

July 12, 2011



NATO on the brink

By William S. Cohen, Nicholas Burns, and George Robertson

Then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates traveled to Brussels in June, where he warned European allies of the “dwindling ... patience in the U.S. Congress” with NATO and declared that if allies did not get serious about meeting their NATO responsibilities they could soon find that American leaders “may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost.”

It has been just a few weeks since Gates spoke those words, and already his predictions are beginning to come true. This week, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) called off a Senate vote on legislation authorizing the U.S. mission in Libya for fear he did not have the support to pass it. The House recently rejected similar legislation authorizing the mission by an overwhelming vote of 295-123 – an unprecedented vote of no-confidence in NATO. And recently, our friend Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, spoke for many when he wrote in the Washington Post that “Europe no longer matters” and asked: “If NATO didn’t exist today, would anyone feel compelled to create it?”

To this we respectfully answer: Yes, we would. NATO is in desperate need of reform, to be sure. But NATO is needed. An America that cannot be either isolationist or unilateralist must have allies in a dangerous, complex and highly integrated 21st century. Of the last four wars the United States has fought — Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya — NATO has had a direct combat role in three. The alliance has proven its worth, and the U.S. would be a substantially weaker power without it.

Despite its uneven execution of the mission in Libya, NATO has still saved countless lives. Before NATO’s intervention, Moammar Gadhafi had promised to make the streets of Benghazi “run with blood” and was subjecting the people of Misurata to a daily barrage of rockets, cluster bombs, and sniper fire. Today, Gadhafi is on the ropes as NATO and the rebel alliance have regained the offensive. Civilians in both cities are no longer under threat of massacre. They are certainly glad that NATO exists today.

So are the people of Afghanistan. NATO went into Afghanistan in 2003 and has stayed with the U.S. there for eight years. When the U.S. faced a tougher-than-expected fight in Iraq and surged forces into that country in 2007, NATO held down the Afghan front during this critical period. Without NATO’s efforts, the Taliban might well have prevailed, and the military progress President Obama described in his recent address to the nation would not have been possible.

We cannot know what unexpected challenges we will face in the decades ahead, but we do know this: There is real value in having a collective defense organization like NATO that is on our side. But to be of value, NATO must be ready to act, and today its ability to do so is increasingly

in doubt. For too long, NATO's European members have relied too heavily on the U.S. to shoulder the lion's share of the work.

As Gates correctly pointed out, NATO's recent operations have exposed fundamental weaknesses of both will and capability that have called into question the future viability of the Atlantic Alliance. In Libya, for example, fewer than one-third of NATO allies have participated in strike missions, and fewer than half have contributed to the Libyan operation at all. That is unacceptable.

One reason NATO has struggled in Libya is that for the first time since the founding of NATO six decades ago, the organization's natural and most powerful leader has not led. America cannot hand off the mission in Libya to its European allies and say "let NATO handle it," because America is and always has been the heart and soul of NATO. Now that NATO is engaged in Libya, the credibility of the alliance is on the line. NATO must succeed, and we believe NATO could more effectively do so if the U.S. were leading the military effort there.

When it comes to Afghanistan, NATO is in danger of failing another test of its credibility. Public opinion in much of Europe has long been swinging to troop withdrawal. Now, with President Obama's decision to draw down U.S. forces in Afghanistan, there is a real danger that the rush for the exits in Afghanistan will become a stampede. Already this week, Germany became the first NATO ally to declare, in the wake of Obama's drawdown announcement that it plans to begin bringing its own troops home from Afghanistan by the end of the year. Germany is the largest NATO nation in Europe, yet it is not helping in Libya, not fighting with the U.S. in the east and south of Afghanistan (where the battle truly matters), and now it is planning to quit the Afghanistan war altogether before the mission is complete.

The fact that America is reducing its force levels in Afghanistan from 100,000 to 70,000 troops is no excuse for Germany or other European governments to unilaterally withdraw their forces before the job is done. As Secretary Gates said in Brussels, "The way ahead in Afghanistan is 'in together, out together.'"

The missions in Libya and Afghanistan have also exposed the sorry state of Europe's defense capabilities. In 2002 — when one of us was NATO secretary general and another was U.S. ambassador to NATO — all 27 members made a commitment in Prague to spend a minimum of 2 percent of GDP on national defense. Today, only five allies — the United States, Britain, France, Greece and Albania — are meeting that minimum threshold. And it shows.

After just a few weeks of combat in Libya, allies began to deplete their stocks of precision munitions. Yet at this moment, NATO European countries are supporting millions of useless conscript forces and have some 10,000 main battle tanks whose role in any conceivable future conflict is negligible if not nonexistent. This is a scandal. If NATO governments will not spend more on defense, they must at a bare minimum shift what they do spend into capabilities that are actually needed.

There is a silver lining in this dark cloud. While some larger NATO nations such as Germany, Italy and Spain shirk their responsibilities, smaller nations including Denmark, Norway, Poland,

Romania, Albania, and the Baltic countries are stepping forward and contributing disproportionately to NATO missions. These countries are the hope of the alliance. They believe that NATO is important and are acting accordingly. It is time for the rest of NATO to do the same.

Cohen is a former U.S. secretary of Defense. Burns is a former U.S. ambassador to NATO and a former under secretary of State for Political Affairs. Robertson is a former U.K. Minister of Defense and a former secretary-general of NATO.