

The Future of Western Collective Defence: Transatlantic Security Cooperation in the 21st Century

In 2002, Robert Kagan published his essay 'On Paradise and Power' to much critical acclaim. Kagan argued that weakening transatlantic cohesion over military matters – as later evidenced dramatically in the rift between Europe and the Anglo-Saxon sphere over the 2003 Invasion of Iraq – was not a passing phenomenon attributable to diplomatic failures by the Bush administration. Instead, Kagan postulated that a permanent gulf had opened between continental Europe and the UK-US alliance in all matters defence. The United States, which had burdened itself with the armed defence of the free world during the Cold War, remained mired in a Hobbesian world, sensitive to the need for the defence of its fundamental interests through armed force. By contrast, European policymakers, sheltered and protected by the mighty shield of the US nuclear umbrella since 1945, built for themselves a post-Kantian paradise of peace, and were increasingly accustomed to co-operation as the status quo in all their immediate foreign policy dealings. The tepid European response to the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, Kagan argued, reflected the European view that military force in the conduct of international affairs was always a dangerous and needless aberration to an otherwise peaceful status quo. The gist of Kagan's theory is that the divergence in transatlantic military policy preferences – e.g. over Iraq – was not the temporary product of leaders' opinions at the time, but stemmed from deeper, structural truths: of the two pillars of the Atlantic Alliance, the US emerged from the Cold War as battle-hardened Mars, whilst Europe was re-born as a flowery, peace-loving Venus. Kagan's analysis impressed many: Francis Fukuyama called it 'brilliant' and John Ikenberry deemed it a 'tour de force' – a remarkable compliment from two liberal theorists, whose own research should make them much more inclined to praise works that highlight the fundamental cooperation and shared interest that unites all liberal democracies.

Ten years on, Kagan's seemingly watertight narrative has been ruptured not only by the continued NATO campaign in Afghanistan but also by Operation Unified Protector, the imposition of the no-fly zone over Libyan skies in 2011. The International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan provides

evidence both for and against Kagan's argument. Given that 68% of all ISAF troops are Americans, there is an unfortunate element of truth to the witticism among US personnel in Afghanistan that ISAF refers to 'I Saw Americans Fighting'. Nevertheless, that still leaves over 40,000 soldiers from other NATO partner states fielding troops on the ground. The fact that all 28 Alliance members contribute both in financial as well as in human terms to the campaign illustrates that the principle of NATO solidarity, far from dead, is still relevant in 2011. It cannot be denied that the lion's share of the conflict's cost is borne by the US and the UK, and that the continental European contribution has been marred by a lack of operational effectiveness and severe constraints on the level of contributions provided. There has been a general unwillingness in Europe to increase its commitment of troops and dollars required to assist US efforts to combat the Taliban and undertake the nation-building needed to turn Afghanistan into something resembling a semi-functional state free from the clutches of Islamic fundamentalists.

All the more interesting, then, were the developments surrounding the uprising in Libya this year. Despite the bipartisan reluctance in the United States to engage in a further armed intervention in the Middle East, said intervention still went ahead: David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy took the initiative instead, and proactively pressed for an air campaign in support of the rebels who were attempting to overthrow Muammar al-Gaddafi. It couldn't be done without US support, to be sure, but in contrast to previous NATO campaigns in the Balkans or Afghanistan, this time the operational tables were reversed: the UK and France together provided about half of all the military resources in the campaign, with the US contributing mostly during the initial wave of sorties aimed at disabling Libyan air defences but subsequently reducing its engagements considerably and supporting the mission primarily through intelligence-sharing.

Six months later, and the operation has succeeded: Gaddafi is dead – which, as was clear from the outset given the Colonel's unyielding fanatic response first to the uprising in Libya and then to Nato's campaign, was the only way to Libya would ever be liberated. Under the leadership of France and Britain, control over Africa's fourth-largest nation was wrested from Gaddafi's iron grip. It is easy to

forget that Gaddafi had kept the country in a stranglehold for more than four decades, making him the fourth-longest serving head of state on the planet, until his gruesome demise at the hands of the people he had so ruthlessly oppressed. Not only was this achieved without a single loss of life on the part of NATO, but in the process a new paradigm for regime change – aerial bombardment in support of a local insurgency – was successfully designed and put into practice by military planners at NATO HQ in Brussels. The increasingly vocal disgruntlement of China and Russia after their initial toleration of Security Council Resolution 1973 is unsurprising. After all, NATO's showcasing of its ability to deliver democracy via Tomahawk missiles makes despots everywhere nervous. Moreover, the speed and efficiency of the campaign hardly confirms the narrative that BRICS have vigorously been pushing since the onset of the financial crisis – namely, that the West is on a path of ineluctable decline and that the 21st Century will be marked by the ascent of what we once had the audacity to call the 'developing world'. If one is to treat Russia's and China's response – maybe that should read 'silence' – to the Arab Spring as a litmus test for the BRIC's approach to international affairs, then their dominance, if it is ever to become a reality, will hail an era of diplomacy where commerce prevails over principle, sovereignty is absolute no matter what the cost to human life, and human rights vanish from the global diplomatic agenda. It needn't be so, and it is imperative that this vision does not become a reality.

Care has to be taken not to read too much into Europe's recent military forays. But compared to how things looked in 2003 regarding Europe's war weariness, it is hardly controversial to argue that events can quickly overtake even the most convincingly argued theory like Kagan's. Whilst it is unlikely that the Libya campaign will herald the rebirth of a (somewhat streamlined) liberal interventionist doctrine under the patronage of the United Kingdom and France, several observations are worth highlighting. Operation Unified Protector took place in the immediate aftermath of the worst economic crisis to engulf Europe since the Great Depression. Budget cuts are the order of the day across the EU, and defence departments are not exempt from this, nor can they expect to be. Going forward, however, the key take-away from the Libya campaign is that austerity need not mean retrenchment. Britain and

France retain the capability to engage in simultaneous military operations across the world – so far in 2011, Anglo-French portfolio of achievement includes Afghanistan, Libya and Cote d'Ivoire.

Naturally, the underlying strength and resilience of a nation's economy remains the primary determinant of its military capabilities. It is true, too, that the recent economic woes in Europe and the US do not look favourable compared with the galloping growth rates witnessed in rising stars such as China, and that certain strategic truths follow from these two contrasting growth stories. The key point here, however, and an oft-overlooked one at that, is that there is no reason to suspect that Western economies will not return to sustainable growth sooner rather than later. Provided policymakers across the Atlantic have learnt the lessons of Japan's Lost Decade and take the right steps to prevent the recession from turning into a prolonged stagflationary slump or even a depression, we will witness a return to growth by the end of the current Parliament at the latest. Indeed, an optimist may even contend that the ongoing debt crisis will finally spur European leaders into taking those painful but necessary steps toward shrinking the size of the welfare state, making government leaner and meaner, which could result in a growth trajectory that exceeds pre-crisis levels and frees resources up for defence. Either way, if by 2015 we are in a position to begin increasing military spending in real terms, then there is simply no need for an across-the-board scaling back of ambitions in the West.

The Libyan experience has shown that Europe's approach to defence matters is not so much a direct function of economics as it is of willpower, mettle, and leadership. Whilst other nations will continue to grow faster and other economies will in the medium-run outperform those in the West in terms of growth, there is no case for scaling down NATO's capabilities as long as the underlying economic foundations upon which our way of life is built remain sound. Logically speaking, all that is required as an enabling condition is that defence budgets continue to grow once we have returned to economic normality; the rest – that is, actual defence policy outcomes – depends on our leaders' intellectual confidence in liberalism and their willpower to defend the legitimate interests of the West, all scepticism surrounding the concept of a unified 'West' notwithstanding.¹

¹ By way of explanation, 'West' here is taken to mean the assemblage of NATO member states as representatives of the block of liberal democracies in the world who share a common interest in human freedom and dignity.

If this analysis were to be extended to the USA, the argument would career out of the realm of plausibility and into the domain of fiction. Since the end of the Cold War, defence spending as a proportion of US GDP has risen from a low of 3.6% in 2000 to over 5% in 2009.² In the absence of a direct threat to US national security, and given the dire state of US public finances as well the crowding out effects that such a vast defence burden produces - preventing the urgently needed investments in the domestic infrastructure of the US - it seems likely that the Pentagon will have to make do with less in the foreseeable future, at the very least with below-inflation budget increases. The whole point of the preceding argument, however, has been to illustrate that from a European perspective, the prevailing intellectual consensus that the Old World's days as a global military player are over is simply not backed up by the evidence. The pooled power projection capabilities of European NATO players like Britain and France, and even Italy and Spain, are substantial – evidenced by the logistical complexity of participating in numerous overseas campaigns – and, more importantly, there is degree and scope for an increase in the amount of resources European states can make available to their militaries after economic growth kicks back in.

Robert Kagan's argument relies on structuralist causation: he assumes that there is a deep-seated structural reason for the different attitudes to war in Europe as opposed to the United States. I argue here that this is not so. Europe is very much capable of displaying American bellicosity, the key variable being leadership. As such, what it takes for the vision of a European military resurgence to become reality is the political will to communicate this convincingly to voters. The electorate in NATO countries is not *a priori* disposed to an anti-war stance. Witness, for example, how polls have shown that nearly two-thirds of French voters supported their country's interventions in both Cote d'Ivoire and Libya. Political leaders need the courage to put it to their voters that the Iraq Syndrome – a general weariness in Western states about deploying military force in order to secure policy objectives, no matter how legitimate these objectives may be – is counterproductive.

² Council on Foreign Relations, 'Trends in US Military Spending', 2011

Since the fall of Communism, we have had the luxury of living in a world where the prevailing dogma of liberalism has not met a serious ideological challenge. The Chinese model may be admirable to some – short-sighted – commentators awed by the supposed efficiency and dynamism of the top-down, highly centralised decision-making model that is the hallmark of the Communist Party's dictatorship. But this admiration, where it exists in the West, extends generally to the economic realm and no further; only die-hard capitalists with no understanding of the interrelatedness of liberal politics and capitalist economics would endorse the imposition of censorship and stifling of political debate – i.e. the Chinese model – as a viable social structure for the future. Politically speaking, no alternative to liberal democracy has emerged or will emerge.

An entirely understandable side-effect of this two-decade long run of liberalism as the only ideological show in town is a sense of disillusionment and cynicism that has sprung up in the political mainstream of the West. Our ability to self-criticise is admirable and a key pillar of that which separates the West from the rest. But the fact that over the past two decades it has become part of the mainstream political discourse to assume that the Western way of doing things is somehow defective or immoral masquerades the simple truth that only in the West is it possible to utter publicly such governmental criticism without fear of persecution. Sooner or later it will become apparent to even the most ardent critic of the Bush-Blair years that for all its faults, liberalism is the only societal mode built on the principle of individual freedom, and that there are darker systems out there, unburdened by internal debate, ruthless in the pursuit of their aims and fundamentally illiberal in nature.

The point is that it is not unreasonable to expect voters in Europe to understand this, and that we must do away with the assumption that electorates across Europe will unfailingly vote down any leader who exhibits hawk-ish tendencies. The future of Western Collective Defence rests on economics and leadership, no less and no more, and certainly not on the immovable forces that Kagan has conjured up which somehow condemn Europe to perpetual military decline.

What is the exact point made this essay is trying to get across? To be clear, the argument not a jingoistic call to arms, with neoconservative trumpets loudly accompanying the relentless crescendo of the war drums that some readers will no doubt have been hearing throughout their consumption of

the preceding paragraphs. The analysis does not call for a broad European campaign of rearmament and policy of neo-imperial aggression. Instead, the thesis aims to punch holes in the fabric of the structural narrative that has prematurely consigned the Western alliance into the dustbin of history, convinced of the inexorable decline of Europe and the imperial overstretch that will allow the Chinese to bring the United States to its knees by 2025 at the latest. The structural story is relevant only insofar as economic growth is required to sustain NATO's military might; all other defence policy outcomes require little more than moral vigour and intellectual confidence on the part of our leaders, confidence in the legitimacy and strength of the Western way of doing things. The liberal way of life is too precious an experiment for us to give up its defence prematurely on grounds of an erroneous belief in the pre-determined trajectory of history. The unexpectedly combative NATO stance toward Gaddafi's brutal attack on his own people occurred because of the political will demonstrated by David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy, coupled with their intuitive sense of the moral righteousness of liberal democracy. We need more leaders combining this kind of courage with a sense of liberal purpose and conviction if the free world is to survive the challenges it will face in the decades to come.