

NATO and the Future of Europe–US Relations after Afghanistan

David Owen

Lord David Owen reflects on the history and future of Europe–US relations.

We are living in a very strange and worrying political world, with the rise in military might of President Vladimir Putin’s Russia and President Xi Jinping’s China being set against internal criticism of NATO within Europe, and Europe’s falling out with the US over Afghanistan. When the US announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the option had been discussed earlier for the EU and the UK to combine to replace the Americans, but President Emmanuel Macron, Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Boris Johnson – in my view, correctly – decided not to keep their troops on the ground without the associated power of the US and NATO’s integrated command structure.

In November 2020, Macron began public criticism of NATO by saying it was becoming ‘brain dead’. Merkel wisely condemned his drastic words. Yet, 10 days later, standing beside NATO’s secretary general, Macron said NATO had become focused on budget issues instead of evolving geopolitics. But budget issues are vital, and the simple truth is that the EU as a whole is not ready to spend the money that is needed for effective defence against Russia and relies far too heavily on US readiness to finance NATO.

On 22 August 2021, in the last month of the US-led withdrawal from Afghanistan, in which the Taliban agreed not to attack US troops (a promise they fulfilled), an article appeared on former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s website using the word ‘imbecilic’ in connection with President Joe Biden’s policy in Afghanistan.

Blair’s actual words were that the withdrawal was made ‘in obedience to an imbecilic political slogan about ending “the forever wars”’.¹ Yet, Blair knew perfectly well that his chosen word would be interpreted as an attack on Biden’s withdrawal and so, predictably, it was, despite the fact that Biden is a longstanding supporter of NATO.

An American, Peter Galbraith, former UN deputy special representative for Afghanistan and for many years a chief adviser to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and US ambassador to Croatia under President Bill Clinton, immediately answered Blair:

In terms of what was imbecilic, frankly it was the strategy that was followed for 20 years, which was to try to build a highly centralised state in a country that was as diverse – geographically and ethnically – as Afghanistan, and to engage in a counterinsurgency

1. Tony Blair, ‘Why We Must Not Abandon the People of Afghanistan – For Their Sake and Ours’, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 21 August 2021.



President Harry Truman signs the North Atlantic Treaty on 24 August 1949. Around him, diplomats of signatory states and US officials witness this signing. States represented are the UK, Denmark, Canada, Norway, France, Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands, Italy and the US. *Courtesy of Everett Collection Inc / Alamy*

strategy without a local partner and the local partner was corrupt, ineffective, illegitimate.²

Galbraith added that the coalition powers ‘never seriously tried to address the corruption that was prevalent from the top’, acquiescing in ‘fraudulent’ Afghan elections and trying to fit facts into a pre-determined strategy ‘rather than having a strategy that was based on facts’.

Stabilising Afghanistan after 9/11 should have been the US’s single objective, with NATO support, not embarking on a war against Iraq.

NATO was warned as long ago as 2010 by Sherard Cowper-Coles, British ambassador to Afghanistan, about the ‘Herculean’ task the Allies had set themselves in promising to rebuild the Afghan nation and state.³ President Barack Obama considered withdrawing from Afghanistan soon after May 2011, when Osama bin Laden was killed by US special forces in Pakistan and buried at sea. It might have been better had Obama done so.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) must now speed up humanitarian aid to the people in Afghanistan who face starvation this winter. The attempt to moderate Taliban attitudes must

continue but broadly speaking the more this is left to Muslim countries, the more likely it is to succeed. The same goes for the Taliban attitude to women and their continued education, where in many Muslim countries, not least in Saudi Arabia, women have seen changes for the better. Taliban attitudes to women are not irrevocably fixed, as we see in some parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The major area for cooperation in Afghanistan with the Taliban is over curbing terrorism. Since the Islamic State – Khorasan Province attack at Kabul airport, there have been other attacks in Afghanistan. The Russian and Chinese explanation of their abstention in the main UNSC vote, as US forces withdrew from Afghanistan, should not be too hard to resolve. The sponsors of the resolution, the US, the UK and France, but also very much supported by India, somewhat surprisingly omitted other terrorist organisations such as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State. China is against ETIM because it supports the Uighurs and some countries want to reclassify ETIM as not a terrorist organisation. Despite our serious criticisms of China’s handling of the Uighurs, it is essential to

2. George Bowden and Lauren Turner, ‘Afghanistan: Tony Blair Says Withdrawal Was Driven by “Imbecilic” Slogan’, *BBC News*, 22 August 2021.
3. Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West’s Afghanistan Campaign* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011), p. 262.

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regard all international terrorism as wrong. We in NATO should not weaken our resolve on that simple fact but continue to tighten our criticisms of China for its conduct bordering on genocide towards the Uighurs.

We must not forget either how the combined air forces of the US, Russia, Syria, the UK, France and Israel successfully dealt with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. This is harder to do in Afghanistan, but with cooperation from the Taliban and being allowed access to airfields in neighbouring countries, such as possibly Uzbekistan, we could find NATO cooperating seriously over international terrorism with Russia and China. One of the best ways to do this is for France and the UK to learn from the mistakes we made in Libya. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's decision to abstain in the UNSC offered a chance for a fresh start. Yet we failed to use the mechanism of the NATO–Russian Ministerial Council to explain and discuss in detail our attitudes to Muammar Qadhafi with the Russians. Sadly, it ended up with the Russians regretting they had not used the veto and Putin, as then prime minister, openly criticising Medvedev's decision as president.

NATO's Historical Genesis

Too many European political leaders seem today to have forgotten that NATO came about because twice the US felt it had to cross the Atlantic to help out in the defence of Europe in 1918 and 1941–45. No one should be misled by the description of the 1914–18 war as the First World War. It was primarily a European war. American reluctance to become involved was clear, manifesting itself after Woodrow Wilson's public decision which meant that US troops only joined the fighting in spring 1918 and then made a decisive difference. Again in 1939 it was initially a European war, only becoming a genuine world war when the US came in following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

In 1945, Harry Truman started to pull US troops back from Europe, telling Americans he was bringing the 'boys' home. He then reversed his stance in 1946, saying that from then on the task was to construct a defence organisation in which the US would stay with troops on the ground in Europe to deal with the Soviet threat. That decision is as relevant today as it was in 1946. Putin is no Joseph Stalin, but he has to be contained as the invasion and present threat of further invasions of Ukraine demonstrate.

It is very important to remember that in the lead up to the 1948 North Atlantic Treaty, when Foreign Office officials came forward with opaque language on military matters, Ernest Bevin, then foreign secretary, sent them back with a strong injunction for greater clarity. He did not want fudged wording because he saw, as a Cabinet minister during the Second World War, that unity and speed were essential for military success. Bevin importantly minuted Prime Minister Clement Attlee on the 13 articles of the treaty that he did not want a situation in which the UK would be an outpost, still left in doubt about US action. For that reason, the language of the treaty had to be definite: 'We shall never fix the German-French problem unless it is [definite]. The finding of words that may leave ambiguity will be disastrous'.⁴

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NATO's most precious asset is its accepted command-and-control procedures and the well-defined relationship between the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) and the NATO secretary general, as well as the military line of command under SACEUR. Such a structure takes time to build. It demonstrated its value in Kosovo when British General Mike Jackson challenged SACEUR's order because he felt it risked a third world war. His decision was upheld by the UK Chief of Defence appealing to the US Chief of Defense. To throw that proven structure away and add the probable need to create new treaty language and practice would be an act of folly. It is still not recognised enough in Europe how Russia under Putin has greatly improved the quality and capacity of its armed forces. They are smaller than in Leonid Brezhnev's time but arguably more effective.

Restructuring NATO and Other Defence Ambitions

The first and all-important decision following Brexit was the new UK government's Spending Review of

4. Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983), p. 643.

2020, which announced sizeable additional defence funding (over £24 billion in cash terms for defence exceptionally guaranteed over four years, including £6.6 billion of R&D). This has made the UK the largest European spender on defence in NATO and the second largest in the Alliance after the US.

For the UK, blue-water diplomacy fortunately is also back with naval forces in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS followed naturally from the Australian decision that the aggressive military situation in President Xi's China meant Australia needed nuclear-powered, not diesel, submarines. Of course, France is welcome to coordinate its submarine activity in the Pacific with AUKUS. While the issue could have been handled better, Macron decided to elevate his problem with Australia and use it to push for defence autonomy in Europe.

Yet politicians in Europe who talk continuously of European autonomy within NATO defence decision-making need to recognise now that they have reached the point where the very ambiguity of their words is undermining NATO. There has not been a single US secretary of state for defense over the past 20 years who has not warned Europe about the dangers of fragmenting the single military decision-making embraced in Article 4 and Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. That power structure makes it possible to deploy NATO forces effectively in the Baltic states and for the UK armed forces to deploy in Estonia.

The only serious option for a European army is for some of the EU countries to develop a full political and military federal union with a single political head. The global power of the US came when its small 'states' combined into one powerful state under one democratically elected president. That same democratic option is open to the EU.

The UK should not contemplate being part of a European army of individual NATO states under separate command-and-control mechanisms to NATO. Both François Mitterrand and John Major refused to create a European army in the Balkans in 1992–95 and chose to operate within the UN aided by NATO airpower. Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron tried to operate together, when the US was only present for the start of the air battle over Libya in 2011 to take out Qadhafi's ground missile defence system. When France and the UK operated together, Obama called it truthfully 'a mess', but then Obama chose, in the telling words of General David Richards, '[to] lead on Libya, as it were, from the rear'.⁵ Richards added that the US 'still played a vital role, especially through their intelligence and

logistical assets'. Sarkozy and Cameron both refused to put boots on the ground in sufficient numbers to restore law and order in Libya.

From the mid-1960s, I was a good friend of Michel Rocard, former prime minister of France, despite his being an EU federalist. I, as foreign secretary, was opposed to federalism when the UK was in the EU. Rocard, who sadly died in 2016, wanted the UK to leave the EU in friendship because he argued, correctly, the UK's presence within the EU would always resist it becoming a federal state.

What we in the UK can now hope for after the French elections is an open and honest debate within the EU countries about their future relationship with NATO. There is an inherent logic for an initially small federal EU to emerge. But NATO cannot be used as the vehicle to create a federal union. Only when a federal union, small or large, is fully established, with a democratically elected head of state in Europe with armed services answerable to that head of state and its parliament, can there be a European Defence Force worthy of the title within NATO.

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European security is too important and sadly now too insecure for Macron's deliberate provocation and opaqueness on defence to continue unchallenged. I do so as one who has long championed closer French and UK cooperation on nuclear strategic issues and welcome our joint work on testing nuclear warheads without explosion. I hope that the forthcoming election in France will clarify underlying French attitudes. I also hope that the new German SPD-led coalition will continue with the robust attitude to defence matters that was the hallmark of Helmut Schmidt's leadership. The announced programme of the SPD, Green and FDP coalition government should be able to provide strong, clear-cut decision-making with the SPD holding the post of defence minister. The new coalition has already agreed to NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements and will continue to host US nuclear weapons and maintain aircraft capable of delivering them.

5. David Richards, *Taking Command* (London: Headline, 2014), p. 314.

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It can be argued that a single federal EU of whatever size within NATO might have a stronger influence on the US than France and Germany. Yet both are given a special weight by the US now. Also, presently vulnerable countries, such as Poland and the Baltic states, are rightly treated by the US with special attention. The present arrangement for NATO has many unacknowledged strengths.

As the US changes its strategic approach to China, itself a massive task, there is no pressing need to start a long and divisive debate in Europe about the restructuring of NATO. It would be irresponsible at this time, certainly debilitating, and risks Russian exploitation. The pretence of a European army, without its own democratic military single decision-making structure, is in short a political indulgence.

We have problems enough in NATO, with tensions in the Mediterranean that have been greatly exacerbated by the discovery of oil and gas in the disputed waters off Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt. Those tensions will be far easier to resolve under the existing NATO than in any other conceivable special European defence arrangement. France sells naval ships to Greece and has a new treaty relationship, while Germany sells submarines to Turkey.

Biden was very wise to see Putin in Geneva early on and hold a two-hour virtual meeting in December on Ukraine. This needs further

discussions in NATO. There should be an open discussion around what lies behind Russian fears of NATO membership being extended to cover Georgia, which the Biden administration has raised; or, at some later date, the possible admission of Ukraine to NATO. The conduct of Belarus in relation to Poland in facilitating immigrants arriving at its border cannot be ignored, and there is a risk it could extend to Lithuania. There must also be a frank discussion of the promises made to Russia at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. We need a framework too for more meaningful negotiations. The Minsk I and II format, involving Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE, represented by Germany and France, has never gelled and needs reshaping. Its remit was too narrow for the magnitude of the core issue – the annexation of Crimea.

As I argue in my recent book, ‘only in a wider negotiation involving Russian concerns over NATO expansion do I think Russia will be constructive over Crimea and Ukraine. As part of this search for an overarching solution it may also be appropriate to address other disputed boundaries and recognition issues, such as Transnistria, Kosovo and Georgia.’⁶ ■

Lord David Owen is a former British Foreign Secretary. His latest book *Riddle, Mystery and Enigma: Two Hundred Years of British–Russian Relations* (Haus) was published in October 2021.

6. David Owen, *Riddle, Mystery and Enigma: Two Hundred Years of British–Russian Relations* (London: Haus, 2021).