CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM
briefing note

THE ROADMAP TO BETTER EU-NATO RELATIONS

By Tomas Valasek

The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, recently signalled that he would like French officers to return to NATO's military command. He also said that France should stop treating NATO as a 'bogeyman' and that it should 'renovate' its relationship with the alliance.[1] In doing so, Sarkozy has broken a long-standing taboo in French foreign policy, and opened the possibility of a dramatic improvement in EU-NATO co-operation.

[1] *Nicolas Sarkozy has laid out his ideas in a speech to the French ambassadors' conference in Paris on August 27th 2007, and in an interview with the New York Times on September 23rd 2007.*

Sarkozy's predecessor, President Jacques Chirac, viewed relations between NATO and the European security and defence policy (ESDP) as essentially a zero-sum game: what was good for one was bad for the other, and vice versa. NATO-ESDP co-operation has, with a few exceptions, been meagre in recent years. While NATO and the EU talk on some things, like Bosnia, they are not allowed to discuss other important issues, like Kosovo. Sarkozy's words now promise to end this ruinous quarrel between Europe's two main security organisations.

But for the new French president to prevail, a number of conditions must be met. France and Britain will need to reconcile their competing views on ESDP. The United States and Turkey will also need to respond with compromises of their own. This briefing note outlines what a possible future agreement among all parties could look like.

The problems that will need to be overcome are real but they are practical rather than philosophical. The significance of Sarkozy's initiative is that for the first time in the brief history of ESDP, none of the governments involved in Europe's security is seeking actively to undermine either the EU or NATO. The United States, an original critic of ESDP, dropped its opposition long ago, and France has now followed suit.

Brothers in arms or brothers at war?

NATO and the EU make very poor friends. Even though the membership of both institutions is nearly identical (21 of the 27 EU member-states are also in NATO), the two barely talk. Worse, they compete for the member-states' defence money, and for the attention of others. For example, in 2005 they could not agree on who should support the African Union's mission in Sudan, so each organisation now runs its own operation there. Occasionally, the rivalry between the EU and NATO leads the member-states to sabotage much needed equipment purchases, like NATO's plans to acquire a fleet of C-17 transport aircraft (which France long opposed).

This competition leaves everybody worse off. Member-states divide their already scarce defence budgets between the EU and NATO. Both institutions have given their member-states a long 'shopping list' of new equipment needed for military operations (the so-called 'capability goals') but the EU and NATO have failed to reconcile those lists. Each organisation is thus asking the same cash-strapped governments for slightly different things. Not surprisingly, when either institution tries to put military force in the field, it invariably

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finds that its member-states, torn between competing NATO and EU requirements and desperately short of defence money, do not have enough troops and weapons.

Sarkozy's predecessors are partly to blame for this odd state of affairs, but the roots go deeper. Bureaucratic rivalry is behind much of the problem. Also, Turkey (which is in NATO but not in the EU) and Cyprus (which is in the EU but not in NATO) use their memberships in the respective institutions to settle scores with each other. And for a long time the US blocked all attempts to create a European security and defence policy, although it later changed its mind.

To unblock the EU-NATO relationship, the allies will need to address many of the issues just mentioned, and to do so more or less simultaneously. First, Britain and France must seize on Sarkozy's initiatives, or else the hopes for better EU-NATO relations will evaporate. Britain and France form the undisputed core of European defence. They are the main providers of troops, and the largest producers and buyers of military hardware. The two countries are alone in Europe in having a truly global, strategic, expeditionary mindset, and the forces to back up their ambitions. They virtually invented ESDP at the Chirac-Blair summit in St Malo in 1998. If these two disagree, little happens in Europe on defence.

France also needs to reach a deal with Washington on which NATO command posts should go to French officers. But the US may want something from France – namely more troops for Afghanistan. And the US will resist French calls to make the EU, in effect, one party at the NATO table. Washington will seek to preserve the alliance as a grouping of 26 member-states, rather than see it become a forum for US-EU consultations.

And last but not least, for the EU and NATO to really start co-operating, Turkey needs to drop its opposition to NATO sharing sensitive information with Cyprus and Malta (which are both members of the EU, but not NATO). Turkey has blocked much formal contact between the two bodies and prevented common planning between the EU and NATO for situations like a potential crisis in Kosovo (prompting some member-states to accuse Turkey of playing with peacekeepers' lives). Turkey may be tempted into more co-operation with Europe if the EU offers it greater access to its defence initiatives. But this is proving controversial with a number of EU countries, especially Cyprus.

France: Priorité Europe?

General De Gaulle took French officers out of NATO commands in a fit of pique in 1966. Under Sarkozy's immediate predecessor, Jacques Chirac, France fought a two-front campaign: it sought to build up Europe's defence initiative, the ESDP, into a full-blown military entity. And French diplomats at NATO fought to keep the alliance in its Cold War box – armed for the highest-intensity operations and waiting for an (unlikely) conventional attack on Europe – rather than let it adapt to dealing with new security threats.

This policy was designed to turn the EU into an alternative to NATO, to make NATO irrelevant, and, by doing so, to reduce US influence in Europe. But it made terrible military sense: while the global demand for peacekeeping troops has sky-rocketed in the past ten years,[2] EU-NATO squabbles have left Europe as a whole divided and weakened. European countries are now ill-prepared to deploy troops in Africa, Central Asia, and elsewhere where they are needed.

[2] While in 1998 the UN deployed 14,000 peacekeepers worldwide, in 2005 the figure increased four-fold to over 60,000. Center on International Co-operation, 'Annual review of global peace operations 2006', Rienner, 2006.

Sarkozy does not share Chirac's penchant for competing with America, and he and his team are more keenly aware of the insecurity around Europe's borders. So they have essentially told NATO that France will stop playing politics with defence, and that both the EU and NATO should get on with the job of building and operating military forces.

However, the French offer to return to NATO, while tremendously important for EU-NATO relations, is not the top priority for all of the French elites. While people close to Sarkozy say that the president is genuinely keen on returning to NATO, with no strings attached, much of the French foreign policy establishment prioritises Europe, and, more specifically, the task of converting Europe's many militaries of varying size and relevance into a stronger and more unified force, under the ESDP initiative. And much of this establishment, as well as many senior French politicians, remains viscerally hostile to the idea of moving closer to NATO. So in order to sell the idea of reintegrating with NATO to doubters, Sarkozy needs to extract a price: to strengthen ESDP. That is the gist of the proposals he first unveiled in August 2007 to a conference of French ambassadors, and which he subsequently expanded in a September 21st 2007 interview with the *New York Times*.

The difficulty is that France does not know quite yet what it wants from and for Europe's defence. Before floating the possibility of a return to NATO's integrated command, Sarkozy had ordered a wholesale review of French national security policy. The review is still underway, and a new 'white book' is not due to be published until March 2008. It may recommend fairly radical changes to the way the French government organises its national security efforts, possibly reshuffling the responsibilities of several 'power' ministries such as defence and interior.

Virtually all of France's leading defence thinkers are preoccupied with the 'white book' process. They are not likely to turn their gaze to Europe until close to mid-2008, and French ideas for ESDP are not likely to congeal until close to the start of its EU presidency, in the second half of 2008.

But already, the first glimpses into French thinking suggest an ambitious agenda for ESDP. In a speech in September 2007, the defence minister, Hervé Morin, said (without much elaboration) that the European Union should get into the business of offering to train those member-states' militaries that need it, that the EU should buy a fleet of military satellites, and that EU member-states should create a common European defence budget. Most controversially, from the UK point of view, Morin also wants to turn the embryonic EU planning cell, tasked with preparing and commanding the EU's military-civilian operations, into a permanent, full-blown command.

This French emphasis on strengthening ESDP could yet derail the *rapprochement* with NATO. Paris is likely to assume that by offering to behave reasonably towards NATO, it will entice its allies into agreeing the French vision for European defences. But the reality is different. The UK would welcome France's return to NATO, but it remains lukewarm to many French ideas on ESDP. London continues to focus on NATO rather than ESDP. French offers of a return to NATO's military command, while welcome, do not solve NATO's very real problem that it cannot generate enough forces for Afghanistan or NATO's rapid reaction forces.

Not the best of friends: France and the UK on ESDP

British diplomats say that France is already behaving in a far more friendly and co-operative manner at NATO meetings than under Chirac. They also seem heartened by some French ideas for ESDP, particularly those aimed at putting pressure on other EU member-states to raise their defence budgets. But UK defence officials remain adamant in their opposition to the permanent EU military planning headquarters.

Britain fought this proposal tooth-and-nail when it first surfaced, in 2004, at the infamous 'praline summit' in Belgium.[3] Then as now the British government argued that NATO already possesses a first-rate headquarters, SHAPE, which is available to the EU on request; that several member-states, including Britain, France and Germany, have their own headquarters that are suitable for managing EU military missions; and that building a separate EU operational planning cell would be a frivolous waste of money. In 2004, the debate ended with a compromise, under which the EU assembled a small team of military planners. They can only be used if NATO or national planners are not available. They are also tasked with planning joint civilian-military operations, rather than purely military missions.

[3] *The summit took place in the middle of the Iraq war, and it brought together Europe's most vocal opponents to the war. At the summit, Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg floated several ideas on strengthening European defences, which were viewed by critics of the summit as a thinly veiled attack on NATO and the US.*

British reservations about France's ideas for ESDP extend beyond the country's defence officials. Prime Minister Gordon Brown is anxious to avoid any new initiatives on Europe until the UK parliament ratifies the Treaty of Lisbon. The treaty, which replaced the ill-fated European constitution, has proven enormously controversial in Britain, and the country's eurosceptic print media is subjecting Brown to vicious criticism for signing it. Parliament is now debating the treaty and ratification is likely in the summer. The prime minister is understandably concerned that a new European defence initiative would inflame opposition to the treaty, and hence complicate its passage through the legislature.

This leaves the UK government in a paradoxical situation. It has always wanted NATO and the EU to co-operate closely. Britain now has the best opportunity in a decade to achieve just that. But, until the Treaty of Lisbon is ratified, its government is unwilling to make the compromises required to reach an agreement with France.

Assuming that the treaty is ratified by the summer, Britain and France will still have to address UK reservations about the merits of some of the French ideas for ESDP. This will not be easy because the two sides have already been through the argument over EU operational headquarters once, in 2004, and both

parties walked away from it embittered. However, the possibility of improving EU-NATO relations should be a sufficiently strong incentive to try again, and this time, to try a different route.

A Franco-British compromise?

The possible solution to UK opposition to the establishment of an EU defence headquarters lies in NATO. The alliance should be allowed to expand the way it plans military operations, and its planning should be made to look more like the European Union's. Meanwhile, the EU's operational planning headquarters should be brought into the closest possible co-operation with NATO's (reformed) planning process.

As things stand, the EU and NATO member-states, when considering a new operation, have to choose between using a miniscule group of planners with both civilian and military expertise (the EU's planning cell), and a big, state-of-the art, military planning cell (NATO's Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe – SHAPE). But what both of them really need is a robust and civilian-military capacity. And that means also giving NATO the possibility to do joint planning with non-military organisations.

Some NATO countries, including the UK, have long argued that NATO should be allowed to plan its operations in conjunction with non-military bodies, such as the EU, but possibly also the UN or even non-governmental organisations. The argument makes perfect sense: every single military operation that NATO has carried out in the past decade has involved important elements of nation-building. And that is a task for policemen, judges and administrators, as much as soldiers. But NATO war planners are currently not allowed to involve civilian organisations in drafting their plans, even though those plans often include provisions for civilians to be deployed alongside NATO's military forces.

The absence of joint planning between the military and the civilians diminishes the chances of NATO succeeding, and it jeopardises the safety of civilians working alongside NATO troops in areas of conflict. France has opposed the idea of joint civilian-military planning at NATO, in part for doctrinal reasons. The Chirac government feared that allowing NATO to co-ordinate with civilians would undermine the EU's status as a unique provider of both military and civilian resources.

But NATO is not planning to start commanding thousands of police officers; it merely wants to be able to co-operate with those organisations, like the EU, that have police and judges and other civilians at their disposal. The UK government should tell the French that the EU could build permanent planning headquarters if and when France allows NATO planners to start working with civilian organisations in planning NATO military operations. This approach would strengthen both the EU and NATO.

The EU and NATO planners should also be required to work closely together from the earliest stages of operations, on the assumption that both institutions are likely to get involved. That is already the case in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo. NATO and the EU have already exchanged small liaison cells, but they should also consider sharing facilities. Co-location of NATO and EU planners would make co-operation easier, foster convergence of mindsets and approaches, and facilitate intelligence sharing.

Les Américains

The US is not only NATO's largest country but also the holder of the highest command posts in the organisation. As such, the US will need to agree with France which jobs in the NATO command structure should be assigned to French officers. This is more difficult than it sounds: the US as well as a number of European allies will need to give up as many as 900 posts. France has in fact already attempted to rejoin NATO's command structures once, in 1995, but the deal fell apart precisely because Washington would not give France as prominent a role in command structures as France wanted.

This time, however, US officials have signalled that a deal with France should be feasible. A change in US priorities since 1995 makes this possible. To Washington, the mission in Afghanistan is now the most pressing task on NATO's agenda. This means that the composition of the permanent commands (which France wants to return to, but which do not play an active role in fighting the Afghanistan war) has declined in importance. Washington will find it easier to make room for French officers; the posts that the US and other allies would have to give up are no longer central to the allies' war plans.

The US may put some pressure on Paris to consider expanding its contribution to Afghanistan. France is already a significant player in the country; it has over 4,000 troops in Afghanistan and on nearby seas. But that is still much less than the British (7,700 troops), and France is not involved in the fighting in the south, where NATO forces badly need fresh troops.

The odds are that Washington will not block France's re-integration into NATO by demanding more troops for Afghanistan. However, there would be no better way for France to demonstrate its renewed interest in NATO than by contributing fresh troops to replace the exhausted British, Canadian and Dutch contingents in the south of the country.

On the question of ESDP and EU operational headquarters, some French officials also believe that the Americans may help them by leaning on the UK to accept the permanent EU planning headquarters. And indeed, US diplomats have spoken privately to their UK counterparts, urging them to make the necessary compromises with France. They are right to do so: the cost of a few extra planners for the EU – particularly if they are made to work closely with NATO – is a price worth paying for ending EU-NATO hostilities.

At some point – although not necessarily before France returns to NATO's military command – Washington and Paris will need to address the place of the EU within NATO. Sarkozy wants the EU to have its own role in the alliance, acting as a sort of a caucus. But Washington (as well as Canada, Iceland, Norway and Turkey) will hesitate to use NATO if they cannot talk with individual EU countries, and if EU member-states' diplomats need to leave the room every few minutes for EU-only consultations.

The idea that a group of allies should behave as a single bloc in NATO has been tried once before, with Russia, and it failed. The 'permanent joint council' (PJC) which the alliance set up for Russia in 1997 originally allowed NATO to talk to Moscow only after the allies had already agreed on how they wanted the discussions to end. This arrangement was hugely frustrating for Russia because it was never really consulted, as opposed to being informed of pre-cooked decisions. The PJC proved so ineffective that in 2002 NATO scrapped it and invited Russia to join discussions as an equal partner, and to take part in decisions (on a limited range of subjects) with NATO, rather than after NATO had made already them. The US will insist, rightly, on being treated at least as well as Russia.

Yet if the integration of Europe's foreign and defence policies continues, NATO will have to resolve its 'EU question' at some point. The decision should be made on a pragmatic basis. If the EU insisted on having its own personality in NATO before Europe could truly speak with one voice, it would only frustrate the Americans and discourage them from taking NATO seriously. It would therefore weaken Europe's security. The EU needs to demonstrate to its non-EU allies that there is value in dealing with the European Union rather than with individual member-states. A simple rule of thumb should apply: the EU should demand a special seat at the NATO table only if and when it agrees that that seat would replace the individual member-states, and if it feels confident enough to fill that seat with a representative who has real decision-making powers.

There will be those who will argue that it is NATO itself, with its habit of dealing with governments rather than European institutions, that hampers further integration of Europe's security and defence policies. But there is little evidence for that. ESDP has been able to grow and flourish alongside a strong NATO. By launching nearly 20 ESDP missions while also giving NATO new responsibilities (in Afghanistan, in Iraq) over the past ten years, EU-member-states have clearly proved that it is possible to harmonise their policies while working individually with the Americans in NATO.

Not to be forgotten: Turkey and Cyprus

For NATO and the EU to start fully co-operating on defence, Turkey will have to drop its opposition to closer ties between the two institutions. France and Turkey have historically worked in a perverse harmony, with France resisting closer EU-NATO ties from its EU perch and Turkey doing the same from its chair at NATO's table – and each for different reasons.

Turkey's arguments against closer military links with the EU rest on a technicality (namely that two non-NATO EU member-states, Cyprus and Malta, do not have an agreement with NATO on protecting classified information). But it is widely understood that Turkey has opposed close NATO links with the EU as a way of punishing the Union for having admitted Cyprus while dragging its feet on Turkey's membership application. Turkey has a long-running dispute with Cyprus, whose northern part it has occupied since 1974.

As long as Turkey's obstinacy in NATO was balanced by France's obstinacy in the EU, Ankara had little reason to shift its stance. But France's decision to stop blocking EU-NATO ties will now isolate Ankara and put pressure on it to rethink its opposition.

It will be difficult to entice Turkey into an agreement, but both Turkey and the EU have a lot to offer each other. Turkey wants to be a part of Europe's defence policy. Its army is very capable, and is Europe's largest.

At the same time, Europe does not have sufficient troops to fulfil all its peacekeeping commitments, and it is already relying on Turkish help for some of its operations. Turkey also wants to be a part of the European Defence Agency, the EU body that works to pool procurement and production of military hardware.

The EU should offer Turkey an associate partnership in ESDP. Europe would benefit by securing better access to Turkey's military resources. Turkey, whose EU membership bid has stalled recently, should welcome a closer relationship with the EU. As a contributor to EU operations, it also wants and deserves a say in shaping Europe's security and defence policy. And the agreement could pave the way to better EU-NATO co-operation.

France has begun talking to its EU partners about giving associate membership in ESDP to Turkey. As a known sceptic of Turkey's EU membership, France has a unique credibility when it comes to convincing other reluctant EU member-states to agree. Even so, it appears its efforts have run into opposition. Paris should persist. Associate membership for Turkey is the right approach.

Beyond current debates

Once NATO and the European Union have moved past the most immediate hurdles to France's full membership in NATO, UK opposition to an EU operational headquarters, and Turkey's reluctance to see closer NATO ties with the EU, other issues will need to be addressed.

The relative decline in Europe's military capabilities is accelerating. EU member-states are not sending as many forces to Afghanistan as the operation commanders have requested, and they have failed to provide enough soldiers for the NATO response force. They are equally unlikely to develop the EU's battle groups into as powerful a force as originally planned. Most of the responsibility for this lies with the European governments, and their unwillingness to raise defence budgets or to even make the case for higher defence budgets. But the competition between the EU and NATO also weakens Europe's defence capabilities.

Both the EU (primarily through the European Defence Agency) and NATO are concerned with boosting the member-states' military strength. But they follow different paths: NATO's list of priorities, the 'Prague Capabilities Commitment' (PCC) is different from the EU's 'European Capabilities Action Plan' (ECAP). The differences are not massive but they are real nevertheless. This makes little sense; the member-states find it difficult to meet either goal individually, and the EU and NATO only make things worse by asking them to focus on (somewhat) different priorities. At a minimum, both institutions should clearly designate one member-state government as the lead co-ordinator for a given capability in both organisations, as an October 2006 study by the European Parliament proposed.[4] This would guarantee that for each military skill, both institutions are pursuing the same path to improvement. Eventually, the two lists of priorities, EU's ECAP and NATO's PCC, should merge into one.

[4] *'EU and NATO: Co-operation or competition?', Policy department external policies, European Parliament, October 2006.*

The two organisations should co-operate in other ways, too. The EU and NATO need to reach an agreement on sharing some critical 'enabling' technology such as heavy airlift. Without transport ships and aircraft neither the EU nor NATO can move their troops and weapons to areas of conflict. The world's militaries are desperately short on transport aircraft in particular. In times of crises – particularly if the NATO response force and the EU battle groups go to war at the same time – Europeans may find themselves renting expensive capacity on the spot market or, worse, without any means of moving troops or equipment. The EU and NATO should work out beforehand who will use what aircraft and under what conditions. A number of European countries have created 'co-ordination cells' that help both the EU and NATO to make better use of transportation planes and vessels (both commercial and military). This makes movements in and out of the battlefield quicker and cheaper. These cells should be merged into one European military mobility unit, as a study by a prominent US think-tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has suggested.[5]

[5] *'European Defense Integration: bridging the gap between strategy and capabilities', Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2005.*

The list could go on. For example, the EU battle groups should accept NATO standards for 'certification' – the process through which the alliance verifies whether the member-states have really met all their promises on a given capability or a military unit. NATO's process is not infallible (the alliance, too, often finds that governments cannot deliver on all their commitments) but it is the best verification system devised to date, and the EU should not try to reinvent the wheel.

The few proposals listed above would be a good start. Europe needs a strong military muscle to exercise credible global influence. Diplomacy and engagement must be Europe's preferred approach but when they

fail, as they sometimes inevitably do, the EU must have a Plan B. Otherwise, its diplomacy will not be taken seriously. Sarkozy knows this, which is why he is focusing on working with NATO, rather than fighting it, and on strengthening Europe's militaries in the process. Many of his ideas make sense but he will need to convince his allies – the UK first and foremost – that France is serious about no longer trying to undermine NATO. The members of both organisations have much to gain if NATO and the EU stop their senseless squabbles. They should meet Sarkozy part of the way, because NATO will grow stronger, too, if it and the EU stop competing for Europe's defence money. NATO and the EU will sink or swim together. After a decade of European 'civil wars' between NATO and the EU, common sense may at last prevail.

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