

## BRIEFING NOTE

### Europe needs an *avant-garde* for military capabilities

*by Daniel Keohane*

Europe has many lessons to learn from the Iraq crisis. Politically, Europe is divided between “old” (those countries that opposed the Iraq war) and “new” (those that supported the war). Europe’s lack of military muscle compared to the Americans was exposed by the short Iraq campaign. The gap in transatlantic military capabilities is even greater now than was the case in Kosovo or Afghanistan.

Does all this doom and gloom spell the end of the European security and defence policy (ESDP)? No, if European states can overcome their political differences and deepen military co-operation.

Belgium, backed by France, Germany and Luxembourg, is hosting a mini-summit on April 29<sup>th</sup> to agree on proposals to develop ESDP. The Belgians argue that the Iraq crisis showed that ESDP is not working now, and will never be effective with upwards of 25 states participating from 2004. Guy Verhofstadt, the Belgian prime minister has instead proposed that these four countries should form the core of a European defence union inside the EU. After all, neither the euro, nor the Schengen agreement on common borders, would have come about without the leadership of an *avant-garde* group of states. Participating countries in the defence *avant-garde* would commit to defending each other from external attack, set up a European military headquarters, and pool some of their military resources.

Other EU governments are unenthusiastic about this summit because of the poor diplomacy ahead of the meeting; concern over some of Belgium’s proposals; and anxiety that the summit may only serve to deepen European divisions.

Originally there was confusion whether or not other EU member-states were invited to the meeting, or whether it would be confined to only four countries. Verhofstadt has since said that the summit is open to all EU governments.

Few defence experts would quibble with the Belgian desire to beef up European military capabilities. But some of the Belgian proposals are sub-optimal choices for European governments. In particular, a new European military structure outside the NATO framework would be financially costly and politically divisive. And it seems an odd move, since the EU reached agreement on access to NATO military assets only last December. This long-awaited EU-NATO agreement, which came after months of political wrangling, allows the EU to use NATO resources to overcome its own capability shortfalls. For example, EU peacekeepers in Macedonia depend on NATO’s help – such as the expertise of its military planners – to conduct their operation there.

More significantly, the summit takes place at a time when Europeans should be working to overcome their differences with the US. Those European countries that supported the US on Iraq (like Britain, Spain and Italy) are suspicious of its real motives. Washington could perceive a European defence union, led by the Belgians, the French and the Germans, as nothing more than an anti-US alliance. Moreover, if European

governments feel they have to choose between NATO and a European defence union, this would greatly harm the EU by making divisions between “old” and “new” Europe more permanent.

Instead, the EU should use the existing EU-NATO framework, and involve as many countries as possible based on certain criteria. And France and Britain, the two most-militarily capable countries, should take the lead. ESDP was born of Franco-British parentage at St. Malo in 1998, and will not succeed unless those two countries drive it forward.

The declaration on defence signed by Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac at their Le Touquet summit in February 2003 was far-reaching. But, because the Iraqi crisis stole the headlines, their plans were largely ignored by the press. The declaration sets out a number of sensible objectives for ESDP that other EU governments should be able to support. The strong emphasis on capabilities in the Le Touquet declaration is crucial. One reason why ESDP lacks credibility in Washington and elsewhere is that it has focused more on institutions than capabilities.

Aside from the well-known transatlantic gap in military capabilities, there is a large equipment gap between EU member-states – a gulf that will widen with the accession of 10 new members in 2004. The final report of the European Convention working group on defence called for a “defence Euro-zone”. To join the “defence Euro-zone” participating countries would have to have certain types of pre-identified forces and military assets. The French and the British governments further refined the “defence Euro-zone” proposal at Le Touquet, calling on the EU to “set new objectives, both quantitative (including relevant measures of defence expenditure) and qualitative (preparedness, military effectiveness, deployability, interoperability and sustainability of forces)”. If EU countries agree to a defence *avant-garde*, the Franco-British proposals for improving European military capabilities are the best way forward.

In addition, Blair and Chirac proposed the creation of a new “defence capabilities development and acquisition agency”, tasked with encouraging member-states to bolster their military capabilities. The new agency would work on harmonising military requirements, co-ordinating defence R&D, and encouraging the convergence of national procurement procedures. And the British and the French want the EU to be able to deploy air, sea, and land forces within 5 to 10 days. Such a force would represent a huge improvement on the present arrangements for the EU’s rapid reaction force, which is supposed to be deployable within 60 days.

EU governments should back the Le Touquet proposals. An *avant-garde* for capabilities would be a major step forward towards improving overall European military effectiveness. The more European countries that are involved, and the more they co-operate on military matters, the less likely it is that they will disagree on security issues in the future. But an *avant-garde* that amounts to no more than political grandstanding, and further divides the EU, will do nothing to enhance the fragile credibility of European defence policy.

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