Secretary General touts NATO's benefits at joint session of Congress

U.S. Department of Defense

WASHINGTON — The North Atlantic Treaty Organization not only is the longest-lived alliance in history, but also is the most successful, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told a joint session of the U.S. Congress here today.

Stoltenberg, whose term as NATO's civilian leader was extended through 2022, marked 70 years of the defensive alliance. The Washington Treaty, which established the alliance, was signed April 4, 1949.

The secretary general's most repeated message in his address was "It's good to have friends." He was interrupted many times by applause from the members of Congress, members of the Cabinet and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He received many standing ovations during his speech.

Stoltenberg detailed the history of the alliance and the changes it has made to stay strong and relevant for 70 years. The alliance was formed in response to the millions of deaths in two world wars and the increasing danger the Soviet Union posed in 1949.

The 12 nations that formed NATO did so "with a clear purpose: to preserve peace and to safeguard freedom, with an ironclad commitment by all members of the alliance to protect each other," he said. "They made a solemn promise: One for all, and all for one."

Unprecedented Period of Peace

And it has worked. In 70 years, through the waxing and waning of Soviet might, peace has been preserved and freedom maintained, Stoltenberg said. "The Cold War ended without a shot being fired in Europe, and we have experienced an unprecedented period of peace," the secretary general added.

And this is in the best interests of all allies, on both sides of the Atlantic, he said.

"Ever since the founding of our alliance in 1949, every Congress, every American president, your men and women in uniform, and the people of the United States of America, have been staunch supporters of NATO," Stoltenberg said. "America has been the backbone of our alliance. It has been fundamental to European security and for our freedom. We would not have the peaceful and prosperous Europe we see today without the sacrifice and commitment of the United States. For your enduring support, I thank you all today."

NATO has been good for Europe, but it has also been good for the United States. "The strength of a nation is not only measured by the size of its economy or the number of its soldiers, but also by the number of its friends," he said.

The United States is the preferred ally in the world, Stoltenberg said, adding that no other nation could have put together the defeat-ISIS coalition. It all started in 1949 with NATO, he said.

"Through NATO, the United States has more friends and allies than any other power," Stoltenberg said. "This has made the United States stronger, safer, and more secure."

Stoltenberg turned to Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pekosi — who were seated behind him as he faced the House chamber to deliver his address — and said, "Madam Speaker, Mr. Vice President, it's good to have friends."

But NATO is not a monolithic organization like the former Warsaw Pact that slavishly agreed with anything proposed by the apparatchik in Moscow, Stoltenberg said.

"We are an alliance of many different nations, with different geography, history and political parties," he said. "This is democracy. Open discussion and different views are not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength."

There are disagreements among the NATO allies, he acknowledged. "The strength of NATO is that despite our differences, we have always been able to unite around our core task: to defend each other, protect each other, and to keep our people safe," he said. "We have overcome our disagreements in the past, and we must overcome our differences now, because we will need our alliance even more in the future."

Great Power Competition

Russia and China are great power competitors. The struggle against terrorism is a generational fight, he said. "We have only just seen the beginning of the threats in cyber space," the secretary general added.

The alliance is being more assertive with Russia, Stoltenberg said, responded to Russia provocations with the largest reinforcement of collective defense in decades.

"For the first time, we have combat-ready troops deployed in the east of our alliance," he said. "We have increased the readiness of our forces, tripled the size of the NATO Response Force, modernized our command structure, bolstered our cyber defenses, and we have stepped up support for our close partners, Georgia and Ukraine, sovereign nations with the sovereign right to choose their own path."

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