

Interview - Anders Fogh Rasmussen

Written by E-International Relations

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Anders Fogh Rasmussen was Secretary General of NATO up until 2014 and served between 2001-2009 as the 39th Prime Minister of Denmark. He entered the Danish Parliament in 1978 and served in various ministerial positions, including as Minister of Tax and Minister of Economic Affairs, before becoming leader of Venstre.

As NATO Secretary General, Mr. Rasmussen oversaw the Alliance's operational peak with six operations on three continents including Afghanistan, Kosovo and Libya, as well as counter-piracy along the Somali coast, a training mission in Iraq and a counter-terrorism operation in the Mediterranean. In response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, he initiated a "Readiness Action Plan" adopted by Heads of State at a historic summit in Wales to strengthen the collective defence to an unprecedented level since the end of the Cold War. His upcoming book *The Will to Lead: America's Indispensable Role in the Global Fight for Freedom* (Broadside Books) will be released this September.

Are we living in a new Cold War?

I would say we are within a similar situation to the Cold War. Of course there are differences between the Cold War and the current situation; primarily that during the Cold War the Soviet Union was the ideological leader of a communist camp in the world. Today, Russia is not the ideological leader of anything. On the contrary, Russia is quite isolated internationally, so in that respect there is a clear difference. Though there are also a lot of similarities; mainly that Russia is now threatening her neighbours in Europe, primarily Ukraine, but potentially also other countries. Hence, my assessment is that we do live in a similar situation to the cold war.

NATO expanded significantly during the 1990s, and the idea of Russia joining NATO had previously been circulated. Does NATO's expansion explain the argument that Russia feels alienated and isolated?

That argument is not justified. The Russians claim that they received, so to speak a promise, or the West pledged, that from 1990 we would never expand our Western organisations towards the East. That's not true. It's part of the Russian propoganda but it's simply not true. Recently, documents from the negotiations on the reunification of the two Germany's were declassified so we know exactly what was said and what wasn't said, and this issue was never discussed. So no promise, no pledge was given.

It's also important to respect the fundamental principle that each and every country has an inherent right to decide each alliance and affiliation herself. Neither the EU, nor NATO, wanted to expand just to expand. We accepted requests from countries in central and eastern Europe to become members of our organisation and they have the right to apply for membership, and that same right goes for Ukraine and Georgia.

Beyond Crimea, what do you make of Putin's increasing interventionism in the Middle East, particularly in Syria?

I think Russia has two motives to engage in Syria. First of all, it is about protecting one of the few allies that Russia actually has in the Middle East. Russia's policies have made itself quite isolated in the Middle East and the Assad regime is one of the few allies. Another motive is to demonstrate that Russia is a player on the international scene

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and no solution to the Syrian problem can be found without Russia. Russia wants, so to speak, to become a member of the board where the decisions are taken. Overall, the political and strategic goal of Russia is that it's part of President Putin's ambition to restore Russian greatness.

The current Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, stated in May of last year that NATO's efforts to stabilise Libya post-Gaddafi had failed. In retrospect, given the fatality and death toll, was NATO right to intervene in Libya?

Absolutely! Not only was it the right thing to do, but we almost had a duty to do that after the UN Security Council mandated an operation in which we should take all measures to protect the Libyan population against attacks from its own government. What we did was to take responsibility for an air campaign in Libya; no boots on the ground and once the air campaign was finished on October 31, 2011, we left.

From a military point of view, our operation was really a great success. It was a campaign with unprecedented precision in which we minimised the civilian casualties and collateral damage. But seen retrospectively, the international community failed to follow up and help the new authorities in Libya to establish a new and viable government. Over many years of dictatorship, Gaddafi had demolished all structures in Libya so we had to start from scratch and no-one was there to help the new authorities. I think that's one of the lessons learnt from our Libya operation; that we should always accompany a military operation with a well-thought through political strategy.

In light of NATO's missions in Afghanistan and Libya, does this interventionism signify a redefinition of NATO's role?

In November 2010, NATO adopted a new strategic concept according to which it has three core tasks: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security. In principle these three core tasks are equally important. You might call Libya and Afghanistan crisis-management, and this management is just as important as collective defence. I would also add that in light of the new Russian assertiveness, collective defence has regained its importance from the Cold War; so there might in the coming years be more focus on territorial collective defence at the expense of crisis management and cooperative security. However, in principle NATO should be able to carry out all three core tasks.

You argue in your soon-to-be-released new book, *The Will to Lead: America's Indispensable Role in the Global Fight for Freedom*, that the United States must act as the world's policeman. How would you assess the Obama presidency in terms of its effectiveness in assuring NATO's objective of collective security?

I have written the book about determined American leadership and the reason why I wrote the book is as a statement of disappointment with the tendencies of isolationism or non-intervention in the United States. One can point to the Obama administration, Mr. Trump, or other Republicans, and so my goal is not to oppose individuals as such, but I oppose the idea of isolationism which was very prominent throughout the 1930s and the first few years after the Second World War until Pearl Harbour. I fear that the current administration, as well as some of the presidential candidates, are inclined to adopt the same kind of isolationism. That's a problem, because if you remove American leadership it will leave a vacuum that will be filled by the bad actors in the world.

What do you make of the argument from some, including Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, that the United States commits and influences disproportionately within NATO, and that other countries don't do enough?

I agree and I disagree. I agree with Mr. Trump and many other Americans, because it's not only Mr. Trump; it's also the current administration. I agree that the Europeans should invest more in defence and our common security. However, I disagree with Mr. Trump that NATO is obsolete. On the contrary, NATO is just as important as it was during the Cold War; not least taking into account the current Russian aggression and compared to the past, the Europeans actually engage more than they did a few years ago. They have taken part in the Libya operation, and in

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Afghanistan where 1/3 of all troops were non-American. During the Cold War, the Europeans didn't deploy one single soldier out of area, but in Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere, they are engaging. In that respect, he is not right.

How would you assess NATO's durability as an alliance today, in comparison to when you took office in 2009?

I would say it's a much stronger alliance politically, as well as militarily. It is stronger militarily because NATO's troops from partnering countries had worked together, for instance in Afghanistan. NATO's military capability is much stronger than it was; more combat-ready than we were, and politically, we have also gone through very difficult processes which I think have really strengthened the alliance. As an example, in Libya, some allies were reluctant to engage but they accepted that the rest wanted to engage so all 28 allies contributed one way or another, and politically that's very important.

Having said that, I would also say that there's a need for a strong and determined leadership in many countries. In 2009, the Pew Research Center published a survey that called into which a majority of people in Germany, France and Italy, were opposed to engaging in the defence of a fellow ally; that is in contradiction with the core of our alliance. The core is Article 5, whereby if one ally is attacked, it is considered an attack on the whole alliance. Hence, when opinion polls indicate the contrary, then strong political leadership is essential.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is Deputy Features Editor at E-IR.