

Pentagon chief condemns European “pacifism”

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26 February 2010

Amid growing fears in Washington that European powers may withdraw their troops from Afghanistan, just as the US escalates the war there, Defense Secretary Robert Gates delivered a speech blasting Europe for insufficient militarization and warning of a deepening crisis in the NATO alliance.

Gates gave the speech February 23 at Washington’s National Defense University, a training center for mid-level and senior US officers. His audience was a forum on the reworking of the “strategic concept”—essentially the mission statement—of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The revision of the statement is being conducted by a panel led by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and a draft is to be presented to a NATO summit in Lisbon, Portugal in November.

Gates’ remarks came just three days after the Dutch government was brought down over opposition to continuing the deployment of some 2,000 Dutch troops in Afghanistan. The Labor Party, one of the government’s coalition partners, refused to support the extension of the deployment for another year, setting the stage for their withdrawal by the end of 2010.

There is strong popular opposition to the Afghanistan war in the Netherlands, as there is throughout Europe. The concern within US ruling circles is that a Dutch withdrawal could set a precedent for a number of other NATO members pulling out their troops as well.

With the total number of US troops killed in “Operation Enduring Freedom”, centered in Afghanistan, having topped the 1,000 mark, and US generals predicting far bloodier months ahead, Washington is anxious to dampen opposition to the war at home by employing more European soldiers as cannon fodder.

Gates insisted that to achieve this aim, European

powers would have to confront underlying “cultural and political” trends.

“One of the triumphs of the last century was the pacification of Europe after ages of ruinous warfare” he said. “But, as I’ve said before, I believe we have reached an inflection point, where much of the continent has gone too far in the other direction.”

Gates continued: “The demilitarization of Europe—where large swaths of the general public and political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it—has gone from a blessing in the 20th century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st.”

“Not only can real or perceived weakness be a temptation to miscalculation and aggression, but, on a more basic level, the resulting funding and capability shortfalls make it difficult to operate and fight together to confront shared threats.”

The conception that “lasting peace” in the present century can be achieved only by confronting popular aversion to war and building up the armed forces of the continent’s nation states will no doubt be seen as perverse in Europe itself. European militarization in the first half of the last century preceded two world wars and the deaths of tens of millions.

Underlying Gates’ remarks are deepening tensions between Europe and America that threaten to undermine the 60-year-old trans-Atlantic alliance.

In the “post-Cold War, post-9/11 world,” Gates argued, NATO is compelled to shift “from a static, defensive force to an expeditionary force—from a defensive alliance to a security alliance.”

In reality, this supposed transition from defense to “expeditionary” interventions has been driven by an explosive growth of US militarism and the waging of two aggressive wars—in Iraq and Afghanistan—over the

course of the last decade.

Washington is attempting to pressure NATO's European members to bear more of the costs of America's wars, both in terms of money and the lives of their troops.

Gates complained that the Europeans are not pulling their weight. He pointed out that while the Obama administration has proposed a record military budget of over \$700 billion for 2011—5 percent of US GDP—only four of NATO's 26 European members had budgeted more than 2 percent of their GDP for military spending.

As a result, said Gates, NATO "faces very serious, long-term, systemic problems." He pointed in particular to the failure of European NATO states to carry through on proposals to build more cargo planes and helicopters, warning that "their absence is directly impacting operations in Afghanistan."

In what appeared to be a sharp rebuke of unnamed NATO members, the US defense secretary invoked the conditions facing troops in Afghanistan "living in austere conditions, and...facing enemy fire on a daily basis."

"That is a stark reminder that NATO is not now, nor should it ever be, a talk-shop or a Renaissance weekend on steroids," he continued. "It is a military alliance with real-world obligations that have life-or-death consequences."

Divisions within NATO have emerged over a host of issues. In relation to Afghanistan, the Obama administration had requested other NATO countries to join in its "surge" by deploying an additional 10,000 troops. Only 7,000 have been promised, and even this lower figure reportedly includes soldiers already deployed in the country. Moreover, some of NATO's European members have placed restrictions on the mission of their contingents that limit their role in combat.

The European powers have backed the US war in Afghanistan in part out of concern that to withhold support could tear apart the NATO alliance under conditions in which they have no structure to replace it. Moreover, European ruling circles hope to reap some of the spoils of the predatory war, in terms of access to the energy-rich Caspian Basin and the pipeline routes for extracting its oil and gas reserves.

With the election of Barack Obama, European governments had hoped that the unilateralist character

of US policy would be changed and that they would be dealt with as Washington's partners. Despite cosmetic and tactical shifts, however, the US continues to pursue its interests unilaterally, demanding that Europe accept its decisions and line up accordingly.

In ordering the escalation of the Afghanistan war and the deployment of an additional 30,000 US troops, for example, the Obama administration acted without any consultation with the European states, despite the fact that the war and occupation are ostensibly being carried out under NATO's banner.

Sharp divisions have also emerged over NATO expansion, with Germany and France reluctant to bring Washington's client states in Eastern Europe into the alliance and wary of provoking Moscow by pushing NATO to Russia's borders.

Der Spiegel, meanwhile, reports that Germany is demanding that "the US remove its nuclear weapons from German soil." It has allied itself with Norway and the Benelux countries in seeking a discussion of the issue at a NATO conference set for April in Tallinn, Estonia.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton preceded Gates' remarks with her own speech on Monday, ratcheting up intra-NATO tensions and speaking directly to Germany's position on nuclear arms, insisting that they should stay put.

"This dangerous world still requires deterrence and we know there's a debate going on in Europe and even among some of our leading member nations about, well, what does that mean," she said. "We would hope that there is no precipitous move made that would undermine the deterrence capability."



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