

In the Shadow of American Imperium

By Dr. John Bruni

Outgoing US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates' final speech at NATO Headquarters, Brussels (June 10, 2011), which criticised European contributions to NATO, said more about the misdirected post-World War II attitude of Washington than it did about America's European allies. Gates said:



Though we can take pride in what has been accomplished and sustained in Afghanistan, the ISAF mission has exposed significant shortcomings in NATO – in military capabilities, and in political will. Despite more than 2 million troops in uniform – NOT counting the U.S. military – NATO has struggled, at times desperately, to sustain a deployment of 25- to 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.ⁱ

Furthermore,

In the past, I've worried openly about NATO turning into a two-tiered alliance: Between members who specialize in "soft'

humanitarian, development, peacekeeping, and talking tasks, and those conducting the "hard" combat missions. Between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership – be they security guarantees or headquarters billets – but don't want to share the risks and the costs. This is no longer a hypothetical worry. We are there today. And it is unacceptable.ⁱⁱ

Since the end of World War II, a primary aim of American foreign policy has been to ensure that it maintained its position as the epicentre of Western strategy.

When the international 'tectonic plates' shifted (between 1989-92) and the Berlin Wall fell, along with the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, the US stood supreme among nations, unencumbered by rivals. It was America's 'hyper-power moment'. And, like the astronomical phenomenon of the black hole where not even light can escape its gravitational pull, little could escape America's force of economic-cultural-strategic attraction.

The creation of the European Union (EU) in 1993 under the Maastricht Treaty did not worry American policy makers. After all it was an *economic* union, not a centre of military power. Most of the significant core-states of the EU were members of NATO – a US-led collective security architecture, formed in 1949. These same EU states, having had their respective 'great power' traditions quashed



by 60 years of American domination, had grown accustomed to taking their orders from Washington – a situation they both welcomed and resented. Western Europe was a prime beneficiary of this arrangement. The states of Western Europe did not need to expend national treasures on their armed forces as they did in the years prior to 1949. Washington guaranteed the security of Western Europe by dint of its technologically superior conventional and nuclear arms. America was therefore the pinnacle of the Trans-Atlantic alliance structure, and Europe, its compliant and much weaker partner. As a consequence, America took the strategic lead and held on tight to the reins of its international power. American arms and technology saturate the armed forces of Europe. European defence industries, while strong in certain sectors, find it difficult to compete against American arms companies. One might even go so far as to say that US arms companies have an *unfair* competitive advantage because they are so big and so internationally pervasive.

Then again, since the end of World War II, Europe has never seriously entertained the notion of going it alone. It is almost '*verboten*' to think that Europe collectively can reach an accord among its constituent members which would enable it to deploy substantial military forces without US leadership and the significant command and control capabilities it brings.

Arguably the only real dissenting voice in Europe has been France with its political

elite in Paris eager to map out a more Euro-centric approach to international affairs.

The problem for France, however, is that being an ambitious, mid-sized European power, other sovereign European states and historical rivals are never quite sure whether France is fighting for 'Europe', or attempting to carve out an unassailable leadership niche for itself within Europe. This peculiarly French problem turned out to be advantageous for Washington in that it (Washington) did not have to fight hard to gain the trust of European states convinced that Parisian aspirations were figments of French aggrandizement, not a working alternative to the American dominated collective security system of NATO.

But the central question is, is Gates justified in his comments?

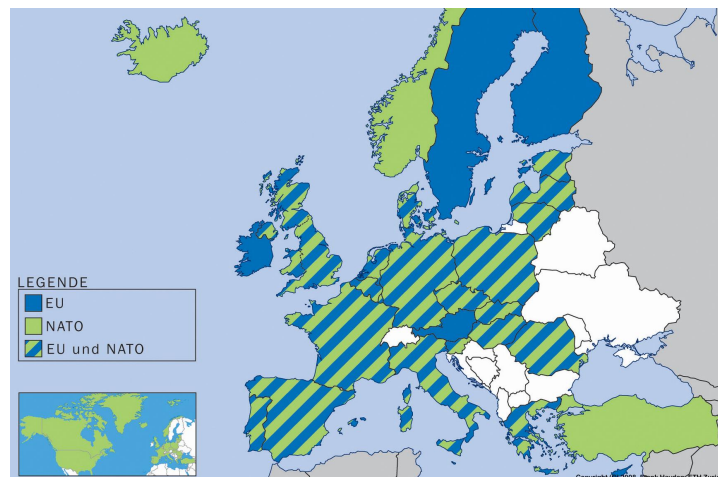
Washington is almost equally at fault for the parlous state of Europe's security architecture. Blaming Europe for not contributing enough to NATO operations is akin to a bully blaming the victim for its weakness. It was the US that wanted *no peer competitors* to its international power – a situation that prevails to this day. For nearly three generations it actively sought to undermine alternative security arrangements to NATO in Europe, playing to Europe's many natural divisions based on history, culture and mutual suspicions. Post World War II Europe might not have had the will or the desire to fall back into the old militarised rivalries of the past, but now, some 60 years on, the once proudly self-

sufficient military cultures of the Continent have been effectively emasculated by the ever-present dominance of American power. European policy makers have been almost ‘socially engineered’ to accept their inferior international status vis-à-vis the United States. Consequently, for long-standing international disputes and confrontations, the only real alternative to regional chaos is an American politico-military solution – perhaps with a little European flavouring as in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The situation in Libya is different in that the operation to oust Libyan dictator Moummar Gaddafi is a largely ‘European NATO’ driven initiative, but nonetheless, underwritten by critical American support without which the European and Arab contributors to this mission can not function effectively.

In a role reversal of historic magnitude: A weak and divided Europe, like the equally weak and divided American colonies some 300 years before when they struggled to find their identity under the shadow of a global European imperia, is now struggling to determine a new identity for itself in the shadow of a mighty global American imperium. But the American imperium, while showing signs of strain, will not move aside easily to accommodate new rising powers such as the People’s Republic of China, India or the Russian Federation, let alone the minor aspirations of Continental Europe. In fact, as US President Thomas Jefferson said in his inauguration speech in 1801, America sought “*peace, commerce,*

and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none”. Economic crisis aside, it is hoped that a European ‘Jeffersonian’ may emerge from the moribund labyrinth of EU bureaucracy to chart a new, rational course for Europe which could make it a credible alternative to US power in the world.



ⁱ Gates R., Transcript, *The Future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*, Washington Wire: Political Insight and Analysis from the Wall Street Journal’s Capital Bureau, Wall Street Journal, June 10, 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/06/10/transcript-of-defense-secretary-gatess-speech-on-natos-future/>
Date accessed: (14/06/2011)

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*

Image of Robert Gates

<http://i.huffpost.com/gen/289242/thumbs/s-ROBERT-GATES-NATO-large.jpg>

Image of EU/NATO Flag

<http://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/jpg/NatoEU.jpg>

Image of EU/NATO overlap

http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/container_maps/files/Nato_EU_d.jpg