



France, NATO and European defence

By Tomas Valasek

★ France and the UK are close to an agreement that would dramatically improve relations between the EU and NATO. The two institutions currently make poor partners. Besides Franco-British disagreements, Turkish squabbles with the EU also impede EU-NATO co-operation.

★ France had long championed the EU over NATO for defence co-operation but President Nicolas Sarkozy has changed that. He has ordered his diplomats to stop obstructing NATO's work and offered to return France to NATO's military structures.

★ Britain should now respond to Sarkozy's initiative by agreeing with France to strengthen the EU's defence policy. And Turkey should be offered a bigger role in the EU's security and defence policy. Together, these steps hold promise of much better EU-NATO ties.

Soon after his election as French president, Nicolas Sarkozy 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. In doing so, Sarkozy broke a long-standing taboo in French foreign policy, and opened the possibility of a dramatic improvement in EU-NATO co-operation.

For much of his term in office 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 few exceptions, been limited in recent years. While NATO and the EU talk on some issues, like Bosnia, they are not allowed to discuss other important ones, like their respective missions in Kosovo. Sarkozy's words now suggest that the ruinous quarrel between Europe's two main security organisations may be nearing an end.

But for the new French president to prevail, a number of conditions must be met. France and Britain will need to reconcile their conflicting 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, neither the US nor any European government is actively seeking to undermine either the EU or NATO. The United States, an original critic of ESDP, dropped its opposition long ago, and France, too, is now keen for NATO and the EU to co-operate.

Brothers in arms or brothers at war?

NATO and the EU make very poor friends. Even though the membership of both institutions overlaps to a large degree (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 for several years each organisation ran its own operation there. Occasionally, the rivalry between the EU and NATO leads the member-states to sabotage much needed equipment purchases, like when France slowed down NATO's plans to acquire a fleet of C-17 transport aircraft.

This competition leaves everybody worse off. Member-states divide their already scarce defence budgets between the EU and NATO. Both institutions have given their members a long 'shopping list' of new equipment

needed for military operations (the so-called 'capability goals') but the EU and NATO have failed to fully 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 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 predecessor is partly to blame for this 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 hampered attempts to develop a European security and defence policy, although it later became more positive.

To unblock the EU-NATO relationship, the allies will need to address many of the issues just mentioned, and do so more or less simultaneously. First, Britain and France must seize on Sarkozy's initiatives, otherwise 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. The US needs to agree which NATO posts should go to French officers upon their reintegration into the command structure. The two might also disagree about the role of the EU in NATO decision-making. 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 individual countries, rather than see it become a forum for US-EU consultations.

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 might be tempted into allowing more co-operation if the EU offers it greater access to its defence plans. But such a deal would prove controversial with a number of EU countries, especially Cyprus.

France: Priorité Europe?

General de Gaulle took French officers out of NATO's integrated military command structure in a fit of

pique in 1966. Under President 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 preparing 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 sense militarily: while the global demand for peacekeeping troops has sky-rocketed in the past ten years, EU-NATO squabbles have left Europe as a whole divided and weakened.¹ European countries are now ill-prepared to deploy troops in Africa, Central Asia, and elsewhere where they are needed.

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 full participation in NATO, while tremendously important for EU-NATO relations, is not the top priority for all of the French elites. People close to Sarkozy say that the president is genuinely keen on returning to NATO's core, with no strings attached. But much of the French foreign policy establishment prioritises the EU, and, more specifically, the task of converting Europe's national 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, remain viscerally hostile to the idea of moving closer to NATO. So in order to sell the idea of fully returning to the alliance, Sarkozy needs to extract a price: to strengthen the 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*.

What France wants from and for Europe's defence is not yet entirely clear. 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 June 2008. Until it comes out, French officials are keeping most of their ideas for the ESDP under wraps.

The first glimpses into French thinking suggest an ambitious agenda for the ESDP. In a speech in

¹ While in 1998 the UN deployed 14,000 peacekeepers worldwide, by 2006 the figure had increased five-fold to over 70,000. Center on International Co-operation, 'Annual review of global peace operations 2006', Rienner, 2006.

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 countries should create a common European defence budget. Most controversially, from the UK point of view, Morin also wants to turn the embryonic EU operations centre, which will be responsible for preparing and commanding the EU's missions, into a permanent, full-blown command.

This French emphasis on strengthening the ESDP could yet derail the *rapprochement* with NATO. Paris appears to assume that by offering to behave reasonably towards NATO, it will encourage its allies to sign up to the French vision for European defence. But the reality is different. The UK would welcome France's return to full participation in NATO, but it remains lukewarm on many French ideas on ESDP since it continues to prioritise NATO. French offers of a return to the allied military command, while welcome, do not solve NATO's very real problem that it cannot generate enough forces for its Afghanistan mission or its rapid reaction forces.

Who commands whom?

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

² *The summit took place in the middle of the Iraq war, and it brought together Europe's most vocal opponents to the war. 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.*

Britain fought this idea tooth-and-nail when it first surfaced, in 2003, at the infamous 'praline summit' in Belgium.² Then as now, the British government argued that NATO already has a number of excellent command centres, which it makes available to the EU; 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 permanent EU planning and command centre would be a frivolous waste of money. In 2003, the debate ended with a compromise under which the EU assembled the core of a planning team, rather than a full planning and command headquarters. This EU 'operation centre' can only be used if no NATO or national planners are available. And it is tasked with planning joint civilian-military operations, rather than purely military missions.

France has always viewed this arrangement as temporary. Sarkozy's government now says that it

wants to add more planners to the operation centre. And it wants this centre to start producing plans for likely future EU military missions. These steps would make it all but inevitable that the EU rather than NATO or individual member-states would command future European operations.

France's renewed interest in EU operational planning 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 the full French return to NATO and the prospect of better EU-NATO relations hinges on a compromise with France on the unloved EU operational headquarters.

Britain and France clearly need to find a solution that allows France to claim progress on ESDP, but also meets the UK's desire for closer EU-NATO co-operation. This will not be easy because the two sides have already been through the argument over EU operational headquarters once, in 2003, 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?

As things stand, the EU and NATO member-states, when considering a new operation, have to choose between using a minuscule group of planners with both civilian and military expertise (the EU's operation centre), and a big, state-of-the-art military headquarters run by NATO. But what both institutions really need is a robust civilian-military capacity. So a possible compromise lies in giving NATO the option to jointly plan missions with non-military organisations. Meanwhile, the EU's operational planning headquarters should start working with NATO's (reformed) planning process as closely as possible.

Some NATO countries, including the UK, have long argued that the alliance should be allowed to plan its operations together 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 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 assume that civilians will 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. So the UK government should tell the French that the EU could add more operational planners 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. It would also satisfy French demands for NATO reform. (Sarkozy made it clear that France would not re-integrate into the 'old NATO'. This is in part for political reasons – Sarkozy does not want to appear to be openly reversing General de Gaulle's 1966 decision – and in part because France genuinely thinks NATO's command structure should be smaller. The UK should insist that NATO become both smaller and better prepared for civil-military co-operation.)

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 side by side, as is the case in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo. NATO and the EU have 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.

In an ideal world, the EU and NATO would not just co-locate but share operational planning headquarters. They both rely on essentially the same pool of military forces. The obvious difference is that five NATO allies – Canada, Iceland, Norway, Turkey and the US – are not in the EU. But this has not kept the five from contributing troops to EU operations anyway. The US has pledged policemen to the EU mission in Kosovo, and a Turkish plane flew EU peacekeepers to Africa. So it would make sense for the EU and NATO to also use one headquarters rather than two. But the symbolic value of the EU possessing its own military headquarters is proving too much of a lure for France and many others in the EU. So 'co-location' is the second best solution, and one that could satisfy both French demands for more EU military autonomy and UK insistence on a close relationship between the ESDP and NATO.

Les Américains

The US is not only NATO's largest member 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 attempted to rejoin NATO's command structures once before, in 1995. But the

deal fell apart precisely because Washington would not give France as prominent a role in command structures as France had 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. The alliance has activated a number of operational commands to direct NATO troops in the country. 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.

Paris has also won a few hearts in Washington by deciding in April 2008 to send new troops to Afghanistan. France was already a significant player in the country; it had over 4,000 troops in Afghanistan and on nearby seas. But that is still much less than the British (7,700 troops), and the alliance badly needed fresh soldiers to fight a revitalised Taliban in Afghanistan's south. So Sarkozy responded by ordering a battalion (700-800 troops) to deploy to Afghanistan. The US will view this as a sign that France is serious about NATO. And Sarkozy's decision should, among things, help smooth the French return to NATO's command structures.

On the question of ESDP and the 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. The Americans might not go that far but US diplomats have spoken privately to their UK counterparts, making the case for a compromise. 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 so often 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, just 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 already made 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. At the moment, the EU is often too divided on major security issues like Russia or Iraq so its internal divisions would hold up NATO business. This would only frustrate the Americans and discourage them from taking NATO seriously.

The EU member-states need to demonstrate to its allies in NATO that there is value in dealing with them as a group rather than as individual countries. A simple rule of thumb should apply: the EU should act as a group only on issues where it is strongly united. In those cases, it should act through an appointed representative with 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 over 20 ESDP missions while also giving NATO new responsibilities (notably in Afghanistan and Iraq) over the past ten years, EU member-states have clearly proved that it is possible to harmonise their defence 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 relations 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 also 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. Meanwhile, Turkey is making enemies in NATO because it has been obstructing discussions between NATO and the EU over their respective operations in Kosovo. Other allies are furious. Without such co-operation, "it's only a matter of time before someone shoots someone he shouldn't", said one defence official from a NATO member-state.

It will be difficult to entice the Ankara government 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 of 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 (EDA), the EU body that works to pool procurement and production of military hardware.

The EU should offer Turkey an associate membership in the EDA and consultative partnership on ESDP, as a 2006 CER pamphlet suggested.³ Europe would benefit by securing better access to Turkey's military resources. Turkey, as a contributor to EU operations, would gain a say in shaping Europe's security and defence policy. And the agreement could pave the way to better EU-NATO co-operation.

³ Charles Grant, 'Europe's blurred boundaries: Rethinking enlargement and neighbourhood policy', CER pamphlet, October 2006.

Turkey will welcome a greater say in the EDA, but it may view the offer of consultation on ESDP with some hesitation. On the one hand, it has often said that it wanted a greater say in ESDP. On the other, Ankara has turned down offers of special relationships with the EU on subjects like economics or energy. Turkey tends to regard them as a detour from its path to EU membership, and insists that co-operation should come about only as a result of the accession process.

But accession talks will likely last for many more years, and the EU and NATO urgently need to improve relations. So the EU should move ahead of the accession process and offer partnership on ESDP to Ankara now. To pre-empt Turkey's concerns, Britain should be the country that makes the offer. The UK has strongly supported Turkey's bid for EU membership and has more credibility in Ankara than most other EU member-states.

France and Germany would need to back the project so as to convince Ankara that the EU is serious about the offer, and to minimise chances that another EU member-state will block the partnership. Paris may have to lean on Cyprus and Greece in particular. The two have frequently opposed closer Turkey-ESDP ties, as has France in the past. But now Paris needs to convince Athens and Nicosia that the task of strengthening Europe's security requires closer relations with Turkey. The chances of success are improving: the new Cypriot government, elected in

March 2008, has pledged to restart the process of looking for a solution to the island's division. If there was progress towards reunification, Cypriot-Turkish and Greek-Turkish relations could improve dramatically, removing another obstacle to a greater Turkish role in the ESDP.

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. Despite France's recent pledge, EU member-states are not sending as many troops 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 European governments that are unwilling to raise defence budgets. But, as explained, the competition between the EU and NATO also leaves Europe's defence capabilities weaker than they would otherwise be.

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 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

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

guarantee that for each military skill, both institutions are pursuing the same path to improvement. Eventually, the two lists of priorities, the EU's ECAP and NATO's PCC, should merge into one.

The two organisations should co-operate in other ways, too. The EU and NATO need to reach an agreement on sharing some critical 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 of transport aircraft in particular. 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 transport 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 Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'European defence integration: Bridging the gap between strategy and capabilities', 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.

Europe needs more 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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