

# The Symbiotic Intermingling of Culture, Economics, and Security: A Personal Retrospective

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## The forging of a life in culture, economics, and security

My formative years were marked by my parents' hopes and dreams that I would channel my vocal talents into a future where I would perform as a lyrical tenor on an operatic stage.<sup>1</sup>

Musical talent and voice training had inspired these aspirations, which were cruelly shattered when I joined a rock band to accompany my academic studies. Gradually, my father's disappointment subsided as my career as an economist developed, gaining me recognition and influence.

Eventually, he came to acknowledge that my lifelong commitment to music, economics, and security had provided a fine platform for success. Combining a career in economic analysis in the twentieth century with economic security assessments for NATO in the twenty-first created a richly varied, cultural, and rewarding life.

## 'Are you a professor of economics or a rock 'n' roll performer?': The antecedents from wintry Illinois

The antecedents to this lifelong passion emerged one cold winter's morning in January 1979. The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the Illinois university I was visiting asked

<sup>1</sup> Such hopes and dreams had been nurtured by my singing Bach to win a major music festival.

me this question in a withering voice.<sup>2</sup> Memories of my father's disappointment came flooding back. The Dean had obviously been made aware of the events of the previous night, and the reckoning had arrived. I had made my debut as a singer/guitarist at a popular pizza house/bar in town. While singing a well-known contemporary ballad, a young woman emerged from the shadows to stand behind the stool on which I was precariously perched.

Swaying and holding me tight, her embrace threatened to dislodge me and the guitar, and terminate the song. Somehow, the song was finished and after a warm hug and a farewell flourish, she returned to the shadows, never to be seen again. With compelling urgency, the pizza house manager rushed up and insisted that I repeat the song. Sales of pizza and beer had suddenly soared during the ballad and gently erotic spectacle.

Confronted by the curious but faintly amused Dean the following morning, there was no choice but to accede to her request that I write a paper for the First International Conference of Cultural Economics in Edinburgh later in the year (it transpired that the Dean was one of the Editors of *The Journal of Cultural Economics*).<sup>3</sup> My agreement drew inspiration from John Maynard Keynes' dying dictum that 'economists are the trustees not of civilisation but of the possibility of civilisation'.

<sup>2</sup> Precipitated by a headline in the local newspaper announcing that a British rock and roll singer would be performing at a well-known pizza house/bar.

<sup>3</sup> Published by Springer in Switzerland.

## From Edinburgh and culture to Bristol and defence

Following Edinburgh, I returned to my home city, Bristol, and increasingly undertook research into the understanding and analytical foundations of defence economics, inspired by Bristol's regional, national, and international importance as a major centre of the European aerospace and defence industry. This distinctive field of enquiry led to many conference presentations and papers. These achievements stimulated a unique invitation from the United States Naval Academy to accept an endowed Chair in the Economics of the Defense Industrial Base at Annapolis, Maryland (combined with a semester at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California).

This new transatlantic odyssey permitted once more a life combining business with culture and the nurturing of my musical soul when singing Monteverdi, Mozart, Motown, and the blues in Annapolis. A fulfilling chapter of life ended when I crossed the Atlantic once more to occupy a senior post at NATO in Brussels, heralding new opportunities and contributions to security, economics, and culture.

## The nexus of economic security and cultural diplomacy

I arrived in Brussels in late August 2001. Within three weeks the US was convulsed with anger, sorrow, and disbelief following the devastating, extraordinary Al Qaeda attacks on the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001.

In the frenzied aftermath of 9/11, and as the fear of a similar attack on NATO Headquarters receded, I was employed in an international role as NATO's principal Defence Economic Analyst, cooperating with Allies and Partners in developing sustainable security. During the 12 years of my NATO job, missions to numerous NATO member and Partner countries and regions meant frequent presentations at events and conferences, and a permanently packed suitcase.

## The unstable unfolding of the twenty-first century

These missions took place in the complicated aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. A decade of retribution and conflict embodied in the so-called 'War on Terror' followed, enacted in the October 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan and the calamitous and misconceived US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

These actions inflamed antagonisms and discord among NATO Allies—notably France and the US—and also with some Partner countries. The antagonised states were notably from the Middle East and the Gulf, including the seven members of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the four members of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

Such tensions built on the festering and continuing insecurities in Southeast Europe, notably among Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. These insecurities resulted from the fragile Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995, at the end of the Yugoslav War, and NATO's bombing of targets in Serbia during the 1999 Kosovo crisis.

NATO membership granted to Slovenia in 2004, Croatia in 2010, and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020 has left a legacy of smouldering ethnic, linguistic, religious, and economic instability in other Southeastern European states, such as Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

## A sacred mission to the Russian Far East

Brighter news and a cautious sense of optimism appeared with the historic NATO–Russia Summit in Rome in May 2002. The hope that a constructive and mutually beneficial partnership between Russia and NATO could be forged was represented by the formation of the NATO–Russia Council. A few months later, the Office of the Secretary General requested that I travel to Moscow and then to Khabarovsk in the Russian Far East. A speaking engagement at an international conference organised by the Khabarovsk State Academy of Economics and Law, on the integration of the Russian Far East into the Pacific Rim, provided an opportunity to stimulate comparisons and contrasts with NATO's origins and Euro-Atlantic identity.

The ten-hour journey from Brussels across nine time zones and the seemingly endless Russian taiga provided an unforgettable prelude to my visit to this remote region beyond Siberia. A note of sharp realism emerged during a subsequent speech to the Khabarovsk regional parliament. The Speaker was forced to take decisive action to protect me from visceral and angry Deputies who insisted that I be arrested as a NATO spy.

Escaping from Khabarovsk was accomplished by means of a dramatic overnight train journey on the last leg of the Trans-Siberian Express. I arrived in the early morning at the menacing but beautiful Vladivostok railway station. Vibrant, welcoming students from the celebrated Far Eastern State University escorted me to the campus. There followed a series of presentations on international relations and security to a variety of enthusiastic students and classes. Later, I held some conversations in—other than English and Russian—French and German, and to my Scandinavian surprise,<sup>4</sup> there was even a hybrid Swedish–Old Icelandic dialogue! Such a linguistic mélange offered the perfect prelude to an impromptu concert with caretaker Nikolai in the Vladivostok Children's Home. The spacious meeting room echoed to anthems from Santana and the Beatles including, inevitably, 'Back in the USSR'.

An eventful return journey from Vladivostok to Brussels was followed by congratulations from Secretary General Robertson on a successful diplomatic and musical mission. This affirmation emboldened me to engage in further musical diplomacy at other NATO conferences and events.

## The return of the Cold War

Unfortunately, the positive vibrations from the NATO–Russia partnership faded, and were fatally damaged in 2008. Georgia had become increasingly vociferous and articulate in expressing its desire to join NATO as a full member. This provoked the surprise Russian invasion of Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions in August 2008.

This disruption to the framework and programme of mutual NATO–Russia cooperation was never fully restored. The death knell was sounded as Russia became increasingly alarmed by Ukraine's own ambitions to join NATO. Unrest in Kiev preceded the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2013, and the subsequent insurgency in Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine erupted when separatists were backed by Russian militia.

The origins of this particular (ongoing) 'Frozen Conflict' were

<sup>4</sup> Swedish mother and biological father.

precipitated by the 2005–06 natural gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine, which was manifested in unresolved financial and transit disputes between Naftogaz Ukraine and Russia’s Gazprom. This ‘gas war’ greatly unnerved NATO member states, especially those with a significant dependency on Russian natural gas and its transit through Ukraine.

Russia’s continuing need for the security of hydrocarbon energy demand and critical state revenues combines with Western Europe’s dependency on Russian gas. This *pas de deux* continues to be played out against the economic dislocations of COVID-19, and against the alarming escalation in climate insecurity and international pressure for radical reductions in hydrocarbons and energy substitution through renewable energy sources.

### Singing before the Orange Revolution

At the conclusion of a NATO–Ukraine Joint Working Group on Economic Security in Kiev in 2004, the year of the Orange Revolution, a reception took place in a stylish contemporary art gallery in the Old Town of Kiev. A distinguished string quartet from the Kiev National Symphony Orchestra had been asked to provide music, but neither they nor I could have anticipated a request from the Reception Host, the Deputy Minister for Economic Security, that they should accompany me in some songs. With neither rehearsal nor music, the quartet brilliantly improvised accompaniments to Lennon–McCartney songs, which culminated in ecstatic dancing at the reception. This experience imparted an indelible impact on the folklore of NATO–Ukraine meetings that resonated throughout my tenure at NATO.

### Music has charms to soothe troubled breasts in the South Caucasus

The most compelling example of the power of musical diplomacy to transform an acrimonious and tense Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) event took place in Tbilisi in the early summer of 2004.

The EAPC conference on economic security in the Black Sea had promised to be a difficult, uncooperative, and hostile event, with the genial Georgians hosting Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

In autumn 2020, violent and tragic confrontations erupted between the Azeris and Armenians in and around the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus. The Azeris, supported by Turkish and Syrian militias, sought to wrestle back control of this volatile territory, which had been seized by Armenian forces during the internecine conflict of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The secession of predominantly Christian Armenia and predominantly Muslim Azerbaijan from the Soviet Union reawakened deep historical ethnic and religious wounds.

On the first day of the EAPC conference, the hostility and the tensions between many of the participants were palpable, and the NATO chairman of the conference called on me to sustain fragmented and difficult discussions.

The Georgians hosted a large dinner that evening at a restaurant just outside downtown Tbilisi. At the circular table, the Georgian Minister of Economy, members of his ministry, NATO participants,

and the new British Ambassador drank an initial toast. My NATO boss then commented jokingly that my talents as an economist were outweighed by my singing abilities. Shortly after, the aide-de-camp to the Minister came over and whispered that the Minister requested that I sing. Observing my incredulity, she pointed to the band on the stage in the large imposing hall and returned to her seat. While pondering what to do next, the personal assistant returned to restate the Minister’s request more insistently.

This prompted the newly appointed British Ambassador to announce that he liked to sing in the bath every day. As though in a dream (or nightmare), I went with the Ambassador to the stage, discovering en route that he had never previously sung in public. Short conversations in Georgian, Russian, and English set the scene. The band began to play, and to the astonishment of the hall we began to sing ‘Johnny B. Goode’ followed by ‘Let It Be’.

The audience, electrified by this spectacle, flocked toward the stage with chants of enthusiasm and encouragement. The evening continued with a Georgian contingent performing animated national dancing, followed by the rendition of beautiful national folk songs, firstly and artistically by the Armenians and then by the Azeris. Long after most guests had departed the dinner hall, the restaurant manager begged me to persuade the vodka-inspired Ambassador to stop singing and go home to the Embassy.

The consequence of this extraordinary evening was a reinvigorated conference the next day, with frequent constructive exchanges between Azeris, Armenians, and other participants. The conference report that I submitted to the Office of the Secretary General was applauded for the substantive discussions and proposals. Music had won the day, and would do so many more times in many more places before I retired from NATO in early 2014.

My retirement from NATO did not end regular participation or contributions to NATO’s Building Integrity Programme,<sup>5</sup> or to NATO’s Strategic Foresight Analysis programme (including virtual conversations through the pandemic). Retirement has not diminished my enduring love for the benefits to soft cultural power and security from music, economics, and security.

<sup>5</sup> Including the composition and performance of ‘Building Integrity Blues’.