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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 turning out to be uncomfortable. The atmosphere at alli­

dation headquarters in Brus­

sovereignty two days later.

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 always have the assets will always be asked to deliver," says Mr de Hoop Scheffer.

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He would, for example, like to see more common funding for the essential capabilities Nato needs for most missions: heavy airlift, transport helicopters and medical facilities — exactly the shortfalls in Afghanistan. A dozen or so nations finance Nato's Aawacs, the early warning airborne control system. And a handful of European countries are funding the A400m heavy transport aircraft.

"We need to think 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.