



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

briefing note

EU DEFENCE TAKES A STEP FORWARD

By Charles Grant

The deal struck between Britain, France and Germany on the future of European defence is good news for those who believe that the EU should focus more on military capabilities than institutions. Now that the three have agreed to set up an EU military planning cell – an item which will make very little difference in the real world, despite the highly-charged negotiations surrounding it – the EU can move ahead with what matters. And that is not only boosting Europe's military capabilities, but also preparing to take over NATO's peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.

The agreement on military planning is one fruit of the increasingly close co-operation on foreign and defence policy between London, Paris and Berlin. Yet it is only six months since France and Germany, together with Belgium and Luxembourg, produced plans for a 'core Europe' defence organisation that excluded Britain. That scheme deepened the divisions caused by the Iraq war and convinced many Americans that France and Germany were determined to undermine NATO.

Emotions have subsided since the spring. President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder have abandoned their plans for a defence core. They now believe that European foreign and defence policies cannot take shape without the UK. For the sake of an agreement with the British they have diluted their original plan for a military headquarters that could run an EU operation. Instead a small unit of operational planners will join the existing EU military staff, as part of the Council of Ministers secretariat.

Tony Blair, too, has had to compromise, by accepting the principle that the EU may need to do its own operational planning, and by agreeing that this unit may one day evolve into a real headquarters – if everybody agrees that it should do so. But in return France and Germany have agreed to change two contentious parts of the EU draft constitution: the article committing members to defend each other if attacked will be greatly watered down, while that allowing a group of countries to move ahead with a defence avant-garde has been revised so that it is focused on military capabilities.

More importantly, Blair has reasserted British leadership in European defence, one of the few areas where Britain is well qualified to set the EU's agenda. Following the Iraq war, Blair had a credibility problem in some parts of Europe, being seen as President George Bush's lackey. His new commitment to EU defence will help to dispel that image and restore British influence in the EU.

Initial reactions in Washington have not been favourable. Since Blair came up with the idea of an EU role in defence, five years ago, he has often had to expend energy on persuading first President Clinton, and then President Bush, that European defence would not damage NATO. This time Blair will find the task more difficult, for Washington has become increasingly hostile to giving the EU a role in defence. That is a consequence of the rampant Francophobia that is particularly strong in the Pentagon, where European defence is seen – wrongly – as a French invention.

The gang of four

The summit on April 29th of the leaders of Germany, France, Belgium and Luxembourg did a great deal to sour opinion in Washington. The four leaders agreed to co-operate more closely on defence matters in seven ways.

Six of these were not particularly controversial. But the seventh was the Belgian idea for the establishment of an EU operational planning staff in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren.

The argument for this initiative is that if, as the EU-15 have agreed, the EU should be able to conduct autonomous operations, it will need its own operational planners. The argument against, put by those governments excluded from the April 29th summit, is that the EU can rely on NATO planners at SHAPE for a so-called Berlin-plus operation, like that in Macedonia, when it decides to work with NATO; or the EU can use a national headquarters, duly modified to reflect the nationalities of those taking part in the mission, as it did for the mission to Bunia in the Congo, when a French HQ was in charge.

The counter-argument is that only the larger EU countries have suitable national headquarters, and that many smaller members would like to participate in an EU planning group, rather than second staff to a headquarters run by a big country. The response from the Anglo-Saxons is that if the EU had a very small HQ of just a few dozen people, it would lack the capacity to manage a military mission, while if the EU had a large operation it would duplicate and in the long run rival SHAPE.

These technical arguments, however, were not the issue. For the Belgian proposal, strongly backed by Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac – against the advice of their foreign and defence ministries – was of huge political importance. The four governments involved were the same four which had blocked NATO aid for Turkey in January and February. That the ring-leaders of the EU's anti-war camp should try to set up a core European defence organisation, with its own operational planning staff, had an obvious message to American, British, Spanish, Italian and east European eyes. This was an initiative designed to undermine NATO – and exclude the British from the one area where they are able to play a leading role in European integration. Moreover, this initiative was not just about defence: the French and German governments had for years dropped hints that they wished to establish some sort of core Europe, which would provide leadership to an enlarged EU. They hinted that such a core Europe should exclude those who were not committed to putting Europe first, a category which certainly included the British and the east Europeans.

The gang of four denied that their initiative was intended to bring about these consequences. But they did see it as historically significant, in the way that earlier initiatives on the single currency had been. They reckoned that defence was the next big area for European integration and they were not prepared to let Anglo-Saxon hostility deflect their purpose.

The concept of an EU staff of operational planners is, in itself, not a big deal. It is probably desirable, if in the long term the EU is to engage in medium-sized autonomous operations. But given the context in which the Tervuren initiative was launched – with Europe split into two hostile camps – the timing was extraordinarily foolish. This scheme jiggled the knife in the wound between New Europe and Old Europe. It made everyone mistrust everyone else's motives. And, worst of all, it caused delight among the Pentagon hawks. Their ambition is to maintain the wound between New and Old Europe, to practice a policy of divide and rule, and the April 29th summit achieved exactly that purpose.

In Washington senior figures in the administration viewed the Tervuren proposal – however misguidedly – as an attempt to create an alternative to NATO, and thus to weaken the alliance. They have added it to the other things coming out of Europe which they dislike. One was the manner in which the EU embarked on the mission to Bunia: EU ministers did not discuss the operation with NATO, to work out which organisation was better suited to send the troops, but unilaterally decided to dispatch peacekeepers. Another annoyance has been the constitutional convention. The draft version of the constitution presented in July 2003 contained a mutual assistance clause which seemed to imply that the EU could become a collective defence organisation to rival NATO. It also had provisions for 'structured co-operation', which would allow a sub-group of members to move ahead with defence integration. In Washington that looked like a way of formalising the results of the April 29th summit. During the course of this year opinion in Washington has shifted strongly against ESDP. Europeans should worry about this; it will be very hard to make ESDP work if the Americans are actively opposed to it.

Big three co-operation revives

Meeting in Berlin in September, Schröder, Chirac and Blair sketched out the framework for a compromise on European defence, and in late November the details were finally agreed. The deal involves three elements.

First, the EU will deploy a small group of operational planners to SHAPE, NATO's planning headquarters near Mons. This group will work on ensuring a smooth relationship between the EU and NATO on 'Berlin-plus' missions, when the EU borrows NATO assets. There will also be a new unit of operational planners for the EU's military staff, which currently consists mainly of 'strategic planners' (their job is to advise EU foreign ministers on the operational plans that may come out of SHAPE or a national military headquarters). The new unit, located in the EU Council secretariat, will help with the planning of EU military missions. It has been agreed that, when the EU conducts an autonomous EU mission, a national headquarters will normally be in charge. However, if there is unanimous consent, the EU may ask its operational planners to play a role in conducting an autonomous mission. They would need to be beefed up with additional resources before they were able to run a mission on their own.

Second, the inter-governmental conference will amend the treaty articles on 'structured co-operation', so that the rationale of the avant-garde group becomes the enhancement of military capabilities. A separate protocol will describe what the structured co-operation will do, which will be to become, in effect, a kind of capability-enhancement club. The criteria required for entering the club will not too stringent – for example the country concerned must have forces ready for action in 5 to 30 days, which can be sustained on a mission for 30 days – which means that it will not be exclusive. While neutrals or others which are uninterested in boosting their capabilities may wish to stay outside, the majority of member-states will probably join. The way the protocol is drafted, structured co-operation cannot be about military operations, nor about a small group of countries establishing new institutions or headquarters. The British are therefore happy with these arrangements, which is why they have agreed that the European Council should be able to formally trigger the structured co-operation by QMV.

Third, the treaty articles on mutual military assistance will be amended. The mutual defence clause in the detailed part three of the constitution has been deleted altogether. The more general article in part one of the constitution has been watered down, with references to members aiding each other 'in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter', and to NATO remaining 'the foundation of members' collective defence and the forum for its implementation'. Thus the EU will not be making claims to be a collective defence organisation of the sort that could rival NATO.

Blair's central role

Tony Blair's role in the revival of European defence co-operation has been crucial. For the British government has not been firmly behind his efforts to promote EU defence. Much of the Ministry of Defence, and even parts of the Foreign Office, were not enthusiastic about compromising with the French and the Germans on planning staffs. They knew how badly the Bush administration would react. But 10 Downing Street has led on this dossier, forcing the other Whitehall departments to follow.

Blair also plays an essential role in reassuring other interested parties that big three co-operation on defence is not harmful. There is probably no one else who is capable of reassuring Washington that EU defence will not harm NATO or American interests. He has a powerful argument to use with the Americans. If Britain blocked any EU role in operational planning, France and Germany would probably go ahead – with a few of their friends – to set up some sort of multinational military headquarters outside the EU. And that could develop in a way that harmed NATO. But if the British are part of the new EU planning arrangements, they can steer them in a NATO-friendly direction. Blair is likely to persuade Mr Bush, if not everyone in the Pentagon, that he is doing the right thing.

Other European countries need reassurance, too: the smaller ones tend to get worried when the big three concoct a deal. The Central and East Europeans, in particular, are fans of NATO who have often had doubts about an EU role in defence. But when Blair – whose Atlanticist credentials cannot be doubted – tells them that they need not worry, they are inclined to believe him.

Together with Jacques Chirac, Blair conceived the idea of EU defence, five years ago. The Iraq war nearly killed the infant. But Blair's pursuit of a policy of compromise with France and Germany this autumn has breathed some new life into European defence.

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