

Transatlantic Relations: A Case for Optimism

Written by George Robertson

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GEORGE ROBERTSON, AUG 14 2011

The title may seem at best generous and at worst delusional, especially when US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates' final speech in office berated European allies for their growing uselessness in the security field.

To explain my position, I should first say that I believe Secretary Gates is correct: the situation is grave.

On Afghanistan he rightly highlighted the positives which can be taken from a war which NATO unanimously undertook in 2001 while I served as Secretary General. He highlighted that in 2006, when he took over as US Defence Secretary there were about 20,000 non-US troops from NATO nations in Afghanistan. Recent levels have doubled to that figure to 40,000 and 850 non-US troops have been killed. He pointed out that with these new resources and new strategies there has, in his words, been a decisive change *'in the military momentum on the ground, with the Taliban ejected from their former strongholds'*

But he went on to outline the negatives too:

The ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mission has exposed significant shortcomings in NATO – in military capabilities and in political will.

Echoing sentiments that I and my successors at NATO HQ have relentlessly made, he added,

Despite more than two million troops in uniform, not counting the US military – NATO has struggled at times desperately, to sustain a deployment of 25-40,000 troops, not just in boots on the ground, but in crucial support assets such as helicopters, transport aircraft, maintenance, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and much more.

And then he turned to the Libyan mission and again his message was brutal:

While every alliance member voted for the Libyan mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission...We have the spectacle of an air operations centre designed to handle more than 300 sorties a day struggling to launch about 150. Furthermore the mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country – yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions, requiring the US, once more to make up the difference.

His valedictory message ended with a none-too-veiled warning about the US commitment to an alliance which, during the Cold War, saw US defence expenditure make up 50% of all the alliance's military spending, a share which 20 years after the end of that war, has increased a further quarter to 75%

The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US Congress – and in the American body politic writ large – to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defence.

Why Make a Case For Optimism?

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I rest my case for optimism on the fact that the European members of NATO have suddenly been made aware more than ever before that their 'Emperor is stark naked'. Finally the US has said, and done, what it threatened for many years – and that is to demand that Europe protects its own interests through its own means. And this time, over Libya, it has done just that.

The comfortable illusion – even delusion – that if something happened in Europe or its back yard – be it Bosnia, Kosovo and now Libya, then the US would always be there to fill the yawning, inexcusable gaps in our capabilities, has now been exposed for the nonsense it was. Through that delusion-free atmosphere we can forge a new, albeit uncomfortable and expensive, relationship.

The old balance was out-dated based, as it was, on two main threads. Firstly Cold War ties of confronting a common Soviet opponent and secondly lingering memories of how transatlantic divisions early in the Second World war brought us close to Nazi victory. Our historical justifications today in terms of relevance was (and is) increasingly wearing thin.

Of course the transatlantic link still does matter, because the 'West' still has business in confronting the dark side of globalisation. The developed world has much to lose from the perils of terrorism, organised crime, cyber warfare, failed states, nuclear proliferation, pandemics, population movements – as well as from the backwash from looming resource conflicts – energy, water and food.

Yet the terms of political trade have changed dramatically with austerity, budget balancing, burden sharing, economic interdependence and financial interconnectivity signalling a revolution in political affairs. With the migration of power and influence as well as economic muscle from West to East and South, and from mature and stable democracies to the new emerging powers with their own sharp elbows and ambitions, Europe and the US still need each other – but not in the same old, unbalanced way.

This dynamic has the flavour of an old Soviet-era joke. *'We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us'*. The US has picked up the tab for European security and the Europeans let them dictate the policy. Which may have been good enough for yesterday's grand bargain, but it is out of time for today's multi faceted and complex world.

European Union: A 'Military Pygmy'

In NATO I made a speech in Sweden rather similar to the Gates one, calling the European Union an economic giant but a military pygmy. This incensed the French Ambassador to NATO, Benoit D'Abboville who confronted me in the NATO Council. He thundered that anthropologically pygmies were small but were also fully grown. In contrast he insisted the EU's military capability was new and still growing. It was therefore premature to judge it.

That was 10 years ago and my accusation is still horribly valid today. The US and Europe are now involved in two wars. We are investing huge amounts of money and thousands of lives and limbs in asserting our values and in protecting our interests and safety in two continents but do we really mean business?

United We Stand, Divided We Fall

If you want to win, then you have to look as if you want to win, it is crucially important that your own population knows why we are in these conflicts. They need to know – and so do the electorate – that the mission matters and that sacrifices in terms of money and lives lost and brutalised have a purpose.

Put yourself in the command bunkers of the Taliban and Col Gaddafi and look through their eyes at what they confront. The policy debate on Afghanistan is now taking place on cost considerations and staged draw-downs but in the context of the US primary and Presidential election framework . A target for withdrawal by the UK seems based

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primarily on the next General Election date.

In neither case are we transmitting the idea that withdrawal should be based on success on the ground and on the defeat of the enemy. We parade our weaknesses and we undersell our manifest successes. We debate withdrawal, its pace and size, without reference to what we leave behind and we do so as if the antennae in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border regions and in the Tripoli basements don't pick it up. Be aware they watch every move we make.

No modern war was won on military force alone. Psychology has always played a huge part and demoralising the enemy has a vital utility. Our Prime Minister has been to Helmand province in Afghanistan. Good; his presence helps get over the importance of what is being done and achieved into public consciousness. But how much better might the visit have been if he had been accompanied by the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Prime Minister? That would have shown the troops, and this country and importantly the Taliban too that this was not just a war by the British government but by the nation as a whole?

I have in the past, and to general astonishment, quoted Leon Trotsky in this context and I do so again. At another time and about another war he said, *"You may not be interested in this war, but this war is interested in you."*

Afghanistan is not like Vietnam, a comparison regularly and foolishly made. A premature exit from Afghanistan would not leave that country to fade into Taliban dominated remoteness and isolation. You only have to look at what happened when the Soviet troops left. For four years we ignored that country having helped expel the Red Army, only to see the Taliban take over and offer free rein to Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

If the Taliban managed to win against NATO, and that's precisely what a premature election timetable-driven withdrawal would mean, then the shock waves will certainly not stop in Afghanistan. The parasite Bin Ladenites will return to their favoured terrain and the war of terror will once again engulf the world.

A Rebalancing: Implications

It's not as if there are not resources to fill the gaps in our defence spending. The European NATO Member states spend some \$300billion a year on defence, but it is spent in the wrong directions for the wrong threats at the wrong time. Undeployable troops, some of them still useless conscripts, irrelevant main battle tanks, fast jets with no precision bombing capabilities, transport planes with no long range, big cargo capacity - all these are there in quantity. All of them for the last war not the current or next one.

Pooling and sharing of key equipment is more than possible, but a resistance to such common sense solutions means that much of that \$300billion offered by European taxpayers is simply poured down a Cold War drain. All of this does not sound optimistic I grant but within it I assure you there is a case being made.

NATO: A Quick Defence

Some contend there is a crisis for NATO. It has taken on two major commitments and neither seems to be going well. The organisation, say the critics, has taken on too much and it cannot deliver.

In reply I argue that NATO is not some monolith, it is the sum of the nations who make it up, its permanent staff is tiny but high quality; Its Headquarters is crumbling but effective. All its decisions are taken unanimously and are the property of the nations not the bureaucracy. If NATO nations take on Afghanistan unanimously and take on Libya unanimously but then surround operations with caveats, limitations and no-shows then that is the failure of those national governments not of NATO.

If countries in Europe want to confront the security challenges of today and tomorrow (and remember that not a single one of them has a purely national solution) and in the process guarantee their people the safety my generation has enjoyed then it will not be achieved by voting for it in the NATO Council chambers and then walking on. This is sadly

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what is happening far too often.

Closing Thought: The Case for Optimism

When President Obama supported the rescue mission in Libya, but pulled back to let the Europeans lead, he performed a great favour to our continent. He has forced the European nations to confront their own destiny and he has precipitated a rebalancing in the Alliance, one which so often in the past has been shirked and avoided.

In the coming weeks as the Libya drama comes to a climax and as the debate on Afghanistan sharpens on what happens next, the European nations will have to make a decision on what kind of transatlantic relationship they want, or need, or value. The option of grumbling dependency is over, an era of shared responsibility and mutual contribution is about to dawn.

President Obama and Robert Gates have truly started something, and I am, as a consequence, optimistic that the result will be a reinvigorated and renewed transatlantic relationship ready for the next generation.

***Lord George Robertson** served as a Member of Parliament from 1978 until 1997, British Secretary of Defence from 1997 until 1999 and Secretary General of NATO from 1999 until 2004. A longer version of this editorial was original delivered as a speech at Chatham House, where he is Co-President. The original text of the speech can be found [here](#).*