

US asks Nato for help in 'draining the swamp' of global terrorism

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By Ambrose Evans-Pritchard in
Brussels

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THE United States called yesterday for Nato's assistance in "draining the swamp" of global terrorism.

Paul Wolfowitz, the US deputy defence secretary, told Nato ministers meeting in Brussels: "While we'll try to find every snake in the swamp, the essence of the strategy is draining the swamp."

He did not request immediate military support or reveal a timetable for action, but emphasised that the campaign would involve a myriad of "different coalitions" for specific tasks on every conceivable front, with most nations contributing at a level far below military action, and some keeping their participation secret.

"It can't be stressed enough that everybody who's waiting for a military action because they think that's the definition of a campaign needs to rethink that and understand . . . that this is a broad campaign," he said.

Meeting behind a barricade of razor wire and an overwhelming force of Belgian security police, the defence ministers of the 19-strong alliance were told not to expect "spectacular" strikes but rather a carefully calibrated response involving intelligence agencies, police forces and, "where appropriate", direct military action.

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The United States did not make any specific request for military help from the alliance as a whole, and most defence ministers were left in the dark about Washington's final intentions. Mr Wolfowitz said: "If we need collective action, we'll ask for it. We don't anticipate that at the moment."

The Bush administration also chose not to invoke Nato's mutual defence clause, Article 5, which deems that an attack on one member is an attack on all 19, triggering a collective response.

Mr Wolfowitz said the [decision of the alliance two weeks ago](#) to extend the definition of Article 5 beyond conventional military attacks to include terrorist atrocities already gave the United States a "a very powerful basis for a variety of individual requests to individual countries".

The crucial meetings yesterday occurred outside the main hall in a series of "bilaterals" between Mr Wolfowitz and important allies in the anti-terrorist coalition, including Britain's Defence Secretary, Geoffrey Hoon, and his counterparts from France, Germany, Turkey, and Russia.

Nato diplomats said the Americans were reluctant to divulge sensitive information about future attacks to a wide circle of countries.

Instead, Washington has adopted an "a la carte" approach that involves sounding out allies for future contributions, without tipping its own hand.

Mr Wolfowitz also warned the allies privately of a serious risk that terrorist networks already had access to weapons of mass destruction.

He said there was "an alarming coincidence" between those states accused of harbouring terrorists and those that were developing, or had already acquired, biological, chemical and nuclear weapons capable of inflicting massive damage on civilian populations.

This overlap hugely complicated the task of bringing these pariah states to account. Mr Wolfowitz did not specify which countries he was referring to, but Nato diplomats said he was undoubtedly pointing a finger at [Saddam Hussein](#), which has [stockpiled huge amounts of anthrax, botulin and other deadly agents](#), and has demonstrated its willingness to use chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians.

Lord Robertson, Nato's secretary-general, said the alliance was stepping up "homeland" defence measures against any escalation by terrorist groups using biological and chemical weapons.

"The proper defence of the people of the 19 states is very high on our agenda," he said. "The suicide bombers may be dead, but the people who drove them and organised them are still alive."

Mr Wolfowitz said there was no question that Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'eda network was involved in the terrorist attacks, but declined to offer the alliance proof.

He admitted that Washington was still in the dark about the structure of the terrorist movement. "There are things we don't know about the events of September 11, and that we don't know about the al-Qa'eda," he said.

Later, Mr Hoon echoed overnight comments by Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, that the start of the battle would not be marked by any massive ground campaign.

"This is not an enemy that is going to line up and be attacked in a conventional sense," he said. "Therefore it is necessary to use all of the means at our disposal to deal with that kind of enemy."

Peter Hain, the Foreign Office minister, added that the war against terrorism would probably last a lifetime. He said its targets would be much less precise than during the Gulf conflict a decade ago.

"We are talking about a global network which has to be combated by a global operation," Mr Hain said.