

By Mike Hancock MP

Our previous Prime Minister, like Winston Churchill, believed that the world would always be safer if America and the United Kingdom were fighting on the same side. Mr Brown has followed that line with enthusiasm, to the regret of many in the United Kingdom, myself included. Nevertheless, it is believed that Europe and America are better served by working together rather than against each other or in different directions.

We cannot ignore public opinion in Europe. For far too long, politicians, particularly those in the European Parliament, have ignored the voice of the people of Europe. National parliamentarians have continuously tried to reignite enthusiasm for Europe by trying to get Europe to engage with the population. That is fundamental. Europe must have a voice and it must decide whether Europe should proceed alone by shouting loud from Brussels through the European Security and Defence Policy or whether Europe is best served through NATO, from which some European countries are excluded.

I believe that there is a middle road where both are important to the future stability of Europe and to the peaceful prospects for the world. NATO and the EU can be seen as positive missions for good in our community and further afield. We continue to battle with the problems of global security. The Middle East is still as explosive as ever and we need to see what we can do with our American colleagues to try to break the logjam that has existed for far too long.

I met a Palestinian refugee aged 61, the same age as me, who had lived his whole life in a refugee camp. His aspirations were for something better, but his children and grandchildren had been raised with no real optimism for the future. I hope that what we have seen in Annapolis and the cooperation between the United States, Israel and Palestine will lead to a breakthrough. But the pressures there continue to affect us.

The crisis affecting all NATO states and their relationship with the United States is Afghanistan, where NATO cannot afford to fail. If it does, NATO will not recover. It is vital that we get it right, not just for the short or medium term but for the long term. It is a battle for hearts and minds not just in Afghanistan but in Europe and the United States.

We took our eye off the ball in Afghanistan and it is common ground that we missed an opportunity and allowed the Taliban to regroup. We were distracted by the situation in Iraq, important though it was. We have lost some of what had been achieved in Afghanistan. Anyone who visited the country in the early days after the coalition went in would have seen the revitalisation of interest in political life there. There was a great emphasis on education and women were playing a greater part. For some reason that has never been explained to me by the British Government, we lost a situation of immense gain and allowed the confidence of the Afghan people to ebb away.

We need to succeed, but we are working from a position of weakness.

British troops are fighting day to day. I spoke to a young Royal Marine commander who told me that on six occasions in 10 days he was fighting so closely that he had a bayonet in his rifle, something he had not done since training 10 years ago. What does that do to young men and women who are put in that situation? We are creating a scenario that is difficult to contemplate. Young boys of 18 or 19 are coming home having witnessed death and in some cases having caused death. We cannot expect them to be the same people they were when they left.

I was surprised that NATO had not equipped itself to deal with the repercussions of such a war scenario. Afghanistan presents NATO with a challenge in respect of national caveats. How is it possible that some countries can choose to opt out of putting their troops on the ground and in harm's way?

All member states signed up for the NATO operation and all had equal say in it. It is invidious, therefore, of some countries to say, "We will send our military, but they cannot be in daily contact with the enemy." The public in Canada, Britain and other countries who have lost soldiers in Afghanistan will agree that once a country has made a commitment, it must see it through.

Previously I have highlighted the fact that young British men and women are fighting and dying on the front line in Afghanistan, and at the same time British kids are overdosing on heroin from Afghanistan. Our soldiers pass the poppy fields of Helmand province but are powerless to do anything about it.

Why do we not have an alternative solution? For 20 years, the EU has been paying farmers billions of euros not to grow crops. Why can we not have a similar system for Afghanistan? We must bear it in mind, however, that the Taliban will always have control over the poppy growers. Someone has proposed the selling of poppy crops on the legal market, but for that to succeed we would need troops on every farm to ensure that the farmers were not killed by the Taliban.

The EU and the United States are the principal actors equipped to tackle current threats, but that will not apply for much longer: China and India fancy their chances as emerging world powers militarily, politically and, more damaging for some, economically. Russia is reasserting its position in the world. Indeed, Putin's principal achievement perhaps has been to give back the Russian people their self-esteem.

We must work on relationships between the EU and NATO. I was depressed to discover that there is little dialogue between our colleagues in NATO and those in the EU. Meetings were held but they did not result in a coming together. It seemed to me that more divided them than unified them. Why cannot these two organisations, which geographically are so close in Brussels, find a better working relationship? Ambassadors representing their country at NATO say one thing but say almost the opposite to the EU.

Why have the Americans persisted for so long in saying, "We don't do peacekeeping; we leave

that to others"? We were delighted to learn from our American colleagues that the United States Administration recognises that it has a world role to play not only in fighting but in delivering long-term stable solutions. I hope that lessons have been learnt from Iraq and Afghanistan - that you must have an exit plan, including what you leave when you go. No one had a plan for Iraq and it was felt that it could be left to the Iraqi people, but if you remove a dictator and most of a country's structures you have to start from scratch in rebuilding it.

There is much tension in Europe about missile defence - about whether it is right to have rockets in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic. Opinion polls in the Czech Republic and the journalists whom I met reflect the fact that the public are reluctant for the radar to be sited there. They say that they are not a target at the moment, but the presence of the radar would make them a possible target. The same can be said of Poland. We must engage with our American friends on those important issues.

My recommendations would be as follows:

- 1) Further deepen the current NATO-EU dialogue so as to consolidate and enhance the existing framework of cooperation between them, thus enabling them to exploit synergies in military and civilian crisis management more efficiently. We do not want bureaucrats telling us that there is insufficient dialogue.
- 2) Develop a more proactive European dialogue with a view to reaching consensus on global security issues in order to project confidence and thereby create a climate of political and public trust. Let us engage with the public we claim to represent.
- 3) Give full and unified support to and bring influence to bear on the search for a lasting resolution of Kosovo's future status. Let us hope that we can find a peaceful solution.
- 4) Develop an antimissile concept driven by European interests, interoperable with the United States' Ballistic Missile Defense System (BMDS) and amenable to Russian proposals for cooperation. Let us engage seriously with the Russians on that.
- 5) Take such action as is necessary and cooperate more closely with the United States in Afghanistan in order to curb the local drugs industry. Let us see some positive action in tackling the scourge of drugs.
- 6) Increase their investment in the various new technologies designed to tackle the new security threats, step up dialogue with and implement more transparent policies towards national defence industries with a view to strengthening the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) and seek to achieve greater transparency of national defence markets so as to avoid unnecessary duplication and cost. That will be best achieved by the continuation of parliamentary assemblies such as the Assembly of Western European Union. We elected representatives are in close contact with our constituents and we must represent their interests more clearly than the European Parliament can.

I also hope that our American allies will listen to the voices of the people of Europe a little more than they have seemed to do over the past 10 years.

This paper is based on a speech given by Mike Hancock MP at the 53rd Plenary Session of the European Security and Defence Assembly on the 4th December 2007 as a presentation of his report "Transatlantic Security Challenges". The full text of the report can be found on the following link:

http://www.assembly-weu.org/en/documents/sessions_ordinaires/cr/2007/cr07.php#P68_6851