

Final Report – 57th General Assembly of the Atlantic Treaty Association

Tirana, 14 – 16 November 2011

Rapporteur: Julie Lindhout, Vice-President, ATA, President, Atlantic Council of Canada

Mr. President, your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

The theme of this ATA Assembly Program was “Tackling new Security challenges with Partners”, and that theme was both demonstrated and discussed.

It was, undoubtedly, a challenge for a small organization like the Atlantic Council of Albania to put on a major assembly for a large number of national and international participants. However, in partnership with ATA Secretary General, Troels Frøling and his staff, and two Canadian interns, President, Dr. Arian Starova, and Executive Secretary, Kristaq Birbo, and their volunteer staff rose to the challenge magnificently and presented a very rich program which has given us much food for thought.

From Dr. Starova’s opening remarks right through to the closing speech by the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Dr. Sali Berisha, we were reminded of the intense security challenges that face us in our North Atlantic world, from physical and cyber threats, suppression of human rights and freedoms, through natural disasters, to financial and economic challenges. For any country to face this challenges alone would be impossible, but in partnership with others who share our values and/or our interests, the tasks may become more manageable.

This is something that is well understood by the members, partners and observers of one of the world’s most successful alliances who are represented at this gathering.

One of the most difficult challenges that we face is the constantly changing security environment of the past decades, which means that NATO must continually adjust how it does business and with whom.

Who would have foreseen in the mid 1980s the fall of the Berlin Wall and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, followed, after the first euphoria, by serious difficulties in some of the former Yugoslav and other states that have required the assistance of NATO to resolve.

That involvement first started people talking about “out-of-area” operations. But who would have foreseen how far “out of area” NATO would be going after 9/11 and continuing with counter piracy operations and disaster relief.

Even the so-called “Arab Spring” was a total surprise, and the way it played out in Libya required a significant intervention by NATO, which likely prevented a much greater loss of life than has occurred to this point. We are now at a stage where these challenges are piling on top of one another, with few of them actually reaching a final resolution in the near future.

There are several key messages that were presented again and again during the course of the Assembly. Perhaps the most obvious one is that while there is so much still to be done about the challenges already identified, no one knows what might be around the corner.

There is still much to be done to continue democratic and economic development in some of the new NATO member countries and in the Partner countries. Afghanistan must not be abandoned, Iraq needs to be strengthened, the Arab Spring is only the beginning of change in the countries affected, and it is not all clear if and how NATO can help in what needs to be done.

We repeatedly heard the admonition that peace cannot be achieved militarily, even though we must have effective military capability to create the conditions that will support the next steps for lasting peace. It requires a political process to transition from military activities to development activities and the building of a civil society. The key element of such a civil society is good governance. People must be able to have trust and confidence that their government will provide economic and social security and support the rule of law. That will give them the hope to build a future. This transition is in itself a huge challenge.

Overlay all this with the threats and uncertainty of cyber attacks, and a serious financial crisis, and the situation becomes very discouraging.

However, several people also pointed out that these challenges present new opportunities to do things differently. There is a better understanding among the existing and potential partners that there needs to be more collaboration and less competition.

We heard such terms as “smart defence.” I’m not too enamoured of the term because it suggests that what we have been doing all these years was not very smart, but be that as it may. We also heard of “pooling and sharing”. There is a recognition that this needs to happen, but how it is to happen still needs to be worked out in most instances.

We were told that NATO needs to develop stronger partnerships with the EU, UN, and AU; and a stronger working relationship with Russia and with moderate Arab countries, to name only a few of the necessary initiatives. Included in this, is the need to develop more strategies for civil/military cooperation and more consideration of regional issues in addition to focused country approaches.

Finally, this morning we looked at how the ATA and other NGOs can help to promote the values of Atlanticism and we were left with the following messages:

- NATO’s ability to survive has been the result of its ability to adapt.
- Not all democracies are liberal democracies, and it behooves the liberal democracies to be more vocal about the values of liberal democracy.

- As a Canadian, I was both flattered and amused by the recommendation to be more Canadian. We are not used to promoting ourselves. We just act.
- We need to develop a strong master text about our Atlantic beliefs which recognizes that Atlanticism is broader than NATO.
- In spite of disappointments and fears, support for NATO is high, although support for specific NATO missions may not be high enough.
- There is a role for the ATA members to make our publics feel that they have a stake in promoting Atlantic values and explaining how NATO operations fit into both these values and into NATO's core purpose of collaborative defence.
- The relationship with Russia continues to be a complicating factor which evokes different points of view in individual NATO countries and, therefore, needs to be addressed differently by and in the different countries.
- We need to analyze carefully our own publics to determine where the information and attitudinal gaps are in order to plan an effective communication strategy.

It was a pleasure to have Prime Minister Berisha address us. He has never hesitated to express his support for NATO and for the ATA. I remember that he traveled all the way to Canada in 2007 to address the ATA Assembly in Ottawa. Founding and long-term members may take NATO for granted, and so it is important for us to hear what NATO means to new and aspirant members.

In closing, I would like to remind us of Prime Minister Berisha's statement that surviving is different from building a future and that NATO has helped different countries to move from simply surviving to building a future. That is significant!! It should inspire us to go home and work harder than ever on our mandates to inform our publics about NATO and the transatlantic values that bind us together.