukraine?**

— As a Russia specialist and former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, I have been deeply engaged in the United States' and in NATO's relations with Russia, in good times and in bad. I believe strongly in NATO's policy of strong defence coupled with meaningful dialogue with Russia, aimed at bringing Moscow back into compliance with the principles of the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Indeed, experience shows that it is only by negotiating from a position of strength, and showing NATO's determination to defend every single member, that we can achieve positive results in our dialogue with Russia.

### **The Cold War ended in 1991. Yet, Russia is still using military force to redefine geographic borders in Ukraine and seems to be adopting a hybrid warfare approach as part of its overall strategy in re-asserting Russian influence. How worried should the Baltic countries be regarding their security and NATO's ability to respond in a Collective Defence situation when non-conventional hybrid tactics may be employed? What can NATO expect from Russia in the short and long terms?**

— Indeed, the high hopes of the 1990s, aimed at building a cooperative security system with Russia as an integral part, have not been fulfilled. Over the past decade we have seen an increasingly assertive and revisionist Russia—willing to change international borders by force. It has illegally annexed Crimea and continues to destabilise eastern Ukraine. In doing so, it has fundamentally torn up the rule book that has stabilised Europe since the end of the Second World War, and trampled upon the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. We cannot rule out the possibility that Russia, with its military build-up and mastery of hybrid warfare, could threaten the security of members of the Alliance, especially those along NATO's eastern flank. NATO's core task is Collective Defence. Our commitment to defend each other, enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, is as strong and as relevant today as ever

before. NATO's response to a newly aggressive Russia has been robust and transparent. Under the Readiness Action Plan launched at the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO has implemented the strongest reinforcement of our Collective Defence since the end of the Cold War. We have tripled the size of the NATO Response Force to 40,000 troops. We have put a 5,000 strong Spearhead Force at its core. Eight small headquarters now operate in the eastern part of our Alliance to facilitate training and reinforcements. We have also increased the number of our exercises, deepened our intelligence sharing and sped up our decision-making to respond to hybrid forms of aggression. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, Allies took additional decisions to bolster our deterrence posture for the long term. They agreed to deploy four multinational battalions to the eastern part of our Alliance—in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These battalions will serve as a deterrent, but will also be capable for combat, if necessary. We are also increasing our presence in the southeast, with a multinational framework brigade in Romania. This is a clear demonstration of Allied solidarity and determination to defend NATO territory against any threat. We will continue to adapt, demonstrating our ability to act quickly to defend our territory and populations.

### **How would you characterize and assess the other major challenges that NATO is confronted with today? How confident are you that NATO is taking the right steps to respond to these challenges, especially in light of new and unconventional threats and the rise of global terror?**

— Today, NATO is confronting the most unpredictable security situation since the Cold War: from a resurgent Russia in the east to the arc of instability and turmoil across much of the Middle East and North Africa. Terrorism also represents an immediate and direct threat to our nations and the international community. In Afghanistan, NATO has long played a key role in the fight against terrorism and we are stepping up our efforts. Through the Global

Coalition against ISIL, every NATO Ally is already in the fight, standing side-by-side with our partners in the region. Our long experience in the Balkans and Afghanistan tells us that an essential ingredient of long-term stability is the strength of local forces and local institutions. That's the reason why NATO is committed to building local capacity, helping our partners provide for their own security. At the Warsaw Summit, we agreed to start training and capacity building in Iraq. NATO has already trained hundreds of Iraqi officers in Jordan to better fight ISIL and we are expanding this programme into Iraq itself. We also agreed to provide direct support to the Coalition. Our advanced AWACS surveillance aircraft now provide valuable information to support the air operations of the Coalition. We are taking the right steps to combat terrorism and build resilience against attacks.

### **From your perspective, what was the priority for the 2016 Warsaw Summit and what were the key take-aways?**

— At the Warsaw Summit, we took important decisions to enhance security in and around Europe, based on two key pillars: protecting our citizens through modern deterrence and defence; and projecting stability beyond our borders. To strengthen our deterrence and defence, we decided to enhance the forward presence of NATO forces in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These defensive battalions will be rotational and multinational, and robust enough to make clear that an attack against one Ally will be met by forces from across the Alliance. In addition, we agreed on a tailored forward presence for our southeastern flank, with a land element built around a multinational framework brigade in Romania. This will be supplemented by steps to strengthen the readiness and interoperability of air and maritime forces in the Black Sea region. We also took steps to enhance our resilience, both within our nations and collectively. This includes modernising our capabilities, improving



# POST-WARSAW . . .

"THE CENTRAL ISSUE TODAY in European security is not transponders, or Incidents at Sea agreements, or military lines of communication or the Cooperative Airspace Initiative, or air safety, or arms control and Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs). The central issue, in my view, is the conflicting visions of European security. Simply put, Russia has, in recent years, been seeking to overturn the rules-based European security system that we have worked so hard to build since the end of World War II. That includes the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1990 Charter of Paris. It seems that Russia wants to turn the clock backwards to a time when big powers decided the fate of smaller nations; when Europe was divided into spheres of influence instead of the system we know and treasure today—a system based on respect for state sovereignty and the freedom of every state to choose its own security arrangements, free from outside interference or intimidation.

"In Ukraine, Russia has violated international law, the Helsinki Final Act, and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. This is not acceptable. We have, therefore, repeatedly urged

Moscow and its proxies to fully implement the Minsk agreements. Given our conflicting visions of European security, we have to be realistic about how much can be achieved through negotiations on arms control and risk reduction measures. But being *realistic* is not the same thing as being *fatalistic*.

"NATO, therefore, will continue to seek meaningful dialogue with Russia and press for a return to the core principles and rules at the heart of our existing Euro-Atlantic security system. We would like to see an engaged Russia that offers innovative ways to implement the Vienna Document, rather than to circumvent it; a Russia that responds positively to the proposals by various NATO Allies to strengthen the Vienna Document; and a Russia that agrees to join a dialogue on rebuilding the conventional arms control regime that respects long-established principles, such as host-nation consent.

"Let me sketch out a brief summary of the proposals NATO Allies are backing to modernize the Vienna Document. We propose:

- Lowering the thresholds for notification and observation of military exercises,

- Closing loopholes that allow nations to avoid notification and observation of exercises, including the snap-exercise loophole,
- Strengthening verification by improving inspections and evaluations and providing additional quotas for all states,
- Bolstering the mechanism to address concerns about unusual military activities,
- Enhancing military-to-military lines of communication,
- Fully elaborating and activating the hazardous incidents notification provision of the Vienna Document.

Implementing steps like these—some of which Russia supported in the past—would move us away from today's tense relations and toward greater predictability, transparency and stability. It would help us to better manage what is likely to remain a competitive relationship over the short and medium term."

ALEXANDER VERSHBOW  
OSCE SECURITY DAYS

(Abridged), 3 October 2016

civil preparedness, and ensuring we have the right mix of military and civilian capabilities to meet evolving security challenges, including hybrid and cyber warfare. To project stability beyond our borders, we committed to provide direct support to the fight against ISIL. NATO AWACS aircraft will provide information to Coalition forces, a clear signal of our resolve to tackle terrorism. We are also stepping up our capacity building efforts and cooperation with regional partners. At Warsaw, we decided to start training and capacity building in Iraq and we will continue training hundreds of Iraqi officers in Jordan. In Warsaw, we also made a historic decision to work more closely with the European Union than ever before. The Joint Declaration, signed by the NATO Secretary General and the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission, identified key areas for expanding our cooperation, including on countering hybrid and cyber threats, fostering the resilience of our partners, coordinating exercises, and

increasing maritime security. Together with the European Union, we can mobilise a much broader range of tools to respond to the challenges we face. Warsaw was a Summit of unity and solidarity, agility and strength. We remain committed to fulfilling our three core tasks: Collective Defence, Crisis Management, and Cooperative Security.

**NATO has been conducting joint operational level training and exercises on Article 5 operations since 2012 in order to adapt to a changed security environment. In your opinion, why are exercises so vital for NATO? What is your outlook for the future in terms of exercises? Which areas require further attention?**

— Exercises are vital for our Alliance because they increase the readiness and flexibility of our forces. They enable our militaries and civilian organisations to test key capabilities and practice working together in demanding crisis situations. In this way, exercises contribute to improving interoperability—the ability of our

forces to operate together. They also provide an opportunity for partner forces to modernise, applying NATO concepts, doctrines and standards. NATO forces have worked together with partners in many challenging parts of the world, including Afghanistan and Kosovo. Training together ensures that our forces can operate together whenever they need to. At the Wales Summit in 2014, NATO leaders made a pledge to increase the focus of exercises on Collective Defence scenarios. We are delivering on this pledge, ensuring more ambitious exercise programmes. National exercises are an important part of this effort. In 2015 alone, NATO and Allies conducted 300 exercises, including NATO's largest and most complex in over a decade, TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2015 in Italy, Portugal and Spain. As cyber-attacks present a clear challenge to the security of the Alliance, we also remain committed to exercising our cyber defence capabilities through exercises.

**JWC provides media simulation support to**



**Clockwise:** Ambassador Vershbow with General Hans-Lothar Domröse during the STEADFAST JAZZ Live Exercise (LIVEX) demonstration, 7 November 2013; troops in front of the NATO flag, Georgia, photos by NATO. AWACS E3A landing on runway at Ämari Air base, Estonia during NATO exercise RAMSTEIN ALLOY, photo by NATO. Article 5 operational level exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE 16 Phase III B opening remarks in Stavanger, Norway, by Commander JWC, Major General Andrzej Reudowicz. Photo by Maj. Stephen Olsen, JWC PAO.



"NATO leaders made a pledge to increase the focus of exercises on Collective Defence scenarios."

**NATO's Annual Crisis Management Exercise (CMX). What is different about CMX?**

— Crisis Management is one of NATO's fundamental security tasks. Our annual crisis management exercise tests our decision-making procedures at Headquarters and in capitals, including with Partners and other bodies that could be involved in a real crisis. This year, our Crisis Management Exercise included a simulated Article 5 Collective Defence response with challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats in the Baltic Sea area, complete with a range of realistic overt and covert military, paramilitary and civilian measures.

**Would you agree that there is now more emphasis in NATO on interagency partnerships, not only with EU and UN but with experts from Nations, academia and industry as well?**

— Cooperative Security is one of NATO's core strengths. This includes cooperation with partner countries and international organisations, but it also means closer cooperation with non-governmental actors. Working together is as important as ever, because the challenges we face—from hybrid warfare to terrorism—are substantial and interlinked. No nation or organisation can tackle them alone, but together we can achieve much more than acting alone.

One example is the Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme—a policy tool that enhances cooperation and dialogue with NATO's Partners, based on scientific research, innovation, and knowledge exchange. The SPS Programme provides funding, expert advice, and support to security-relevant activities jointly developed by NATO Allies and Partner countries. The Alliance also benefits from the experience and expertise of participants in civil society writ large, notably in Kosovo and Afghanistan. A wide range of individuals and groups have provided valuable feedback to NATO-led operations. One area in which we



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The strength of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force was demonstrated during NOBLE JUMP 2015 in Zagan, Poland, between 9 and 18 June 2015. Exercise joint press point photo by SHAPE PAO.

consult particularly closely is on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Over the years, women's rights organisations, human rights advocates, female community leaders, academic institutions and think-tanks have developed a strong expertise on the protection of women against violence and their rights, and the positive role women can play to prevent and resolve conflicts. We benefit from regular engagement with civil society—both at the level of policy and its implementation. Finally, our close support and partnership with industry have enabled NATO to ensure Euro-Atlantic security for over six decades. Every weapon, every plane and ship, every guidance system and service contract—everything in short that makes up our armed forces—is developed, designed and made by and with industry. There would be no NATO, no military, no security, without our partners in industry. Our continued collaboration is vital for national and international security. So yes, there is a strong emphasis in NATO on constructive partnership—and we are grateful to our counterparts

in civil society, in academia, in think tanks, and in industry, for being part of the NATO community, helping us adapt to a challenging security environment.

**In your view, what drives NATO's military Transformation? And what would you define as NATO's biggest strength?**

— NATO's military transformation is driven by the evolving threats and challenges we face—to the east and to the south. Over the past two years, the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) has been the basis for strengthening our deterrence and defence posture, putting in place what we need to protect our Allies from any attack from any direction. Through the RAP, we have established a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force that is operational and able to move within a matter of days. We are also running around-the-clock assurance measures, with more planes in the air, ships at sea and boots on the ground in and around our eastern Allies. Everything we are doing has a 360-degree scope. We do not have the luxury of choosing between different challenges. But

it is important to note that all of our measures are defensive in nature, proportionate and in line with our international obligations. Our greatest strength is our unity. All Allies contribute to our security through their armed forces, capabilities and military equipment, from satellites to submarines. In return for this commitment, every Ally receives the support of 27 other countries. Each ally knows that if attacked, it will not stand alone—for all 28 Allies, that is a commitment worth investing in. We are stronger together than we could ever be apart.

**We would be very pleased to receive your suggestions for reading, both fiction and non-fiction; would you be able to recommend any books, and who are your favorite writers?**

— As I depart NATO after four and one-half very busy years, I hope to have more time for reading about Russia. Top of my list is Svetlana Aleksievich's "Secondhand Time" and Anne Garrels' "Putin Country". For pleasure, I hope to read recent novels by Alan Furst, Joseph Kanon and Ian McEwan.

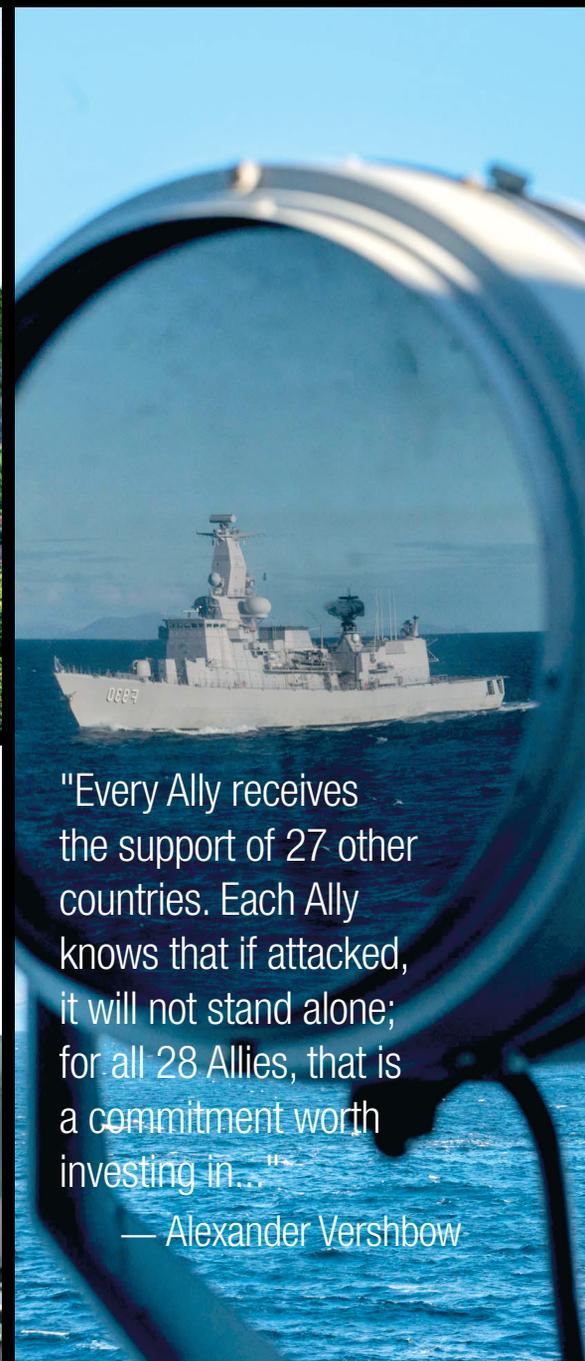
**Ambassador Vershbow, you handed over to Ms Rose Gottemoeller on 17 October 2016. What will you miss the most?**

— While I will never forget the accomplishments of the Alliance over the last four and half years, what I will miss most are the wonderful friendships my wife, Lisa, and I have made with colleagues from NATO Allies and partners from around the world, including EU officials, journalists, scholars, and think-tankers. The common values and shared interests that unite this Alliance have certainly been key to the unity of purpose that underpins our work. But it is the human qualities of our people that represent NATO's secret weapon. Every day at NATO headquarters, it's been my privilege to work with so many dedicated men and women, civilian and military, who form NATO's superb International Staff and International Military Staff. Thanks to their expertise and dedication, and the commitment of our Member Nations, we have been able to ensure that the Alliance is strong and that Europe is safe. ✦

*This interview was conducted on October 24, 2016*



Photos by NATO and MARCOM



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— Alexander Vershbow