



Remarks by UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw
at the Istanbul Pan-Atlantic Student Summit, 28 June 2004

I want just to make a few remarks about the changing transatlantic relationship, to lead into our discussion.

Fifty-five years since the signature of the North Atlantic Treaty, there is talk of the 'end of the West' – of the decline, even irrelevancy, of the transatlantic relationship. The premise of that claim is that with the Cold War over, Europe and America no longer need each other as they once did.

The European continent was certainly a crucial front-line of the Cold War – and hence the focus of international attention. Today, that focus has shifted elsewhere – to the Middle East, to Afghanistan, to Africa. But that hasn't made the transatlantic alliance irrelevant. Indeed I would submit that the alliance is as important as ever: but its focus has changed. The key to the transatlantic relationship today lies not in Europe, but in the challenges of global security around the world.

Today's threats affect us all; and they often come not from states but from small groups of terrorists, proliferators or criminals operating outside the law in conditions where order has broken down. We saw tragically on 11 September 2001 how the violence and repression of Afghanistan mutated into horrific terrorism thousands of miles away in the United States. Today, 95 per cent of the heroin which enters Britain comes from Afghanistan – so it is vital that NATO continues to build security there, so that opium production can be tackled effectively. Likewise, a breakdown of order in the Balkans would have knock-on effects on us all through organized crime, illegal immigration, or the creation of possible breeding grounds for terrorism – so NATO's role there is vital.

So, to misquote Dean Acheson, NATO won a Cold War, but has found a new role. As the world's strategic focus has shifted, so has NATO's; and today it is an alliance which helps us build global, not regional security, operating far beyond the borders of the Treaty area.

And NATO today exports its know-how through a wide network of partnerships. The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative which we are launching here will offer the countries of the Broader Middle East access to NATO's help and expertise in tackling terrorism and proliferation, and in improving their armed forces' capabilities to deal with today's threats. We are strengthening our work to stop terrorism in the Mediterranean area by getting more countries involved in operation Active Endeavor.

All this is a far cry from the NATO of the past. Indeed a visitor who attended the first North Atlantic Councils some 55 years ago would hardly recognize the organization if he returned today. For a start, the alliance has more than doubled its membership – and played an important part in ending the division of Europe. And where we once planned how to stop a surge of Soviet tanks through the Fulda Gap, today we are building a close partnership with Russia and its neighbors, and working far beyond the boundaries of our region.

But that visitor would, I think, note one point which is unchanged: NATO is still built on the underlying strength of the transatlantic alliance. It is a sign of that strength that NATO has been able to make such an effective transition to new tasks and missions, and move its focus from regional to global security. And in the years ahead, it is vital that we keep that winning combination: a strong alliance, with the flexibility to tackle the challenges of global security which affect us all.