

Mr. Chief Executive, generals,

ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the first Air-to-Air Refuelling Conference in Europe. Addressing you all as opening speaker for this event, is truly an honour. The efforts of the European Defence Agency and of all the other partners, be it from NATO, EU, national Defences or other organizations, to bring about this conference are commendable and warmly appreciated. I would like to sincerely thank all of the people involved in organizing today's event.

Today will definitely involve many different speeches from many different viewpoints, which will lead to interesting discussions on the past, present and future of Air-to-Air refuelling capabilities in Europe and our coalitions. I believe that this is a very good thing. As we have seen so far, the challenge of providing our European militaries with the necessary Air-to-Air Refuelling-capabilities is one that will have to be continuously addressed by a very large group of focused and talented people and organizations. Not only from different countries but also from different professional, technical and cultural backgrounds. It is a combined, multinational and multilateral effort and this conference provides us with an opportunity: we can take stock of the steps we have taken so far and we can define the road ahead.

Moreover, we will take the time to discuss how Air-to-Air Refuelling needs and requirements, technologies and capabilities will evolve in the next decades. And we will jointly develop, not in the least for today's and tomorrow's policy-makers, a better understanding of our future

challenges.

Before delving into the recent political milestones with regards to Air-to-Air Refuelling; allow me to take a few moments to assess the recent shifts in global and regional security, as a wider frame of reference to the importance of our efforts on this combined Air-to-Air Refuelling.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, the implosion of the Soviet Union and the assumed definitive victory of democracy and freedom, many European countries, including my own country Belgium, cashed in on the “peace dividend”, as it is called, by decreasing defence spending and shrinking their armed forces and capabilities.

Much has changed in the past ten years. Our continent, although at peace, is surrounded by a periphery of chaos. Today, it is clear that our security and prosperity are no longer automatically guaranteed, and that defending them requires continuous and combined efforts from our populations, our governments, our law enforcement and, of course, our armed forces.

The world is becoming more complex and more unpredictable by the day. Our eastern neighbour is increasingly asserting itself, from the latest frozen conflict in Ukraine including the illegal annexation of Crimea, over its intervention in Syria to the myriad hybrid actions within and against NATO and EU member states. The Arab Spring has led to a further deterioration of the security environment to the South and the South-East of Europe. These regions, encompassing Northern Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle-East, are

according to the Fragile States Index, home to many of the world's most fragile and failed states and their instability is facilitating illegal trafficking, insurgencies, mass migration and worldwide terrorism. In the meantime, much of the world's attention, including the United States', is shifting to the Pacific Ocean and Eastern Asia, where we see both the threat posed by a rogue state and the emergence of China, as well as a struggle for economic domination that may spill over into other domains, not in the least security and defence. Additionally, the substantial melting of polar ice and increasingly accessible natural resources and shipping routes, are turning the Arctic region into an area of interest for all key players.

Clearly, there are many powerful drivers for the growing need for European countries to reinvest in their defence capabilities and to deploy these to counter the trends of destabilization around us. We need to do more, we need to do better and we need to do so together. As countries, but also across organisations.

It is critical that NATO and EU cooperate, avoid duplication and reinforce each other's efforts. Moreover, there is a paramount, critical necessity, a capability gap, for strategic "enablers" like reconnaissance drones and ISR, transport aircraft and air-to-air refuelling tankers. These enablers are indispensable for the strategic autonomy of European countries to act in defence of their populations, values and interests.

Over the past years, we have seen the planting of many initiatives. Both individually on the national or organizational level or jointly, through existing or new multinational and multilateral frameworks.

NATO is in full transformation from post-cold war hibernation towards a more agile and ready versatility commensurate with the current and future environment.

Within the European Union, member states have realized that they need to assume more responsibility and develop additional military capabilities. They, together with the Commission and the EDA, have launched different initiatives including the Permanent Structured Cooperation, PESCO, that has the ability and the potential to become a gamechanger; but in my opinion, everything, everything will depend on the actual projects, which are member states driven.

Defence cooperation in Europe has been largely driven by bottom-up approaches, when states decide that they better join forces with others to do things together. And for this, trust is essential.

On the national level, I can assure you that I am convinced that Belgium must step up its defence spending, which has in recent years fallen below 1% of GDP. Through our Strategic Vision for the future of Belgian armed forces by 2030, this government has committed to bringing Belgium's defence effort back to the average of the non-nuclear European NATO Allies. This is a first step.

This regeneration of our defence capabilities is underpinned by several key principles: firstly, the ambition to develop significantly more capable armed forces. Our total force will be younger and better equipped. And they will be able to focus on their core military tasks as we will externalize non-military and non-essential activities.

Secondly, we will dedicate considerable resources to the acquisition of military materiel: our government has agreed to invest 9.4 billion euros and, for the first time in our history, our parliament has voted a multi-annual military program law, anchoring the budgetary means to be devoted to these investment plans.

All reinvestment contracts for major equipment are still scheduled to be signed this year. This includes the replacement of fighter jets, a new generation of naval assets (both mine-countermeasures vessels and multi-purpose frigates), medium altitude long endurance UAV systems, and the complete renewal of the major equipment for the motorized land forces.

In doing this, we aim at collaborating closely with key partners towards long-term strategic partnerships. Our ambition reaches even further: we also aim at achieving synergies, not only in the specific acquisition, but also in maintenance, upgrades, training and doctrines, as well as actual operational deployment.

This kind of partnership is not established overnight. It requires years of maturation through cooperation and, above all, trust and confidence in one another. I strongly believe that these

can only succeed by a bottom-up approach supported by the different partners; an approach that catalyses each partner's efforts and maximises the capability output based on limited resources.

Our Navy has, as an example, for a very long time already, been closely integrated with the Dutch Navy, and we are endeavouring to find an agreement with France on cooperation in the domain of motorized land forces. I strongly underline that we have conceived the Strategic Vision in such a way that it also contributes or will contribute to filling existing EU & NATO capability gaps. Amongst others, we are making strong efforts towards contributing to this Air-to-Air tanker refuelling capability.

As many of you know, Air-to-Air Refuelling tankers are among the most significant of all air power force-multipliers and a critical enabler for the projection of air power. Currently, our Air Force only operates receiving aircraft with the F-16. Both EU and NATO clearly identified Air-to-Air refuelling as a shortfall, and we have, for a long time, fully supported the different attempts to overcome this shortfall.

The Belgian Air-to-Air Refuelling requirement is dimensioned by the training needs and real projection of our combat capability. This capability is currently either provided by the US or by other European partners.

Operational deployments boost the Air-to-Air Refuelling need drastically, in function of the tasking assigned by the Combined Air Operations Centre. Whether to cover long distances

between the base of departure and the working zone in the operational theatre, or to fulfil a long time on station above an area in support of land forces in hostile territory, both situations illustrate the crucial requirement for Air-to-Air Refuelling in modern operations.

Between October 2014 and June 2015, an average of 850.000 liters of fuel per month was delivered to our F-16's for their operations in support of the coalition against Daesh. In coalition operations Air-to-Air Refuelling tankers are a pooled asset: a tanker from one nation may thus be required to refuel aircraft from several other nations during the same mission. The interoperability of the different aircraft is therefore critical for success, as already mentioned by the chair.

In order to solve the European capability shortfall, the Strategic Vision for Defence foresees the purchase of 2 A400M Air-to-Air Refuelling kits in addition to the participation in the Multinational Multi-Role Tanker Transport Fleet.

The EDA Steering Board endorsed Air-to-Air refuelling in 2013 as one of eleven Pooling & Sharing priorities. Subsequently, Ministers declared their willingness to support further prioritized development of Air-to-Air refuelling capabilities and to better coordinate them. Moreover, they agreed that these capabilities should be made available for potential use during NATO, EU or other operations.

Since then, the European Defence Agency has developed a global approach with three objectives: increasing overall Air-to-Air Refuelling capacity, reducing fragmentation of the

fleet and optimizing the use of assets. This work has led to three complementary work-strands, on some of which the EDA is cooperating closely with other agencies and organizations. In the meantime, the EDA has, amongst others, been working on training, streamlining certification, sustainment and common command and control. I am sure that the EDA's Chief Executive will tell you a lot more about that and this will be the subject of your meeting today.

The NATO Defence Planning Process describes Air-to-Air Refuelling as a relative shortfall based on the guideline that no single nation should contribute more than 50% of the requirement for a capability. So, even though the US is able to meet the entire NATO requirement for Air-to-Air Refuelling, this rule concludes that the non-US NATO allies combined are unable to provide the other 50%; hence the relative shortfall. And this has been clearly shown in operations in Mali, Libya, and Kosovo, where European forces had to rely heavily on US assets. Today, Europe is able to field 42 tanker aircraft of 12 different types, compared to the US's resources of over 550 tankers of only 4 types. A clear indication of the European shortfall.

The NATO Defence Planning Process states as target for Belgium to provide 3 tanker aircraft which we will do through our aforementioned participation in the MMF and the acquisition of Air-to-Air Refuelling kits for the A400M.

A few thoughts on this Multinational MRTT Fleet: its main goal is to further close the gap in the shortfall of European Air-to-Air Refuelling assets. Therefore, it is vital for the MMF to reach

and maintain a reliable but flexible Air-to-Air Refuelling capability, with the ability to very quickly deploy globally.

In July 2016, The Netherlands and Luxembourg signed a Memorandum of Understanding to proceed with the acquisition of a pooled fleet of Airbus A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport aircraft. Fourteen months later, the contract was amended to include Germany and Norway. Last February, after a national political process, I signed the Memorandum of Understanding on our accession to the pool of multi-role tanker transport aircraft, in which we will participate pro rata of one aircraft out of the eight foreseen. Even though we say we acquire one “aircraft”, in reality we are buying 1/8<sup>th</sup> of the capacity of a jointly acquired and managed tanker fleet. Total MMF requirement has been estimated at 8.800 hours per year, our participation thus amounts to 1.100 hours per year. Options for three additional aircraft remain and I have understood that several other countries have shown interest to join the MMF, which we would, of course, heartily welcome.

Currently, the MMF Programme is well under way with aircraft delivery scheduled to begin in May 2020. Initial Operational Capability is foreseen by the end of 2021 and Full Operational Capability is planned for mid-2023.

This project is a very good illustration of what we can achieve when countries and organisations work together: it was initiated by the EDA. The acquisition phase is managed by OCCAR, Europe’s organization for the management of cooperative armament programmes. After acquisition, the NATO Support and Procurement Agency, the NSPA, will be responsible

for the complete life-cycle management of this fleet. An impressive cooperation between three organizations and five countries, so far.

Besides the MMF, we will also acquire Air-to-Air Refuelling kits for the A400M. So far, Germany, France, Spain, Belgium and Luxemburg have ordered Air-to-Air Refuelling pods. The European Defence Agency has launched a *food for thought* paper suggesting the idea of jointly procuring a pool of pods, and we have strongly welcomed this paper.

Finally, Air-to-Air refuelling is and will remain a key force enabler for EU and NATO forces. We are currently well underway to achieve 70% of the European Air-to-Air refuelling needs. The last 30% need to be filled. We owe it to the brave women and men, who are daily giving their best to make our world a better place.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, unity, trust and collaboration are the key drivers that we need to enhance, together, our capability to protect our populations while making the world a safer place for all, one step at a time. I am confident that today's conference will foster this unity, trust and collaboration and as such, I wish you a very enlightening and productive conference.

And with this, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to close my remarks and I remain available for any questions or comments you may have.