

Making The Case For Defence in Europe
The Need For A More Selective Approach

Key note speech by the Dutch minister of Defence, J.S.J. Hillen, at the SDA conference
Shaping NATO's Reform Agenda in Brussels on 29 June 2011.

(Mr De Hoop Scheffer, Mr Meritt, thank you for that introduction and for the opportunity to speak to this audience here today.)

Ladies and gentlemen,

Five hundred years ago, the country I represent here today did not exist like it does today.
The Netherlands were literally nether lands.
Sometimes dry, sometimes inundated.
The low countries were at the mercy of the sea and rivers.

The rest is history of course.
The Dutch built dikes.
Lots of them.

I like to think Holland is ruled by Her Majesty's ministers....
But in fact, Holland is ruled by dike wardens
Without them, Holland would be the new Atlantis....

The Dutch can breathe easily now. Their foe is well under guard.
Dunes and dikes are the first line of defence of the Netherlands.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is another powerful system of dunes and dikes which will guard us against any foe.
It's called NATO.
We can all breathe easily, because it is there.
24/7, 12 months a year.
But just like Holland's impressive water balance, it requires not only respect but also careful maintenance.
By all of us.

Therefore, my parting colleague from the United States, Bob Gates, is right when he points out that burdens should be shared equally, and that Europe must be careful on economising on security.

Our Alliance faces new challenges.
Just as Holland accepts the inevitability of rising sea levels, our Alliance has to accept the social, economical and political climate change that we are confronted with.

Today I want to comment on these developments and their impact on NATO.
Then, we will need also to look at the consequences.

What should be Europe's reply to Bob Gates?
Of course, there's not just one decisive answer to the issues he raised.

There are many aspects to consider in understanding Europe's position and seeing what needs to be done.

Banking crisis

Ladies and gentlemen,

The banking crisis has leapt the Atlantic Ocean as if it were a mere duck pond. It has shown us that we truly live in a globalised world. It has exposed weaknesses, bad bookkeeping practices; it has forced us to cut deep into our government budgets.

A new foe has bruised our economy, tested our stability and damaged our budgets. Yes, also our defence budgets. The foe of greed and elitism in the financial business. This foe came from within. It originated in the US, but European banks proved to be contaminated as well.

We are already seeing the effects on our military capabilities. In the Netherlands for example, despite cutting hard in support and staff, I am also having to do away with all our battle tanks. Other European countries are taking equally drastic measures. The US also faces deep cuts.

Health costs crisis

But in addition to the financial crisis, there's another development that we cannot afford to overlook, if we want to provide an answer to the question whether Europe is willing and able to keep up its end of the transatlantic bargain.

It is the rise in healthcare costs. Even more so than in the US, Europe's population is aging; living standards are rising, as are the technological possibilities. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has predicted that public health expenditure will almost double by twenty-fifty.

The worrying part of their prediction is that even if governments adopt more cost-containment policies, these expenditures will still increase by around fifty percent.

These circumstances - the financial crisis as a starter and ballooning healthcare costs as the main dish - mean we have to rearrange public expenditure. Not only to avoid deficits but also to prevent necessary budgets like security and safety from being elbowed out automatically. The ruling coalition government in my country has agreed to cut back 18 billion euros over a period of four years. In the meantime, however, the budget for healthcare is set to increase by 15 billion euros! The net savings as a result of this big cutback operation will therefore only be 3 billion euros. 3 billion euros out of 18. The rest goes to growing healthcare expenditure. That's the story.

We're dealing not so much with a deliberate European policy to give up on its defences or to let the Atlantic Ally down, but far more with a need to set new priorities to public expenditure.

Admiral Mullen has warned that the American national debt is the biggest threat to his country's national security.

Let me issue a similar warning for Europe.

Europe too has its menace from within.

These are the difficult political choices Europe needs to make. Do we merely focus on high standards of healthcare or on our future security needs as well?

To give you an idea of the mind of the Dutch, when it comes to budget cuts, sixty four percent agrees on Defence cuts. Only thirty two percent favours cuts on cure and care.

As minister of Defence, I have declared it to be my mission to call attention to the importance of adequate defence spending. Especially in Europe, we have to make our defence agendas more of a grassroots priority in the midst of all the other issues that already are grassroots priorities.

We have to build a stronger case.

Socio-political changes

Operations are the armed forces' most visible output.

We face shifting public and political opinions with regard to these operations.

We are seeing the growing phenomenon called localism. Or glocalism, as the former Secretary-General and current co-chair of the SDA, Mr. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer labelled it.

This growing number of people question the need for military action outside their own country's borders.

They do not subscribe to the globalist view that security and stability far away equals security and stability close to home.

These sentiments are translated into political power by new political parties gaining substantial numbers of votes.

We can see the consequences for instance in decreasing support for the European idea.

If we want to maintain public support for our defence and security policies, we have to take these sentiments into account.

Afghanistan

Against this background we have to consider NATO's most prominent, high-profile operation in the last ten years: ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

ISAF has to be praised as a unique operation in which 48 countries willingly worked together to fight terrorism and to bring sustainable development to the people of Afghanistan.

As Allies we have all made huge contributions.

Financially, militarily and – ultimately - in the lives of our soldiers who were killed in action.

We have learned valuable lessons in Afghanistan.

Our hands-on experiences in the Afghan military theatre have boosted the professional level of our armed forces.

Technologically, we have also evolved. Tracking down and defusing IEDs and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles have earned their place in our military spectrum.

We have achieved a great deal in Afghanistan.

And I am happy the Dutch are still contributing to ISAF in Kunduz, after having been lead nation in Uruzgan.

Public support

There is another, perhaps more difficult lesson that we need to learn from Afghanistan.

Despite the successes of this mission, despite its evident added value in the fight against terrorism, we are finding it difficult to maintain support for military interventions like ISAF.

We asked people to support the building of a nation.

This comprehensive approach is important but should not detract from our military task.

Our military has become detached from its core business.

Our soldiers are the best development workers there are.

But we should not want soldiers to be development workers alone.

People want and expect soldiers to be soldiers and that is being military craftsmen first and foremost.

Just like people want the police to arrest the thief who stole their car.

Whether we like it or not, we will lose public support if we as NATO do not manage to do the basic military job successfully.

That is where the urgency lies.

A selective approach

If we look at the global security situation, we see the rise of new economic and military powers around us. We see an impressive build up of naval power in the western Pacific, in particular by China. There's the Arab Spring, with its own wide-ranging consequences and large groups of refugees and the potential for a great deal of instability in a powder keg. We see a rapidly growing human population competing for limited resources such as food, water and energy supplies.

And we face threats such as weapons of mass destruction and, in this cyber century, the equally destructive weapons of mass disruption.

These developments lead us to conclude that we have every reason to be on our guard.

But also that we need to be more selective and should seek to have a much smaller footprint.

In future operations, we need to have a clear sense of urgency.

Our security interests must be at stake.

We must be the only one up for the job.

And we must bring in others to fulfil the comprehensive approach.

And if we do decide to step in, it should be exactly that.

Stepping in.

Not moving in.

Let me illustrate this with operation Ocean Shield.

It is a good example of what we should do. Our interests are clearly at stake.

But it's less of an example of how it should be done.

It's an example of being too careful and being unable to deliver the military successes we need.

That is why I want to step up our efforts against piracy.

Together with a coalition of seafaring nations, we are looking at ways to do more to disrupt and discourage the pirates' operations.

We have to arrest that car thief and also dismantle the international criminal organisation behind him.

That would provide us with clear-cut results that will enable us to demonstrate the added value of military operations.

The NATO umbrella

In our operations, we should act as one.

But at the same time, I strongly believe in the merits of coalitions of the willing within NATO.

Where pioneering countries can take the lead with regard to a specific issue.

Always under the NATO umbrella.

But within smaller, flexible groups that roughly share the same outlook, if deemed necessary.

We should not be afraid to use this recipe for quicker and more tangible NATO results.

European cooperation

Ladies and gentlemen,

One cannot cut down the apple tree and still expect a good harvest.

In these times of austerity we have to find other ways to get the apples for our pie.

We can start by taking a hard look at our own structures.

The Dutch armed forces were labelled one of the most efficient worldwide - by McKinsey in two-thousand-and-nine. But even we have been able to find two-thirds of our budget reductions in overhead, staffs and support structures.

And so it should be for all countries.

We have to be smart about defence, an initiative that Secretary-General Rasmussen has taken on very adequately.

It means pooling and sharing.

It means cooperating and integrating.

I believe we are only at the beginning of what is possible in European military cooperation and integration.

I believe we are only at the beginning of what is necessary in this field.

I think the report by Tomas Valasek of the Centre for European Reform on this subject is very interesting and I believe it could lead us further along this promising path.

Valasek concludes that in the field of pooling and sharing, forming islands of cooperation does not run counter to the idea of a stronger and more unified Europe. On the contrary. Forming subgroups within NATO will make each and every country militarily stronger. It will give NATO (and the EU) access to more capabilities.

But we have to realise that this also implies accepting mutual dependencies and thus giving up a certain degree of national sovereignty in this area.

This is a question that must be raised and answered in our national parliaments in the longer term.

In my view, we could consider these steps, if they truly enhance our European security.

France and the UK have taken new steps in this form of cooperation.

The Netherlands also has ample experience in this field.

Our Navy shares an amphibious marine force with the UK.

And it cooperates to a high degree with the Belgian naval forces. We are now consulting within the Benelux to see whether we can expand this model of integration even further.

With Germany we already share an army corps headquarters and we are intensifying our talks with Germany on further cooperation.

There is still much to be gained. But we have to set about it in a structured manner. That is why I have proposed an extraordinary ministerial session within the European Union by the end of two-thousand-and-eleven where all countries should state their intentions with regard to initiatives to pool and share capabilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the perspective of previous centuries, the European Union has been a dramatic success.

Brought to us not by war, but by economic interdependence.

We see this worldwide, today.

China is carrying the US debt.

Both world powers are interdependent.

What a blessing for both.

What a blessing for us....

That same everyday reality also tells us that - unfortunately enough - in international relations you cannot rely on soft power alone. You also need muscle to defend and protect your interests and the interests of those you consider to be your friends.

If we have too little of it, sooner or later, we will be faced with the consequences.

Europe should acknowledge the message that Bob Gates has delivered.

We need to take more responsibility and seize this opportunity to develop an effective European defence strategy with matching military means.

With regard to Libya and counter-piracy, we have already witnessed situations where Europe has stepped up because America did not lead the way.

I admit there are clearly lessons to be learned.

But I also see a Europe that does make a serious effort to pull its weight.

We all need NATO's dunes and dikes.

Shouldering the burden together is the only way to keep them strong and to demonstrate that Europe does not take America's partnership for granted.

For Europe to sustain its leadership role in key areas, whether through NATO or the EU, will require addressing some of the key issues that I have outlined this morning:

- Getting our economies and public finances back into shape
- Being more selective with regard to future operations

- Ensuring public support by limiting our actions whilst setting clear objectives for success
- Reforming our armed forces and boldly strengthening defence cooperation in Europe
- Letting pioneer groups help move NATO forward

Europe should take up the gauntlet that Mr Gates has thrown down.

Not as a kneejerk reaction.

But simply because it's in our own interest to have NATO remain a strong Alliance.

Europe is the largest economy in the world.

Europe represents 500 million people.

NATO helps defend our borders, propagate mutually shared values and provide the worldwide stability we need for our economies.

We cannot afford to wait and see if the dikes will survive the climate change.

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