

By Nick Watts

UK Conservative MPs met the NATO Secretary General (Jaap de hoop Scheffer) on 26th January 2009. He outlined what he saw as the priorities for NATO at the forthcoming 60th anniversary summit, being held on April 3rd – 4th at Strasbourg. These are:

- Afghanistan: NATO needs more forces in theatre with fewer caveats. Alongside the planned US military surge there needs to be a civilian (aid and development) surge. There is currently a disconnect between the military effort and the civilian side, notably the reform of the Afghan government.
- Russia: In the light of the August events in Georgia, NATO needs to develop a well thought out Russia policy. Russia seems to have a European policy, but NATO lacks one for Russia. On the day of the visit the Secretary General had convened an informal meeting of the NATO – Russia Council (NRC).
- Enlargement: From 26 members to 28, with the admission into the Alliance of Croatia and Albania.
- France: The re – admission to the integrated military structure is expected to be addressed and is still being worked on in Paris.
- Transformation: The continuing process of moving the Alliance away from its Cold War footing into a newer more responsive structure with more deployable forces. The Afghan operation indicates the sort of operations which NATO sees itself becoming involved in, in the medium term, so forces must be configured to meet this contingency.
- Georgia and Ukraine: At the Bucharest summit of 2008 NATO political leaders committed to allow Georgia and Ukraine to apply for membership of the Alliance. There can be no vetoes on enlargement by third parties (Russia) although it was clear that membership was not around the corner for either country, given their relations with Russia.
- NATO – EU: More work is needed to develop co – operative structures between the two organizations, to avoid duplication of effort and resources.

Afghanistan: ISAF is the biggest operation which NATO has, with strength of 55,000 personnel. Several non – NATO countries are participating. The Secretary General said that as far as this operation was concerned "losing is not an option". Further discussion with officials gave an understanding that "victory" would be achieved when the Afghan people were able to go about their daily lives without hindrance. The Secretary General felt that Afghanistan would take a generation to fix.

NATO is one part of the international community's effort to bring Afghanistan from its post – Taliban state into something like a country comparable with others in the region. The key to this was to see Afghanistan in a regional context – not in isolation. The Secretary General had been to Pakistan the previous week, to discuss the situation and to consider how best co – operation can be developed. A key weakness remains the governance of Afghanistan, where elections are due later this year.

Not only does the poppy crop / drug production question need to be addressed, but the broader question of government corruption needs resolving. The solution to the problem in Afghanistan is not purely military – so NATO cannot fix the problem on its own, Nevertheless to do the job it has been asked to do requires more troops. The US is committing between 20 – 30,000 troops this year. Efforts to generate forces from other Alliance members have not been as successful as hoped. Efforts are in hand to provide additional helicopter lift – via the provision of ex – Soviet Mil helicopters. The French are funding a pilot training programme using EU funds.

Russia – The Russian view is that NATO doesn't take them seriously. This is understood to mean that NATO doesn't agree with Russia's views on enlargement to include Georgia and Ukraine. It was also unhappy about the decision to recognize Kosovo. Russia is also unhappy about the planned US Ballistic Missile Defence plans for the region. President Medvedev has proposed European security conference, which has so far got little traction among European countries.

NATO and Russia continue to co – operate at an operational level in areas which touch on terrorism, as Russia is particularly concerned about its "southern belt" which consists mostly of Islamist republics. They do not want another Chechen situation developing, and are therefore keen to continue co – operation regarding overland transit to Afghanistan.

Transformation: Adapting the Alliance and its structures to the 21st century security landscape is an urgent priority. This also touches on the question of how operations are resourced. Discussions are under way about common funded projects – such as the NATO AWACS capability. 3 C 17 aircraft have been ordered to provide a strategic airlift capability and are due to become operational in April – May 09. They will be based in Hungary. The NATO helicopter initiative is an effort to generate more helicopter lift – primarily for Afghanistan, but also looking to future operations. By way of illustration Afghanistan requires 300 helicopters; the commander has 200 of which 140 are available at any one time. There are 5,000 helicopters in the inventory of NATO members, not all of which are combat or transport helicopters.

NATO – EU: Co – operation between the two organizations needs to be developed further. The only area where the two organizations touch directly is over matters in Bosnia. Despite the fact that the two organizations have 21 members in common, co – operation has proceeded slowly since the initial Berlin plus agreement of 2003. The EU's European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) tends to concentrate on "soft" power missions, albeit with a military capability. These missions tend to be stabilization type; the current Atalanta mission off the coast of Somalia is an ESDP mission, as is the Democratic Republic of Congo mission.

An area where problems arise – blocking further co – operation is the Turkey – Cyprus dispute.

Cyprus tends to veto any EU initiative and Turkey does likewise in NATO meetings. There are areas where co – operation can be established locally (as in Afghanistan) via locally arranged mechanisms to work around procedural disagreements. The US is becoming more supportive of ESDP – participating in the EULEX mission in Kosovo – to provide support for the development of police and judicial structures.

Georgia and Ukraine: There is a NATO commitment deriving from the 2008 Bucharest summit, to allow both Georgia and Ukraine to be considered for membership of the Alliance. Russia was never supportive of this and the developments in August, when Russian troops moved into Georgia were not entirely surprising. Observers felt that the Russians might do something – and it might happen in August. The decision to recognize Kosovo earlier in 2008 also hardened attitudes in Russia.

Not with standing this, the leaders of the Alliance are pledged to continue their support for both countries. It is widely acknowledged that both countries have particular problems; Ukraine has internal political ones, Georgia has external ones. The way ahead in terms of Alliance relations lies in encouraging both civic and military reform via the various partnership programmes, in both countries, which NATO organizes.

The key lesson for the Alliance is to be wary of making too many promises to countries which are embroiled in disputes (frozen conflicts) such as Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan. There is currently no unified view within the Alliance on the best way forward. Only Ukraine and Georgia are able to help themselves.

At the April summit the Alliance will announce the beginning of a new strategic concept; the last one was unveiled in 1999, marking the end of the Cold War. The challenge will be to boil down the key issues where the Alliance can make a difference, and to avoid getting drawn into areas (such as climate change) where NATO does not add value or expertise. The challenge of failed states and emerging threats such as cyber warfare need to be dealt with. In the modern era threats cross boundaries so the Article 5 guarantee needs to be interpreted in a changed light – but not to the extent that it loses its relevance.