# Nato transforms itself to remain relevant

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Nato Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer addressing UAE journalists at Nato headquarters in Brussels.

**BRUSSELS** — The UAE reporters, who paid a visit to the Brussels-based North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) headquarters, had the ooportunity to get to know the alliance's transformation after the Cold War.

Being the Atlantic alliance between Europe and North America since 1949, the Nato established a system of collective defence, whereby its member states agreed to mutual defence in response to external attacks. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which marked the end of Cold War, new challenges other than the early ideological ones between the former communist and capitalist parties arose.

With the dissolution of Soviet Union and fall of eastern Europe, instability spread to various parts of Europe. The September 11 attacks on the United States also created another confrontation the alliance had to face. The enemy this time, terrorist groups and organisations, is an unusual one.

## Partnership initiatives

Though geographical grounds prevent some countries from joining the Nato, partnership initiatives were conducted due to the uprising of joint, global, and security challenges, on top of which are stability, and war against terrorism's hideouts and grounds. This took shape in the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1995, the Nato-Russia and Nato-Ukraine Councils in 2002, and the Istanbul Summit in 2004.

The Istanbul summit launched in Turkey in June 2004 was the 17th Nato summit, in which heads of state and governments met to make formal decisions about security topics. The summit is generally seen as a carry-over of the transformation process that kicked off in the 2002 Prague summit. There was a hope to create a shift from a Cold War alliance against Soviet aggression to a 21st century coalition against new global security threats.

New partnership initiatives were launched and more effective measures were adopted. These are aimed to improve the organisation's operational capabilities, and enhance cooperation in scores of fields, such as training, political dialogue, early air-borne warning system, joint military manoeuvres against terrorism, and anti-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and smuggled armaments.

## The Castle

Unexpectedly, the Nato headquarters were not that high-tech as featured in American movies. Simplicity prevails every nook and corner. Security procedures were even less tough than other places we have been to. We, nevertheless, feel as if we were moving inside a castle. Our questions had to be as accurate and concise as possible. Ditto the answers we received. The Nato officials we met were very conservative. They sometimes cough or drink water before giving answers to think enough, and then reply.

We had a meeting with Nicola de Santis, Head of Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Countries Section, Public Diplomacy Division. He spotlighted the Nato's adoption of dialogue and support stability and security in North Africa and the Middle East in response to common security challenges, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. He detailed how Istanbul Initiative did boot up members' capabilities in confronting such threats.

We had a tense conversation with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Nato Secretary-General, on the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. He stressed the multi-party feature of the initiative, and that other parties' approval is indispensable to be effective. The Nato does not market anything in the region. It tries hard to explain its role, and how effective information and technological cooperation does enhance mutual trust.

The organisation, Scheffer went on to say, is not a government. It is an alliance of 26 democratic countries. It offers help and partnership to all non-member states facing similar challenges. Istanbul Summit was then reached to enhance cooperation with all countries, yet without any military interference; just an exchange of information, latest technology, and training against terrorism.

## Middle East

In reply to a question about the Nato's keener interest in the Iranian file than the Palestinian-Israeli cause, Scheffer said the European Union and the United States, along with some UN organisations play an effective role in the struggle. Therefore, the alliance finds no grounds for interference.

Nonetheless, the organisation does have a noticeable military existence in some other hot areas, such as Afghanistan and Kosovo. "We also provide aid for Pakistan following a massively destructive earthquake. The same happened after Hurricane Katrina. We also have military training missions in Iraq and other Middle East countries," Scheffer pinpointed. As for the Nato's definition of terrorism, Scheffer said the 26-country organisation rather confront terrorism instead of wasting time in definition.

## Operations

Amb. Maurits Jochems, Nato Deputy Assistant General Secretary for Operations, said the organisation has been involved in peace-keeping operations in many hot spots all over the world since 1995. However, such tasks are all under UN Security Council. There is no direct mechanism to take action upon receiving a request from any country. A proposal should go through certain procedures. It shall first be unanimously approved by all member countries. This is completely unattainable in the Palestinian-Israeli struggle. This was Jochems' answer when asked if the Palestinians have sought help from the organisation to protect them against Israelí military attacks and raids on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"We really regret all civilians who fall victims to our operations in Afghanistan. We try our best to avoid such casualties. People's lives are so precious to us. Compensations are paid to victims' families. Yet, Taleban, with its attacks and blasts from residential areas, is the main reason behind such mishaps. Political solutions are further adopted. We do support national dialogue between the government and moderate opposition. We are there for assisting the Afghan government," Jochems' replied to another question about Afghan civilian victims.

What would the organisation do if Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan, asked the alliance to leave? Jochems said: "We will certainly do what is required of us. Yet, I do believe he will not. The Nato has successfully participated in achieving many social and economic advantages in Afghanistan."