Gates reads the riot act to Europe

Patrick Martin
13 June 2011

The speech delivered by outgoing US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to a NATO conference in Brussels Friday amounted to a political ultimatum from American imperialism to its weaker rivals and co-belligerents in Europe. These countries must dramatically increase the money and manpower they devote to US-led military operations or the United States will go its own way and NATO will face a "dim, if not dismal, future."

Gates delivered the speech less than a month after President Obama spelled out his new military doctrine in his speech on the Middle East, sweeping aside past limitations on the use of military force and declaring that any country could be the target of US attack, depending only on whether US interests, as defined by the White House, were at stake. The perspective was one of indefinite warfare to establish neocolonial regimes in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

Now the secretary of defense was telling the European powers that they had to reorganize their own societies to provide the resources required for an enormous expansion of militarism. Otherwise, they face losing out on the booty—the oil that is to be plundered from Libya, and, more generally, access to raw materials and strategic territory.

While praising the NATO countries for contributing troops to the counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan, Gates declared that the Afghan war "has exposed significant shortcomings in NATO—in military capabilities, and in political will." NATO has had difficulty providing sufficient resources—not just troops, but also "crucial support assets such as helicopters, transport aircraft, maintenance, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and much more."

He pointedly warned against NATO countries reducing their deployments in Afghanistan, saying "we cannot afford to have some troop-contributing nations to pull out their forces on their own timeline…"

The alliance's performance in Libya was even worse, Gates said. He rebuked the majority of the NATO countries for failing to contribute sufficient forces—or any forces at all—to the war that began in mid-March. This failure was despite the fact that the war was limited to air strikes, with no commitment of ground troops, and was conducted in a region close to Europe and vital to European security, he said.

The Pentagon chief demeaned in sarcastic terms the military capabilities of many of the nominal "allies" of the United States. "Frankly," he said, "many of those allies sitting on the sidelines do so not because they do not want to participate, but simply because they can't. The military capabilities simply aren't there."

The United States had to supply specialists to identify bomb targets, and even had to supply bombs. He said acidly, "the mightiest military alliance in history is only 11 weeks into an operation against a poorly armed regime in a sparsely populated country—yet many allies are beginning to run short of munitions, requiring the US, once more, to make up the difference."

Speaking with the arrogance of a feudal lord calling his vassals to order, Gates noted the danger of a "two-tiered alliance," in which some countries pulled their weight in combat, but most did not. He singled out Britain, Norway and Denmark for praise, while denouncing the position of unnamed countries—above all, Germany, but also Poland, Italy and Spain—as "unacceptable."

He blamed a "lack of will, much of it from a lack of resources in an era of austerity." But he made clear that budget constraints were no excuse for a failure to devote sufficient funds to the military. "Today, just five of 28 allies—the US, UK, France, Greece, along with Albania—exceed the agreed 2 percent of GDP spending on defense," he said.

Gates concluded by warning that European NATO members ran the risk of "collective military irrelevance," and that "if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US political leaders…may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost."

Just as significant as the speech Gates delivered was the response of his audience of European government and

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military officials. Not one challenged the premise that the NATO alliance must become the spearhead for a series of imperialist wars. None asked the US Pentagon boss, “Who are you to lecture us? Your country is now waging five wars at the same time, and is hated throughout the world.”

On the contrary, the assembled representatives of the European imperialist powers listened to Gates’s diatribe with a mixture of fear, admiration and envy. They have the same appetites for plunder and domination, and they would like to follow the American example of devoting hundreds of billions to the military while spurning the basic needs of the working population. The speech by Gates serves the purposes of the most reactionary elements in European society, who will now cite “American pressure” and the obligations of the NATO alliance as a reason for more attacks on social services and more spending on the military.

Gates did not dwell on the political consequences of such policy changes within the various European states. But editorials the following day in the leading US liberal and rightwing dailies spelled them out.

The *New York Times*, in an editorial headlined, “Telling Truth to NATO,” hailed Gates’s remarks as a salutary warning to the European powers. “As he made clear,” the *Times* declared, “this country can no longer afford to do a disproportionate share of NATO’s fighting and pay a disproportionate share of its bills while Europe slashes its defense budgets and free-rides on the collective security benefits.”

The *Times* condemned “NATO’s shockingly wobbly performance over Libya”—i.e., the refusal or inability of most NATO countries to take part in the war of aggression that has the enthusiastic backing of the liberal milieu.

The newspaper then asked, “What if they had to fight a more formidable enemy than Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi’s fractured dictatorship?” Given that NATO was formed as an alliance against the Soviet Union, a country that no longer exists, it is not clear what “enemy” the Times has in mind. There are numerous candidates, most notably Iran and Syria, but also Russia and China.

The *Wall Street Journal* went further in elaborating on Gates’s critique, naming “a nuclear Iran and a rising China” as potential antagonists of a more heavily militarized NATO alliance. The newspaper drew out more explicitly the implications for domestic social policy, in the United States as well as Europe, editorializing: “As for the US, Europe’s defense decline is an omen of what happens to nations that attempt to finance cradle-to-grave entitlements. They eventually discover that they can’t afford, or are unwilling to pay the price, to defend themselves.”

A similar point was conveyed in the news pages of the *Times*, which quoted Andrew Exum of the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank, arguing, “The Europeans enjoy generous social welfare programs in part because the United States subsidizes their defense spending.”

Eight years ago, when the United States invaded Iraq, the predecessor of Gates at the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld, ridiculed opposition to the war from France and Germany while hailing the support of the small countries of Eastern Europe, along with Britain. On Friday, the current Pentagon boss, rather than counterpoise “old Europe” and “new Europe,” essentially denounced most of Europe as slackers and freeloaders.

The speech by Gates, and its endorsement across the US official political spectrum, sheds new light on the decision to launch the war of aggression against Libya, with Britain and France thrust into a co-leading role. This war is seen as a new model of increased European involvement and commitment of resources, an effort to force much higher military spending on the European countries and off-load some of the military costs.

Beneath the increasingly threadbare and discredited rhetoric about waging war for “human rights” and “democracy,” the reality identified by Lenin and Trotsky a century ago is being reasserted. Imperialism as a world system means the domination of humanity by a handful of oppressor countries, each striving through economic, diplomatic, political and ultimately military action to obtain the upper hand against its rivals.

The logic of imperialist militarism is the eruption of new and more terrible wars, culminating in a global conflagration that would destroy human civilization. The only alternative is the mobilization of the international working class across national borders and on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution.

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