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Transcript

Transatlantic Relations: A Case for Optimism

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Robin Niblett:

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Chatham House. Thankyou very much for joining us on this gorgeous summers evening for our annual Dillon Lecture. As I think you all know, the Dillon Lecture is one of our most longstanding named lectures here at Chatham House. It's a lecture that is broadly meant to cover the topic of US-European relations, or Transatlantic relations.

It was created in honour of Douglas Dillon, who was Undersecretary of the Treasury under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, in 1961-5, Undersecretary of State for President Eisenhower from 1959-61, Ambassador of France back in the late 1950s, and somebody who was particularly knowledgable of, and close to, Chatham House and this is a lecture that we were able to create in his honour some years ago now. And its just wonderful that we have George Robertson, Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, giving us the lecture this year. Not least because he's eminently well qualified to do it. But also because he has been now for ten years serving as one of our three co-Presidents, and will retire from that position at our Annual General Meeting in July.

And so being able to press upon him to do this at this stage was particularly good from our stand point as it gives us the chance not only to get the benefits of your insights, but also to thank you for the fantastic work that you've done as President of Chatham House in all my time here as Director, and seen Chatham House through from a period of being a little bit under siege to being now in a position of considerably greater strength.

So we are going to hear from George Robertson on this topic, Transatlantic Relations: A Case for Optimism. And its been all too easy in the last few years to do the case for pessimism in the last few years, and there may be a few here afterwards who may want to challenge George on his case for optimism, but I know he will make it extremely forcefully. George Robertson is a former Defence Secretary of the UK from 1997-99, former Secretary General of NATO between 1999-2003. A long and distinguished parliamentary career starting off as a parliamentary private secretary in 1979, a number of ministerial positions including at the FCO, Spokesman for European Affairs, and a number of important positions he has held in the non-governmental sector, including now being the Chairman of Ditchley. So in a way, out of Chatham House and into another of the great institutions of the UK.

George thankyou very much for taking the time to prepare and give this lecture here tonight. So once again, welcome to Chatham House.

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

In the wake of US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates' final speech in office, berating as it did European allies for their growing uselessness in the security field, my title may seem at best generous and at worst delusional. I need to explain.

First of all I agree with Secretary Gates. Indeed in his forensic and scathing criticism of the Europeans he may well have pulled some punches. The situation is grave. Let me remind you of what he said just four weeks ago.

On Afghanistan he rightly highlighted the upside of the war which NATO unanimously took on under my stewardship in 2001. He highlighted that in 2006, when he took over as US Defence Secretary, there were about 20,000 non-US troops from NATO nations. Today it is 40,000 and 850 non-US troops have been killed. He pointed out that with these new resources and new strategies there has, in his words, been a decisive change 'in the military momentum on the ground, with the Taliban ejected from their former strongholds'.

But he went on to outline the downside too. 'The ISAF mission has exposed significant shortcomings in NATO – in military capabilities and in political will.' He added, echoing the sentiments I and my successors at NATO HQ relentlessly made in our time, 'Despite more than 2 million troops in uniform, not counting the US military – NATO has struggled at times desperately, to sustain a deployment of 25-40,000 troops, not just in boots on the ground, but in crucial support assets such as helicopters, transport aircraft, maintenance, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and much more.'

And then he turned to the Libya mission and again his message was brutal: 'While every alliance member voted for the Libya mission, less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission.' He went on, 'We have the spectacle of an air operations centre designed to handle more than 300 sorties a day struggling to launch about 150. Furthermore 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.'

His valedictory message ended with a none-too-veiled warning about the US commitment to an alliance where during the Cold War US defence expenditure on NATO made up 50 percent of all NATO military spending, and where 20 years after the end of that war it was now running at 75 percent.

'The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the US Congress – and in the American body politic writ large – to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defence.' So there it is. Straight on the chin. He may now have demitted office, but Bob Gates' words should put a shiver down the collective European spine.

So, given that clarion call, why on earth should someone come here and make a case for optimism? After all I am not one to be mesmerised by fine words about underlying bonds of common values and common barbecues in Number 10 gardens. They don't provide helicopters and precision bombs.

I rest my case for optimism because the European members of NATO have suddenly been made aware more than ever before that their Emperor is stark naked. Finally the US has said, and done, what it threatened for many years – and that is to demand that Europe protects its own interests through its own means. And this time, over Libya, it has done just that.

The comfortable illusion – even delusion – that if something happened in Europe or its back yard, be it Bosnia, Kosovo and now Libya, then the US would always be there to fill the yawning, inexcusable gaps in our capabilities, has now been exposed for the nonsense it was. And in that delusion-free atmosphere we can forge a new, albeit uncomfortable and expensive, relationship. We will have no other choice left.

The old relationship was, anyway, time limited. Based as it was on Cold War ties of confronting a common Soviet opponent and with lingering memories of how transatlantic divisions early in the Second World War brought us close to Nazi victory, its relevance today in terms of glue was wearing thin.

Of course the transatlantic link did matter, and indeed still does, because the 'West' still has business in confronting the dark side of globalisation. The developed world has much to lose from the perils of terrorism, organised crime, cyber warfare, failed states, nuclear proliferation, pandemics, population movements – as well as from the backwash from looming resource conflicts – energy, water and food. But the terms of political trade have changed dramatically. Austerity, budget balancing, burden sharing, economic interdependence and financial interconnectivity have signalled a revolution in political affairs.

With the migration of power and influence as well as economic muscle from west to east and south, and from mature and stable democracies to the new

emerging powers with their own sharp elbows and ambitions, Europe and the US still need each other – but not in the same old, unbalanced way.

I'm reminded of the old Soviet-era joke. 'We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us'. The US picked up the tab for European security and the Europeans let them dictate the policy. That may have been good enough for yesterday's grand bargain but it assuredly is out of time for today's multi-faceted and complex world. Robert Gates, a Republican working for a Democrat President has now called time.

When I was Defence Secretary of this country attending a meeting of NATO Defence Ministers, my good friend US Defence Secretary William Cohen (another outstanding Republican working for a Democrat President) complained of the contradictory voices he heard at such meetings. Some said; 'Yanks go home, we can look after our own affairs.' Others said 'Americans stay, your security is our security.' I replied 'Bill, if you can't ride two horses, why are you in this circus?' But frankly that's not good enough, even as a joke, today.

In NATO I once made a speech rather similar to the Gates one, calling the European Union an economic giant but a military pygmy. This incensed the French Ambassador to NATO, my friend Benoit D'Abboville, who confronted me in the NATO Council. He thundered that anthropologically pygmies were small but were also fully grown. In contrast he insisted the EU's military capability was new and still growing. It was therefore premature to judge it.

That was 10 years ago and my accusation is still horribly valid today. I ask my fellow Europeans this, have we no pride? Why are we content to flex economic muscle (the Eurozone crises notwithstanding) but remain so feeble and incompetent when it comes to hard power?

This country, the US and Europe are now involved in two wars. In Afghanistan and in the continuing attempt to permanently protect civilians in Libya from a merciless and brutal dictator. We are investing huge amounts of money and thousands of lives and limbs in asserting our values and in protecting our interests and safety in two continents but do we really mean business?

Are we in both conflicts to win or just go through the motions? I ask that question because I am having genuine doubts about the capacity of the main players to achieve victory rather than declaring it. If you want to win, and I passionately believe that we have to win, then you have to look as if you want to win. It is crucially important that your own population knows why we are in these conflicts. Praising and honouring the men and women who are fighting

is right but wholly insufficient. They need to know and so do the electorate that the mission matters and that sacrifices in terms of money and lives lost and brutalised have a purpose.

And crucially the enemy whether in Tripoli or in the Tora Bora caves needs to know precisely why we are there and why they have to be defeated. Constant repetition and reinforcement of the mission and the message 'NATO does not do losing' is an absolute requirement.

So too is preparing for victory. In the case of Libya, why are we not already planning for the stabilisation force which will be required if Col Gaddafi's mercenary force capitulates? In the latter stages of the Kosovo conflict it was the reinforcement of the 'peacekeepers' in Macedonia by Gurkhas and Paras which made the Serb Generals believe their game was coming to an end. We had looked them in the eye, physically through CNN as well as metaphorically, and told them that we would go on until we had achieved our aims – Serbs out, NATO in, refugees home. For the whole 78 days of the conflict we held press conferences with variations on that simple message and it eventually got through to the military high command – and Milosovic himself – in Belgrade.

But where is that sense of purpose in the wars of today?

Put yourself in the command bunkers of the Taliban and Col Gaddafi and look through their eyes at what they confront. The policy on Afghanistan is now taking place on costs and staged draw-downs in the context of the US primary and presidential election framework and a target for withdrawal by the UK seems based on the next general election date.

In neither case are we transmitting the idea that withdrawal should be based on success on the ground and on the defeat of the enemy. We parade our weaknesses and we undersell our manifest successes. We debate withdrawal, its pace and size, without reference to what we leave behind and we do so as if the antennae in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border regions and in the Tripoli basements don't pick it up. They watch every move we make.

No modern war was won on military force alone. Psychology has always played a huge part and demoralising the enemy has a vital utility. Our Prime Minister has been to Helmand province in Afghanistan this week. Good; his presence helps get over the importance of what is being done and achieved into public consciousness.

But how much better might the visit have been if he had been accompanied by the Leader of the Opposition and the Deputy Prime Minister? That would

have shown the troops, and this country and importantly the Taliban that this was not just a war by the British government but by the nation as a whole? I did that exercise during Kosovo and I know it had the three effects.

I have in the past, and to general astonishment, quoted Leon Trotsky in this context and I do so again. At another time and about another war he said, 'You may not be interested in this war, but this war is interested in you.' And these are wise and relevant words today.

Afghanistan is not like Vietnam, a comparison regularly and foolishly made. A premature exit from Afghanistan would not leave that country to fade into Taliban dominated remoteness and isolation. You only have to look at what happened when the Soviet troops left. For four years we ignored that country having helped expel the Red Army, only to see the Taliban take over and offer free rein to Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaida.

If the Taliban managed to win against NATO, and that's precisely what a premature election timetable-driven withdrawal would mean, then the shock waves will certainly not stop in Afghanistan. The parasite Bin Ladenites will return to their favoured terrain and the war of terror will once again engulf the world. It is said that not foreseeing 9/11 was a failure of imagination. We now face a total absence of imagination.

Where is the next surprise going to hit us? We were caught of guard by the collapse of the Berlin Wall, by the disintegration of the Soviet Union just 30 months after they exited Afghanistan, by the global financial crisis, by the Japanese earthquake and tsunami and then by the Arab spring. Are we ready for the next surprise? Have we the tools to deal with what might come next? Will we be forgiven if we not only don't forecast the next surprise but are incapable of dealing with it whatever it may be? That's why capability tool-boxes are so essential, why defence investment is so important and why a range of instruments both physical and human are so pivotal. And it is why their absence at this juncture is such an indefensible outrage.

All of this does not sound optimistic I grant but within it I assure you there is a case being made.

Some contend there is a crisis for NATO. It has taken on two major commitments and neither seems to be going well. The organisation, say the critics, has taken on too much and it cannot deliver.

I say this to them. NATO is not some monolith. It is the sum of the nations who make it up. Its permanent staff is tiny but high quality. Its headquarters is a slum but effective. All its decisions are taken unanimously and are the

property of the nations, not the bureaucracy. If NATO nations take on Afghanistan unanimously and take on Libya unanimously and then surround operations with caveats, limitations and no-shows then that is the failure of those national governments, not of NATO.

Atlanticism is no longer lived, it has to be learned. For those of us committed to that sentiment this is a hard fact. If countries in Europe want to confront the security challenges of today and tomorrow and not a single one of them has a purely national solution, and in the process guarantee their people the safety my generation has enjoyed, then it will not be achieved by voting for it in the NATO Council chambers and then walking on. That sadly is happening too often.

When President Obama supported the rescue mission in Libya, but pulled back to let the Europeans lead, he performed a great favour to our continent. He has forced the European nations to confront their own destiny and he has precipitated a rebalancing in the Alliance, one which so often in the past has been shirked and avoided.

In coming weeks as the Libya drama comes to a climax and as the debate on Afghanistan sharpens on what happens next, the European nations will have to make a decision on what kind of transatlantic relationship they want, or need, or value. The option of grumbling dependency is over. An era of shared responsibility and mutual contribution is about to dawn.

President Obama and Robert Gates have truly started something, and I am, as a consequence, optimistic that the result will be a reinvigorated and renewed transatlantic relationship ready for the next generation.

Robin Niblett:

George, thank you very much for those remarks. It strikes me at the end that maybe you were talking about the case for the *need for* optimism rather than the *case for* optimism because I think in the end you were making an appeal to be fair rather than a statement and maybe this is something we can get into in a few minutes in the questions.

But I was struck throughout by a number of key points. As you said, you agree with Bob Gates and the various points he's made about the European military shortfalls. It did strike me when I saw the speech come out... we've now gone from spending 50 percent to 75 percent. It does of course include the fact that the US military spending has gone up hugely as a result of its commitments to Iraq and of Afghanistan which in a kind of way have

unbalanced perhaps somewhat the contributions in terms of numbers and maybe that's something that we can come to.

Nonetheless the point you're making is that the case for optimism is built around the fact that we are now in – your phrase – a 'delusion-free atmosphere', that we can see on the European side that we are naked in the gap between our intentions and our capabilities but as you pointed out, our ability to get from that realization to then making some of the right decisions is going to rely on a sense of shared interests and one of the things perhaps we can get into in a minute in the discussion is what are the shared interests.

And my concern again, just reacting to some of your points there, is that Afghanistan and Libya are almost becoming the future of a NATO *a la carte*; Afghanistan maybe as US-UK and maybe Libya as not US and its France-UK and the interests may not end up coming as much together.

Again, maybe this is something we can discuss in a minute; in other words, do we have a sufficiently common sense of what our shared security interests are to be able to then build this case for optimism now that we cannot be as deluded about who we were in the past.

In any case, those are some of the points I'd like us to be able to draw out. You'll have many others of your own and I'll draw out a little bit now from the floor some questions. We've got a good 25 minutes to be able to have discussion.

Question 1:

Firstly, what's your opinion of attempts to create negotiations between America and the Taliban? Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing? And the second question, leading on from that, is why do you believe that the Taliban can actually be defeated?

Question 2:

How can we have a strategy without a partner in Afghanistan? With the Karzai criminal patriot and its network government as our ally how can we ever expect to win? What is winning when that's a partner?

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

Well the Taliban is not a monolithic organization. It's made up of a lot of random people who are fighting and I think that some of them would be quite content to do some deal and would be part of any future government of Afghanistan. They are not all violent. They don't all see things through Al Qaida's eyes and some of them I think would have deeply resented the way in which being host to Al Qaida brought what happened to Afghanistan and we actually know quite a lot of these people because, as Lord Carrington was saying last week at a meeting we were at, he said: 'I hope you people realise when I was Foreign Secretary I used to give a lot of your money to the Taliban.'

So we provided them with a lot of money and support in order to get rid of the Soviet Union, so this is not a blank sheet. I think we've got a lot experience, especially in this country, of dealing with people who were nominated as terrorists to make the transition there. I don't see any great problem of trying to divide the Taliban into those who are unreconstructive and those who might want a peaceful future for Afghanistan without them dominating everything there.

Why do I think they can be defeated? Well they were defeated. They were militarily defeated after 9/11 and in 2001 and they can be defeated again. But that's not what defeat actually means. Coming back to the question, it's what is winning about. It's creating an Afghanistan that is stable. It's not going to be Switzerland, but we've left the Balkans imperfect but people are not killing each other, advances have been made, the normalization is what we're talking about but they've had two rounds of elections in Afghanistan. They're now used to having a choice. Some three million people are back at school in Afghanistan. Two-thirds of the violence in Afghanistan today is confined to four of the Afghanistan provinces, so success has actually been made on the ground. Even I was surprised to see some of these figures because we don't hear enough about it, so I think we can actually start working towards a degree of normalization in the country.

Our partners there might not be perfect. They certainly are not going to be. They come from a completely different tradition but you have to deal with what you've got. You can't pick and choose – that's the last thing on earth that you're trying to do – and they will evolve.

Robin Niblett:

You mentioned the Balkans in the comparison here. There was a long-term western presence and continues to be a presence in parts of the Balkans. I mean how do you see that playing out with the kind of troop withdrawal pressures that exist in Washington and in London obviously at the moment? Are we going to need to prepare people for a different type of presence for a longer term or do you think we really can pull out in the kind of time lines that people are discussing for Afghanistan?

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

No, I don't think you can and I think a terrible mistake is being made by trying to bring people out before you have created the progress.

In the Balkans we had 65,000 NATO troops in Bosnia in 1995 and they were drawn down relentlessly after that depending on the circumstances that prevailed in the country and now it's what, 3,000 paramilitaries under an EU badging? But we brought them down very substantially, but we did it in a measured way.

To simply say we've got an election coming up, we've therefore got to start taking the troops out, just when the military believe that we're on the cusp of really starting to make an impression, seems to me to give precisely the wrong signal at the present moment.

A lot of people have died – and I've met some of the soldiers who have been badly injured as well and they are casualties there – are we going to say that their sacrifice wasn't worth it; that we are getting tired of it, the electorate are getting tired of it? Partly we're getting tired of it because we don't hear about it. You hear of Help for Heroes but you don't actually hear that relentless drum beat of repetition about why we're there and why it matters to people in this country.

My former Permanent Secretary who is sitting at the back of the room now will remember how we struggled sometimes to keep the press conferences going day after day but I can tell you, I meet people to this day who watched every one of these things, sometimes in the most horrible of circumstances, and it gave them hope that they were going to be rescued. And I've met Serb military who got rattled by the fact that they were being lectured everyday. Any visiting politician who came through London was immediately hijacked and frogmarched in front of a camera to say this is why we're there and we're not going to give up; you guys are going to be defeated.

At the end of the day it was not as easy as people think and it turned on a sixpence at the end of it but the psychological war was much more important frankly than bombing from 15,000 feet.

Robin Niblett:

It may be an underlying question but I want to come to at some point is this kind of pre and post Iraq alliance and the extent to which the Iraq war perhaps has taken away some of that strength [inaudible].

Question 3:

I must say, I hope that Lord Robertson you're right, that we're on a success but I must say history worries me. Twice the Afghans have not only beaten but humiliated in one case two major powers. In the 19th Century the British were absolutely shattered by Afghanistan and in the last century the Russians, another powerful nation, were also defeated. Now what is different now? I mean there is certainly not much sign of success but what is different now which gives up hope in Afghanistan?

Question 4:

The Americans have saved our bacon in two world wars. In view of NATO's weakness, do you think we can count on them a third time?

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

Well let me deal with that. I don't think there's going to be a world war and I think if it came to that, they're part of an alliance. I invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty – an attack on one, is an attack on all – and actually at that time I read carefully the debates that took place in the United States Senate about the North Atlantic Treaty. It went through against the grain of public opinion in the United States. A certain senator got up and said: 'I know what this is all about.' He said the Europeans are going to get involved in a war again and they will expect the United States to fight it for them. So it's a bit ironic that on 12 September 2001 Article 5 is invoked for the first time in solidarity with an attack on the United States of America.

So there is no question that alliance solidarity exists and it is absolutely there. What we're talking about here are things where it is not an attack on a nation state and Libya is a classic example. It is in Europe's backyard, Europe's

interests are affected. Refugees pouring into Lampedusa Island and coming into Italy. The Mediterranean is a channel for all of the instability that is there and I think the Americans are right to say the European Union accounts for one-quarter of global GDP, just the same as the United States, they can look after it. So in these terms the United States has said and now done what they threatened to do and say: 'You look after it.' And I think people have got to waken up to what that actually means for the people in Europe.

I've spent a lifetime in politics and I've thought at times and debated with colleagues about what is a sure fire way of losing an election, breaking promises, doing u-turns, changing your complexion, even changing parties? No, that doesn't do it. Lose a war, that's one sure fire way of losing an election and I think people need to remember that.

History? Well I got a [inaudible] grade in history at school and I'm not sure it helped me greatly on but you're absolutely right, Afghanistan has humiliated two great Empires in its time but we live in a modern world. We live in the world of globalization. We live in a world where the internet connects people. We live in a world, and Afghanistan, where people voted in huge numbers for the first time in Afghanistan's history and liked the way of doing it, were deeply disturbed by the way in which the last election was conducted and that will eventually count for something as well.

But I remember chairing during my presidency the meeting when President Karzai came here and talked and was asked a question: 'What are you doing about the drugs in Afghanistan; people are worried about the heroine transportation?' And he said, 'if you would buy our fruit, you wouldn't need to buy our poppies.'

And I think that's the world we live in. We actually can do something now that the Soviets couldn't do and that the British Empire couldn't do. We can bring them in as part of a global community. The world has changed; much much smaller, much more interconnected, and I think Afghanistan and indeed Pakistan are moving, albeit slowly, in that direction and that's what gives me heart; that we can and we should make them part of that global community.

Question 5:

You've said repeatedly the Americans have pointed to European economic muscle and military underdevelopment. Do you think their expectations of the European nations are realistic given divides within Europe? If you look at Baltic military policy it's very much geared to what they perceive as a Russian

threat and European nations are committed to their own national defences, NATO and a European joint strike force, so they are committed to more than America.

Question 6:

I want to pick up if I may one of Robin's points which is; is your optimism a hope to be optimistic or is it actually a reality that we can be optimistic? And I'll posit the argument that mutual interests isn't enough. Even let's hypothetically say we do within the NATO member countries have mutual interests, but that isn't enough. You actually have to have a threat that you're responding to and if that's true, what is the threat that we're going to have to all come together to respond to? What does that look like and are we going to see one? Is that going to be enough?

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

The expectations. The point I made about the Europeans is that there is actually quite a lot of money around. The Europeans have got the money to be able to do it. Are they going to change? Well a lot of countries are beginning to do it.

Your biggest and best example is Germany. Under Mr Guttenberg, who now has departed from politics, they started the process of abolishing conscription. Now that is a momentous decision by the Germans. I used to go there and was mired in controversy every time I went, saying, why is it that Germany has got 320,000 troops in the Bundeswehr and it can deploy a maximum of 9,000 troops outside of German borders? What on earth are the German taxpayers paying for 320,000 people in uniform when they are basically useless in that category?

So the penny has dropped and Germany is now doing that. There's other things in Germany that give me more to worry about but there is a transformation taking on in people's view about how their armed forces should be configured. So if that money is moved into more productive areas then more capability will be produced and I think that Libya has shown that Europe is going to have to do more in this area.

There's a big preoccupation with the Eurozone crisis at the moment which is perfectly understandable but Libya is staring us in the face. We either win in Libya, and there are people who say, well over the next couple of weeks it's

going to happen, he'll crack, it'll all happen; and there's other people who say, here's another Cyprus, a divided country for the next 30 years.

Time will tell but if you want the option of a free Libya you have to make it happen and only the Europeans are going to be in a position to do it and there are signs of it growing. So that allows me to be slightly more hopeful than I might have sounded. But it's the wake-up call of how hopeless we are in Libya that encourages me to think that people will now start thinking about pulling resources, about sharing resources more on the model of the AWACS fleet that is commonly owned by 16 nations in NATO. The model is there. The example is there. The money is there – and it can be done – but I always have said since I came out of NATO that I'm a conditional optimist. I'm optimistic if people recognise that there's something out there.

What's the threat? Well there are lots of threats. I tell you this, if we prematurely leave Afghanistan, we will know what the threat is, and that's what should focus the policy-makers' minds. If we come out, will we have to go back in again? The threat will certainly be there but that range of threats can't be dealt with by one country, even the United States on its own, and people need to focus on the fact that it isn't a simple world now of the Soviet Union over there with nuclear missiles and vast troops, which all turn out to have been hopeless and useless anyway, simple to portray, simple to sell. It's more complicated now but it's actually no less dangerous as it gets out of control.

Robin Niblett:

Even if there is this moment of removing delusion, Germans and making steps on Bosnian conscription, you said some better examples, other countries as well are either specializing or pooling, we could end up with a NATO that is relatively robust from a capability standpoint but if NATO has to be out of area in the future, is it always going to be *a la carte* in terms of who's involved?

Now as you said at the beginning, we can't have a situation as Bob Gates said where everyone votes in favour of an action but then only certain countries get involved. Is that a false wish? In other words, maybe that is the reality of the future; that if NATO is looking out of area you will have people who are all capable of participating but where inevitably in the future only certain ones will. But can you foresee such a NATO? Would you accept such a NATO? Or is that just the beginning of the end?

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

No, it's the beginning of a new NATO. I came to NATO when they'd allowed three of the Warsaw Pact countries to come in, the [inaudible], the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and that was quite a big thing to swallow.

The generals there all spoke Russian and had been trained as part of the Warsaw Pact and I brought in seven countries including three that had been part of the Soviet Union, so that gobbled up another thing. It strengthened NATO politically but in many ways made it more complicated and more difficult to get decisions. I found it very difficult to get decisions among 19. I think Rasmussen has got a real nightmare trying to make it with the 27/28 that he's got just now and the Balkan states are going to want to come in – we'll have Bosnia coming in, we'll have Montenegro has applied, Macedonia when it's sorted out the crazy name situation will come in. I think Serbia will come in undoubtedly and I think eventually you're talking about a completely different security organization and in that you can't have unanimity and unanimous purpose.

There will have to be people who say, we'll vote in favour of the mission but we don't happen to believe it happens but we'll pay for it. That's going to be the critical [inaudible]. If people can't opt out completely having made the critical decision... but we have to be ready for new models but still keep the same sense of resolution and the same sense of common values but also a common appreciation of the threat and how to deal with it.

Robin Niblett:

The paying part is something I think one of your successors, Liam Fox, made precisely on that point.

Question 7:

Just returning to Germany. They've got the most people outside the US, they've got the most money and they've got the least willingness. What would you be saying to a German audience? You've already addressed this to some extent.

Question 8:

You say that after the defeat of the Soviets, and there were the few years where the jihadis including Bin Laden, the Taliban, were created and left. If

we look at the recent history, then we look at the fact that jihadis we created, the US, Saudi Arabia. I remember in the 1980s, jihad was celebrated, it was [inaudible] the newspapers. Bin Laden was sent.

Of course after they defeated the Soviet infidels then they were looking for other infidels to fight and the Taliban as well, who were the students in the madrasas of Pakistan.

So my question really is, what can we learn from recent history about their ideology and what is remnant of it today, and also perhaps dealing with the powers in the region, who can help people who still have the telephone numbers of the Taliban and know how to speak to them?

Question 9:

My question is related to investment in foreign relations notwithstanding your point about the inefficiency with which Europe spends its taxpayers' money. It's really related to the fact that people in this room are not representative of the population at large with an interest in foreign relations and that a number of senior politicians have expressed a view that there are no votes in defence or more widely in aid or diplomacy or soft power even. So I'd just like your general thoughts on how you think politicians in this country or other European countries of any political hue should make the case for investment in foreign relations and defence in particular. Thank you.

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

Actually I did address a German audience last Friday in Munich with nobody from the political classes present. They were a bunch of industrialists who wanted to hear about energy policy but it was interesting how they reacted to what I said.

And I'm a great friend of Germany and have longstanding connections. I think they're just abdicating at the moment and it's incomprehensible how they could have not voted in the Security Council for the Resolution on Libya, remarkable that they don't send any equipment for the strikes on Libya and yet at the same time Mr Westerwelle goes to Benghazi and recognizes the rebel government unilaterally.

So there are contradictions which have to do with I think German domestic politics which they need to sort out if they want to fix their position. Closing down all the nuclear power stations and making themselves dependent on

dirty coal from Poland and nuclear power from France seems to me to be slightly contradictory but you know, you can live with a lot of contradictions in politics but the Germans at the moment seem to be living with quite a number of them as well.

But I would be blunt and straightforward to a German audience, and I was and they appreciated it, I have to say, and many of them agreed with it there as well.

How do you get the message about defence over? Well you can only do it by repeating and repeating and repeating the message and we've got an audience at the moment today. There is a huge support for our troops in Afghanistan. Help for Heroes was set up to raise money for a swimming pool at the hospital for injured soldiers and has now raised £25 million. There's people collecting in every street in the land. Wootton Bassett became a signal to honour the dead coming back from Afghanistan.

So the climate of interest is there. What's missing is the political leadership that links that to the message that a victory by the Taliban and by Al Qaida in Afghanistan relates to our own security and here we are, sitting on the eve of 7/7 and the bombings in London, and I in my office was just beside Edgware Tube Station, I remember that day vividly. We should be able to get over the message that what happened then can happen again and will happen again if we revitalize Al Qaida by getting out prematurely from Afghanistan.

After the Soviet Union left, we left them alone. The movie Charlie Wilson's War which I've only seen recently because I thought it was a joke but Charlie Wilson was an American Congressman who beat up the Congress, raised huge amounts of money in order to send arms to the Taliban and their ilk and the moment victory was achieved and the Soviet Union left, he was still shouting for money to invest in hospitals and in schools and in jobs in Afghanistan and there was no interest. The doors were closed. The doors that opened for rocket propelled grenades were not in the slightest bit interested in talking about the schools. So for years Najibullah dangled until eventually the Taliban took over. We should learn from that recent history and make the investment now because it will guarantee our security in the future.

Question 10:

Thank you for your conditional optimism and masterly talk, and I do share your feeling about Libya; that rebalancing, if successful, could of course have

implications in terms of European freedom of manoeuvre, self-confidence, perhaps wanting to do things a little differently.

Can we go right out of area to tomorrow's tensions rather than today's, to China. The Americans have a strategic relationship with China. It's often adversarial. It has quite a lot of commercial attachments to it. We as Europeans rather stay out of strategic dialogue, it's too complicated, and yet one could say we lose thereby. The Chinese for their part would like some sort of strategic relationship with Europe. There are areas like Africa we could discuss with them. Do you think that we should have strategic relationship with China? Does our relationship with the US and the way in which NATO functions actually preclude what would be in our interest as Europeans in the commercial and broader political relationship with China and if so, where in Europe would we situate a strategic relationship with China?

Question 11:

One quick question on the responsibility to protect. When we went into Libya we had the advantage of the Arab League's say-so and the United Nations' sanction. It is quite clear that both Russia and China are quite likely to veto any other responsibility to protect intervention. What authority can we accept if the United Nations is not going to be available to us, Security Council at least?

Question 12:

How much contempt do you think there is in the Pentagon for the European military and particularly the British military after we came out of Basra early, we needed their help to come back in to look after us there and we've needed extra help in Afghanistan also?

Robin Niblett:

They are three big questions to finish up with. Let me just [inaudible] the one on China because I did want to mention, hoping you might touch somewhere on the SDSR, Strategic Defence and Security Review that took place here, and that kind of big question I'm not so sure got fully covered in that. I'm going to mangle your quote; something about the fastest strategic failure I think or something like that you called it, the SDSR, not keeping up with realities and future threats? Maybe as you answer that comment about China,

because that could be a huge answer, but are we really thinking about it in the kind of strategic way that Michael raised?

Rt Hon Lord Robertson:

I can't do Michael's question any credit in the last couple of seconds but I think we need to reach out to China, to India and to Brazil because they've got ambitions and they've got money and they're not going to simply follow along in the wake of western powers.

When NATO went into Afghanistan I was careful enough to go and talk to President Putin, tell him what we were going to do. I went to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and to speak to the presidents there. I spoke to General Musharraf on the phone in Pakistan and we spoke to the Chinese through the Chinese Ambassador to Belgium and at that time we were having a problem with the French who were basically saying yes, we'll take on ISAF but no NATO flags are to fly in Kabul; we'll take over the operation but we're not going to separate NATO. So I asked the Chinese Ambassador who had got his instructions, 'what do you think?' He said, 'we want NATO to go into Afghanistan, we want a stable Afghanistan and if you can do it then we will support you.' And I said, 'what about NATO flags' – 'as many as you can fly!' I thought that was good and it seemed at that point that they had forgotten the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade but they hadn't.

The responsibility to protect. Well that's a very good question I must say that you asked and I hope you ask the leader of your party as well about that.

I worry about the rhetoric of the present government in relation to Libya. They never waste an opportunity on making a debating point that this is not Iraq, we've got a Security Council Resolution. If you paint yourself into that corner we'll never do anything again because you are then hostage to any veto in the Security Council and as Jeremy Greenstock knows, that's serious politics. But you know in order to make a point about Blair and Iraq, they're painting us and generally those who believe in the responsibility to protect, into a very dangerous little corner or cul-de-sac as well and we need to watch very carefully about that if something happens in the rest of world are we going to be stopped by the fact that we can't get a Security Council Resolution.

I remember 24 March 1999 when we started attacking military targets in Yugoslavia at that time without a Security Council Resolution, brand new territory. We didn't know when it was going to finish and we were starting something where there was completely fresh ground. Every nation found its

own legal mandate to do it and retrospectively the UN gave the mandate to us after that but let us be very, very careful on that front.

Contempt among the Americans? Among some for the British contribution but not much. I think we perhaps – and I'm as guilty as anybody else – thought that our experience in Northern Ireland gave us an edge in dealing with these kind of urban conflicts and sort of urban guerrilla conflicts. What we forgot was that our infantry changes all the time. We recruit young soldiers and they can only be young in the infantry, so the people on the streets actually didn't have that collective wisdom, didn't have that background of the fighting in Northern Ireland, so we lost our edge in that area rather quickly but we're building it back again and I think that the Americans have got a huge respect for what we're doing in Helmand Province, absolutely full respect.

Robin Niblett:

George, I think if you keep making the case for optimism I think we're going to be convinced.

Great set of remarks, thoughtful, drawing on the history, as would befit the Dillon Lecture, as I know has befitted and benefited Chatham House now for the past ten years with your very sage advice as a President of Chatham House. Fortunately you're remaining on our panel of senior advisers and our North American Advisory Council and other affiliations with Chatham House. We're not going to let you go that quickly, especially not now with your newly minted KCMG adding more lustre to us as well as to you for your association.

A great set of remarks. I know we will be returning and working on these topics. Thank you very much for taking the time, thank you for posing tough but great questions and we look forward to having you back again very soon. Thank you.