Gates' Parting Shot

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MARK WEBBER, JUL 11 2011

In a valedictory speech in June 2011, US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, warned of a 'dismal future for the transatlantic alliance'. NATO, he argued, risked becoming a 'two-tiered' alliance divided 'between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership but don't want to share the risks and the costs.'[1] Gates was well-placed to comment. A veteran of 30 years of service in the CIA, the National Security Council and the Pentagon, he had served under Republican and Democrat administrations as far back as the mid 1970s. Gates had been in office during the latter stages of the Cold War, helped shape US policy during the Gulf War and, for five years after his appointment to the Defence portfolio, had overseen US and NATO involvement in Afghanistan. Gates had, in fact, been a frequent critic both of America's European allies and of NATO itself. In January 2008 he suggested that 'some military forces […] don't know how to do counterinsurgency operations', a deficiency that was allowing the Taliban to steal a march on NATO in Afghanistan.[2] In a speech two years later, this failing of NATO's European allies in Afghanistan was seen as part of a wider malaise – a combination of risk aversion, demilitarization and a reluctance to spend adequately on defence. NATO itself, moreover, was characterised by 'outdated command structures', badly-coordinated spending and a consequent shortage of 'the vital equipment for ongoing missions'. Addressing these issues, he suggested, was vital to the 'long-term viability and credibility of NATO, and to the transatlantic security project writ large.'[3]

None of these comments should come as a surprise to NATO watchers. They reflect, in fact, a structural feature of the Alliance that goes back to its very creation – namely the near absence of permanent pooled military assets and thus the periodic eruption of disagreement over who should bear the burden of NATO's responsibilities and by how much. One would expect the US, of course, to shoulder the greatest load – it is, after all, NATO's premier military power and its driving political force. Indeed, historically, the price of leadership for the US has been a disproportionate share of the common defence – whether this be in the shape of the nuclear guarantee offered to NATO states during the Cold War or the size of its contribution to NATO's most significant post-Cold War missions – Operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force in the former Yugoslavia and the ISAF campaign in Afghanistan (which despite a sizeable European and Canadian contribution has, since the Obama surge from 2009, been overshadowed by the US commitment). There have been undeniable benefits that accrue to the US as a consequence; by acting through NATO (despite the inconvenience of joint decision making) it has obtained niche capabilities and political cover for what would otherwise be seen as unilateral and perhaps illegitimate acts. That the US campaign in Afghanistan is a NATO one backed by countless UN Security Council Resolutions affords it a legitimacy and credibility that the 2003 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq never enjoyed. And in a curious twist on this pattern, over Libya, the US has been able to sit back and allow NATO Europe to prosecute a campaign Washington supports politically but would prefer to keep its distance from militarily. That the campaign has the imprimatur of a UN Security Council Resolution makes such political support all the easier to provide.

What then is Gates really worried about? The ever growing gap in quantitative and qualitative terms between the US and European (and Canadian) armed forces is certainly part of it. While burden-sharing debates are decades old, the transatlantic gap has certainly widened in recent years. Two responses, however, can be offered to criticism of the European effort.

First, it could very well be argued that the US spends too much on defence rather than that the Europeans spend too little. By any measure the US defence budget is gargantuan, accounting in 2010 for some 43 per cent of total global

expenditure.[4] And such military primacy is not always a good thing, tempting as it does the powerful to chase dragons in far off lands rather than concentrate on their own domestic needs. Iraq is the most obvious example here, but it applies also to Afghanistan. By mid 2011, over 2,500 ISAF troops had been killed. 1,600 of these have been from the US.[5] Far fewer than the fatalities sustained in Vietnam, this toll has nonetheless been chastening, and Afghanistan now stands as the longest war in American history.

Expensive in lives, the war has also been costly in material terms. During financial year 2010, the US Department of Defence spent an average of $6.7 billion per month. The total US war spend between 2001 and 2011 amounted to some $443 billion. This was less than the $805 billion dedicated to Iraq in the same period but while the trend in Iraq has been downward from 2008, that in Afghanistan has been inexorably upward. The Obama administration's request to Congress for financial year 2012 was thus seven times greater for Afghanistan ($113.7 billion) than for Iraq ($17.7 billion).[6] No wonder, then, that Obama in his speech of June 2011 announcing the drawdown of US combat troops noted that for the US 'it is [now] time to focus on nation-building here at home.' [7] The military preoccupation also crowds out other approaches. True, the US has been the single largest bilateral donor of aid to Afghanistan, but the $11 billion it disbursed between 2002 -2009 is a mere fraction of the American military outlay.[8]

Second, Gates' criticism ignores other ways in which the states of NATO Europe contribute to international security (and here a distinction with 'defence') is important. These states may not always meet NATO's notional two per cent target for defence expenditure, but bilaterally and when gathered in the EU, most of them make a significant contribution to conflict resolution and management through the Common Security and Defence Policy, and to addressing the root causes of conflict through generous aid budgets. European states have been the main contributors to post-conflict rebuilding not only in places like Bosnia and Kosovo (as one might expect) but also – among others – Sierre Leone, Uganda, the DRC , and the occupied Palestinian Territories. It should also not be forgotten that the European contribution to UN peacekeeping dwarfs that of the US. In May 2011, the US accounted for just 13 of the UN's 82,400 peacekeeping troops – well behind France (1,363), Italy (1,683), Spain (1,070) and even the more modest contributions of the UK (274), Turkey (353) and Germany (267).[9]

While these efforts do not apply to NATO as such, they nonetheless offer a more nuanced reading of European efforts than is evident in the somewhat disdainful tone of Gates' remarks. But to be more charitable to the Secretary of Defence, he does seemingly have a point in his allusion to a quite separate development. As the generations of American leadership pass, he suggests, so more distant becomes the commitment to, and interest in, those institutions which were once central to the experience of American foreign policy. Gates was one of the few officials in the Obama administration who served in government during the Cold War. Obama's generation and those that come after will not, as Gates did, regard that period as 'the formative experience' of their political lifetime.

Yet here too, Gates overstates his case. The experiential gap has, in part, been compensated for by NATO's long post-Cold War quest for credibility and purpose, a quest to which successive post-Cold War presidencies have contributed. Written off by commentators on several occasions as being a dinosaur of the Cold War, NATO's problem has not, in fact, been one of redundancy but of having reacted all too enthusiastically to its post-Cold War, and post-9/11, environments. In the twenty-plus years since the Alliance adopted its path-breaking 1991 New Strategic Concept, it has engaged in approximately 34 separate operations. According to former Secretary General Lord Robertson, NATO has 'retooled first to help spread security and stability eastwards across Europe, then to use its unique multinational military capabilities to bring peace to Europe's bloody and chaotic Balkan backyard, and [then] to confront the new threats of our post-9/11 world'.[10] The US Ambassador to the Alliance noted similarly in July 2010 that NATO 'is busier than ever' – undertaking missions in Afghanistan, the Balkans and off the coast of Somalia.[11] And to that list one could, in 2011, add the air campaign (Operation Unified Protector) being waged by NATO-badged pilots over Libya. What was remarkable about this, NATO's latest armed operation, was that it was being waged at a time when its two main contributing nations – the UK and France – were already bearing heavy political and material demands in Afghanistan. It should also not be forgotten that NATO, while attending to both Afghanistan and Libya, has also retained a significant presence in Kosovo (approximately 6,000 troops being in place in June 2011).

Certainly, this is indicative of an alliance in demand. Yet to what end? The problem with all this activity is that the

Alliance still lacks an over-arching strategy that might connect its various operations. The 2010 revised Strategic Concept promised to provide the contextual guidance for the Alliance – and in 1999, its predecessor document was premised on similar expectations. That earlier version was overtaken by the events of 9/11 and there is no guarantee that the 2010 statement will be future-proofed any better. NATO since the end of the Cold War has tended to act in a reactive manner according to the most urgent need of the moment in American and (less often) European foreign policies. Further, while the three post-Cold War Strategic Concepts catch some of the political- and even intellectual-flavour of their time, their expansive character means NATO has lacked a sense of strategic restraint or a long-term sense of priority. This is not to argue in favour of a return to the sort of narrow focus that sustained the Alliance during the Cold War. That was born of a necessity consequential upon a seemingly fixed international order and a predictable agenda of security, both of which have long since passed and are unlikely to return. NATO's burgeoning agenda since occasionally narrows to something specific and cohesive – that was true in Operations Allied Force in Yugoslavia, shortly after 9/11 (although less so during the subsequent long years of the Afghan campaign) and in the case of Libya. Yet, it is far from clear how any of these can be a reliable guide to NATO's future. The Afghan mission is unlikely ever to be repeated and the justifications given for OAF and Unified Protector have not cemented NATO's position (or reputation) as a redoubt of humanitarian intervention.

The Group of Experts appointed by NATO to advise on a new Strategic Concept noted in 2010 that:

'NATO's past accomplishments provide no guarantee for the future. Between now and 2020, it will be tested by the emergence of new dangers, the many-sided demands of complex operations, and the challenge of organising itself efficiently […]'.[12]

No major transatlantic bargain is in the offing, nor any sudden organisational or strategic leap of faith likely, that will address this predicament. But for good or ill (and there is much to criticise about key NATO decisions, not least those surrounding the ISAF mission) the Alliance has demonstrated an institutional robustness and level of political commitment over the last twenty years that suggests an ability to adapt to major events (the end of the Cold War, the violent collapse of Yugoslavia, 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan) and to scotch claims that its demise was imminent.[13] What NATO has demonstrated in the past twenty years is its utility as facilitator of action by its members – deployed in a variety of different configurations (of number of allies and of assets committed) on the basis of what are seen as the compelling strategic and political judgements of the time. Looking ahead, there is likely to be more of the same – NATO's future is not assured but neither should we assume, as Gates implies, that the Alliance is condemned to possible irrelevance.

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[1] Remarks by Secretary Gates at the Security and Defence Agenda, Brussels, 10 June 2011, at: http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4839

[2] As reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 January 2008.

[3] 'Remarks by Robert Gates – NATO Strategic Concept Seminar', 23 February 2010 at: http://www.voltairenet.org/Remarks-by-Robert-Gates-NATO

[4] http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2011/04/04A

[5] http://icasualties.org/oef/

[6] A. Belasco, 'The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11',*CRS Report for Congress* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 29 March 2011), esp. p.3.

[7] 'Text of President Obama's Speech on Afghanistan', 22 June 2011 at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/world/asia/23obama-afghanistan-speech-text.html

[8] L. Poole, *Afghanistan: Tracking Major Resource Flows, 2002-2010* (Wells, Somerset: Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2011), p.4.

[9] 'Monthly Summary of Contributions' (as of May 31 2011) at: http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2011/may11_1.pdf

[10]'Change and Continuity', *NATO Review*, Winter 2003 at: www.nato.int/docu/review/2003/issue4/english/art1.html

[11] I. Daalder, 'NATO's Economy of Scale', *International Herald Tribune*, 23 July 2010.

[12] *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement – Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO* (Brussels: NATO Public Affairs Division, 2010), p.5.

[13] W.J. Thies, 'Was the US Invasion of Iraq NATO's Worst Crisis Ever? How Would We Know? Why Should We Care?', *European Security*, Vol.16(1), 2007, p.39.