

Time to patch up Nato

When President-elect, George Bush, meets Mrs Thatcher this week he will turn his attention across the Atlantic. He will see an alliance economically strong, militarily capable, but politically confused. Without the new administration's thoughtful attention, allied differences of opinion could develop into deep divisions.

Two developments underlie the sense of unease in Nato. First, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov has frayed the allied security consensus with his barrage of diplomatic offensives. Second, confidence in one of Nato's basic tenets, the military doctrine of flexible response, has begun to erode.

Bush has already taken an important first step by calling for an early Nato summit to review current strategies. Many hope such a summit could set in motion a process similar to the 1967 effort by Belgian Defence Minister Pierre Harmel, who established a formula that provided Nato coherence for two decades. Like the original Harmel Report, this new effort would need to address both the nature of the Soviet challenge and the credibility of Nato doctrine.

Gorbachov's charm offensive has profoundly affected much of Western Europe. In West Germany, for example, public opinion polls show that he is held in much higher regard than either Ronald Reagan or Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

And yet the charm offensive may be ephemeral, threatened by the possible failure of *perestroika*, the Soviet nationalities problem, or disruptions in Eastern Europe. It may also prove to be a calculated effort to divide the United States from its European allies. A close comparison shows that Soviet rhetoric far exceeds Soviet deeds. No significant changes have taken place thus far which improve the conventional military balance in Europe or reduce the military nature of the Soviet threat.

The new American president-elect seems to understand that Western responses to Gorbachov so far have been ragged and insufficient to meet European political needs. He is also

aware that the West needs to be alert to opportunities created by Soviet "new thinking" by developing a co-ordinated Western position which is realistic about the nature of Gorbachov's initiatives without missing potential opportunities to reduce East-West tensions.

Getting the response to Gorbachov right, however, will not be enough. The second element in any new Nato strategic consensus must be to repair the tattered Nato doctrine of flexible response. That doctrine rests on the triad of the extension of the strategic US deterrent to Europe; the maintenance of modern battlefield nuclear weapons in Europe; and the development of a robust conventional deterrent.

In recent years the geographic cleavage inherent in flexible responses has widened. The US has stressed strategies that appear to confine war to Europe and Europeans have stressed the importance of coupling transatlantic security interests through the threat of rapid escalation. In the process, all three elements of the Nato triad have come under strain.

During the past five years, US strategic policies have tended to shift their emphasis from enhancing nuclear deterrence to eliminating nuclear weapons. For the Europeans, the Reykjavik Summit proposals, the double zero agreement on INF weapons, and the population defence rationale for the Strategic Defence Initiative all contribute to the perception that Americans want to make nuclear weapons unusable. But since flexible response rests firmly on retaining the option to use nuclear weapons first if Nato is attacked, this perception has eroded European confidence in America's extended deterrence.

If the Bush administration wishes to restore this confidence it will have to change European perceptions about the goals of US strategic initiatives. Both START and SDI, for example, must enhance crisis stability and deterrence to gain European support. Simply restating US determination to extend nuclear deterrence would be another improvement. So would an early



decision to earmark a number of sea-launched cruise missiles for Nato use.

Modernizing the second element of the Nato triad, the battlefield nuclear weapons, may be the most difficult European security challenge facing the Bush administration. Nato planners have now conceptualized a new smaller nuclear force. It would include an airborne stand-off missile similar to the US SRAM II, a 450 kilometre range ground-launched ballistic missile to replace the Lance, and continued modernization of nuclear artillery shells.

The West German public seems relatively content with the first and third aspects of this modernization programme, but there is broad opposition to a new generation of ground-based missiles. Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher insists that any Lance modernization decision be coupled with a Nato pledge to negotiate with the

Soviets on these short-range missiles to achieve equal ceilings at lower levels. Much of the rest of Nato remains concerned, however, that the Soviets will exploit their numerical superiority in this category of weapons and propose a so-called third zero. That could be difficult for Nato to resist while at the same time detrimental to flexible response.

The Bush Administration should not agree to negotiate with the Soviets on short-range nuclear weapons unless Nato heads of state can agree in public on the specific requirement for minimal deterrence. Without this clearly defined bottom line, negotiations would be a trap that could lead to a denuclearized Nato. In the absence of such an agreement, it would be safest to begin a life extension programme for the existing Lance. If the Germans continue to insist on negotiations as the price for modernization, then developing

a clear definition of minimal nuclear deterrence in Europe should be an important aspect of the strategy review.

Re-emergence of the burden-sharing debate puts intense pressure on the third element of the Nato triad, conventional forces. With no tax increase, budget reductions in the United States will trim more than \$300 billion from planned defence spending levels during the next five years. That squeeze will inevitably raise the spectre of US troop reductions from Europe.

During his campaign Bush indicated that conventional force problems will be tackled in at least two ways. First, he promised to give the highest priority to conventional arms control, with reducing Soviet preponderance in tanks, artillery, and armoured vehicles the main goal. If these negotiations succeed, they would help to stabilize the conventional military balance in Europe. But the

talks may take years to complete and their existence is unlikely to diminish pressure in Congress for troop cuts.

Second, Bush advisers have indicated interest in the so-called competitive strategies doctrine. This stresses high-tech approaches to conventional defence such as the use of accurate stand-off weapons, mobile rocket launchers, stealth technology, penetrating warheads to neutralize command bunkers, and sophisticated target acquisition radar systems. While the doctrine makes full use of Western comparative advantages, Europeans may resist it for favouring US industry, for shifting resources away from efforts to sustain capabilities of existing forces, and for having an offensive bias.

It is not difficult to see why the British Government is concerned that the Harmel II policy review process could spin out of control. Yet the transatlantic consensus cannot be allowed to continue to unravel. So it is important to set up the procedure for review very carefully. The idea of a "wise men's group" used by Harmel in 1967 is attractive, because it would allow creativity while unworkable recommendations could be officially disavowed by governments.

Lord Carrington remains a favourite choice to head such a group. He has two important qualifications. He is a respected former Nato Secretary-General who understands the military and political issues. He is also sceptical about a Harmel II process, and would approach it with due caution.

There are difficult times ahead for Nato, in responding to Gorbachov and in reviewing Nato doctrine. The Bush administration will have the advantage of taking a fresh look at the problem. The comprehensive approach that Bush seems to have in mind will hopefully allow Nato to rebuild its consensus on security policy.

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