

NATO OFFICIALS IN Brussels have started looking forward to their annual summit meetings with barely concealed dread. Given the organisation's tenuous hold on the elusive quality of 'relevance', the meetings themselves are easily buffeted by ill winds in the broader transatlantic relationship. The Istanbul summit of 28–29 June was an acute example of this problem. The expectations for a 'successful' meeting were set low: avoiding a flare-up over Iraq; agreeing to meet the modest and probably inadequate goals the Alliance had already set for itself in trying to stabilise Afghanistan; and endorsing a tepid version of the Bush administration's initiative to promote modernisation and democracy in the Arab Middle East. Almost forgotten in coverage of the summit was that seven new members from the former Warsaw Pact – Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania – were welcomed into the Alliance. This drowning out of a truly historic step was reminiscent of the way that the last enlargement – covering Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in spring 1999 – was overshadowed by the Kosovo war that NATO found itself fighting at the same time. Yet Kosovo was a war in Europe, touching on the new members viscerally. In 2004, the tests of NATO's continuing credibility and relevance were unambiguously 'out of area', in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan.

By NATO's modest goals, the summit was not a failure. But nor did it surge with institutional confidence. NATO leaders may have given up arguing publicly over Iraq, but they hardly furnished the US with the kind of support it once hoped for. Members reaffirmed their commitment to Afghanistan, but pessimism abounds about saving the country from another descent into state failure. It is notable, to be sure, that the whole 'out of area' debate of the 1990s – that is, whether NATO had a role beyond the physical territory of its member states – has been relegated to historical theology. Still, the abiding question is whether NATO as an institution will be important and effective in the critical strategic theatres of the 21st century.

Iraq: don't ask

NATO leaders agreed to provide training for Iraqi forces, but, in accordance with the 'red lines' set by Germany and France, this will take place outside Iraq, setting practical limits on numbers. The US has virtually abandoned hope of getting more countries to contribute significant troop reinforcements for Iraq. But the administration had nonetheless hoped to come out of the summit with NATO assuming a formal role in the country.

NATO's Istanbul summit

Alliance under a cloud

Suggested options included a geographic role (with the Polish and British sectors in the south coming under NATO command) or a functional role (such as protecting United Nations personnel helping prepare the country for the January 2005 elections).

The rationale was not to acquire new troops but to help keep the ones already there. When a new socialist government was elected in Spain, soon after the 11 March 2004 Madrid bombings, it immediately confirmed that it would carry out its promise to withdraw its forces from Iraq. Salvadoran troops left with them, and suddenly the whole coalition – with the exception of the US and Britain – looked troubled. A formal NATO command in the south was seen as giving the Polish and Italian governments a means to argue that this was truly an Alliance effort, and not just subordinates' support for a US intervention that – in Italy anyway – remains deeply unpopular. The numbers of troops at stake are not huge (2,400 Poles and 3,000 Italians), but their withdrawal would certainly leave the US even more isolated politically, and would likely embolden both the insurgents in Iraq and jihadist terrorists worldwide. In the weeks before the summit, US officials made clear they were not going to embarrass themselves by courting rejection. But they hoped that, in the course of various high-level meetings throughout June – including the D-Day commemorations in Normandy and the G8 Summit in Sea Island, Georgia – an Alliance consensus would emerge for putting the quarrel over Iraq to rest. This has largely happened: the unanimous adoption of UN Security Council

Resolution 1546 means that the US and Britain have generally accepted the French view of the way forward. Formal sovereignty has been handed back to an Iraqi government which has the power, at least in theory, to order foreign troops out.

At Sea Island, however, French President Jacques Chirac made clear that Paris would block the necessary consensus for a NATO role in country. The French position is that NATO's formal entry into Iraq would associate the Alliance with an unpopular occupation, which would be bad for NATO and would in any case not really help the forces in Iraq. German officials, while insisting that they would not formally block the rest of NATO from going forward, were also opposed in principle; their attitude ensured that France would neither be isolated nor persuaded. The Germans also believed that a formal NATO role would make little difference on the ground, and that NATO's reputation could suffer. In this regard, they voiced a specific concern: if there is ever to be an Israeli–Palestinian peace settlement, it will – in Berlin's view – require foreign forces to guarantee and keep the peace, and NATO may be the only credible institution to fill this role. But an extraordinarily perilous mission would be made even more difficult if NATO were already involved in putting down an Arab-Islamist insurgency in Iraq. The notion of 'saving' NATO for an Israel–Palestine role seems rather strained, insofar as a peace agreement is hardly in prospect, and the notion of NATO member countries interposing themselves between Hamas and the Israeli military seems implausible on

At Istanbul, NATO:

- Decided to expand the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan
- Agreed to conclude the Alliance's successful SFOR operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and welcomed the readiness of the European Union to deploy a new and distinct UN-mandated Chapter VII mission in the country, based on the Berlin+ arrangements agreed between NATO and the EU
- Confirmed that a robust KFOR presence remains essential to further enhance security and promote the political process in Kosovo
- Decided to enhance the contribution of *Operation Active Endeavour*, NATO's maritime operation in the Mediterranean, to the fight against terrorism
- Decided to offer assistance to the Government of Iraq with the training of its security forces
- Agreed on an enhanced set of measures to strengthen NATO's individual and collective contribution to the international community's fight against terrorism
- Decided to further the transformation of NATO's military capabilities to make them more modern, more usable and more deployable to carry out the full range of Alliance missions
- Reaffirmed that NATO's door remains open to new members, and encouraged Albania, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to continue the reforms necessary to progress towards NATO membership
- Taken a number of steps to further strengthen the Euro-Atlantic Partnership, in particular through a special focus on engaging with NATO's Partners in the strategically important regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia
- Decided to enhance NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and to offer cooperation to the broader Middle East region through the 'Istanbul Cooperation Initiative'

Source: <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2004/06-istanbul/home.htm>

many levels. That said, the record of recent years is replete with examples of hitherto 'unthinkable' NATO roles coming to pass – as in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Courting failure in Afghanistan

The real threat to NATO is probably not so much the failure to agree on the Iraq intervention as it is the failure to deliver on commitments that have been agreed to elsewhere. In Istanbul, members promised to increase the NATO force in Afghanistan from 6,500 to 10,000 in time for elections planned in September. (A separate US-led force of 20,000 is fighting al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants in the south.) The Afghan mission is not controversial; there are military personnel from most NATO members, including all the leading powers, present in the country. But they have repeatedly failed to deliver on equipment and capabilities already promised. One notorious example was the months-long struggle to acquire just a few helicopters (eventually they were provided by Turkey). This is a perfect example of structural flaws in the organisation's force-generation capabilities. Countries make political commitments to missions, but then find no room in their defence budgets to deliver. The new NATO secretary-general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, has already been frustrated by a huge discrepancy between the massive collective arsenals and troop levels of NATO's membership and the meagre assets sent to Afghanistan. The solution, in his view, lies in major reforms to the way the alliance mobilises for individual missions. There should be more common assets, always available; currently, only AWACs and some more minor systems belong to NATO as such. And there should be common funding for operations, instead of the current arrangement whereby those nations that volunteer forces also have to pay for sending them to theatre. Meanwhile, the NATO contributors to the Afghan mission – especially Berlin, which has the lead role – argue that success there will be the real test of Alliance credibility. But success is far from assured. Taliban fighters in the south have killed people for simply carrying voter registration cards. While Kabul seems secure, the rest of the country is not. Meanwhile, the opium economy is burgeoning.

Letting go in the Balkans

Another problem for NATO in Afghanistan is the tendency of troop contributors to stipulate 'national caveats' on how those troops will be

used. German troops, for example, have some difficulty with crowd control: they are legally prohibited from using tear gas. 'National caveats' writ large seemed to afflict some NATO troops when a pogrom against Serbs erupted in Kosovo last March. During the two-day rampage, in which Serbs were killed and Orthodox churches burned, a number of KFOR units stayed in their barracks. The dysfunction has to be repaired quickly; a movement towards final status negotiations in the next year or two seems inevitable, and could easily be accompanied by more violence.

So far, Bosnia is more peaceful, and the Istanbul summit marked a milestone when NATO's SFOR formally handed over its peacekeeping responsibilities to the European Union's EUFOR. Since most of the foreign troops in Bosnia are from EU members, this will largely be a matter of changing shoulder flashes. Command of the operation will be assumed by the EU, but through a chain-of-command running up to the European general who is also NATO deputy commander. Still, the EU will now have overall political responsibility, and may be straining to provide logistical support that previously came through NATO. It will be the first major test of the so-called 'Berlin Plus' arrangements by which the EU, even as it cooperates with NATO, conducts autonomous operations. This European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) has been the subject of considerable resentment and suspicion across the Atlantic. Thus, even though the US military, severely overstretched, was eager to palm-off one of its many commitments, the Istanbul agreement on actually doing so was more than a minor achievement.

Suspicious all around

French and German officials insist that they feel no *schadenfreude* over the Bush administration's setbacks in Iraq. They insist that they are fully aware that failure to stabilise the country would be damaging to Europe as well as America – not to mention the Iraqis themselves. This has not dimmed the suspicions of many American analysts and policymakers – by no means confined to the political right – that Paris and Berlin are hoping to be vindicated by American failure in Iraq. Such suspicions are poisonous, and reveal the extent to which NATO, and the broader alliance that it serves, remain under a cloud.

While the main allied opponents of the war have not done enough, for their part, to heal the breach, the broader American suspicions are probably false and the likely truth more complicated. Firstly, Paris and Berlin almost certainly believe

in what they say – that NATO in Iraq would do no significant good, and would probably damage itself in the process. Secondly, given the deep unpopularity of the war in France, Germany and, for that matter, almost all European countries, the administrations in Paris and Berlin are not going to risk their own political capital by acquiescing in troop deployments (although approval of a symbolic NATO role would not have been so hard to accept). Thirdly, while they genuinely fear the consequences of an American strategic failure in Iraq, France and Germany would not be unhappy to contemplate the Bush administration's political failure in the upcoming US election. Under those circumstances, direct help to the Bush re-election campaign in the form of an unambiguous Iraq olive branch was never likely. This raises the possibility that, in the event of a victory by Democrat candidate John Kerry, NATO opponents of the war might be more forthcoming with military help. Direct evidence for this speculation is thin, however, and there is a real possibility of mutual disillusionment if Kerry wins and the situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate. After all, he has based much of his campaign on the proposition that he would do a better job of persuading more allies to help; this could be the first failure of a Kerry presidency. It is ironic that more troops are only likely in the event that a stabilised security situation makes them less necessary.

Disunity over Iraq stems from real disagreements about the wisdom of the war – and the French and German pre-war arguments have hardly been repudiated by subsequent events. Meanwhile, both nations are present on the ground in Afghanistan, a front in the 'war on terrorism' that is uncontroversial among NATO governments. The stabilisation effort in Afghanistan, the measured success in Bosnia and more limited success in Kosovo – even the seemingly far-fetched scenario of NATO peacekeeping in Israel–Palestine – do provide a partial answer to the now constant questions about NATO's relevance. Although America is likely to be chastened by its difficulties in Iraq, and therefore less ebulliently interventionist for some time to come, the real need for military intervention and resuscitation of failed states will not go away. Notwithstanding certain regional initiatives to promote peacekeeping capacities, it is hard to see this global demand being filled except by the transatlantic consortium that has done so in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. NATO is the institutional framework and force-generating engine for that consortium. If NATO did not exist, it might be worth inventing. □ IISS