



NATO Parliamentary Assembly

SUB-COMMITTEE ON  
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE (CDS DG)

SUB-COMMITTEE ON  
TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS (PCTR)

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## **MISSION REPORT**

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**PHILADELPHIA AND CARLISLE,  
UNITED STATES**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

1. The approach of the new US Administration towards a number of international hotspots is still developing and the United States remains firmly committed to the Alliance, a delegation of lawmakers from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly heard from experts during a 18-21 September visit to Philadelphia and Carlisle, Pennsylvania.
2. Briefings primarily focused on Russia, the conflict in Syria, and the situation in the Gulf, as well as the North Korean crisis. While the independent experts who briefed the delegation held different, and sometimes conflicting views, especially regarding the Syrian crisis, they generally felt that US policy towards these regions has yet to be clearly defined. However, while the rhetoric of President Donald Trump differs notably from that of his predecessors, there is also considerable continuity in many areas of US foreign and security policy, the delegation heard.
3. One expert noted that the US Administration is torn between its reluctance to expand international engagements and its willingness to act decisively and resolutely. In the meantime, other powers, such as Russia and China, are attempting to carve out areas of influence where the United States appears to have withdrawn from its leadership role. Several independent experts also called upon US allies to offer coherent policies themselves rather than to content themselves with being mere spectators of and commentators on the evolution of the US foreign policy.
4. The delegation of two Assembly Sub-Committees – the Sub-Committee on Democratic Governance (CSDSG) and the Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Relations (PCTR) – met with independent experts in Philadelphia and visited the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College in Carlisle. The visit complemented the array of briefings that NATO PA delegations obtain during the visits to Washington, D.C. NATO Parliamentarians also visited the Delaware Valley Intelligence Center of the Philadelphia Police Department. The delegation consisted of 26 legislators from ten NATO members and two NATO partners, and was led by CSDSG Chairman Lord Jopling (United Kingdom) and PCTR Chairman Øyvind Halleraker (Norway).

## II. US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

5. On Russia, US experts noted that it was “too big to ignore”. Russia has *de facto* been at political war with NATO and the EU for at least a decade, but it took time for the West to realise it, not least because Russia’s influence operations were largely covert. These influence operations were originally focused on Russia’s neighbours, but in recent years the Kremlin has also been trying to influence processes in Western countries as well.
6. The Euro-Atlantic community needs to have some working relations with Russia, even though earlier attempts to engage had not worked because of the entrenched imperatives that drive Russian politics. As this is unlikely to change in the near future, NATO member countries need to remain united and firm against any Russian attempts to undermine the Alliance. Moreover, while member states’ defence budgets grow, the Alliance needs to focus on improving force readiness, which can be achieved, for example, through joint training. This will not only demonstrate NATO’s ability to protect Allies but will also send a strong signal to Russia, as well as to NATO partners. One expert suggested that Allies should clearly identify Russia as a competitor and develop a shared perspective of the Russian threat. He warned against accommodating Russia’s demand to halt NATO and the EU enlargement because that would contradict the values of the Alliance and the West.
7. One expert noted that Russia is not just targeting NATO, but also the EU. Russia’s preferred model is the “Concert of Europe”, based on the interplay among major European powers. The European integration project does not fit with this model. Europe has been increasingly aware of the Russian threat, particularly since the aggression against Ukraine. The EU’s response has been

unexpectedly robust. In addition to sanctions, the EU has also stepped up its efforts to increase energy independence and, especially through the so-called “Third Energy Package”, to undermine Russia’s ability to use its energy resources as a political weapon.

### III. THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MENA REGION

8. The new US Administration seems to prioritise re-forging ties with its traditional allies in the MENA region and taking a harder stance on Iran, the delegation heard. President Donald Trump and a significant part of the US Congress view the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) very critically and want to abandon it. The delegation heard very different views on this issue. Some experts argued that the nuclear deal would empower Iran and provide the regime in Tehran with significant financial assets. They warned that in ten years the international community will face the same problem with Iran as with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK – North Korea) if the JCPOA was implemented. In contrast, other speakers advised against abandoning the deal. They commented that failure to implement the JCPOA would be a gift to hardliners in Iran and would not impede Iran’s ability to acquire nuclear weapons.

9. This position of the Trump Administration has encouraged Saudi Arabia to take a more assertive stance in the region. Following the consolidation of power domestically, the Saudi leadership is investing more in proxy wars with Iran. It has also started a confrontation with Qatar for its alleged pro-Iranian stance. One expert noted that a more assertive Saudi Arabia might bring short-term gains for the US interests, but there could be negative implications in the long term, as Saudi Arabia continues to promote the dissemination of Wahabi ideology. Another speaker pointed out that the split within the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) weakens the US position in the region, since the GCC has been instrumental in helping to project US power in the Gulf.

10. Experts warned that the imminent military defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq will not bring stability to the region. Others argued that Daesh no longer poses a real threat, and that the West should focus on containing Iran and its clients. While NATO Allies are still struggling to find common ground about Syria, Russia and Iran have strengthened the Assad regime. Iran has increased its influence even in Sunni-majority areas liberated from Daesh. One speaker suggested that the Assad regime is willing to use the most brutal strategy to defeat its enemies in order to deter any future challenge to the regime. The exodus of millions of Syrians and the influx of Shia fighters has also markedly increased the share of the Alawites in Syria – possibly now making up some 30% of the population. One participant viewed diplomatic efforts to find a political solution in Syria more optimistically and argued that negotiations, including the Astana and Geneva processes, are making progress. The so-called de-escalation zones also work and Syrian refugees are seeking shelter there, the delegation heard.

11. Sectarian differences are becoming more prominent across the region, experts said. In Iraq, the Sunni minority still feels disenfranchised. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is increasing its influence on the government and its synergy with the Lebanese armed forces. There is an increased risk of a sectarian proxy conflict within Lebanon, experts warned.

12. The Kurdish question in Iraq and Syria complicates the general picture. NATO Allies Turkey and the United States have very different positions with regard to the role of Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). Some experts argued that Kurdish forces are the most effective US allies in the fight against Daesh or, as one independent expert suggested the “silver bullet” in this struggle. On the other hand, US experts were worried about potential implications of the announced Kurdish independence referendum and stressed the need to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq. Turkish members of the delegation emphasised that Turkey is one of the strongest advocates of the territorial integrity of Iraq. They warned that a referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan is a grave mistake as it would undermine Iraq’s territorial integrity and destabilise the region.

13. Overall, however, one expert noted that the strategic importance of the Middle East is decreasing, not least due to the energy revolution that renders Middle Eastern oil and gas resources less important. He argued that strategic alliances in the region will likely be replaced by ad hoc coalitions.

14. The delegates also discussed the problem of homegrown terrorism and extremism in the West. Speakers representing moderate US and British Muslim organisations regretted that their religion is being misused by radicals and that in some mosques in the West believers are being brainwashed by hateful sermons. They stressed the need to protect young Muslims from hateful ideology. They also suggested starting by identifying the problem clearly and replacing the elusive term “Countering Violent Extremism” with “Countering Violent Islamism”. To address the problem of homegrown terrorism, the ideology itself must be targeted, because many violent jihadists start as non-violent ones, the delegation heard. Another expert argued that the threat of terrorism is overestimated in Western societies – only 3% of terrorist attacks take place in Western countries. The speaker suggested that the industrialised countries could do more to foster socio-economic development in the developing world to reduce the space for extremist groups’ activities.

#### **IV. THE SITUATION IN EAST ASIA**

15. The challenge posed by the DPRK, described as the “Cold War fossil” by one speaker, was another focus of the briefings. Experts suggested that the North Korean regime wants to perpetuate its control over the country and considers nuclear weapons as the regime’s survival strategy. The most feasible approach at this stage, it was argued, is to seek an arrangement where North Korea agreed to limitations and international inspections of its nuclear programme in exchange for conditional assurances to not use force against the regime. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) probably has the most leverage over North Korea, and its support for the DPRK has weakened significantly. However, as “China and the U.S. have very different bad case scenarios it seems unlikely that the PRC will help solve the North Korean issue”, one expert suggested. For China, the risk of war on the neighbouring Korean peninsula and of the emergence of a unified pro-American Korea outweighs the dangers of the current standoff, the delegation heard.

16. Other speakers maintained that the current US Administration lacks a clear Asia-Pacific strategy, while China itself has been vigorously pursuing its “Belt and Road” initiative. China’s rise is triggering a power transition vis-à-vis the United States, and this change will affect the entire international system, the delegates were told during the visit.

17. Delegates were warned not to underestimate the risks stemming from other potential hotspots, including Taiwan and the South and East China Seas. One speaker suggested that developments in the South China Sea, and notably the PRC building-up military facilities on the Fiery Cross, Mischief and Subi Reefs in the Spratly Islands, are an important issue that does not get sufficient international attention. He commented that these efforts represent a challenge to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Another expert commented that China is “not going to turn the South China Sea into a South China lake”. He noted that China’s rise has triggered a power transition between China and the United States, which is going to affect international relations in the future. This power transition has been going on for 40 years and is now reaching its second stage, manifested most visibly in an increasing assertiveness of the PRC vis-à-vis other actors. The “Belt and Road” initiative is another visible sign of China’s increasing international engagement, although this programme is not underpinned by a coherent, articulated overall foreign policy, the expert said.

18. One speaker discussed the situation in Afghanistan, which is gradually deteriorating. The Taliban rejects political accommodation, and the fate of Afghanistan will be decided on a battlefield, he argued. He also noted that this US Administration is likely to take a harder stance on Pakistan, but he doubted if pressure on Pakistan could bring the desired results. Pakistan remains

a key partner for the United States and NATO as it provides the only reliable land access to Afghanistan.

## **V. OTHER ISSUES**

19. NATO Parliamentarians also visited the Delaware Valley Intelligence Center (DVIC) of the Philadelphia Police Department. The DVIC is one of a number of intelligence fusion centres created across the United States after the 9/11 attacks and designed to improve the response to criminal, terrorist and homeland security threats. The DVIC produces intelligence analysis for both law enforcement and non-law enforcement personnel and is capable of providing information in real-time to its key partners throughout the United States. The DVIC serves as the hub that received, analyses and distributes crime-, terrorist- and emergency-related information among relevant public and private institutions in the Delaware valley, an area that unites parts of four US states and is home to some 7 million people. Major concerns include the crime rate (especially narcotics) as well as the fact that Philadelphia's numerous historic sites might be a target for terrorists.

20. DVIC officers particularly value partnerships with the private sector, which owns about 85% of Philadelphia's infrastructure and whose assets are of critical importance in order for law enforcement to have a full operational picture. DVIC officers informed the delegates that the improved intelligence analysis and sharing brought tangible positive results. Delegates also visited DVIC's state-of-the-art Real Time Crime Center (RTCC), an innovative unit that provides real time analytical and investigative support to the Philadelphia Police Department.

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