2004-11-16

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

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/20166

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Nato chief calls for a radical shake-up

Secretary-general wants changes in planning and funding to meet needs of 21st century

By Judy Dempsey in Brussels

Nato's top diplomat is proposing a radical shake-up of the way the military alliance plans and finances its operations as part of an overall strategy to adapt to the needs of the 21st century.

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer's proposals, set out in an interview with the Financial Times, come amid warnings that the US-led alliance could become irrelevant if it is not reformed. The alternative, diplomats say, is that the Pentagon would use Nato to create ad hoc "coalitions of the willing", undermining its status as a collective defence organisation capable of dealing with new threats.

The reforms would create a small but essential pool of military assets that NATO could call on without having to assemble a force from scratch for each mission. They would also spread the cost of missions across the alliance's 26 members.

Mr de Hoop Scheffer, who became Nato secretary-general in January, said he would spell out his plans during next month's summit in Istanbul.

The reform agenda has gained new urgency because of Nato's ambitious mission in Afghanistan. Begun in August, it is considered the big test for the alliance's credibility and ability to function outside its traditional transatlantic area of operations.

"Afghanistan is a complicated operation," said Mr de Hoop Scheffer. "If Nato enters into a political commitment, Nato cannot, will not and must not fail. And we will not fail."

Mr de Hoop Scheffer's proposed reforms would seek to close the gap between the huge military inventory of Nato's members and the meagre commitments the alliance can muster for a single mission. He also wants Nato countries to transform their armed forces, many of which are still designed for the cold war.

If accepted, they would continue an overhaul begun by George Robertson, his predecessor, who reduced Nato's bureaucracy. Military chiefs have also reformed the command structure, creating a Nato Response Force - mobile, flexible units of high combat readiness that can be deployed within days.

In future, Mr de Hoop Scheffer wants member states to say exactly what resources are available when they make a political commitment to become involved in any mission.

He wants member states to become more involved in common funding, in which several countries would finance equipment needed for missions. Nato has rarely resorted to this method, except for Awacs, the airborne early warning system, and the A400m transport aircraft.

He also wants to review the way missions are funded. In most cases, the nations are responsible for any troops or equipment they deploy abroad. Mr de Hoop Scheffer says this system of "costs lie where they fall" means that costs tend to fall on countries with the most needed assets, such as the US, Britain and France.