



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

opinion

Resolving the rows over ESDP

By Charles Grant

European defence has returned to the top of EU governments' agendas this year, with the divisions provoked by the Iraq war making it a highly sensitive subject. It is possible to argue that the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) has proceeded according to plan in 2003. Early in the year the EU took over the UN police-training mission in Bosnia; in the spring the EU took responsibility for its first military mission, in Macedonia – a mission for which the EU depends on NATO support; and in the summer it embarked on its first 'autonomous' military operation, with the despatch of a few hundred peacekeepers to Bunia in the Congo.

Meanwhile the EU's defence ministries have continued to work on the 'European Capabilities Action Plan', which, like the parallel work going on in NATO, is intended to plug the principal deficiencies in Europe's military capabilities. The EU's draft constitution includes a reference to the establishment of a 'European Armaments, Research and Military Capabilities Agency', with the brief of defining Europe's capability requirements and how to meet them, encouraging governments to fulfil their promises, promoting more common procurement policies, and boosting the European defence industrial base.

The true picture, however, has been more fraught. A dangerous combination of circumstances has threatened the very existence of the ESDP: the impact of the Iraq conflict, which split the EU states into pro- and anti-US factions; the desire of the anti-US faction to push ahead with a core European defence grouping;

the adverse US reaction to plans for a core Europe in defence; and the reflection of these arguments in the constitutional convention.

ESDP only makes sense as an instrument at the service of European foreign policy. The point of having an EU military capability is to reinforce EU foreign policy: declarations that are not backed by the threat of force carry little weight. When serious divisions disable European foreign policy, as was the case over Iraq, an EU military capability serves little purpose.

Tervuren

Meeting in Brussels on April 29th, the prime ministers of Germany, France, Belgium and Luxembourg 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 at 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 (it already has strategic planners, charged with advising EU ministers, inside the Council of Ministers).

The argument against, put by those governments excluded from the Tervuren 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 Bunia, 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.

These technical arguments, however, are not the issue. For the Belgian proposal, strongly backed by Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac – against the advice of their foreign and defence ministries – has proven to be of crucial 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 four Tervuren governments 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 initiative was launched – with Europe split into two hostile camps – the timing was unbelievably foolish. Tervuren 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 Tervuren achieved exactly that purpose.

In Washington senior figures in the administration have 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 Bunia mission: 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, which drew up a mutual assistance clause which seemed to be a threat to NATO's own Article 5 mutual assistance clause. Furthermore, the draft constitution's provisions for 'structured co-operation' seemed to a way of formalising the results of the April 29th summit.

In short, 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. This hostility also has implications for EU plans to take over the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. For the civilian side of the Pentagon is strongly anti-French and anti-EU. It therefore does not want the EU to take over the peacekeeping in Bosnia, since this might mean that the EU – and the French – could claim a success for ESDP. In the words of one of the most senior State Department officials, "we will never be able to persuade the Pentagon to allow the EU to take over the NATO mission in Bosnia if some Europeans push ahead with Tervuren".

The way forward

When Blair, Chirac and Schröder met in Berlin last month they worked hard to make sure that these sensitive issues were *dédramatisés*. Chirac appears to have understood that there is not much point in creating a European defence that

excludes the UK. Schröder had always felt uncomfortable about excluding the UK. For his part, Blair has over-ridden the advice of his officials, and especially those in the MoD, and accepted the concept of an EU planning staff – so long as it can be established in ways that are NATO-friendly.

The compromise among the big three appears to be along the following lines. The inter-governmental conference should amend the treaty articles on structured co-operation, so that unanimity is required before any *avant-garde* group is established for European defence. As currently worded, the constitution allows a group to proceed without the consent of all EU members. The principal of allowing the more capable members to do things together is sensible. The larger countries may not want some of the smaller or neutral countries to be involved in every piece of military business. However, even if the big three agree on this, some of the smaller countries are likely to raise difficulties in the IGC. They are unhappy about any scheme which allows larger states to leave them behind. The final wording will probably make clear that the threshold for qualifying for membership of an *avant-garde* group should not be set too high.

The treaty article on mutual military assistance will also be amended, to emphasise that NATO is the means through which countries will come to each others' aid. Only NATO members will fully subscribe to this clause. This need not be controversial issue. The Western European Union treaty, which ten EU members have signed and is still in force, contains a mutual military assistance clause. It is no big deal if EU

members promise to defend each other, so long as it clear that NATO is the organisation which is responsible for collective defence.

As for the Tervuren initiative, its four backers have agreed that nothing should happen in Brussels suburb of Tervuren itself. They and the British agree that the EU should boost its planning capability, as part of the Military Staff inside the Council of Ministers. The EU should be able to take on more of the preparatory work for its own military operations. What is still undecided is whether the EU should be able to manage the conduct of its missions, once they are underway; the British – and the overwhelming majority of the EU-25 – still oppose that step. The view in Berlin, if not Paris, is that – in a spirit of compromise – the Tervuren four should not push for the EU to be able to conduct its own missions any time soon.

So long as Britain, France and Germany can maintain a constructive approach to ESDP, it has a future. But if Europe remains divided into pro- and anti-US camps, the ESDP will achieve little. France and Germany must make sure that ESDP develops in a way that does not deepen the New/Old Europe division. Britain, for its part, must show that it is committed to a greater EU role in defence. British ministers need to speak out more in public about the virtues of ESDP, and overcome their fear of provoking the tabloid press. That would do a lot to restore British credentials in some parts of continental Europe. British ministers also need to continue with the difficult and time-consuming work of convincing the Americans to back ESDP.

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