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Transcript

The Future of the Atlantic Alliance

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Jaap de Hoop Scheffer:

In a week's time, I will leave my job as Secretary General of NATO. The five-and-a-half years that I have had the privilege to lead the Alliance have been immensely rewarding. And I will step down with considerable nostalgia.

But I did not come to Chatham House to indulge in regrets. Anyone who has held this unique position for such a long period, and who has had to deal with so many issues and challenges, would want to use their final weeks in office to contemplate what he has been able to achieve, and which thoughts they would wish to pass on to their successor.

So the first question that must be faced is inevitably: in what shape am I leaving the organization? How did it look on the day I took over, and have I been able to strengthen it?

Here I believe that I can give a positive answer. When I took over in January 2004 the Atlantic Alliance was badly bruised from the political fallout of the Iraq war. There was also considerable uncertainty about NATO's future as a viable transatlantic framework. Many pundits spoke of NATO becoming a mere 'toolbox', and future missions being driven by 'coalitions of the willing'. There were predictions of a new era of selective American multilateralism, with NATO being sidelined by shifting country groupings. And in several quarters on this side of the Atlantic, there was equally radical talk about Europe needing to be a 'counterweight' to the United States.

Today, such loose talk has disappeared. There is no serious political force on either side of the Atlantic that favours NATO's dissolution. After an interval of nearly half a century, France has returned to the Alliance's integrated military structure. We have just taken in two new members - Albania and Croatia - and several more countries are knocking on our door. We increasingly work with the rest of the world, and the rest of the world increasingly wants to work with us. In short, NATO is widely accepted as an essential element of the European and indeed, international security order.

NATO today - 60 years after its creation - is busier than ever. We are being called upon to undertake more and more missions and operations, and to turn our

attention not just to immediate threats but also to longer term challenges such as cyber attacks, disruptions in our energy supply and vital lines of communication, piracy and the inevitable security implications of climate change.

If this would be the whole story, I could end my speech right here – which would significantly increase my chances of getting nice applause from this audience for successful management of NATO. But of course, the story doesn't end here. For it is precisely the growing demands that are being made of NATO that are causing a dangerous mismatch: we are trying to develop a 21st century Alliance, but we do so with a 20th century mindset.

I believe that we have a generally sound intellectual understanding of the new security challenges. Yet our understanding of the very concept of alliance – of how an alliance works and what it can achieve in meeting these challenges – has not kept pace. Whether we admit it or not, we still expect NATO to function the way it did in the Cold War: a unified threat assessment, military capabilities perfectly tailored to the threat, and shared vital interests that ensure watertight solidarity if the worst should ever happen.

Alas, this is not how things work nowadays – and the last few weeks have given us ample indication of this. Our former Supreme Allied Commander, General Craddock, for example, has taken the Allies to task for agreeing politically to undertake a mission, but then refusing to resource it accordingly. He recommends that NATO should only take on a job if it has the means to succeed – or, put another way, that NATO should provide the resources it needs to do the jobs it must do.

Now, let me be clear: I know how those words resonate here in the UK these days. This country has suffered a tragic period, and I would like, on behalf of NATO, but also myself personally, to express condolences to the loved ones of those brave servicemen from the UK armed forces, who have paid the ultimate price.

It is not my job to wade into a national debate, and I won't do it here. But let me say just a few things. First, UK forces are doing a critical job, and they are doing it well I've seen them in the field myself, many times. Let no one call into question their effectiveness.

My second point is that they are part of a team. If one reads any national press, you could be forgiven for thinking that your forces were fighting in Afghanistan alone. But they are not. They are part of a team. 14 NATO nations are fighting in the South of Afghanistan, alongside their British colleagues, along with Afghan forces. Hundreds of NATO soldiers from other countries have also lost their lives – which is a sad, but real, measure of shared sacrifice.

We can debate the right numbers of helicopters of troops to have in Afghanistan - and we should. This is not an easy operation, and it needs public debate and public support. But to me, there can be no serious debate about the necessity or the legitimacy of this mission. If we were to walk away, Afghanistan would fall to the Taliban, with devastating effect for the people there – women in particular. Pakistan would suffer the consequences, with all that that implies for international security. Central Asia would see extremism spread. Al Qaeda would have a free run again, and their terrorist ambitions are global.

This is not conjecture. This is fact. Those who argue otherwise – who say we can defend against terrorism from home – are simply burying their heads in the sand. That is not the way the world is anymore. As my predecessor, Lord Robertson, used to say, either we go to Afghanistan or Afghanistan will come to us. His dictum remains as valid as ever.

We must succeed in what we have set out to do: help the Afghans build a country that can secure itself, for our benefit as much as theirs. And I know that the people of the UK understand this.

Afghanistan is just one example of a broad range of issues where we cannot afford not to engage – where we must rise to the occasion, despite scarce resources. But how can we do this? Well, first and foremost, by acknowledging – as hard as it may be – that the new security environment poses an entirely different set of challenges for our Alliance.

Let us be honest: In the Cold War, the threat we faced was both visible and measurable, and our responses were largely institutionalised. Alliance solidarity was near-automatic. Our static pre-positioned force posture left no room for nations to opt out.

By contrast, many of today's challenges are regional in nature and do not affect all Allies in quite the same way. Many challenges also do not lend themselves to purely military solutions. And while some challenges require instant, perhaps even preventive action, others require long-term, costly and risky engagement far away from our own borders.

This is an entirely new ballgame – and it touches upon the very essence of our Alliance. Because solidarity is now a much more active concept. During the Cold War, it was about sharing a certain degree of risk. Today, however, it implies the willingness to accept sacrifice and share burdens – and the degree of solidarity that a nation wants to render is very much at its own discretion. A nation's contribution is now far more a function of its domestic setting, its constitutional reality and its military culture. The true test of our Alliance, therefore, lies in its ability to convince Allies to show the necessary solidarity and to increase their willingness to share burdens equitably.

Another truth of the new security environment is that deterrence, the concept of avoiding conflict by displaying force rather than actually using it, is increasingly unworkable. To be sure, deterrence will continue to apply to relations among states. But you cannot deter civil wars or suicide terrorists, nor can you deter states from collapsing. Such challenges require long-term engagements, and above all, with no guarantee of success.

Any such missions have to be sustained against a public opinion that demands that something 'be done' – and quickly – yet whose support can fade once the engagement turns out to be more difficult than expected. Moreover, we must contend with a widespread popular sentiment according to which the use of force always constitutes a failure of politics rather than a necessary tool in the toolbox.

Another truth of the new strategic environment is that NATO can no longer be a solo-player. Quite the contrary. True success in Afghanistan requires civil reconstruction – something which NATO cannot provide, but which others must supply. If these other actors do not engage, NATO cannot truly succeed either. To put it bluntly: NATO's success depends increasingly on factors which lie outside the Alliance's own control.

These are the hard realities of the 21st century strategic environment. As I just said, they go to the very essence of what this Alliance is about. They call for a new understanding of solidarity among the Allies. And they also call for new forms of cooperation between the Alliance and the wider world.

So this brings us to the sixty-four thousand dollar question: Can we manage? Can we achieve a new understanding of Alliance solidarity in the 21st century? And will we be able to connect NATO with the broader international framework of institutions and nations?

After five-and-and-a-half years at the helm of NATO, my answer to these questions is clear: we are not yet there, but we are on the right track. If we push NATO's agenda energetically forward, we will achieve our aim: a new NATO for a new century. Specifically, I see six key areas in which we need to make progress. Let me very briefly touch upon each of them.

First, one of my own dictums ever since I took office, we must continue to broaden the political dialogue among the Allies. As I have noted, today's security environment can divide us just as well as it can unite us. That is why we need a more proactive discussion in NATO on emerging issues – for example energy security, nuclear proliferation, climate change. This is not about turning NATO into a talking shop. But debate is a precondition for building – and sustaining – the consensus that is necessary for common action.

Second, we need to make further progress in uniting all major international institutions and NGOs in a 'Comprehensive Approach' to today's security challenges. The NATO-UN Declaration which I signed with Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon last September has certainly sent the right signal. I believe NATO should also develop closer contacts with the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference – and indeed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But what is truly crucial for any successful 'Comprehensive Approach' is that we finally manage to better combine the complementary assets of NATO and the EU.

Third, we must continue to develop more flexible and deployable forces. Transforming static Cold War capabilities into expeditionary forces is immensely difficult. The fact that every country in the Alliance, not just the UK with its long expeditionary tradition, has a debate about lacking equipment says more about

those difficulties than anything else. The financial crisis is clearly taking its toll, and we need more imaginative approaches when it comes to funding capabilities. To my mind, we have been much too timid in exploring such new approaches.

Still, I see NATO on the right track. Even those Allies which are more concerned about Article 5 contingencies than expeditionary engagements acknowledge that it does not make sense to maintain forces solely for the defence of one's national territory. So we are developing forces that can do both – defend Alliance territory and take on stabilisation tasks well away from our own borders.

My fourth point: We must get the NATO-Russia relationship back on track. Russia's recent assertiveness has raised genuine security concerns, particularly among NATO's eastern-most Allies. It has also led some to question the future of NATO enlargement as a benign means of consolidating Europe. But most importantly, it has exposed a lack of Allied unity vis-à-vis Russia.

This is an untenable situation – for NATO, but also for Russia. Because despite all our disagreements we need each other more than we sometimes dare to admit. I predict that as the new security environment unfolds, the number of common interests will grow. This will not eliminate our disagreements on, say, enlargement, CFE, Georgia. But I believe that we can get beyond the on-off nature of the NATO-Russia relationship.

My fifth point: keep developing global partnerships. Australian or New Zealand troops or Japanese funds for Afghanistan are most welcome and play a hugely valuable part in ISAF's effort. Let us not squander such valuable contributions by a false debate about a 'global NATO'. Let us simply continue to develop the necessary structures for non-members, wherever they may be located, to associate themselves – politically or even militarily – with NATO-led missions and operations. When we face global challenges, it makes eminent sense to have global partners to help us meet those challenges.

This brings me to my last point, which is to write a new NATO Strategic Concept. Over the past decade, NATO has been busy adapting to rapid change. Indeed, we were so preoccupied with managing our operations that we sometimes ran the risk of missing the bigger picture. We have allowed NATO to evolve in many different directions but without producing a 21st century mission statement that

makes it clear to our publics why they still need NATO and what it offers that other organizations or security frameworks do not. And as a result, many people understand what NATO does - but they don't understand how this relates to their immediate security interests.

A new Strategic Concept will provide NATO's transformation with the broad political context that it needs – not just for our publics, but for the Allies as well. That is why I have been championing such a project for some time, and why I was glad to see NATO's 60th Anniversary Summit in April giving the green light for it. Of course, the successful conclusion of this project will fall to my successor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. But the process is well on track.

A new Strategic Concept will be an indispensable piece of the puzzle of a new, more effective NATO. But let us be perfectly clear: by no means will a piece of paper 'solve' NATO's problems.

For NATO to be truly successful, we need political elites and the general public in all the Alliance's member nations to realize that the meaning of security – and the means to provide security – have changed irreversibly.

As much as we may yearn for the easier days of the past, when the main purpose of our military forces was not to be used, we should realize that today, they must be used. As much as we may long for the near-perfect security of Cold War deterrence, we must accept that security today requires engagement in far away places – engagement that is dangerous, expensive, open ended, and with no guarantee of success. In short, security in today's globalized world is much more demanding to achieve, and yet it is far less perfect.

This is a message that many people do not want to hear – and that many governments therefore do not want to convey. But they must. As long as we cling to the illusion that globalization is just an economic phenomenon without any security implications, we remain vulnerable. And as long as we make ourselves believe that missions like Afghanistan are not really essential to our security, or that using military force is an admission of political failure, we will remain out of touch with reality.

We cannot afford to approach 21st century challenges with such a 20th century mindset. We must find a new understanding of Allied security – and Allied solidarity – in the age of globalization.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When he was asked what constituted the greatest challenge for a statesman, British Prime Minster Harold Macmillan responded: 'events, my dear boy, events.' Macmillan's quip explains perfectly well why not even a well-crafted Strategic Concept will guarantee NATO's continued success. After all, 'events' have the nasty habit of occurring unplanned and unexpected.

We have had our share of examples. Allies fundamentally disagreed over the war on Iraq, yet today NATO is training Iraqi security forces. No one considers NATO to be a humanitarian relief organization, and yet we provided vital support after a devastating earthquake hit Pakistan in the autumn of 2005. Allies may have different views on a NATO role in Africa, and yet we acted when the African Union asked for logistical support in the Darfur crisis. And while the specific NATO role in responding to new challenges, such as energy security or piracy, is not yet perfectly defined, it requires little imagination to predict that NATO will play its part.

Why? Because NATO is unique. Nowhere else on the globe does there exist a group of nations with such a strong sense of belonging together, with a common vision of a just political order, and with shared values. And there is no other group of nations that is equally ready, willing and able to uphold these values when they are under threat.

This, then, is my key message for my successor: Let us do everything in our power to keep this Alliance in good shape. As Winston Churchill has reminded us, working with Allies can be tedious and frustrating, yet the end result is superior to anything we could ever achieve on our own. This is a timeless observation. And this is why NATO is a timeless Alliance.