

For Russia, oodles of options

The Russians are unabashedly gloating at NATO's present discomfiture, and will make the best of the situation, comments
Linda Lloyd

The recent NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) summit has gifted a choice of weapons to Russia in how it takes on the expanding role of the western alliance over the deployment of missiles in Europe to 'deter' rogue states or other issues.

It could take on the United States head-on and try and face down President George W. Bush's 'non-negotiable' plan for the missiles which, allied with plans for expansion into states on the Russian periphery, have presented Moscow's military planners with the biggest headache since the end of the cold war.

Despite several counter bids by President Vladimir Putin to take the sting out of the missiles proposal the American leader came away with his plans unchanged despite the reservations of several states, such as Germany, who place reliability of gas supplies over the urgent deployment of missile defence systems or the short-term expansion of the organisation. The admission of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO membership was put on the back burner but will be placed on the organisation's agenda again at the end of the year. So far so successful, in the eyes of the White House. And so the headlines had it.

But in the secondary part of the agenda, dealing with access for NATO supplies into Afghanistan, Moscow has been handed its greatest strategic prize in many a year and a heaven-sent opportunity to avenge its own humiliation in that country when the Mujahideen, a rag-tag army that no one in their right minds would have thought were a match for them, sent the might of the Russian army and air force packing with the help of American-supplied Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

'This will not be unanswered', said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov of the forceful US position on the missiles. 'But we will respond in a

pragmatic way, not like little schoolboys who were hurt and fled their classroom slamming the door to cry in the corner. We are prepared for various scenarios.'

NATO's constantly deteriorating position in Afghanistan may well present just such a choice scenario.

From a resurgent Taliban to the unwillingness of some European armies to put their soldiers in harm's way, now NATO has the additional difficulty of an unreliable eastern flank in Pakistan through which three-quarters of its war materiel must pass. Since the change of government in Pakistan the determination to take on radical Islamists through military power becomes much less clear-cut. Hit-and-run attacks have already been carried out at such a key NATO supply choke-point as Torkham Khyber on the route into Afghanistan.

The solution, so American and NATO planners decided, was to seek the cooperation of Russia and Central Asian states on the establishment of a route for non-military supplies through Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. After all, we're all fighting terrorism, aren't we? Yes, but some terrorists can be more useful to Moscow than others.



The Russians have been meticulous about their diplomacy in this case. No riding roughshod over allies, American-style. So they went to a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a body which comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who, not surprisingly, signed off on it, surmising no doubt that if terrorism was not contained in Afghanistan they might well find it troubling them.

One can imagine the wry smiles at the need to come to the assistance of NATO, of all places in Afghanistan, and of the opportunities it provides for tweaking the western alliance at a time when it is vulnerable both inside and outside.

Attacks on NATO forces have increased exponentially and have changed in character from more conventional operations to the roadside bombs

favoured by the insurgents in Iraq. Conventional wisdom used to be that while the countryside might be unsafe in the north-east and south-east the capital was more or less safe. Blasts in hotels and roadside attacks have put paid to that.

Commanders on the ground want up to another 10,000 troops but domestic governments have stomach for little other than actually reducing troop numbers. Cost is another factor. With bills running at \$100 million a day and the endgame nowhere near in sight those trans-Asian supplies are going to be especially important as NATO struggles to keep up the fight against the background of increasing sentiment to talk to the Taliban. Already, British forces have had informal contact in their area of operations. A United Nations official was expelled from the country by the government of Hamid Karzai for the same offence.

The CSTO meeting had an answer for NATO on that one too. President Islam Karimov, the Uzbek leader, proposed the revival and expansion of the 'six plus two' format. The original formulation involved China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Pakistan along with the United States and Russia. Karimov suggested that this time NATO might like to join the party in search of a roadmap to peace. That is the beginning of an exit strategy that would undoubtedly be attractive to some NATO members who are growing weary of the prospect of decades of war before them and nary a tunnel in sight.

So, as things stand, NATO's arch-enemies are going to be in a position to influence not only the efficiency or otherwise of the delivery of NATO's vital war supplies for Afghanistan but also mobilise potential, Muslim-based regional Afghan solutions independent of the alliance's efforts.

A taste of the true flavour of Russian pragmatism came from the Russian ambassador in Kabul, Zamir Kabulov, who was reported as saying: 'The longer NATO remains in Afghanistan, the worse it will be for them. But it would be incorrect to imagine Russia wants NATO out of Afghanistan as soon as possible, at any cost. We will not let them out of Afghanistan until they solve the problems they have created inter-national terrorism, unchecked increase in drug trafficking and build a strong state there, and rebuild the economy.'