

US State Department warns against European military independence from NATO

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A recent London meeting revealed sharp differences between the US and Europe over the role of NATO and the European Union in the field of defence.

At a conference held at the Royal Institute of International Affairs October 7-8, entitled “NATO: Development in Partnership—Engagement and Advancement after 2000”, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott bluntly warned Europe against developing a military capability standing outside NATO.

He was responding to comments by Britain's Defence Secretary George Robertson, who is about to become the new NATO secretary general. Robertson called for a significant increase in European Union (EU) defence forces and hardware. He told the conference : “We want to ensure that strong and effective military resources are also available to the European Union, so that we can take action in support of the Common Foreign and Security Policy when NATO as a whole is not engaged militarily. This means that we need to develop the EU's capacity to take timely and informed decisions on emerging crises.”

Strobe Talbott said of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI): “We would not want to see an ESDI that comes into being first *within* NATO but then grows *out of* NATO and finally grows *away from* NATO, since that would lead to an ESDI that initially duplicates NATO but that could eventually compete with NATO. That's a long-term concern, obviously, but NATO, after all, is about the long term, and so is this conference” (emphasis in the original).

Talbott told the conference that the central question was “the transatlantic relationship in the wake of the conflict in Kosovo”. He said, “On this subject, I sense a basic difference of view on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Many Americans are saying: never again

should the United States have to fly the lion's share of the risky missions in a NATO operation and foot by far the biggest bill. Many in my country, notably including members of Congress, are concerned that, in some future European crisis, a similar predominance of American manpower, firepower, equipment and resources will be neither politically nor militarily sustainable, given the competing commitments our nation has in the Gulf, on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere around the world.”

Talbott described the European position as being “determined never again to feel quite so dominated by the US as they did during Kosovo or, for that matter, during Bosnia; in the next crisis—whatever, wherever and whenever it is—our Allies want a say in the conduct of operations more nearly commensurate with the political onus that they bear in supporting the war.”

Both Talbott and Robertson pointed to the massive imbalance in military capability between America and the countries of the European Union, as highlighted in the NATO war against Yugoslavia. Robertson said: “We Europeans flew only a third of the total number of aircraft sorties during the campaign, and only 20 percent of the strike sorties. It was American military power that gave credibility to the diplomatic campaign.”

Underscoring Europe's present inability to mount large-scale military operations independently of the US, Robertson said the European commitment to KFOR, “deploying a force of a few tens of thousands, less than 2 percent of the total military personnel available to us, has undoubtedly stretched our collective resources”.

Press reports indicate that the European Union intends to develop its capacity to make a corps-sized deployment of some 100,000 troops. Although the combined size of the European armed forces is over 1

million, a large proportion of these are relatively unskilled conscripts. In addition, Europe's ability to project its military capacity is far behind that of the US. It does not have the extensive logistical and transport facilities required to quickly move and support a large force over a protracted period. The EU also has a significant deficit on precision guided munitions. Only France has its own independent intelligence satellites.

The underlying tensions between American and European imperialism were brought out earlier in remarks made by outgoing NATO Secretary General Javier Solana on October 6. Speaking to the press, Solana said his new position as EU High Representative for foreign affairs would focus on developing a common European defence policy. "The agenda of the security of Europe will continue to be one of my main concerns as I move on to the European Union", he said. "The experience I have learned here [at NATO] will be without any doubt of great importance for me as I develop the European Security and Defence Identity [ESDI] looking toward the twenty-first century."

Solana added, "I realise a lot of people in the United States are very sensitive about what we are trying to do." Indicating the potential for disagreements to rapidly escalate, Solana said, "I hope we can find ways to calm everybody down."

At the September NATO ministers' conference, US Defence Secretary William S. Cohen had cautioned about developing an independent European defence policy: "What we would insist upon ... is that the Transatlantic link remain strong."

The European Security and Defence Identity should not be "something that is a separate bureaucratic institution, but something constructed under the umbrella of NATO itself", he said. "Whatever developments take place under ESDI, there must be a transparency between NATO and EU, that there should be a sharing of information representatives from EU to NATO. As ESDI is developed the capabilities remain constant with those identified in the Defence Capabilities Initiative so we don't have one set of requirements developing in Europe and a separate set for NATO, which would lead to certainly a disassociation of those kind of requirements and capabilities."

At the September conference, Cohen also

underscored the need for increased military spending, particularly on the part of Europe: "We envision the NATO countries acquiring what we call precision guided munitions. This was demonstrated during the Kosovo conflict, compared for example to Desert Storm, where most of the munitions that were dropped were not precision guided ... those that have them in short supply will have to replenish them and increase their inventories; those that do not have them, we hope that they will turn to them as well for the future."

Washington is keen to spread the financial burden of military operations such as the war against Yugoslavia, while ensuring that the ultimate political and military control remains in their hands. This was Strobe Talbott's message in London.

For their part, the ruling classes in Europe must develop a military capacity commensurate with their economic power, or continue to defer to America. The scramble for influence in the new areas of the globe opened up for exploitation will not be determined by economic factors alone. As in the early days of imperialist expansion, the threat of force must be accompanied by a willingness to apply it.

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