



NATO's Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer is a man with a problem. Actually, several overlapping ones.

The NATO mission in Afghanistan, which was supposed to demonstrate the alliance's ability to transcend its cold-war limitations and to highlight NATO's capabilities to both effectively fight a ground war and engage in post-conflict reconstruction, is faltering. Instead of bringing the alliance together in service of a common cause, Afghanistan is exposing that the vaunted “transformation” NATO has supposedly been engaged in has largely been for show.

Pakistan 's election results have brought to power national and regional governments that may be less inclined to cooperate with NATO's Afghan operations—and could require the alliance to find a new way to direct troops and supplies. The only other feasible route runs via the countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

A number of European countries want to decrease tensions with Russia—and the U.S. Secretaries of Defense and State are currently in Moscow engaged in a series of negotiations on issues such as a missile defense shield for Europe that could produce positive breakthroughs—but Russia has also made it quite clear that its cooperation with the West is tied to slowing down or halting altogether NATO's eastward expansion.

The governments of Georgia and Ukraine , however, want to be given their membership action plans (MAPs) at this summit, so they can begin the process that, in four years or so, would culminate in joining the alliance.

The March 6 th ministerial meeting in Brussels adjourned with no clear signals. No country outright opposes the IDEA of Ukraine or Georgia joining the alliance at some point, but no decision was taken on whether to offer the MAP to either country. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner even declared that the alliance should “take into account Russia 's sensitivity and the important role it plays” in reaching its decision.

Several days later, German chancellor Angela Merkel gave her opinions about the criteria the alliance should use in assessing future members, namely that "A country should become a NATO member not only when its temporary political leadership is in favour but when a significant percentage of the population supports membership" and "Countries that are themselves entangled in regional conflicts, can in my opinion not become members."

The first criterion would rule out Ukraine , where a majority of the population opposes or is ambivalent about NATO membership. The second seems to encompass both Georgia (with its ongoing separatist problems) and Macedonia (with its continuing dispute over its name with Greece)—and any delay in extending membership to Macedonia might cause the alliance to decide to postpone any plans for including the states of the Western Balkans.

Beyond this, the concerns of France , Germany and some other European states such as Spain and Belgium , is that there should be growing symmetry between membership in NATO and likely prospects for joining the European Union. Nothing can be done at this point about Turkey, a long-standing NATO member and a candidate for EU membership—but Paris, Berlin and other capitals are uneasy about expanding NATO further to the east and creating precedents for new NATO members making the case that inclusion in the alliance implies the right to be considered for the EU.

To finalize the stew, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili visits the United States—where politicians from both parties will overwhelmingly endorse his bid to join NATO—and President George W. Bush will travel to Ukraine ahead of the Bucharest summit, and is expected when in Kyiv to endorse Ukraine's bid to receive a MAP.

So the task before the Secretary-General is to come up with a “solution” that keeps open the prospects of increased cooperation with Russia , avoids any semblance of a major split within the ranks of the alliance, yet is not an outright refusal for the aspirant states.

Moving NATO Forward

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I think he will be up to the task. After all, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe came up with a unique formulation to describe the recent Russian presidential elections as both being “not free and not fair” but also “representative of the popular will.” De Hoop Scheffer has already suggested that Tbilisi and Kyiv “will see results of Bucharest as an inspiration for them to proceed on their Euro-Atlantic track. In what form that will exactly be, it is honestly quite early to tell.” Whether this attempt mollifies all sides also remains to be seen.

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