

'If Ukraine loses, our enemies will decide the world order'

Description

by [Roland Oliphant](#), SENIOR FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT via [telegraph](#)

Image credit: unknown

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, a former secretary General of Nato, has seen his fair share of international crises CREDIT: Julian Simmonds

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Lord Robertson of Port Ellen has seen his fair share of international crises. As Tony Blair's Secretary of State for Defence and later the Secretary General of Nato between 1999 and 2003, he presided Nato's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the alliance's enlargement to include former Warsaw Pact members in eastern Europe, and its only ever invocation of Article Five, the North Atlantic Treaty's self-defence clause, in the aftermath of [the Sept 11 attacks](#).

Unlike many retired politicians and generals, he is still viewed by serving defence officials and thinkers as a credible elder statesman. Now, he has a warning: we are living through a period of global volatility "unlike anything in history, and we are not rising to the occasion".

"If they [Ukraine] lose, we lose...because otherwise the world order will be written by the Chinese and the Russians and the Iranians and the North Koreans. And that will make a very, very uncomfortable world for my grandkids."

It is not a reassuring prediction. The war in Ukraine is about to enter its third year, the Middle East is aflame, and Western nerves jangle over [Xi Jinping's plans for Chinese "unification" with Taiwan](#).

Image credit: unknown

Ukrainian servicemen fire a M777 howitzer toward Russian troops at a position near a front line in the Zaporizhzhia region CREDIT: Reuters/Stringer

And by the end of the year, Donald Trump, who is on record telling European officials that "Nato is dead," [may once again be president-elect of the United States](#).

Some officials are openly warning that Britain may be involved in a peer-to-peer conflict within a decade. Some people say the world has never been so dangerous as it is in 2024. Can Lord Robertson reassure us it isn't?

"Oh, it's bad," he says. "People say it's an incredibly dangerous time. Well, it is. We have never had such a volatility of events, so many things simultaneously happening in politics of both democracies and autocracies. Is it the most dangerous period? No."

Lord Robertson left Nato in 2003, but never really retired. At the age of 77 he is a frantically busy peer,

commuting weekly between Westminster and his home in Dunblane where he lives with his wife Sandra (he also has three grown-up children).

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“It’s unlike anything in history this period we’re living through,” he says. “It is almost a battle of alliances. The Global South is taking sides and they don’t seem to recognise that they’ve got a dog in the fight – that if you can change borders by the use of force then anarchy is the eventual outcome. The Western alliance is there, but maybe endangered by Donald Trump coming in. We cannot afford to be taken by surprise again.”

It is the vacuum of leadership that bothers him most. Yes, he concedes, the Westerners, including his own generation of leaders, became complacent in the aftermath of the Cold War.

“Even now, when there is a land war in Europe, when we’ve got Ukraine and some other problems – the Prime Minister was reminding us on Monday of how important it was that [Ukraine] gets the equipment. And he still doesn’t say when we will give them a multi-year commitment.”

Lord Robertson talks to troops from the Ukraine and Poland during a joint training exercise in 1998

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Lord Robertson talks to troops from the Ukraine and Poland during a joint training exercise in 1998
CREDIT: Adam Butler/PA

This week, Rishi Sunak won a standing ovation in the Rada, Ukraine’s parliament, when he announced a new package of aid. It was a strong speech, and greeted with great relief by Ukrainians who sense a creeping fatigue over the war.

But Lord Robertson fears there is still too large a gap between the bravado of Western rhetoric and the hesitancy of their actions for the Kremlin to take them seriously.

“There is a basic principle in politics: it is not what you say, it is what people hear. We forget that all the time. The only thing that will change Vladimir Putin’s mind – and that’s the mind that dictates what is happening there – is you’ve got to say you are there for the duration. One speech on a Monday

afternoon is not enough.

“The money we pay for Ukraine at the moment runs out in a few weeks time in March. The Prime Minister goes out there and makes all the right noises and gets an award and announces £2.5 billion for the next year. What they need is for us to say ‘we’re going to give you £2.5 billion every year.’ Because that’s the only thing that will be heard in the Kremlin.”

He sees a similar problem across the Atlantic. Joe Biden has also shown “timidity” in his response to Ukraine. And Donald Trump has even worse messaging problems.

US President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hold a press conference at the White

Image not found or type unknown

US President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hold a press conference at the White House in December CREDIT: AFP via Getty Images

“I was talking to an American congressional delegation this week who were pointing out that, although he was rhetorical about Nato before, he actually increased the American contribution to Nato. The American Congress has now put in place a law that says he cannot withdraw from Nato,” he explains.

“They were saying, ‘Look what Donald Trump did. We are absolutely on the side of the Ukrainians. We just want this deal done’. I said, ‘But that’s not what is appearing in the Kremlin. And that is all they are listening to’.”

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“I think the next stage for Putin, if he succeeds here, is that you build up another buffer. He will mop up Moldova, Armenia, Kazakhstan – building that buffer in there. There is a timidity both in the White House and in Downing Street and in other capitals in Europe, that they don’t want to escalate.

“You can’t give them long-range weapons because they might use them into territorial Russia and then we will have World War Three. So that fear of escalation is reducing that objective, that Ukraine has got to win,” Lord Robertson explains.

“In my view, again psychologically, we have got to inculcate into the Russian high command the thought that they could escalate and bring about that conflict. Because a conflict with Nato would lead to Russian defeat.”

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[Admiral Rob Bauer](#), Nato’s current military chief, warned this week that Nato must prepare for all-out war with Russia in the next 20 years. The head of Poland’s national security agency last month gave the alliance’s eastern members just three years to arm themselves.

Defence think tanks are rehearsing a nightmare scenario of Russia launching a surprise attack on the Baltic States, presenting Nato with a fait-accomplis before the alliance can agree on an effective military response.

By exploiting fear of nuclear war, Putin could then seek to persuade European governments to talk rather than fight – avoiding a conventional war (which he would lose), while effectively destroying Nato politically by demonstrating that Article 5 is useless.

Lord Robertson is sceptical. “I don’t think he will cross the Article 5 line. The key thing about nuclear deterrence is you don’t know what we’re going to do. And you can say Trump won’t press the button. But actually you’ve got the French and the British deterrents. And the British deterrent is independent.”

He freely admits he has come a long way from scouting for CND protesters at Holy Loch.

And yet the painting on his office wall is a reminder that there is more continuity than contradiction between the angry young pacifist scouting CND campsites and the peer of the realm putting faith in mutually assured destruction.

It was, after all, a group of former student radicals who resolved to stop Slobodan Milošević’s nascent genocide in Kosovo.

“The French, German, and British foreign and defence ministers around that table were all of that Sixties generation who protested against the Vietnam war,” Lord Robertson recalls. “You had people like Robin Cook, and me, and Joschka Fischer, confronted with something horrible going on, that we can stop.

“We knew what the public didn’t know, about Operation Horseshoe and Milošević expelling an entire population. Are you going to take military action? You have to, when you’re faced with that enormous

responsibility.”

In the end, it comes back to the bones beneath the poppies on his office wall.

“We need to look at Ukraine in the same context. Because if they lose – if Putin wins – then we all lose.”

[Read the whole article here.](#)