

Allies urged to boost defence budgets, toughen response to Russia

The Hague, 24 November 2014 – NATO nations must boost defence spending to confront security challenges near Europe and to deal with Russia from a position of strength, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Monday in his first policy address to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

NATO PA President Hugh Bayley called for the reversal of spending cuts, in line with commitments made by leaders at NATO's summit in Wales in September, while Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte underlined the need to reassure taxpayers that their money is wisely spent.

“Over the last five years, Russia increased its spending by 50 percent, and it plans further increases. At the same time, total NATO defence spending fell by 20 percent, and some nations are cutting further,” Stoltenberg said during the Assembly's 60th Annual Session in the Netherlands.

“In more peaceful times, it was right to reduce defence spending. But we do not live in peaceful times,” he said, noting cut backs on military exercises, equipment maintenance and investment.

Over the three-day session in The Hague, parliamentarians, ministers and experts debated the Ukraine conflict and Russia's ambitions, support for Afghanistan as NATO-led combat troops leave, Islamist terrorism in Iraq and Syria and the threats of cyber attacks and missile proliferation.

“Commitments cannot be implemented without adequate resources. At a time of austerity, talking about defence spending is difficult but we cannot duck the issue,” Bayley warned. NATO, he said, has “sent the wrong signals to Russia” by cutting spending since the Russia-Georgia war in 2008.

In a letter to the assembly, President Petro Poroshenko appealed for “urgent and effective support from our partners in the Alliance,” to protect European security from the “illegal actions of Russia”.

Stoltenberg underscored that NATO is now flying five times more air missions than at the start of the year, that it is sending more ships to the Baltic and Black seas and that its troop presence on the territories of eastern Allies will be increased on a rotational basis.

Acknowledging the commitment to step up defence spending, Rutte said that this also “imposes a duty on us, a duty to show our taxpayers that their money is being spent smartly and effectively, not only when it comes to national defence budgets but to NATO's budget too.”

The United States, the United Kingdom, Greece and Estonia are the only nations in the 28-member Alliance to spend at least the target two percent of gross domestic product on

defence. Russia's near neighbours Lithuania and Latvia have been stepping up spending.

A former secretary general of NATO, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, also called for cost-sharing to be improved within the Alliance. "Let's be as inventive as possible" on ways to do that, he said.

The Deputy Secretary General of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development told deputies that defence spending can promote economic growth, and that countries able to might consider doing more. The OECD predicts modest global growth of 3.3 percent in 2014.