International Conference: The United States and Europe: partnership or competition

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Boston University
Nato chief seeks to turn alliance’s weaknesses into a chance to broker fundamental reform

An inauspicious time for a summit could provide an opportunity to tackle military planning and funding issues, writes Judy Dempsey

The timing for next month’s Nato summit in Istanbul could not be worse. The issues supposed to dominate the two-day meeting and show how Nato is finding a role in the post cold war era are turning out to be uncomfortable.

In Afghanistan, the 26-member alliance is hard-pressed to provide a medical corps or a few transport helicopters for the 6,500-strong Nato-led International Security Assistance Force. Its ambitions to develop its own Greater Middle East Policy have been lowered as Washington dilutes its grand plans for the region. Summit invitations to leaders from north Africa and the Middle East have been dropped.

Discussion over Nato’s future role in Iraq will also be limited, as world leaders are turned out to be uncomfortable.

But Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, 56, the Dutch politician who last January took over the helm of Nato, is not. As secretary-general, he seems determined to make a virtue of necessity at Istanbul.

“There is no room for gloom,” he says in a Financial Times interview. Indeed, Mr de Hoop Scheffer intends to raise more uncomfortable issues in Turkey, using the example of Afghanistan, Nato’s first “out of area” mission, to spell out his plans for transforming the alliance. One is the military planning for missions, the other is how they are financed.

When Nato agrees on a mission, military planners call for “a force generation” conference where nations are asked what they can provide. Separately, Nato’s overall “force planning system” has a huge inventory of helicopters, tanks, troops and aircraft. None, however, is immediately available for specific missions.

“If it is not easy to generate forces,” says Mr de Hoop Scheffer, “there is a disconnect between the force planning system and the way we generate our forces. When we enter into the political commitment, we have to know what forces we can generate to honour that commitment.”

In an ideal world, some Nato military officers would like a nation to commit a fixed set of capabilities, allowing the planners easy access. As a former foreign minister, Mr de Hoop Scheffer knows this is unrealistic. “Sending out forces to missions is always a decision that involves national sovereignty,” he explains. “If we can find a solution between the disconnect of force planning and force generation, we will not deny the Dutch, the Poles or anyone else [the right] to make their national decisions.”

The secretary-general says a review of how missions are financed might bridge the gap between the big, elusive toolbox and what nations actually contribute for peacekeeping missions. Missions are financed on the basis of “costs lie where they fall,” with each nation responsible for all equipment and personnel it deploys abroad. “The costs lie where they fall” is a principle that should be fundamentally discussed because it means certain nations that have to finance Nato’s Awacs, the early warning airborne control system. And a handful of European countries are funding the A400m transport aircraft.

“Telling more about common funding. We have to try to be inventive,” says Mr de Hoop Scheffer.

The structure of defence budgets are another problem. “Some countries have one defence budget from which you have to finance peacekeeping operations and new weapons systems. I think peacekeeping operations should not be charged to the defence budget,” he says.

He does not expect Istanbul to deliver such ambitious aims. Instead, with Afghanistan as the catalyst and the big test for Nato’s ability to operate out of area, he hopes to get the green light to start debate.