

Enlargement row overshadows NATO's Afghan plan

A row over the organisation's enlargement dominated the second day of NATO's summit in Bucharest Thursday, delaying and overshadowing crucial talks on international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

NATO leaders agreed to welcome Albania and Croatia into their club but clashed over the membership aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine, which in the end won a promise to join at a later stage.

Meanwhile, strong protests erupted in Skopje after Macedonia's bid for an invitation was effectively vetoed by Greece.

US President George W. Bush scored a victory by obtaining Czech consent to site a missile defence radar system on Czech soil, while Afghan President Hamid Karzai welcomed NATO's renewed commitment to his country and a promise of more troops by France.

The alliance's political leaders had been scheduled to hold two-and-a-half hours of talks on the issues of enlargement, cyber defence and energy security Thursday morning before holding an official ceremony to invite Albania and Croatia into the alliance.

But the working session stretched to double its scheduled time as they wrangled over the exact wording of a final declaration on the membership aspirations of Macedonia, Georgia and Ukraine.

The allies formally invited Albania and Croatia to join, with accession expected at NATO's 60th anniversary summit in the French town of Strasbourg and its German neighbour, Kehl, next April.

And while they refused to offer Ukraine and Georgia a plan paving the way for future membership, they agreed that the two former-Soviet states 'will become members of NATO,' with NATO foreign ministers set to make a 'first assessment' of progress in December.

Analysts initially said that a refusal from NATO to grant the duo a Membership Action Plan (MAP) would be a diplomatic victory for Russia, which fiercely opposes NATO enlargement along its borders.

But Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and his Ukrainian counterpart, Viktor Yushchenko, both hailed the promise of membership, with Yushchenko calling it 'our victory'.

Macedonia, which had also hoped for an invitation, was left disappointed as Greece blocked its bid in a long-running dispute over Macedonia's official name.

Athens maintains that allowing its northern neighbour to call itself 'Macedonia' would imply a territorial claim on the Greek province of the same name, and insists that it will not approve Macedonia's NATO membership until the issue is resolved.

Macedonian delegates walked out of the summit in response, with Foreign Minister Antonio Milososki accusing Greece of using an 'irrelevant argument of ancient times'.

And NATO leaders put as brave a face as they could on the issue, saying that the alliance 'regrets' the failure of talks on the name issue, but that 'an invitation... will be extended as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached'.

As the storm over enlargement passed, NATO leaders finally turned to the subject which they had originally hailed as the centrepiece of the talks: NATO's 'strategic vision' for its UN-mandated operation in Afghanistan.

The four-page document, which they unveiled in the presence of military allies and key partners such as Karzai, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and European Union Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, called on them all to maintain a 'shared long-term commitment' in Afghanistan.

It also urged NATO members to provide 'maximum possible flexibility' in the use of their troops and to fill the current shortfalls in manning levels - two issues that have sparked bitter disagreements in the past.

Thursday morning, French President Nicolas Sarkozy pledged to send 700 extra troops to Afghanistan in a move seen as easing some of the tension over the manning issue.

The Czech Republic also won a key concession, with NATO leaders saying they recognized the 'substantial contribution' the planned missile-defence radar would make to their security and tasking NATO with drawing up plans for a comprehensive NATO system.

They also pledged to boost public support for their missions and raise their ability to transport and conduct long-range operations and to deal with internet-based attacks.

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