

While attention focused on the collapse of the talks on a new EU constitution at last December's summit, a crucial step was taken towards creating a common defence policy. **Charles Grant** reports

# BIG THREE JOIN FORCES ON DEFENCE

'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'

**2003 was a year of sharply contrasting fortunes for European defence.**

The Iraq war split the EU down the middle and almost discredited the idea that the Europeans should develop their own defence capability. By the end of the year, however, a revival of co-operation among the 'big three' – Britain, France and Germany – had put European defence back on the agenda. Furthermore, the Union was preparing to run its first large-scale peace-keeping mission, in Bosnia.

The idea that the EU should be able to run its own military operations originated in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. During the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, dictators such as Slobodan Milosevic took little notice of what the Union said because they knew that while it could pass resolutions, it could not deploy battalions. And then when Kosovo was on the brink of exploding, the EU counted for little in the diplomacy that tried to reconcile Serbs and Kosovars.

The Union's Balkan failure encouraged British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac to launch the idea of EU defence at their summit in St Malo in December 1998.

The essence of the Blair/Chirac deal was

that, to please the British, EU defence should not threaten NATO's primacy; and, to please the French, the Union should be able to act autonomously for modest military missions.

That compromise has stuck for the past five years and has been accepted by the Germans and the rest of the EU. The Union has built new institutions – such as the political and security committee, the military committee and the military staff. It has also worked out a set of agreements with NATO, whereby the EU can use NATO's planners and other assets for 'Berlin-plus' operations – those which the Union undertakes with NATO support.

The first such mission involved the EU taking over NATO's small peace-keeping operation in Macedonia in April 2003. A few months later, the Union embarked on its first autonomous mission when the French led a small stabilising force to Bunia in Congo.

The US never liked the idea of autonomous operations, fearing that they could in the long run lead to the EU duplicating what NATO does. But the Americans grudgingly accepted Blair's assurances that the UK and the many other Atlanticist governments in the Union would ensure that NATO came to no harm.



Photograph: Reuters

### On target: renewed co-operation between France, Germany and Britain paved the way for a ground-breaking deal

One rationale for giving the EU a role in defence was the hope that it would prove more effective than NATO at persuading the member states to enhance their military capabilities. Here the record has been mixed.

Some countries, such as Germany, have cut defence budgets. But others, such as the UK and France, have increased spending, while several have invested in new equipment. Thus six EU member states are building a new transport plane, the A400M. Spain, Italy and France have either introduced all-professional armies, or begun the process. And in 2003, Britain and France came up with the idea of a new EU agency with the job of pushing the member states to improve their capabilities. The Union will establish this body in 2004.

Despite this progress, the Iraq war – and its consequences – very nearly destroyed the idea of European defence. One consequence was the Brussels summit on April 29, bringing together the leaders of Germany, France, Belgium

and Luxembourg, who had led opposition to the war.

They approved a Belgian idea for a separate EU military headquarters in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren, arguing that if the Union was going to conduct autonomous operations, it would need its own operational planners.

The counter-argument, put by the UK and some of those governments excluded from the summit, was that the EU could use a national headquarters, duly modified to reflect the nationalities of those taking part in the mission. That was what happened for the mission to Bunia, when a French HQ was in charge.

Whatever such technical arguments, the Belgian proposal, strongly backed by Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder – against the advice of their foreign and defence ministries – was of huge political importance. The Tervuren initiative had an obvious message for American, British, Spanish, Italian and east European eyes. It appeared to be

an attempt to build up a European alternative to NATO, with a distinctly anti-American flavour.

The concept of an EU staff of operational planners is not, in itself, a big deal. It is probably desirable, if in the long term the Union 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 to prevent the Union emerging as a united and credible actor in foreign and defence policy. The April 29 summit helped to fulfil all those Pentagon aspirations.

In the autumn of 2003, however,

renewed co-operation among the big three – despite persistent divisions on Iraq – revived the EU’s ambitions in defence. Chirac and Schröder abandoned their plans for an *avant-garde* defence grouping, believing that European foreign and defence policies cannot be built without the UK.

For the sake of an agreement with the British, they diluted their original plan for a military headquarters which could run an EU operation. Meanwhile, Blair decided that Britain could not fulfil its objectives in Europe without rebuilding bridges with France and Germany. He too compromised by accepting the principle that the EU may need to do its own operational planning.

The final deal had three principal 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 Union and NATO on ‘Berlin-plus’ missions. There will also be a new unit of operational planners in the Union’s military staff, to help with the planning of EU military missions.

When the Union conducts an autonomous 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.

The other two prongs of this deal concern the draft European constitution. The text which came out of the convention contained two articles which upset the Americans, the British and many other EU governments.

One of these would allow a group of member states to establish a ‘structured co-operation’ in defence – meaning a club for the most ambitious, perhaps along the lines of the Tervuren initiative. The big three agreed to amend this article so that it could apply only to co-operation on military capabilities and so that the criteria for membership of this club would not be too stringent.

The second article – rather like Article 5 of the NATO treaty – would commit member states to defend each other from attack. The Americans worried that this might turn the Union into a collective defence organisation which would rival NATO. France and Germany agreed to water down this article, which now includes references to NATO being the foundation of EU collective defence.

At the Brussels EU summit in December, other governments signed up to this deal. The summit’s failure to reach an agreement on the constitution does not affect the agreement on planning, for which no treaty change is required. However, the treaty articles on defence cannot come into effect until such time as the constitution is adopted and ratified by all the member states.

It is far from certain whether that will happen. However, if some version of the constitution is finally concluded, it will contain the agreed wording of these two defence articles, since it has the backing of all 25 governments.

The deal struck between Britain, France and Germany on the future of European defence is good news for those who believe that the Union should focus more on military capabilities than institutions.

For, now that the EU has agreed to set up its own military planning cell – a development which will make very little difference in the real world, despite the highly-charged negotiations surrounding it – it can move ahead with what matters. And that is not only boosting Europe’s military capabilities, but also preparing to take over NATO’s peace-keeping mission in Bosnia.

## BLAIR TAKES CENTRE STAGE

Tony Blair’s role in the revival of European defence co-operation has been crucial.

Many senior figures in the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office had doubts about his desire to compromise with the French and the Germans on planning staffs in the autumn of 2003. They shared American concerns that a small planning unit could be the germ of something which would be harmful to NATO.

But 10 Downing Street has set policy on this subject, forcing the other Whitehall departments to follow.

Blair has also played an essential role in reassuring Washington that EU defence will not damage NATO. Indeed, just before the Brussels summit, he persuaded George Bush that his administration should accept

the EU planning unit. He pointed out that if Britain blocked any Union role in operational planning, France and Germany would probably go ahead – with a few of their friends – and set up some sort of multinational headquarters, and that could develop in ways which harmed American interests. But if the British are part of the new EU planning arrangements, they can steer them in a NATO-friendly direction.

Many European countries needed reassurance, too: the smaller ones tend to become worried when the big three concoct a deal. The central and east Europeans, in particular, are great fans of NATO who were never very enthusiastic about EU defence.

But when Blair – whose Atlanticist credentials cannot be doubted – tells them that they need not worry, they are inclined to believe him.