“Reflections on the status and future of the transatlantic alliance”
Robert Gates’ final policy speech
SDA keynote address 10 June 2011
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"Reflections on the status and future of the transatlantic alliance"

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Dr. Robert M. Gates was sworn in on December 18, 2006, as the 22nd Secretary of Defense. Gates joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1966 and spent nearly 27 years as an intelligence professional. During that period, he spent nearly nine years at the National Security Council, The White House, serving four presidents of both political parties.

He is the only career officer in CIA history to rise from entry-level employee to Director. He served as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence from 1986 until 1989 and as Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Adviser at the White House from January 20, 1989, until November 6, 1991, for President George H.W. Bush.

Gates has been awarded the National Security Medal, the Presidential Citizens Medal, has twice received the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, and has three times received CIA’s highest award, the Distinguished Intelligence Medal.
Introduction

To mark the final overseas political tour of his office, Robert M. Gates, US Secretary of Defense, addressed a distinguished gathering at the Security & Defence Agenda (SDA) in Brussels on June 10. Gates used the opportunity to “speak bluntly” about how he sees the military shortcomings of European members of NATO; and to issue a warning that the economic crisis and a changing political make-up in US domestic politics could foreshadow a diminishing investment in the transatlantic alliance.

A foreword on solidarity

Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, Co-president of the SDA and former NATO Secretary General introduced the Secretary.

“Mr Secretary, you are leaving an alliance which now has a new Strategic Concept; and you are also leaving an alliance one could only call hyperactive”, he began optimistically. However, “I am going to bring one “caveat” into the group... that we should write the word “solidarity” in the alliance with a capital “S”.”

This capital “S”, he continued, symbolises the important cross-roads the alliance finds itself at in various overseas missions, and the commitment of resources these will entail. “It means for NATO’s very important operation in Afghanistan, that at a time when we might start reducing our military presence there, NATO allies do not collectively head for the exit”, he cautioned. He also called for greater solidarity over alliance operations in Libya, “where the number of actively participating allies is regrettably small”.

“...this imbalance in the burden-sharing, is not sustainable in a world where projecting stability is the order of the day”.

De Hoop Scheffer then focused on the single biggest caveat of them all: the financial crisis. “The capital “S” for solidarity in my opinion means that in times of understandable financial austerity, that the allies go on realising that projecting security and stability does not come cheap”, he warned. Given this, he rallied against the “completely un-coordinated” cuts currently occurring across Europe. In relation to burden-sharing, the SDA Co-president frankly stated that “Europe had a rather pale face in this regard”. He thus concluded his introduction with a final caveat: “that this situation, this imbalance in the burden-sharing, is not sustainable in a world where projecting stability is the order of the day”.

Operational concerns

Thanking De Hoop Scheffer, Gates started by saying that he intended to speak frankly about the transatlantic alliance and Europe, the security of which “has been the consuming interest of much of my professional life.” However, he committed himself to “share these views in the spirit of solidarity and friendship; with the understanding that sometimes, friends must speak to each other bluntly.”
Firstly on Afghanistan, the Secretary affirmed that his recent visit had made him “come away impressed and inspired by the changes that have taken place on the ground in recent months.” He also confessed that it “is no secret that for too long, the international military effort in Afghanistan suffered from a lack of focus, resources and attention”. These challenges were exacerbated by inter-alliance tensions over troop commitments and political will.

Yet noting both the sacrifices of alliance troops and the eventual deployment of 40,000 European soldiers in Afghanistan, the Secretary refused to be down-beat. “Frankly, four years ago I never would have expected the alliance to sustain this operation at this level for so long, much less add significantly more forces in 2010. It is a credit to the brave ISAF troops on the ground, as well as to the allied governments who have made the case for the Afghanistan mission under difficult political circumstances at home.”

Yet whilst this commitment is laudable, Gates made it clear there were some significant shortcomings in the military contributions of European alliance members. These problems extended beyond boots on the ground, but were characterized by shortages of “crucial support assets such as helicopters, transport aircraft, maintenance, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and much more.”

More worryingly, the Secretary voiced his belief that these shortcomings have “the potential to jeopardize the alliance’s ability to conduct integrated, effective and sustained” operations over Libya. Discussing the ongoing alliance mission to protect Libyan civilians under UN Resolution 1973, Gates expressed deep concern about European contributions. Indeed, “while every alliance member voted for the Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in strike missions.” To this dire assessment, he added that “frankly, many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can’t. The military capabilities simply aren’t there.”

A “two-tiered” alliance

The Secretary went on to outline his concern about the lack of political will by European members to commit sufficiently to NATO as an alliance. Specifically, Gates noted a growing divide between members “willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership […] but don’t want to share the risks and the costs.” In the Secretary’s opinion, this divide has come to constitute a “two-tiered alliance”: a divide between those who fight and those who do not. “This is no longer a hypothetical worry. We are there today. And it is unacceptable.”

“Today, just five of 28 allies [the US, UK, France, Greece and Albania] exceed the agreed 2% of GDP spending on defence.”
This lack of will is epitomized by diminishing budgetary commitments to military force in Europe. “Despite the demands of the mission in Afghanistan [...] total European defence spending declined [...] by nearly 15 percent in the decade following 9/11”, Gates declared. Despite being the “latest in a string of U.S defence secretaries who have urged allies privately and publicly, often with exasperation, to meet agreed-upon NATO benchmarks for defence spending [...] Today, just five of 28 allies [the US, UK, France, Greece and Albania] exceed the agreed 2% of GDP spending on defence.”

However, Gates conceded that due to the financial crisis, “realistically, this situation is highly unlikely to change.” The key then to avoid “the very real possibility of collective military irrelevance” will be to “examine new approaches to boosting combat capabilities: in procurement, in training, in logistics, in sustainment.” Yet such efforts, represented in NATO’s current “Smart Defence” initiative, will not solve these problems completely. A real increase in spending is the only solution to many of Europe’s military woes. Ultimately, the Secretary concluded, “nations must be responsible for their share of collective defence.”

The financial crisis and US investment in NATO

This theme of financial investment became the central focus of Gates’ speech. “As you all know, America’s serious fiscal situation is now putting pressure on our defence budget”, and “tough choices lie ahead affecting every part of our government [...] from foreign assistance to military basing, support and guarantees.”

This process, he continued, was raising awkward questions about the ongoing utility of US commitments in Europe. “The US share of NATO defence spending has now risen to more than 75%, at a time when politically painful budget and benefit cuts are being considered at home”, Gates cautioned.

Indeed, “the blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US ... to expand increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defence.” The Secretary then issues his starkest warning yet: “if current trends in the decline of European defence capabilities are not halted and reversed”, many US policymakers “may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost.”

The challenge, then, is for NATO to reverse the “possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance.” The key to this would be to make “a serious effort to protect defence budgets from being further gutted in the next round of austerity measures”. Gates also recommended this could be achieved by “better allocating (and coordinating) the resources we do have; and by following through on commitments to the alliance and to each other.”

The Secretary ultimately expressed optimism in this regard. “The good news is that the members of NATO [...] have it well within their means to halt and reverse these trends, and instead produce a very different future”, he said. “It is not too late for Europe to get its defence and security relationships back on track. “After all, “over the life of the transatlantic alliance there has
been no shortage of squabbles and setbacks. But through it all [...] we came together to make the tough decisions in the face of dissension at home and threats abroad. I take heart in the knowledge that we can do so again”, he concluded.

A final concern - the “ageing out” of transatlantic ties

Before departing, Gates used a question from the floor to elaborate on the realistic likelihood that US policymakers could disengage from the transatlantic alliance. It was noted that this was not the first time the Secretary had issued such “blunt” warnings to Europe, which begged the question: “what more can you do than threaten to stop continuing to support NATO”? The key here is the changing make-up of US policymakers in Washington, the Secretary explained, and the “cost-benefit” calculation that NATO engagement involves. “You have a lot of new members of Congress who are roughly old enough to be my children or grandchildren, and they do not have the formative experiences that I have had”. Most importantly, these are officials “for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me.” This could fundamentally affect the US view of NATO’s utility. Indeed, “I am, in the active US government, essentially the last senior leader who is a product of the Cold War”, Gates claimed. “I think the kind of emotional and historical attitude American leaders have had with this alliance for over 65 years is ‘ageing out’”. This process of “ageing out” will mean future “decisions and choices are going to be made more in relation to what’s in the best interest of the US”.

“These are officials for whom the Cold War was not the formative experience that it was for me.”
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Gates conceded that he did not know “what this will mean in practical terms”, but he maintained that “if you told the American taxpayer what I just did, about America bearing 75% of the financial burden in NATO, it would raise eyebrows”. It is this combination of financial hardship, a changing US policy elite and questionable European value to US military missions that makes the Secretary’s warnings more serious than before.

Gates thus concluded his final speech by calling for a European acceptance of these new realities, saying, “my hope is that this [...] will get the attention of European leaders, who must realise that the drift of the last 20 years cannot be allowed to continue; not if they want to have a strong transatlantic partnership with the United States.”
Global media coverage

Gates’ farewell speech grabbed the world’s headlines, with over 70 journalists and a dozen camera crews present at the SDA. ‘US Secretary of Defence ‘Blasts NATO’, ‘Warns of dim future’, ‘Questions capabilities of the alliance’, were the terms in which The New York Times, Washington Post, BBC, The Economist, Al Jazeera and many others described Robert Gates’ final speech. Tweeted, blogged, and discussed in policy journals, the speech provides great insights for the future of the transatlantic alliance.

Robert Gates used his final policy address as US defence secretary to warn European allies that they faced “the very real possibility of collective military irrelevance” and that Washington was becoming financially unable and politically unwilling to bear the brunt of their defence. In his hour-long address, Mr Gates noted that Washington had made frequent requests “with exasperation” that European NATO members meet the alliance’s benchmarks for defence spending. What made Mr Gates’ remarks more ominous was his assessment of Washington’s view of Europe. He argued that new American leaders, who unlike him had not worked closely with European counterparts through the cold war, may soon decide the return for the US on its transatlantic investment was not worth the cost.

It was a thunderous parting shot from Robert Gates, the outgoing American defence secretary, that most cruelly exposed Europe’s shortcomings. Libya reveals an uncomfortable fact about NATO. Its military strength is determined mainly by what America is ready to put in. Without America, the military punch of even the most powerful European members, Britain and France, is limited. Now, more than ever, Europeans need to get more bangs for their bucks.

Gates warned against a two-speed alliance, where some nations settle for humanitarian missions while others take on combat operations. He also added that NATO would face a “dark future” if allies renounced sufficient shortages in military spending and political will, warning of “a dim if not dismal future” unless more member nations scaled up their participation in the alliance’s activities. With little indication of any change in policy among the more reluctant member nations — notably Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Turkey — Mr. Gates’s harsh words seemed likely to increase pressure on an alliance already deeply strained by differences over sharing the burden in Libya and Afghanistan. “The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. 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 defense,” Gates said.
Robert Gates issued a blunt critique of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, arguing the Libya operations demonstrated America's allies suffered from serious gaps in military capabilities because of their failure to spend enough on their own defence. One of the NATO's most ardent defenders and pointed critics, the outgoing U.S. defense chief scathingly accused Europe of behaving increasingly like a free rider, as budget cuts eat deeper into military spending. America's European allies, Mr. Gates said, are "apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets."

Speaking in Brussels in his final policy speech as Pentagon chief, Gates said: "The mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country. Despite more than two million troops in uniform, not including the US military, NATO has struggled, at times desperately, to sustain a deployment of 25,000 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, Gates said, addressing NATO's Security and Defence Agenda assembly in the Belgian capital.

Robert Gates issued the warning as both continents struggle with the remains of the global recession and President Barack Obama seeks $400 billion in defence spending cuts over 12 years.
to reduce the deficit. While Gates and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen have cautioned European members not to reduce defence spending further, the implicit threat that the U.S. may withdraw support for the alliance marks a hardening of the U.S. position. Rasmussen last year said European defence risked becoming a “paper tiger.”

Robert Gates said that since the fall of the Berlin Wall two decades ago America’s share of NATO’s spending had risen to 75%. He clearly does not think that is sustainable. Only four European countries are spending 2% of GDP on defence and they are France, the UK, Greece and Albania. The Americans have lobbied strongly against UK defence cuts. Even after 9/11, European defence spending declined by nearly 15% over the following decade.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates warned that military shortcomings among NATO members could jeopardise the alliance’s air war in Libya. With half of the countries in the 28-member alliance not participating in the Libya campaign, Gates said it reflected a worrisome lack of military assets. He said the NATO-led ground war in Afghanistan had scored important accomplishments but said the mission, along with the Libya war, had reflected chronic under-investment and at times a lack of political backbone.

Gates cited NATO’s Strategic Airlift Initiative and its Allied Ground Surveillance System as good examples of cooperation. He said the US has no problem with Europe’s efforts to build up its own equipment defence market and that a robust industrial capability between the US and its allies is very important. Gates also said the US government was looking at dramatic cuts in a wide range of programs. “Defence will have to bear some of that burden,” he said.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said the legitimacy of the rule of Syrian President Bashar Assad was open to question after the killing of protesters by security forces. “I would say the slaughter of innocent lives in Syria should be a problem and a concern for everybody,” Gates told a seminar in Brussels. “Whether Assad still has the legitimacy to govern his own country I think is a question everyone needs to consider,” he said.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates warned that NATO’s European allies “must be responsible for their share of collective defence” to avoid becoming strategically irrelevant. During his final policy speech before retiring at the end of this month, Gates said some NATO partners “apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defence budgets.”
In Afghanistan, Gates said it was worrying that an alliance with two million in uniform has "struggled, at times desperately, to sustain a deployment of 25,000 to 45,000 troops" and faced shortages of helicopters, transport aircraft, maintenance and surveillance planes. "Turning to the NATO operation over Libya, it has become painfully clear that similar shortcomings -- in capability and will -- have the potential to jeopardize the alliance's ability to conduct an integrated, effective and sustained air-sea campaign," he said.

In a blunt valedictory address in Brussels, Gates questioned NATO’s viability, saying its members’ penny-pinching and lack of political will could hasten the end of US support. NATO was formed in 1949 as a US-led bulwark against Soviet aggression, but in the post-Cold War era it has struggled to find a purpose. Gates says future U.S. political leaders whose worldview wasn’t molded by the Cold War may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost. Gates spoke to a European think tank at the end of an 11-day overseas journey.
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