

# Who is NATO's new General Secretary George Robertson?

Chris Marsden  
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On August 4, Britain's Foreign Secretary George Robertson was named as the new general secretary of NATO. He is the third European social democrat in a row to hold the position.

Unlike his predecessor, Spain's Javier Solana, whom Robertson formally replaces in October, he has no previous history of radicalism from which he must distance himself. While Solana was active in anti-nuclear and anti-US protests, Robertson defended NATO and opposed unilateral disarmament at a time when official Labour Party policy advocated it. Throughout his career he has occupied a position on the right wing of the party, for which he will now be rewarded by a handsome tax-free salary of £140,000/\$200,000 per annum.

Speculation had centred on German Defence Minister Rudolph Scharping replacing Solana—as the favoured candidate of the Clinton administration—but Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder insisted his minister was unavailable. After this Britain's Prime Minister Blair had private words with Bill Clinton. Robertson's elevation was assured, despite somewhat timid protests from Belgium, Luxembourg and Canada that his nomination was forced through. US State Department spokesman James Rubin said: "The United States is pleased that he has been chosen."

The support of Washington for Robertson has been won through his role during NATO's bombing of Serbia, throughout which he functioned as a hawkish ally of the US. The British were the most aggressive in calling for a ground war and have contributed by far the greatest number of land troops of all the NATO countries in the aftermath of the cease-fire. Robertson's briefings during the war consisted for the most part of bellicose charges of genocide and ethnic cleansing levelled against Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic.

The *Guardian* newspaper in Britain recently obtained correspondence between Robertson and US Defence Secretary William Cohen, which showed a variant of the "special relationship" between the two countries that in this case bordered on a love affair. On February 22, Robertson wrote to Cohen, "As we face another difficult situation in the Balkans and continue to engage in military action in Iraq we are all profoundly grateful for the leadership provided, and the example set, by the US.

"On a personal level, I would like you to know that your constant readiness to give us everything we need and your wise advice makes a tremendous difference. It is extremely reassuring to know that we stand alongside a faithful friend and ally as we face the challenges of these difficult times."

More generally, the US is keen that Europe shoulders a greater portion of the burden of military spending, while remaining subordinate to overall US control. Robertson has long worked to establish closer political ties with Europe, while at the same time defending a strong transatlantic partnership with the US. Together with his insistence that Europe's military role is strengthened, this gave him impeccable credentials as far as the Clinton administration was concerned.

Robertson was born in 1946 on the Isle of Islay, off the West Coast of Scotland, the son of a policeman. He was involved in Labour Party politics from the age of 15. After graduating in Economics from the University of Dundee in 1968, he became an organiser for the GMB union in the whiskey industry in 1969. He pursued a parallel career in the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy until being elected MP for Hamilton South in 1978. Then his focus switched to his elevation through the party's ranks. He was a member of the Scottish Executive Committee between 1973 and 1979 and again since 1993; and chair of the Scottish Labour Party in 1987-88.

After briefly functioning as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Social Services in 1979, he was appointed to the Opposition front bench following the 1979 General Election and the downfall of the Callaghan government, first on Scottish Affairs, then on Defence and Foreign Affairs in 1982-83. He was made Deputy Opposition spokesman for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in 1983 and additionally Principal Spokesman on European Affairs in 1984. He was active in the witch-hunt of the left-reformist Militant Tendency mounted by then party leader Neil Kinnock, describing them as a "cancer" that must be cut out.

He was elected to the Shadow Cabinet and appointed Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland in 1993. After the 1997 General Election he was appointed Secretary of State for Defence.

Throughout his career Robertson was active in a number of organisations promoting Anglo-US ties, including being a founder of the Council of the Atlantic Conference and occupying a post on the Council of the British Atlantic Committee (1979-90). He is vice-chairman of the British/American Parliamentary Group.

As well as this, he has consistently supported greater European integration. He is the Honorary President of the British/German Parliamentary Group and an Honorary Vice-President of the British German Association. The Federal German President awarded Robertson the Grand Cross of the German Order of Merit

in 1991. He was named Joint Parliamentarian of the Year in 1993 for his role during the debate on ratification of the Maastricht Treaty on European Union, for highlighting Conservative Party divisions over the issue.

Immediately after his nomination as NATO general secretary was confirmed, Robertson pledged to work to lessen Europe's military dependence on Washington—without of course undermining its strong transatlantic ties. "European countries at the moment spend about two-thirds of what the United States of America spends on defence, but we don't have anything like two-thirds of the capability", he said. The figure was closer to 15 percent. "That is because we compete with each other, we duplicate each other—that era is now over."

Robertson stressed that he would not let Europe drift away from Washington: "The alliance is the cornerstone of European defence and will remain so." This attempt to combine the development of an independent European military capability with a continued role for the US as the Continent's guardian reflects the fundamental calculation that has shaped British foreign policy since the Second World War. Successive governments have believed that, by acting as America's ally, the strength of its more powerful continental rivals—Germany and France—can be counteracted. But there is nevertheless a growing concern within Britain's ruling elite that Europe must be strengthened militarily if total US domination is to be avoided.

This found its most developed expression in the Strategic Defence Review conducted under Robertson's leadership by the incoming Labour government. The review noted that Britain's economy "is founded on international trade. Exports form a higher proportion of Gross Domestic Product than for the US, Japan, Germany or France. We invest more of our income abroad than any major economy. Our closest economic partners are the EU and the US but our investment in the developing world amounts to the combined total of France, Germany and Italy. Foreign investment into the UK also provides nearly 20% of manufacturing jobs."

The protection of these interests demanded the formation of strategic military and political alliances, with both the US and other European powers. "With the exception of national commitments such as Northern Ireland and the security of our Overseas Territories, future operations will almost always be multinational. Britain will usually be working as part of a NATO, UN or Western European Union (WEU) force, or an ad hoc 'coalition of the willing'," But this still demands the strengthening of Britain's military capability. Not to be able to conduct two medium-sized operations would be an "unacceptable constraint on our ability to discharge Britain's commitments and responsibilities," the review notes.

It called for reorienting military structures, purchasing and military doctrine around rapid reaction forces—capable of moving to any coastal area and providing a base for aerial attack and occupation of any area of the world. Two large aircraft carriers are to be built, in addition to supply ships able to transport troops, armoured vehicles, helicopters and supplies, and to sustain that force for a considerable period. The army will be increased in size and the reservist Territorial Army rebuilt.

This is linked directly to the emerging carve-up of the oil and

mineral rich territories of the former Soviet Union. The review focuses on Britain's military role in bringing about "security and stability in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Russia, but also extending as far as countries in the Trans-Caucasus and Central Asia, through bilateral assistance and co-operation with the countries concerned."

Since the review was made, Robertson has been touring Europe advocating the rationalisation and integration of the Continent's armed forces and armaments industries. This has included an Anglo-French defence meeting at St. Malo and talks with the Italian government on rationalising the defence capacity of EU states. A key target for Britain has been to place pressure on Germany, where the Schroeder government's proposed budget implies severe cuts in defence spending.

Robertson made a speech at the Royal United Services Institute in March outlining his concerns and warning, "Without effective military capability to back up European foreign policy goals, we are wasting our time. We risk being an economic giant, but a strategic midget.... Our ultimate aim, therefore, is not so much a European Security and Defence *Identity* but something altogether more ambitious—namely a European Defence *Capability*."

"The restructuring process does not block off any routes. It is not about creating a 'fortress Europe' nor does it aim to create a 'US-UK industrial alliance'. European and trans-Atlantic relationships are both important to the UK. The restructuring process is driven by the simple fact that at present the European defence industry lacks the scale to either compete or effectively collaborate with US industry," he concluded.

Robertson's appointment reflects a certain stage in US-European relations. There is no doubt that someone less willing to accept US demands would have been vetoed by the Clinton administration. Yet Robertson's stress on building an independent European military force—now seen as a positive asset by Washington—heightens the possibility of future conflicts between Europe and America. What is now portrayed as an attempt to strike a less one-sided balance between the major powers can rapidly become a more serious contest, given the high stakes played for in the struggle to dominate the world's resources and markets.



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