The Future of European Security

Inaugural speech by Sir Lawrence Freedman on 3 March 2017

Resumé

Kallade ledamoten Sir Lawrence Freedman ger i sitt inträdesanförande ett brett anlagt perspektiv på problemområden relaterade till den europeiska säkerhetsarkitekturen. Det handlar om en säkerhetsarkitektur vars upprinnelse finns att söka i åren närmast efter det andra världskrigets slut och som kan betraktas som en framgångssaga givet att den europeiska kontinenten upplevt mer än sju decennier av sammanhängande fred. Till trots för att Europa inte varit helt förskonat från väpnade konflikter är magnituden av dessa inte tillnärmelsevis jämförbara med de två förödande krig som präglade den första halvan av det förra århundradet. Författaren påminner om hur det efterföljande kalla kriget var såväl asiatiskt som europeiskt liksom om hur kärnvapnen och den därav uppkomna terrorbalansen ej utmynnade i en ny världsbrand utan i en fred präglad av rustningar och krig genom ombud som fördes utanför Europa. Från en fred i vapen till vår tids suddigare maktstrukturer där USA:s ledarskap har reducerats och där makthavarna i Kreml söker återta en förlorad maktposition lever européerna med en ökad oro för framtiden.

Redaktören

MY AIM TODAY is to provide an analysis of the structure of the European security problem. By structure I mean those relationships, based on differential power and interests, that have become institutionalized over time. In the case of Europe the origins of the current structures go back to the 1940s. The stability they have brought is one of the reasons why a continent that produced so many disastrous wars has now spent over 70 years largely at peace. Armed force has been used but there has not been a third in the sequence of catastrophic, unlimited wars that marked the first half of the last century. For a variety of reasons there are current anxieties that this structure is now being destabilized. I will return to those concerns later in the lecture. My first aim is to describe the origins of the structure and note the areas of potential contradiction that developed over time and which now cause real tensions.

The origins of the structure lie in the predicament faced by Prime Minister Winston Churchill when he became Prime Minister in the spring of 1940. With Western Europe now occupied and the battle of Britain about to begin, he quickly concluded that if the country was to survive and Germany defeated this could only be done with the help of the United States. He worked hard to forge a close relationship with President Roosevelt. This paid dividends in the direct support provided by the Americans and then Roosevelt's decision, even after being attacked by the Japanese in December 1941, to make the liberation of Europe from the Nazis a priority. This was also the start of

a close alliance between these two countries that was sustained after 1945. It was an early indication of the tension between the distinctive demands of security interests in the Atlantic and Pacific areas, but also that Europe was the more important.

As the Soviet threat replaced the Nazi threat the West European democracies accepted the war-time lesson – that they could not defend themselves against large and aggressive enemies on their own and without the United States. Hence the effort that culminated in the signing of the Washington Treaty in April 1949. The United States was now committed to the defence of Western Europe. Unlike 1914 and 1939 when first the Kaiser and then Hitler could be reassured that they would not be fighting the Americans the Soviet leadership could have no such comfort.

The fact that the United States alone had nuclear weapons at this point was important but not critical. It only became really important a few years later. The deterrent effect came from alliance and not from any military capabilities. If anything the US position had weakened since the war as it had demobilized its regular forces in a way that the USSR had not as it moved to occupy and impose its political system on the countries it had liberated from the Nazis. Then within months – in August 1949 – the first Soviet test of an atomic device was detected, so it would not even be possible to rely on an American nuclear monopoly in the future

Thus the starting point for the new security structure was a straightforward alliance between the United States and its European allies. NATO at this stage did not have much by way of either war-fighting capacity or strategy. Here the key developments were those that followed the Korean War that began in the summer of 1950.

This had two important consequences. The first was that the Cold War was now as much Asian as European. This had already begun with the Communist takeover over China. The United States now began to pick up security obligations to Asian countries, notably South Korea, Japan and Australia, that matched those to NATO. Except that unlike NATO these countries were not gathered together in a single alliance (the now defunct South East Asia Treaty Organization did not include South Korea and Japan). In addition, the politics of Asia was much more dynamic, complex, and often violent, so that after Korea the United States was drawn into the Vietnam War. Thus the inherent tension in American foreign policy between the Atlantic-facing and the Pacific-facing was aggravated. From this point Europeans were always competing with Asia for American attention.

The second consequence of Korea was that because a communist country had aggressed against a non-communist, the military instrument was once again in play. In Washington, London and Paris the alarms bells started to ring again and plans began to be made for rearmament. This was the point at which the Cold War began to be militarized.

Because the Soviet Union was now in the nuclear business it was considered too risky to rely on nuclear deterrence – the rearmament would have to be in regular forces. Unfortunately this was expensive. In addition, to be at all feasible it required German rearmament and membership of NATO. Coming so soon after the end of the Second World War this was a controversial measure – not least in West Germany. Because of the urgent need to boost front-line forces German rearmament was accepted. The main

West German condition was that the alliance should agree to "forward defence" on the inner-German border. The alternative was that the new deal might enable alliance forces to conduct a mobile defence over German territory, little of which might be left once the fighting stopped.

By the time this was agreed, however, American strategy had shifted once more. President Eisenhower was concerned about the economic impact of the extent of the rearmament required to begin to match the Soviet bloc's superior conventional forces. This shift was made possible by the move from fission (atomic) bombs to fusion (hydrogen) bombs and from a few weapons to large-scale production. Both were – if only for a short-time – areas of American superiority and Eisenhower sought to take advantage of them while he could. This was the foundation of the policy of massive retaliation introduced in early 1954 when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles announced that US would respond to aggression 'at places and by means of our own choosing'. This was interpreted as meaning that the US was threatening to respond with a major nuclear strike to any aggression, even if comparatively minor, in a peripheral place and employing only conventional forces.

The Administration knew that this policy would become problematic once the Soviet Union caught up but for the moment it was a way of saving money on an otherwise expensive military build-up. In addition the threat of a nuclear war that would ravage the Soviet state seemed more likely to deter aggression than conventional resistance in the middle of Europe that would leave Soviet territory unscathed. Both these arguments proved to be attractive even as the Soviet Union did catch up. Allies were reluctant to increase spending and believed deterrence worked only so long as the Soviet Union itself felt vulnerable.

The real challenge came with the possibility of a victory in a nuclear battle. The logic of massive retaliation was that any Soviet move across the East- West border could start a nuclear war. This could work as deterrence if it was assumed that neither side would risk suicide. But what if it became possible to reduce the risk of suicide by developing a war-winning nuclear capability? The only way this could be done was if a way could be found to disarm the enemy with a first strike. In such a strike it would not be population centres but bomber and missile bases that would be targeted. In 1957 a panic developed in the United States as it became evident that the Soviet missile programme was ahead. Not only had they tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) but they had also launched the world's first artificial earth satellite (Sputnik 1).

Within a few years this panic was over. The Soviet missile programme lacked momentum while the US moved ahead, putting missiles not only on land but also in submarines where they would be hard to find and destroy. A retaliatory strike might possibly fail if defences could be organized to blunt its impact. Passive, civil defence would be useless because of the power of individual weapons, other than allowing some to escape the worst effects of long-term fallout. Active defences required knocking out incoming bombers and missiles before they reached their targets. The difficulty here was the attacker would have a range of targets to attack; the defender would need to decide which were the most important to defend. Even with a dedicated defence, it would only need one warhead to get through to devastate a city or even a military facility. The

attacker could have missiles with front-ends that included a number of warheads, and even a few dummies. For these reasons by the mid-1960s the United States accepted the logic of mutual assured destruction (MAD) a term that conveyed its meaning with the utmost clarity.

While MAD had the advantage of removing any premium on a surprise pre-emptive strike in the heat of a crisis, because there was no way of ensuring that there would be no retaliation, this also meant that it left NATO with a dilemma. An enormous risk would be attached to any first use of nuclear weapons, even though the threat of nuclear escalation was seen as the best means of deterring aggression. The Soviet bloc was presumed to have a considerable advantage in conventional forces. If Western Europe was being overrun then the United States would be expected not only to rush reserves across the Atlantic, which could take too long, but if necessary to counter with nuclear weapons. But why would they when the result would be to invite retaliation against the nuclear homeland? Would they put New York or Washington at risk for the sake of Berlin, Paris, Brussels or London? This was the dilemma of "extended deterrence", of employing the ultimate threat on behalf of allies. The risk was eased in 1967 with the adoption of the strategy of flexible response, which meant that a nuclear response would not be automatic and a greater effort would be put into developing conventional defences, though because of Vietnam the US was losing interest in increased defence spending in Europe while the Soviet union was catching up in raw numbers of nuclear weapons.

Because of these risks Washington and Moscow worked hard to maintain regular conversations, so that any crisis could be kept under control. That then raised a concern among Western Europeans that their interests might be forgotten as the Americans sought a deal with the Russians. A quite different concern was that in their determination to deal with communism wherever it appeared, the US might drag them into a dangerous confrontation in somewhere they had no interest in fighting, whether the Middle East or Asia.

So by the late 1960s Europe had acquired a distinctive security structure. The Western European countries, with a few exceptions of the neutral and non-aligned, were organized into a single alliance, dependent upon the United States. This dependence had a number of features:

- It involved a nuclear threat of uncertain credibility as there was no way of winning a war involving nuclear exchanges. The alternative was to build up conventional forces, but that was considered too expensive. Yet removing the risk of nuclear war might make conventional aggression too tempting for the Soviet bloc;
- It meant a degree of competition with other regions, and in particular Asia-Pacific, for Washington's attention;
- It created the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment. With abandonment the United States might decide that its own security interests were no longer aligned with those of Western Europe. During the course of a crisis it might refuse to accept the need to honour its alliance obligations. With entrapment, the United States might demand that Europeans act in conflicts in which their own security interests were not directly at stake.

In 1990 the situation was transformed when European communism imploded, the Soviet Union began to fall apart, and its erstwhile allies moved to integrate with Western Europe, through membership of both NATO and the European Union.

Suddenly the European security situation was much eased. Russia shrank as a major power, and the balance of power shifted dramatically. Most European countries, again with the exception of the neutral and non-aligned and some in the former Soviet space, were now members of NATO and the alliance had conventional superiority over Russia. This meant that it was Russia which was now dependent upon first use threats. At the same time fighting broke out within the former Yugoslavia, leading to Western intervention, and raising the question (which was never properly answered) as to whether there was a class of conflicts which Europeans could now manage on their own without the United States.

Yet in other key respects Europe's distinctive security structure remained the same:

- The allies of the United States were gathered together into a single alliance.
- While in principle they should be able to mount a conventional defence against Russia independently of the United States their defence budgets shrank and were spent inefficiently, so in key capabilities they remained dependent upon the United States.
- Furthermore, the problem of extended deterrence remained. The new balance of forces meant that Russia was more dependent upon nuclear threats. Although Britain and France had their own nuclear capabilities, the United States was still seen as by far the most important provider of a deterrent against Russian nuclear use.
- The Asia-Pacific region was even more dynamic and in the years after the end of the Cold War was transformed even more by the dramatic economic growth of China which translated into more political power.
- The spectre of mass casualty terrorism, generated by al Qaeda's attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001, resulted in a "global war on terror", which drew the Americans and some of its allies into campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, neither of which reached satisfactory conclusions.

The great advantage of continuity with NATO was that it kept the question of alliance formation quiet. While the continent is far more inter-dependent than before and shares much in terms of values and political philosophy it is not unitary. The decision by the British people to leave the EU, taken in the June 2016 referendum, warned that of the fragility of some of the links, although Britain has always been a semi-detached member of the Union. The north and south of the continent tend to have distinctive security interests, with the north looking more to Russia and the south more to Northern Europe. The Euro-zone might struggle to hold together in the face of another financial crisis, and if it collapsed that would be in some acrimony and could threaten the wider European project.

If NATO was disbanded then there would be a risk of the continent reverting to its bad old ways. States would have to work out anew with whom they want to align with or against. This would create an obvious potential for trouble. Long dormant tensions may come to the fore – from forgotten border disputes to suppressed ethnic tensions.

Russia would have more opportunities to look for sympathetic partners, whereas at the moment those opportunities do not exist. The question of nuclear deterrence would become much more difficult for some states because either the UK or France would have to provide in the absence of the US or else they would have to think about developing their own capabilities. Thus by its very existence NATO is a force for stability because it renders unnecessary a search for alternative arrangements which would soon become a source of instability and uncertainty.

This is why statements from President Trump before his inauguration that 'NATO is obsolete' set off such alarm bells in Europe. The fear, reinforced by the warm words Trump had for Russian President Putin during and after the election campaign, was that he was after some grand deal that would give Moscow relief from sanctions and a free pass over Ukraine, thereby weakening confidence in those countries – such as the Baltic states – that felt threatened by Russian aggression. In the event, possibly because, the Russian connection became so toxic after the inauguration, forcing the resignation of General Flynn, that politically it was no longer possible to align US positions with those of Russia. Nonetheless, other concerns including the 'free riding' of Europeans on American defence spending. This is not a new issue, and was raised regularly during the Obama Administration. European governments know that they have let things slip and, more because of Putin than Trump, have started to turn things round. In addition, the first big crisis of the Administration – over North Korea's nuclear and missile testing – has been Asia-Pacific rather than European, again following the previous administration which had 'pivoted' to Asia.

So for the moment the old order remains intact and the established arrangements for European security continue as before. Whether these can continue indefinitely is another question. They can continue for some time so long as they are not tested in a crisis. But Europeans need at least to start thinking about whether there are alternatives, either based on the EU (unlikely because of the UK) or a NATO with its current membership (Perhaps eventually with Sweden and/or Finland), but with the United States playing less of a leadership role. The difficulty is that without US leadership the tensions within Europe may become harder to contain. This takes us back to the core dilemma of European security. Any other power in the leadership role would be far more controversial because the United States is so much larger and stronger than anyone else and also less caught up in the day to day politics of the continent. But this requires the Europeans continuing to live with the twin anxieties of abandonment and entrapment.

The author is Emeritus Professor of War Studies, King's College London and a fellow of RSAWS.