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# Opening address at Security and Defence Futures: Possibilities and Practicalities conference

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## **Lord Robertson:**

I had a significant responsibility for the decision to hand the Afghanistan mission to NATO under a strong UN mandate.

I have never for a moment regretted that decision. The task was necessary and urgent and NATO was the only organization in the world which could take it on.

All nineteen nations then in NATO and the seven aspirant countries who were also in the room all agreed, unanimously, that the task should be taken on and that it would be a big and challenging operation

Every one of them knew that if Afghanistan went back to being a failed state 'run' by the likes of the Taliban then the security and safety of all of us would be as vulnerable and as compromised as were the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Centre.

When, as the Leader of the Alliance, I said the words 'We must go to Afghanistan or Afghanistan will come to us' the governments of the twenty six nations in the Atlantic Alliance knew what they were taking on but knew that their people would never forgive them if their safety was to be hostage to a resurgent terror state.

That was the choice then, it is the choice now.

The NATO countries knew that going to Afghanistan was about their own self-interest and their own self-preservation.

It is not just for the security of the Afghan people our forces fight and lay their lives on the line.

Nor is it just to sustain and reinforce the Afghan government elected after the first Afghan elections ever.

No, we are there first and foremost to protect our own safety and security.

That was the case when we took on the mission in 2003 and it is time that we are reminded that it is still what it is all about.

When Afghanistan was controlled by the Taliban they granted freedom to the plotters of the attacks on the West. In the caves and remote valleys of the Tora Bora mountains the jihadists planned the destruction of the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and their human inhabitants.

The Kabul regime permitted, and encouraged, the criminal killers who projected the terror onto the streets of Western capitals and beyond them.

So make no mistake about this. If they got back to power in Afghanistan then the merchants of bloodshed would be back in business

That is why our troops, who serve with bravery and professionalism, must stay and fight off the Taliban extremists and help build a strong Afghan society and economy. That's why I salute and thank those soldiers who serve in Helmand province in the troubled south of Afghanistan and why I mourn and sympathise with those who have lost dear ones in that distant land.

Of course we could bring the troops home. There are those who find it fashionable to say so in some of the newspapers today.

To them and to some others it seems easy and straightforward. Leave this failing state and losing war they say. 'We are not winning, other countries are not pulling their weight, we will simply be bogged down for a generation'. After all, they spin to us, London is a long, long way from Helmand province.

But no it is not. Not nearly far enough.

New York in September 2001 was too close and so were the passengers on the trains in Madrid in 2004, and here in London we were actually next door when death came to the underground on 7/7.

It's a remarkably small world and the tentacles of the purveyors of hate and bloodshed are long and deadly.

If we, and the allies who stand beside us in the South of Afghanistan - Canada, the Netherlands, the USA and some others, took the easy road home, make no mistake the troops would be followed shortly after by the very guys who saw us off.

The tumbleweed of organized crime, the narcotic billions and the jihadist militants won't just stay in their caves.

They will briefly congratulate themselves on defeating the world's most successful defence alliance and then they will reach out to kill again.

And no Tora Bora mountains and no European plains and no North Sea waves will act as a barrier to them.

Just ask the three thousand who went to work across the Atlantic Ocean on Tuesday the ninth of September 2001 and never came home again.

If they could speak today, with a voice also for those who died at Al-Qaeda's hand in London and Madrid and Istanbul and Nairobi and Casablanca, they would say that running away from a bloodthirsty, nihilistic, enemy of our free open society is a sure fire recipe for more of the same.

The NATO alliance is in Afghanistan today to win for the sake of those who have not yet died.

NATO is there to secure our freedoms and our liberties – and we are there to make sure that a failed state succeeds and a democratic state prospers and these are noble and understandable objectives.

So it is absolutely right that NATO is in command in Afghanistan in spite of all the problems. NATO remains, and will remain, a unique alliance of free peoples.

The prize of being in a twenty-six nation Alliance is the security, safety and solidarity it produces for those in it. But the burdens and the responsibilities of an Alliance are the ingredients of that prize. All countries share the prize, so all countries must pay the price.

There can be no two-tier alliance. There cannot be one tier for those to carry the burdens and the bloody sacrifice and a tier for those who benefit from that contribution. Collective security is what it means – collective. No more, no less.

I hope that when NATO Heads of State and Government meet in Bucharest in a few weeks time they will take a long look at the future of a great alliance which produced more than half a century of peace in Europe. And when they do I hope they will recognise what they took on, and precisely what is required to finish the job.

I want today to salute the troops who serve and have served in Afghanistan. Every one of them who went will have had a life-changing experience. They will have seen things and done things which may well have scarred them and will certainly stay with them.

They need to know that their country values and appreciates what they have done and thanks them for their sacrifice in making us here a little safer.

They serve, and some have died or been terribly injured, to allow the people of Afghanistan to live in the peace and security we take for granted.

But let us never forget that where they serve, so far away from their homes, is today's front line in our own national defence.

It's dangerous and tough out there and it will not be a nice place for some time yet. But as one blunt ex-soldier said to me 'It's better we fight and defeat these b\*\*\*\*\*s out there than fight them in the streets back home'.

I was reminded of these sentiments when I walked recently across the island at Hyde Park Corner here in London. Among the memorials there is the mighty one to the Royal Artillery who lost 78,000 men in both world wars.

There are words on that memorial which have stuck with me. It said;

'They died with the faith that the future of all mankind would benefit from their sacrifice'

For the last seventy years we have indeed reaped the benefits of these sacrifices but I say to you with deep conviction that all that sacrifice and the sacrifices still being made will be for nothing at all if we stand by and let evil prevail in Afghanistan today.