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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.

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“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.

But Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, 56, the Dutch politician who last January took over the helm of Nato, is not. As Secretary-General, 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.

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