

Remarks Before the Rome Atlantic Forum

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Mr Froling, Mr. Lucioli, ADM Callini, ADM. Sanfelice Di Monteforte, colleagues, good morning to you all.

Yesterday, I left my family and traveled thousands of miles from home to come here to Rome. I did this so that I could meet you, the future leaders of Europe, and tell you that when you take your place in the halls of power, you must not fail a crucial test of your leadership. That test is how successful you will be in keeping the NATO Alliance strong, after you inherit it from your successors.

As leaders, you will take ownership of an Alliance that has survived both war and peace. It is rare for an Alliance to survive in peacetime, because it is the threat of attack that keeps an Alliance together. But NATO has defied the odds by keeping pace with the times so that its relevance has never faded as the transatlantic community has evolved from a time of Cold War to a time of terrorism.

NATO remains standing because its leaders recognized that even without an imminent threat at our door, we should not throw away what took fifty years to build – an integrated defense establishment built upon a strong foundation of shared values and a sense of community that was worth protecting. Also, the euphoria of peace which accompanied the end of the Cold War was proved to be short-lived; the conflicts of the 1990s confirmed NATO's relevance. Conflict from the Balkan Wars to Afghanistan and Darfur have shown us that the wolf is never far from the door and we must never let our guard down.

Keeping the Alliance strong and relevant is a hard, frustrating task that is not for the weak or the cynical. One's work is never done, there will never come a time when you can rest on your oars and look back at a race won, or a job completed. Once you take your eyes off the Alliance, take it for granted, assume someone else will do the job, ignore it--then deterioration

will set in, the dry rot of bureaucracy, of complacency, of stasis. It will not be apparent at first that the structure is rotting from the inside, termites at work. But once a crisis comes, and our publics turn to the Alliance for action -- and instead they see a structure that has turned to dust, that has come crashing down, then the evidence is there for all to see that the leaders of the Alliance were not doing their job, and at the hour of need, the Alliance was not ready. At that point, you will have failed your people, who put their confidence in you that they would be protected, and that the Alliance would be ready. That failure is on your head.

You might say to me that the failure does not belong to you, to your country, or to your government, but the failure is at NATO HQ, or with the NATO militaries, or is the fault of the big Allies. But what you, the young leaders of Europe must understand, is that the Alliance is YOU, it is your country, and it is your military. NATO itself is just a Treaty, it is a bureaucratic structure in Brussels, and it is a military structure in Mons and in Norfolk. But those structures are just empty vessels, it is YOU and YOUR FORCES which fill those vessels, and it is YOUR POLITICAL WILL that give life to those structures. If those structures are not ready when they are needed, it is not their fault, it is your fault. Do not blame the wine bottle if it is empty, it is empty because you put nothing in. If NATO fails, we all fail, in Rome as in Washington.

Some of you may scoff and ask why is NATO worth your effort in these days, why should you risk your political future keeping the Alliance strong when it wins you no votes at home and no position in the cabinet. I would respond to you that you have no choice as a responsible leader of people who elect you to protect them. For without NATO, you are on your own as a nation, facing whatever nasty surprise is out there, by yourself. There is no strength without Allies by your side. What may look like simplicity in your affairs by acting alone is actually a thin façade of weakness that will be exposed at the hour of crisis.

Another reason for you to hold the Alliance close is that it is capable of doing the job you ask it to do. I have spent much of my adult life helping to put together coalitions, from the Gulf War, to Somalia, to the Balkans, to Afghanistan, Iraq and Darfur. As future European leaders, you need to know that it is very hard to put together an international military coalition that is capable of quickly responding to a crisis, like Southern Lebanon. It is even harder to have them do the right things on the ground and to keep them

there month after month. NATO is the only organization that can plan for, organize and deploy its member's forces to take on a full range of missions, from peacekeeping to high intensity combat. If you don't believe me, look at the range of operations NATO is doing today, from peacekeeping in the Balkans to intense combat in southern Afghanistan.

I urge you to understand, too, that such a capability can disappear in an instant through political neglect.

So, for those of you who are willing to devote some of your leadership time to keeping the Alliance strong, what should you do? First, your efforts should start at home. As I said earlier, it is the nations that provide the military forces and the political will that give NATO its muscle and its direction. Therefore, it is critical that Allies devote the time and attention to their national militaries to ensure they meet NATO standards, are capable, deployable and sustainable in the field.

That is easy for me to say. As young politicians and leaders, you know that defense spending and political attention paid to the military are not as popular as attention paid to social programs or to other parts of political life. Ensuring an adequate defense has been a political problem for democracies for generations. But we know the lessons, too, of governments that failed their people by not exercising the leadership to do the sometimes unpopular thing, and that is to make sure defense is taken care of politically and in the budgets. You must not fail that test. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to build an adequate defense structure after the threat has made itself known...it is too late, and the enemy is set upon you.

Therefore, make sure you pay attention to defense, not just in terms of money, but in ensuring the money is spent wisely. Expect and plan for surprise, have forces that are nimble so that they can react well to the unexpected. Know, too, that not all missions are purely military, but will be integrated with civilian agencies and NGOs as well. We see that every day in Afghanistan. Have forces that are deployable—Alliance forces should not be structured to fight in their homelands but many miles away to keep the enemy from your doorstep. These forces should be sustainable in the field too--many of our future missions may not end as soon as we would want them to, and nations must have a depth in their available forces that allows for force rotations to sustain a NATO presence.

The second place for young leaders to focus is at NATO itself. You must lead the Alliance. You do that by ensuring your best diplomats go to NATO HQ, that your best officers go to the military commands. And they must all be vocal and active, helping to keep the Alliance vibrant and forward looking, shaping where the Alliance is going and what the Alliance is doing. And especially, your diplomats must be skillful at helping the Alliance achieve consensus, identifying those areas where the Alliance must take action and bringing along Allies that lack confidence or who are captured by petty politics at home and play them out at NATO. Finally, keep NATO reform-minded, and not complacent. NATO military transformation has just begun...and, in fact, never really ends. At the November NATO Summit in Riga, heads of state and government will agree on further measures that will move transformation along. These Summit items are important to implement at NATO as well as at home, and you should seize and make your own such transformation agendas.

Some of you may say that the time of NATO has passed, that the EU should take the fore on most things, putting NATO in the cupboard for a big emergency. It may be whispered in your ear that for a young politician, the action is at the EU, not at NATO.

This perception is wrong and shows a misunderstanding of the nature of both organizations. The European Union brings to a crisis a comparative advantage over NATO in expertise in rebuilding civil society, including policing and funding to repair the infrastructure of a nation devastated by conflict. It also brings a political legitimacy that confirms to all the parties the desire by the West to bring an end to a conflict.

NATO's advantage comes in a couple of areas. First, the North Atlantic Council brings together political representatives from both sides of the Atlantic to take action on problems that pose a threat to the Atlantic community. Once action is decided by the political authorities, NATO's integrated military structure -- its commands and its military leadership -- go to the nations and generate those forces required to deploy quickly wherever in the globe the Alliance wants them to go. With the full operational capability of the NATO Response Force, such deployments can happen in days. The EU military forces are limited to the peacekeeping-oriented Petersberg tasks, are small in number and are not designed for intense combat or a sustained, large-scale mission.

It should be obvious that the EU and NATO should work closely together during a crisis, both bringing to the fight the comparative advantage of each. With budgets so small, this is not a time for both organizations to work separately, in isolation from each other. We cannot afford the inefficiencies and waste, and we cannot afford to undercut each other because it is the same pool of forces that are being stretched to fulfill the desires of two military masters!

As Europe's future leaders, fixing the relationship between the EU and NATO is at the top of your agenda. It is not a case of one organization being better than the other, we need both organizations and we need both to cooperate!

Let me close by saying how lucky you are to be young and living in such interesting times. You have great futures stretching before you, and you should do daring things while you are young. But know too that much is expected from you and many will depend on you to make the right decisions on their behalf. But if you hold fast to those things that have served us well down the years, such as NATO, you will have familiar guideposts to help you find your way.