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About two weeks ago, an exasperated NATO Ambassador asked a question to his colleagues around the Council table: Why is it that we always see so many crises happening in the month of August?

The question was, of course, a rhetorical one, so no one felt compelled to respond. But there can be no doubt that August 2008 will go down in history as a key moment in international security. "The Guns of August", to borrow the title of a famous book, will sound in our ears for some time to come.

We saw a war erupt in the Caucasus – with a Russian military response so disproportionate that some observers started musing about a second Cold War. As I will try to explain later in my remarks, I don't believe that a second Cold War is in the offing. But one thing is clear: the role that Russia wants to play in the new international system still remains uncertain.

At the same time, the month of August and the first two weeks of September have also seen fierce fighting and a large number of casualties in Afghanistan – many NATO soldiers and many Afghans have lost their lives, and I want to use this opportunity to express my sympathy to the loved ones and friends of all those British soldiers who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

We have also seen the Taliban and other extremist forces strengthen their positions in the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan. It is thus becoming ever clearer that success in Afghanistan can only be achieved if we engage Pakistan in a common effort against extremism which threatens the future of the entire region.

Conflict in the Caucasus, instability in and around Afghanistan – these two theatres alone would seem more than one can handle at any given time. Yet we all know that these crises are not happening in a vacuum. Both conflicts will reverberate far beyond their points of origin. I don't have to explain at length why Russia's justification for recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia could set a dangerous precedent – with truly global consequences. Nor do I have to explain at length why the conflict will have longer-term implications for our energy policy, notably for the discussion about alternative transit routes.

The conflict in Afghanistan, too, is more than a regional issue. It is about our response to the global phenomenon of international terrorism. It is about our readiness to support fragile young democracies that are trying to take their people out of poverty and into the modern world. It is about long-term stability in Central Asia. And it is about the struggle of moderate Islam to prevail against the forces of fanaticism.

Samuel Johnson once said that the prospect of hanging concentrates the mind. I am not suggesting that we are in any immediate danger of being hung, but if we don't want this world to take a turn for the worse, we'd better concentrate on how best to deal with the challenges we face. So let me give you my thoughts on the way ahead – with respect to Russia, and with respect to Afghanistan.

First; Russia. Here, the issues are crystal clear. Irrespective of who did what and when in the August conflict, Russia has demonstrated a disregard for the sovereignty of a small neighbour, and for international law. This has created a major challenge for our partnership. Both NATO and the EU have made it abundantly clear that the very notion of partnership implies due respect for certain agreed standards of behaviour. As long as Russia chooses to ignore these standards, there can be no business as usual. Russia has long demanded to be treated with respect, as becomes a global power. But respect has to be earned – by taking one's global responsibilities and the defence of universal values seriously, rather than by abusing one's military might.

In both her actions and her accompanying rhetoric, Russia has shown much assertiveness. But what worries me even more is Russia's apparent readiness to stand against virtually the entire international community. Russia's perceived temporary gains in Georgia have come at the cost of her strategic isolation. President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin tell us that the West needs Russia, but that Russia doesn't really need the West. I have no problem with the first part of their statement. Yes, the West does indeed need Russia. But it is an illusion to believe that Russia can go it alone without the West. Going it alone in this global world is simply not an option.

What next? Let me be very clear. A solution to this crisis is possible. But it will only be found if all parties are willing to make concessions and to walk back from where they are today. Such a solution cannot be found if we simply seek to "punish" Russia. NATO is not in the punishment business. Nor is there any need for us to engage in rhetorical escalation. We do not need to crank up the volume. So let me tell you how I, as the NATO Secretary General, see the way ahead.

As a starting point, we need a sober analysis of the implications of the Caucasus conflict in general, and of Russia's policy in particular. And then we must devise a sound policy based on that analysis. This exercise has only just begun, so I don't want to pre-empt its outcome. A few things, however, should be evident.

First, I do not foresee a U-turn in NATO's policy vis-à-vis Russia. You need to make a U-turn when you've gone totally wrong. We, however, have not gone wrong. The key tenets of our Russia policy – a policy of constructive engagement – remain sound. We may have to make adjustments in the way we approach Russia, but we do not need a new policy. No matter how much we may disagree on some issues, the fact of the matter is that both NATO and Russia face a number of common challenges – and both NATO and Russia will be better off by facing them together. That is the reason why we invested so much in the NATO-Russia partnership.

Second, in this new security context, some have called for a reappraisal of the balance

between an expeditionary NATO and our core task of collective defence.

Such a discussion is certainly justified. But, again, I do not foresee a 180 degree change in our approach. Article 5 already exists, we don't have to reinvent it. Neither does upholding Article 5 require us to return to a Cold War military posture in Europe.

Third, irrespective of our approach vis-à-vis Russia, we must support Georgia. Indeed, in many respects, this is the most important thing that we need to do in the short-term. And we are doing it. We are helping Georgia to assess and repair the damage caused by Russian actions. And we will continue to support this country in realising its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Earlier this week, I visited Georgia together with the Ambassadors of the North Atlantic Council. During that visit, we inaugurated the NATO-Georgia Commission. It conveys the message – to Georgia, as well as to Russia – that geography does not have to determine your destiny, and that the era of spheres of influence is over.

In addition to our meetings in Tbilisi, we also saw the refugees from South Ossetia who were camped around Gori. It was a sobering experience. And it reinforced us in our strong conviction that the people of Georgia cannot afford any more conflict. We will continue to stand by Georgia, but we also expect it to remain firmly committed to democracy and reform. And we made that very clear to all our interlocutors.

Georgia may remain a bone of contention between Russia and the West for some time to come. But this must not prevent us from seeking to cooperate with Russia wherever our interests converge. One key area where this is the case is Afghanistan.

When Russia decided last month to suspend most of her cooperation with NATO, this did not include cooperation on Afghanistan. This is a clear indication that common interests can transcend disagreements in other areas. And it reminds us of the singular importance of Afghanistan in the broader security equation.

The outbreak of the Georgian crisis eclipsed Afghanistan from the headlines – but not for long. Now we are back to the torrent of bad news stories of which Afghanistan seems to offer a limitless supply.

There is an old adage which says that only bad news sells. And if that were true, the publishing industry must have been doing rather well recently.

And yet we have no reason to be so pessimistic. An objective assessment of the situation in Afghanistan should make that clear. Not only is our cause a just cause, our key objective of creating a safe and secure Afghanistan that is able to look after itself remains entirely within our grasp.

What gives me reason to be so confident? Again, let me confine myself to three points. The first one is on security. Yes, there is a widespread perception of a Taliban resurgence, as a result of some spectacular attacks. But, no, the Taliban have not been able to capitalise much on it. They continue to suffer heavy losses. And contrary to some alarmist predictions, they have not been able to strangle Kabul. ISAF will not be defeated, neither tactically nor operationally. And our training of the Afghan National Army is now enabling that new force to

engage alongside our own – with increasing success, and with popular support. The ANA now participates in more than two thirds of ISAF's operations. As the ANA expands, it will increasingly be able to deny our opponents their freedom of movement, hold the gains we make, and ultimately allow Afghanistan to take responsibility for its own security.

The Taliban will not be able to reverse this positive momentum. What they did achieve, however, is to create a sense of uncertainty that permeates the country and hinders progress. It is a cruel irony that the Taliban have now realised that our development efforts in Afghanistan are bearing fruit. That is why they are targeting these very efforts. What we build, they seek to destroy. Their aim is clear: to convince the Afghan people that neither the International Community nor their own Government can provide security for them. And to convince our own publics that our engagement in Afghanistan is doomed to fail.

It is up to us to prove them wrong. And this is my second point: We must see through their propaganda – and do whatever is necessary to defeat them. This does not just mean to provide the military resources that are critical for success. It also means to further enhance our training for the ANA. It means to capitalise on the recent decrease in drug production, by stepping up ISAF's support for the Afghan Government. It means to lobby even more extensively for a Comprehensive Approach by the International Community – for an approach that will close the gap between security and development.

It means to support the preparation for next year's elections, which offer a genuine opportunity to re-energise the political process in the country. And it means that our Governments and Parliaments must redouble their efforts to explain to their constituents why it is in our own security interest to prevent Afghanistan from sliding back to pre-"9/11" days.

Within a few months we will have a new Administration in Washington. Whoever wins, I expect the new President to increase US forces in Afghanistan and to focus even more US effort and attention on stabilising Afghanistan and on improving security along the Afghan-Pakistan border. Indeed, President Bush has already started this effort.

While I of course welcome an even greater US effort, I believe that it is important that we continue to make this not just a US responsibility but a collective transatlantic responsibility. When the telephone rings early next year, I hope that the other Allies will also be ready, not just with additional forces, but also with extra contributions to training Afghanistan's National Army and Police, strengthening its institutions and developing its economy.

Success in Afghanistan also means stepping up our political engagement with her neighbours, notably Pakistan. And this is my third point. As long as Pakistan's border region remains a sanctuary for insurgents, Afghanistan will never become truly secure. Clearly, it is up to Pakistan to define its own security interests. Let's be honest: there are some who believe that instability in Afghanistan is somehow in Pakistan's security interest. And there are others who believe that extremism in Pakistan could be dealt with by diverting it into Afghanistan. But I fail to see how a permanently unstable Afghanistan would somehow be conducive to Pakistan's own long-term security.

This should be a key argument in our dialogue with Islamabad – a dialogue that we must intensify.

I will be going to Islamabad next month to meet with Pakistan's new civilian leaders as well as the Chief of Defence. We all need to do a better job together of monitoring and controlling the border, and we need to intensify the work of our Tripartite Commission where our military commanders meet to coordinate their approaches. Above all, we need to establish a permanent dialogue between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the international community to develop a joint strategy. The election of a new Pakistani President gives me hope that this is the right time for a new approach.

At the same time, we need to develop a framework for the broader region. Afghanistan's neighbours also suffer from the turmoil in that country – just think of the problems that Iran is currently facing from Afghan narcotics. We need to bring as many as we can into a process of regional cooperation. The pacification of the Afghan-Pakistani border is not the panacea for all our problems. As in so many other parts of the world, long term stability and prosperity can only come from the development of a regional framework and economic integration. And I believe that more thought should go into how we achieve this.

The events in the Caucasus and in Central Asia remind us of the challenges our transatlantic community must face. But they also reaffirm the logic of Europe and North America acting together. When we do, we can bring about real positive change.

And NATO will remain a unique tool at our disposal. What started as an idea in the minds of Ernest Bevin and Dean Acheson 60 years ago has become an indispensable pillar of international order. Let us use our Alliance, and use its potential to full effect.

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