Mr SEVERIN (President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE).—Mr President, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour for me as President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to address this plenary sitting of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly. As I have stated on numerous occasions, parliamentarians add value to the work of international institutions. It is today more clear than ever that parliaments and parliamentarians can provide a valuable asset to international co-operation and development.

Parliamentary diplomacy is not merely diplomacy by other means. It relates above all to accountability before our citizens. The importance of parliamentary oversight and accountability in international organisations are primary requisites for organisations whose core aim is to promote democratic values and ideas throughout the world.

Building European security in a comprehensive way and preventing conflict is a challenge both for the OSCE and for the Council of Europe. The OSCE remains the most flexible and responsive Euro-Atlantic foreign policy instrument for non-military contingencies. It is the primary instrument for early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation its region. It offers strong advantages in dealing with intra-state conflict and in addressing transnational threats to stability. Its broad Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asian composition and its comprehensive approach to security are an added asset in our Organisation.

The tragedy of 11 September made it clear that international terrorism imposes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security in the twenty-first century and targets the very foundation of our civilisation. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly will devote its eleventh annual session to be held in Berlin next July to the fight against terrorism. I am proud to say that one of the first comprehensive documents adopted by the OSCE after the events of September was the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Sintra Resolution on the fight against terrorism, which maps out guidelines for the fight against international terrorism.

In this context, I shall draw attention to our concept of "multicultural security" or "security through multiculturalism". We parliamentarians could contribute to the fight against terrorism not only by adopting the necessary legislation, but by networking across various cultures and by promoting inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue through inter-parliamentary dialogue.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has developed a particularly active programme for monitoring parliamentary elections. The level of co-operation that we have reached in the field of election monitoring between our two Assemblies and the European Parliament to work as tri-parliamentary troika has undoubtedly helped to join efforts and avoid unnecessary duplication while giving a common message on the electoral process. The input of parliamentarians in election observation missions is a great asset to the overall evaluation of the processes in countries in transition. In this context, I welcome the project of the Council of Europe to analyse and produce a detailed study on electoral systems and the criteria for free and fair elections. Co-operation on this matter between our two secretariats, in order to share values and use the same measurements and criteria in election monitoring will enhance the overall results of election monitoring projects.
Our co-operation within the framework of the Stability Pact for South-eastern Europe has also proven successful. The Stability Pact further strengthened the parliamentary dimension with the creation, in June 2001, of a parliamentary troika composed of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. This development marked the beginning of genuine institutional parliamentary links between the Stability Pact, international parliamentary institutions and national parliaments in participating countries. The fact that we are now included in the works of all three Stability Pact Working Tables and of the Regional Table is very positive.

In the field of minorities’ rights, I would like to make two quick remarks. First, I want to express concern that when confronted with a minority problem, especially in the Balkans, the international community does not ask for the implementation of the European convention with regard to minority rights but instead seeks ad hoc solutions. Are the minorities in the Balkans really so special that general European standards are not applicable to them? I do not think so. I am afraid that it is the international mediators’ or facilitators’ interest in the region that are special and that is why they sometimes become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

I believe that European standards for minority rights are minimal, not maximal. That is why each state is free to go beyond those standards as long as that is in connection with minorities living on its own territory. However, unilateral innovations with international consequences in this very sensitive field can be extremely dangerous in terms of international stability and security.

Co-operation between the Council of Europe and the OSCE today is more important than ever for the sake of peace and stability on our continent.

Let me conclude by thanking you once again for this invitation to present to you the activities and objectives of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. We are determined to continue to develop relations and co-operation with Europe. We have had very positive experiences from such co-operation in the past, such as the parliamentary troikas in Albania and Belarus and many election monitoring projects like the important one in Kosovo. It is essential for us to join forces, particularly in cases where the international community needs to speak with one voice. We very much look forward to our joint activities in the future.

Mr President, as this is your first session as President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I would like on behalf of all members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly to congratulate you on your election to this important institution. I also thank your predecessor, my dear friend, Lord Russell-Johnston, for his productive efforts to enhance dialogue and co-operation between our two Assemblies. During his mandate, the co-operation between our two Assemblies was considerably increased and we have successfully built channels for co-ordinating our policies and activities.

We look forward to continuing our co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I can assure you that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly will continue to do its best to assist in strengthening respect for and implementation of commitments to democracy, human rights, religious freedom, the rule of law and responsible economic and environmental policies; in other words, furthering peace and stability across Europe.

Thank you very much for your attention.