

Heading in the same direction?

America wants Europe to offer more than words of support for the new battle against the Taliban.



Reuters

The international diplomatic caravan moves from the Thames to the Rhine. NATO leaders, many fresh from discussing the financial crisis at the G20 summit in London, will spend this weekend debating Western security. Gathered on the Franco-German border, they will consider NATO's future, its relations with Russia and, above all, Afghanistan.

Many allies welcomed Barack Obama's announcement on March 27th of a new strategy for the faltering war in Afghanistan. This will combine a big increase in troops, a rapid expansion of the Afghan army, initiatives to strengthen the government, a concerted campaign to prod and help Pakistan to fight extremists, and a regional diplomatic effort designed, in part, to draw in Iran. But will European allies offer America more than praise?

Take the Dutch, who hosted a big conference on Afghanistan this week that endorsed Mr Obama's strategy. Dutch work in Uruzgan province is a rare success within Afghanistan. But the Dutch still intend to withdraw fighting troops by the end of next year. France says it already reinforced its soldiers last year. Even the trusty British are reluctant to send more (although the army says it could add about 2,000 soldiers to the 8,000 now in Afghanistan, mostly in Helmand).

The problem is that European voters have little enthusiasm for the war in Afghanistan. To judge by the anti-NATO riots on the streets of Strasbourg on the eve of the summit, some young Europeans would rather fight French policemen than the Taliban.

As a result the campaign in Afghanistan is becoming inexorably Americanised: the extra 21,000 American troops just announced by Mr Obama may be followed by more later this year; they come on top of the 38,000 already in place. Even the United Nations' job of coordinating the political and reconstruction work is acquiring a stronger American flavour with the appointment of Peter Galbraith, an American veteran of the Balkans, as deputy to the Norwegian envoy, Kai Eide.

For Mr Obama the "comprehensive" approach to Afghanistan also means getting Europeans to do more to support the non-fighting dimension of his strategy. He wants European trainers for the growing Afghan army and police, civilian experts to back the government, and lots of money to pay for it all. He may be disappointed. The European Union's police training mission, always inadequate, is struggling to find staff to increase its contingent from about 200 to 400. France has offered to send gendarmes, although it is unclear if others will support this proposal.

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France has expressed his delight at “working with a president of the United States who wants to change the world” and defended his decision to rejoin NATO’s integrated military structure. “NATO has existed for 60 years. If there has been peace it is not an accident,” he said on Friday. He agreed in principle to take in at least one detainee now imprisoned by America at Guantánamo Bay, when the prison eventually closes. Mr Obama repaid him with a strong general endorsement for France’s attempt to strengthen the EU’s defence arm, saying that: “We want strong allies...We are not looking to be patrons of Europe. We are looking to be partners of Europe.”

Much of the summit will be taken up with ceremonies to celebrate NATO’s 60th anniversary, and France’s full return to the fold. This includes a symbolic handshake over the Rhine, once Europe’s military fault-line, between Mr Sarkozy and the German chancellor, Angela Merkel.

Relations with Russia are improving after last summer’s war in Georgia. On Wednesday Mr Obama agreed with Russia’s President Dmitry Medvedev to restart negotiations to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Within NATO, the disputes over how far it should expand are in abeyance. The membership campaigns by Georgia and Ukraine have been set aside and, uncontroversially, Croatia and Albania will be welcomed to the club.

NATO’s soul-searching may return later this year as the alliance begins to debate a new “strategic concept”. Some countries, such as Norway and Poland, are pressing the organisation to focus more on defending NATO’s territory (mainly against Russia) and less on distant wars.

One issue could yet spoil the party: the choice of a secretary-general to succeed Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. The front-runner, backed by America and several big European countries, is the Danish prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. But Turkey, in particular, is resisting his nomination. One reason is that Denmark is disliked by many Muslims after the publication in a Danish newspaper of controversial cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Mr Fogh Rasmussen has declined to apologise for the cartoons.

Instead the Polish foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, may get a chance. But many allies will worry that appointing a figure from the former Warsaw Pact, from a country that agreed to deploy American anti-missile defences on its soil, might antagonise Russia. This may explain why Mr Sikorski has been working hard to reassure the Kremlin of late, even suggesting that Russia could one day become a member of NATO.

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