

NATO security conference: US demands more European troops in Afghanistan

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US Defense Secretary Robert Gates used the 44th Munich Security Conference held last weekend to intensify his pressure on the European allied nations organised in NATO.

Referring to the war in Afghanistan, Gates demanded a “fair distribution of the burden” in the transatlantic alliance. He said, “At the same time, in NATO, some allies ought not to have the luxury of opting only for stability and civilian operations, thus forcing other allies to bear a disproportionate share of the fighting and the dying.”

A “two-tiered alliance,” in which the some fought actively and others did the opposite, could not be allowed, he said. “Such a development, with all its implications for collective security, would effectively destroy the alliance,” the defence secretary declared.

Gates stated that his warning of the destruction of NATO was not explicitly directed against any individual member of the alliance, but that he was addressing all members.

There is no doubt, however, that his comments were directed in particular towards Germany. At the end of January, Gates sent a letter to his German counterpart, Franz Josef Jung, a member of Germany’s conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), demanding an expansion of the German contingent and the deployment of German combat troops in the regions of southern Afghanistan that have seen heavy fighting. The tone of the letter clearly articulated US frustration with the stance adopted by Germany.

At the NATO conference in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius last Friday, the American delegation repeated their reproaches to the German side and increased pressure on the German government.

The arrogant manner in which the head of the Pentagon calls for Europeans, and especially the Germans, to contribute to spilling more blood in Afghanistan is quite remarkable. His statement that restrictions placed on the military forces deployed by Germany require the other NATO allies to “bear a disproportionate share of the fighting and dying” is highly provocative.

Although the criticism of American military policy in Iraq made by former chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD) and former foreign minister Joschka Fischer (the Green Party) was, in the end, inconsequential, the

former government had warned America of the consequences arising from such a military adventure. At the Munich Security Conference six years ago, Fischer told then-US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, “I am not convinced.”

Following the confirmation in Iraq of the worst fears raised by European powers at that time, Gates is now blaming the military disaster on those who warned against it. At the same time, he argues in the manner of a military commander who evaluates allied governments on the basis of how many dead soldiers they are prepared to impose on their respective populations.

Gates told the conference that he was quite aware of public opinion in Europe with regard to the war in Afghanistan, and that a majority of the German population rejects the deployment of the German Army in Hindukush. In response, Gates declared that many citizens had not yet understood that the deployment in Afghanistan had to be successful to prevent further attacks such as those that took place in Madrid and London.

In a barely disguised manner, he requested that the German government not back down in the face of broad popular opposition to the war, while at the same time turning reality on its head. The devastating bomb attacks carried out in the Spanish capital in March 2004 and in London in the summer of 2005 were part of the bloody toll the European population has had to pay for the war policies of the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The American “war against terror” has done nothing to make the situation in Europe safer—quite the opposite. The extent of opposition in Europe to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is due, in part, to the fact that broad layers of the European population are aware of these links.

Gates spoke in Munich as the representative of a government that is not only responsible for major war crimes, but has also suffered considerable military setbacks. The resistance in Afghanistan has clearly increased. Gates came to Munich to plead for support from European governments.

The fact that he could make such an aggressive speech at the Security Conference, and threaten a split within NATO, is bound up with the fact that he is well aware of the cowardice of the European governments—especially in Germany.

None of the European representatives used the conference to challenge the disastrous consequences of US military policies or draw a critical balance sheet. Instead, cooperation between both sides of the Atlantic is to be intensified.

At the same time, there are considerable hopes in many European capitals that the presidential elections in the US this autumn will improve the transatlantic climate, in particular if a Democrat enters the White House.

The illusory nature of such hopes was revealed by Joseph Lieberman, the pro-war “independent Democrat” in the US Senate, who spoke directly after Gates in Munich. Lieberman stressed that, with regard to Afghanistan, Gates was representing the position not only of the Bush administration, but rather stating “a cross-party, American position.” Europe could be assured that Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama would have exactly the same policy in Afghanistan, should one of them win the election, Lieberman said.

Evidently, influential sections of the US ruling elite have come to the conclusion that one of the biggest mistakes in Bush’s war policy was that—apart from Great Britain—it did not involve the European governments. In order to achieve this in future, the conflict with Russia is to be intensified. According to American calculations, if Russia is again seen in Europe as a threat, the European NATO partners will be united behind the US, as during the Cold War.

Republican presidential candidate John McCain, who had originally planned to participate in the Munich conference, put forward this view very openly. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* carried an article by McCain the day before the conference headlined “An Old Friendship.” In it, he demands that Russia be thrown out of the G-8, supports the independence of Kosovo, and proposes that a “league of democracies” under US leadership be established as an alternative to the UN.

McCain writes: “We need a unified Western approach to a revanchist Russia whose leaders seem more determined to chart an old course of conflict rather than join the democratic peace of the West. We should start by ensuring that the G-8 becomes again a club of leading market democracies: it should include India and Brazil but exclude Russia.”

He writes that Europe and the US should improve the “range and coordination” of their programmes in order to support “democracy and the rule of law” in countries where these are lacking. Such programmes are important, for example, in Russia, or in Belarus, where a dictatorship continues its repression, he declares. “However, it is also important to offer a helping hand to the transitional democracies in Georgia, Ukraine and the Balkan states,” he adds.

Robert Kagan—one of the most prominent right-wing ideologues in the US—wrote even more clearly in the same newspaper the next day. He is a founding member of the neo-conservative Project for the New American Century think tank, and writes regularly for the *Washington Post*. He begins his

article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, entitled “The Battle of Centuries,” with the statement: “Seen geographically, Russia and the European Union might be neighbours, but geopolitically they live in different centuries.”

While the European Union has overcome the old power politics and is seeking to establish a modern confederation of states, Kagan claims, Russia is caught up in the great power ambitions of the 19th century. “But what would happen now if a 21st century confederation of states is confronted with a great power from that 19th century?” Kagan asks, and he sketches out the scenario of a European-Russian war.

He then outlines the lines of conflict: “In political bottlenecks such as Kosovo, Ukraine and Georgia, as well as in Estonia; in disputes over gas and oil pipelines; in the harsh diplomatic exchange between Russia and Britain; and not least in the unfolding of Russia’s military power, unparalleled in history since the end of the Cold War.”

It is quite conceivable, Kagan writes, that what is heralded by initial tremors along the European-Russian fault line will break out openly. “A crisis in Ukraine, which wants to join NATO, could lead to a direct confrontation with Russia. And the disputes between the Georgian government and the separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, supported by Russia, could escalate into a military conflict between Tiflis and Moscow.” A larger conflict would then be preordained.

Germany’s grand coalition government in Berlin, comprising the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, is reacting to the increasing pressure from the US by gradually adapting and expanding its military missions abroad, while trying to conceal these decisions from the general population. During the Munich conference, *Der Spiegel* published a report claiming that Defence Minister Jung, in confidential discussions with his American counterpart Gates and NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, had agreed to increase the number of German troops in Afghanistan from the current 3,500 to 4,500.

In addition, it was agreed to expand their operational area to the west and extend their mandate in the autumn by 18 months instead of the usual 12, in order to keep this “sensitive topic” (Jung) out of the Bundestag (federal parliament) elections in 2009. Responding to media questions, Jung answered: “I ask for your understanding that I cannot give any information about future mandates.”



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