

European Policy Brief

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In Europe's Defence?

Introduction

Two factors have brought the question of an integrated European defence policy to the top of the current political agenda, namely events surrounding the war in Iraq and the proposals on defence policy put forward by the Convention on the Future of Europe earlier this year. All European governments were reminded by the war against Saddam Hussein of the disparity between America's military power and that of both its allies and potential enemies. The war was also an occasion for some Europeans at least to ask whether America's military and political interests were today always identical with their own.

This self-questioning found expression in one particular recommendation from the European Constitutional Convention chaired by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. The Convention's draft Constitution controversially proposed a mechanism ('structured co-operation') for accelerated integration of an initially small subgroup of member states in the policy area of European defence. Discussion of this proposal has been a central concern of the current Intergovernmental Conference reviewing the proposals of the Convention. This discussion is not merely, or even primarily, a debate about military technicalities. It is pre-eminently a political debate about the nature of the European Union and its future role and standing in the world.

Background

The idea of a European defence policy is as old as the project of European integration itself. An initiative in 1950 by the French government to establish a European Defence Community (EDC) envisaged defence co-operation between France, Germany and the Benelux countries. This first project came to nothing when in 1954 the French Assembly refused to ratify the Treaty establishing the EDC. This failure ushered in the negotiations which led in 1956 to the establishment of the Common Market, with its specific emphasis on trade and economic integration. Some of those most closely associated with the Convention's proposals today are eager to close what they see as the lacuna of European integration in the defence field, dating from the vote of the Assemblée Nationale in the 1950s.

It was not until the 1990s, and the end of the Cold War, that the concept of a European defence policy re-emerged. This was at least partly in response to the expectation that the United States would then wish to reduce its military involvement in Europe. In the Maastricht Treaty of 1991, the goal of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) for the European Union was proclaimed. This Common European Foreign and Security Policy could lead to the 'eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence.' Slow progress in the 1990s towards CFSP, largely due to the insistence of the biggest member states that they have a right of veto over European foreign policy, meant that progress towards a common defence policy was equally tardy.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the second in a series of regular *European Policy Briefs* produced by the Federal Trust. The aim of the series is to describe and analyse major controversies in the current British debate about the European Union. Forthcoming papers will consider national parliaments, democratic legitimacy and regional policy in the European Union.

We would welcome comments on and reactions to this policy brief. It and its successors will be available on the Federal Trust's website www.fedtrust.co.uk

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New impetus was given to the project of European defence by the Franco-British summit of St Malo in December 1998. At this summit, the European Union's two leading military powers, both members of the Security Council, effectively launched the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), by agreeing that the European Union should have a 'capacity for autonomous action' in the military sphere.

It was highly doubtful at the time of the St Malo summit whether both the French and British governments had exactly the same concept of this autonomous 'capacity' for the European Union, in particular as far as the Union's relationship to NATO was concerned. Nevertheless, the following years saw an increase of initiatives at the European level to strengthen the EU's defence policy. In 1999 EU members decided to create a European Rapid Reaction Force and established the position of a High Commissioner for CFSP in the Council, a task taken over by Javier Solana, former Secretary-General of NATO and former Spanish foreign minister. At the same time a 'Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit' was established within the Council.

The Treaty of Nice in 2000 had made provision for the EU to take over the so-called Petersberg tasks from the Western European Union – peacekeeping, humanitarian and crisis prevention missions. In 2003, the EU undertook its first autonomous missions in Bosnia, Macedonia and the Congo, some of which took place under an agreement signed earlier in the year with NATO, allowing the EU to draw on NATO resources in EU-only operations. 2003 was also the year which saw the publication of a draft EU security strategy by Javier Solana, a document stressing the importance of a coherent and robust EU approach to security questions, which was widely welcomed by the member states.

The Convention's proposals on defence policy

As the European Union has become bigger, the more integrationist-minded among the Union's member states have felt themselves increasingly constrained by the need to secure unanimity to promote further integration within the Union's structure. The Treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice all attempted in different ways to resolve this problem, whether by opt-outs or various mechanisms for enhanced integration among smaller groups within the European Union. The proposals of the European Convention on defence questions are a culmination of this process, allowing a

perhaps initially very small group of member states to use the framework of the European Union to promote among themselves 'structured co-operation', a concept evolved specifically for application to the field of European defence policy.

The nature of 'structured co-operation' is described in Article I-40 of the Convention's draft Constitutional Treaty. The arrangement is limited to an unspecified number of member states whose 'military capabilities fulfil higher criteria'. These states will make 'more binding commitments' to each other with a view to 'the most demanding missions' in the military arena. Under the Convention's proposals (which have already been modified by the IGC) only those member states participating in 'structured co-operation' would have the right to participate in the decision-making of the group, which itself would decide whether to accept new members after its setting up.

As a further contribution to the debate on defence policy, the Convention also proposed the incorporation of a 'solidarity clause' into the draft constitution, by which EU members would agree to mutual defence in case of a terrorist attack or a natural or man-made disaster. It also proposed the founding of a European Armaments, Research and Military Capabilities Agency, a proposal which has already met with general acceptance. The Agency will be set up in 2004, with the aim of identifying gaps in member states' military capabilities and promoting measures to close these gaps.

Initial reactions to the Convention's proposals

Two elements of the Convention's proposals sparked immediate criticism, not least, and not exclusively, from the British government. These were the proposed solidarity clause and the decision-making procedures envisaged for the limited group of member states involved in 'structured co-operation'. The neutral member states of the Union saw the first of these as potentially changing the primarily peacekeeping and humanitarian nature of European military action to a defence role. The British and other governments equally feared that it might undermine the political and military pre-eminence of NATO, which also contains a mutual defence clause.

Even more widespread was concern about the envisaged right of the 'structured co-operation' group apparently to decide on its own formation, rules and membership. The first reaction of the British government in particular was to doubt the real compatibility

of such a system with the overall workings of the European Union.

It is on these two concerns, the solidarity clause and decision-making in the EU's military core group, that discussion in the IGC has focussed in recent months. All participants have been looking to balance a number of interests, such as their own commitment to further European integration, their existing and future military capacity, their view of the appropriate relationship with the United States, their fear of possible estrangement from their European neighbours and their willingness to regard defence issues as simply one element in the general, complex negotiations of the IGC. Unsurprisingly, the discussion today still remains ambiguous and unresolved.

Since the Convention

In April 2003, with an eye on influencing the outcome of the Convention, France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg launched their own initiative on European defence, proposing in particular the creation of autonomous EU operational headquarters in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren. This proposal, originally separate from the recommendations of the Convention, was rapidly incorporated into the IGC's discussions of proposals for a more integrated European defence policy. In particular, it has been at the centre of all the discussions which the British government has had with its major partners about its own evolving attitude to the concept of 'structured co-operation'.

The first such discussion was a meeting in Berlin in September between Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder. At that meeting, the British government seemed to ease its opposition to the Convention's proposals and accept the idea of a specifically European military headquarters, as long as this was integrated into the NATO framework. This approach was confirmed at a meeting between Chirac and Blair on 24 November in London, when the British Prime Minister emphasised that, despite his desire to strengthen European defence, nevertheless 'NATO will remain the cornerstone of our defence'.

The foreign ministers at Naples

An important recent discussion of European defence policy took place at Naples, during an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers on 28 and 29 November. The Italian Presidency presented to this meeting a

revised version of the Convention's proposals, which tried to meet at least some of the concerns expressed by the British and other governments. The new version envisaged a minimum number of member states necessary for the setting up of 'structured co-operation', and provided for decisions on setting up as well as future membership of the avantgarde group to be taken in the whole Council with qualified majority, rather than by the avantgarde group alone. The revised text also included a strong endorsement of NATO, maintaining that it 'remains the foundation of [Europe's] collective defence.'

While some progress towards consensus seems to have been made at Naples, there is a noticeable discrepancy between comments made by Jack Straw after the meeting and the text circulated after the meeting by the Italian Presidency. It is clear that his understanding of what had been agreed by the foreign ministers and the Presidency's understanding differ in material respects. According to the Presidency text, the mutual defence clause, although qualified by a clear commitment to NATO from its members, is to be retained. This is contrary to the British government's wishes, and particularly unacceptable to the neutral countries. Furthermore, while the Council as a whole will decide on the setting up and membership of the 'structured co-operation' group, it will do so by qualified majority, not by the unanimity which the British government would prefer. The 'structured co-operation' group in its turn will decide by consensus. It is still to be decided what rights of veto or consultation other member states not participating in 'structured co-operation' will have on the core group's actions, a matter not finally resolved even in the further revised text presented by the Italian Presidency on 5 December.

It is obvious that much work still remains to be done on the question of defence policy if agreement is to be achieved on the draft constitution at the European Council on 12 December. Defence may well be one of the unresolved questions ensuring that the IGC continues its work into the next year.

The eternal triangle?

Three countries are at the heart of the continuing discussion over European defence policy, Britain, France and Germany. They are militarily and politically the most powerful members of the European Union, and the range of attitudes and interests that they represent faithfully reflect the attitudes and interests of the wider Union. Any agreement between the three of them is

likely to commend itself to many other member states within the Union.

There is no question that the present close co-operation between France and Germany in regard to the IGC in general and defence matters in particular is an illustration of a revived Franco-German 'motor' for the Union. The Franco-German Brigade and the Eurocorps which grew out of it are a long-standing demonstration of the interest both countries have in deepening their integration in the defence field. But an extra impetus has been given to this process by the imminence of enlargement. Both Germany and France fear that a Europe of twenty-five member states will be ungovernable, a prospect which each country, albeit for different reasons, regards as highly damaging to its national interests. Defence has seemed to Jacques Chirac and to Gerhard Schröder a natural arena in which the two countries can reassert what they regard as their central role in the evolving European Union.

The UK, for its part, is clearly trying to balance the two traditional pillars of British foreign policy, its privileged military relationship with the US and its membership of the EU. Rarely has the traditional British policy of 'bridge-building' between Europe and the United States come under such strain from both sides of the Atlantic. Britain's active participation in the war against Saddam Hussein encouraged the view of some in continental Europe that the UK was too prone to take its political cue from American wishes to be a credible representative of European interests in Washington. At the same time, some influential voices are being raised in the United States, suggesting that NATO, traditionally the most important single forum of Anglo-American political and military co-operation, now needs to be fundamentally reassessed.

Britain is helped in its dealings with France and Germany by its possession of a relatively well-equipped and highly-regarded standing army, which it has shown repeated willingness to use to secure national interests since the Second World War. An increasing handicap, however, is Britain's continuing self-imposed isolation from the single European currency, a circumstance which could well lead this country's partners to conclude that the United Kingdom is a reluctant and unreliable partner, to whose interests and specific situation few negotiating concessions should be made. Apparent American suspicion of any permanent European military headquarters, however small and wherever located, raises

the genuine possibility that Britain may pursue a policy too European for its American ally and yet too Atlanticist for France and Germany.

In the final analysis, it must remain an open question whether a viable compromise can be achieved between the European Union's three militarily most powerful countries. There is some overlap between the underlying military analyses of France and Britain which might predispose them to work together. They share a range of strategic and security interests outside Europe, in contrast to Germany, which would be extremely reluctant to participate in any military arrangements that might broaden the scope of its existing commitments. But if there is an underlying military and administrative logic to Anglo-French collaboration, the political links between Paris and Berlin are still the closest of any pairing within the European Union. While France and Germany would like Britain to participate in 'structured co-operation', they will not be willing to water down the concept indefinitely until it meets with British approval. The realisation that a major Franco-German defence initiative is inevitable over the coming decade, whether within the European Union or outside it, has undoubtedly been a factor persuading the British government to soften its original hostility to any such proposals. Fear of exclusion from important developments on the continent has often been a powerful motivating force in Britain's European policy.

The American dimension

The United States has watched developments in the European defence field with suspicion verging on hostility. In particular, France and Germany's outspoken opposition to the war in Iraq fuelled American concern that the proposal for a separate EU military headquarters was an attempt by the Europeans, especially France, to undermine NATO and challenge the general direction of American foreign policy. Remarks in October by the US ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns, were correspondingly harsh, calling the plans for separate European headquarters a great danger for NATO and trans-Atlantic relations.

Since these remarks of Mr Burns there have been more conciliatory tones from Washington. When US Secretary of State Colin Powell met EU defence ministers in November, he afterwards said that the US supported 'all initiatives that are underway to expand the capabilities of the European Union in the security field'. But the guarded

and noncommittal remarks of Donald Rumsfeld to a NATO meeting after the Naples gathering of European foreign ministers made it clear that American suspicions of an independent EU defence policy have still not been overcome. The present American administration does not share the generally benign view of European integration held by its predecessors. But there are many conflicting strands in the current strategic debate being conducted in Washington. It cannot be assumed that future American governments will share precisely the same attitude towards European defence integration as that held by the Bush administration.

Other Europeans

Of the other EU member states, Belgium and Luxembourg are most sympathetic to the Franco-German endorsement of the Convention's proposals for 'structured co-operation'. Other small states, however, fear being sidelined by the Franco-German partnership at the head of a 'core Europe'. These fears have grown since France and Germany's success last month in bending to their national advantage the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact. Similarly, neutral member states of the EU feel uncomfortable with the idea of a subgroup of member states acting in the name of the EU in military matters. The Italian and Spanish governments have reservations of their own, the latter having enthusiastically supported the United States in the Iraq war and the Berlusconi government only sharing to a limited degree the traditional Italian commitment to ever-greater European integration.

The accession countries also tend in general to be sceptical about the project of an independent European defence policy. Many in 'new Europe' (such as Poland) feel reluctant to jeopardise their close relations with the United States by taking on a too predominantly European orientation for their security policy. Others share the fear of some current small EU member states that they may be dominated by a political and military agenda produced in the big countries.

As ever in the European Union, it would be wrong to assume that the concerns described above are immutable. A change of government in Italy or Spain, the willingness of the British government to join the arrangements for 'structured co-operation' on what it saw as acceptable terms, or the breaking up of the 'accession block' of member states through the natural workings of the European Union's changing coalitions in the Council of Ministers – all these entirely plausible events would make for a very

different political background from that obtaining today.

Possible outcomes

Since the Naples meeting of foreign ministers, it seems more likely that Britain, France and Germany will come to an agreement which forms the basis of an acceptable compromise for all member states on the question of 'structured co-operation'. It is still possible that France and Germany will be so disappointed in the final compromise offered to them that they decide to deepen and strengthen their bilateral co-operation, probably with participation of Belgium and Luxembourg, and build stronger defence structures outside the EU framework. Neither Germany nor France would lightly engage on such a path, but it is one that they are explicitly keeping open, not least as a tactic to exert pressure on their negotiating partners.

The United Kingdom's position is the converse of France and Germany's. It has clearly decided that it wants, if possible, to be part of 'structured co-operation' and is doing its best to ensure an outcome which will make it possible to join with France and Germany, without causing too much damage to its trans-Atlantic links. It has been sustained in this latter hope by the reflection that there might be few actual circumstances where the European Union would wish to act militarily in defiance of the United States. France and Germany for their part know that the United Kingdom fears isolation, and that a credible European defence without Britain is difficult if not impossible. The achievement of a final compromise acceptable to all main participants will depend upon the interaction of these distinct cross-currents, some tending to make agreement easier, some to render it more difficult.

If, after Naples, a compromise between France, Britain and Germany is still the most likely outcome, there is another possibility which should not be neglected entirely. When Britain signed the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, it obtained for itself an opt-out from the European single currency, despite having fully participated in all the negotiations on the structure of the euro as if it intended to become a full member of the Eurozone. If Britain, France and Germany could not come to a compromise acceptable to all three, it is conceivable that Britain would agree to France and Germany's using, together with their closest neighbours, the EU's institutions as the vehicle for their enhanced integration in the defence field, without Britain participating immediately in that integration. It would only need the British government to pledge itself to hold a

referendum before taking Britain into 'structured co-operation' for the parallel with the euro to become complete.

Conclusion

The outline agreement reached in Naples last month would have been wholly unacceptable to the British government a year ago. This change in British attitudes has been largely due to the realisation that France and Germany are politically entirely serious in their desire for greater integration in the defence field. The only unresolved question was whether this integration would take place within the EU's structures or outside them. Faced with this dilemma, the natural and predictable reaction of the British government has been to seek, as far as possible, to guide and channel the integrative process. The precondition for this guiding role has been willingness to participate in the process itself.

Although the proposals of the Constitutional Convention specifically referred to the need for enhanced military spending by the EU's member states, the moves towards 'structured co-operation' are not primarily a matter of military doctrine or hardware. Such factors have their place in a discussion of European defence integration, but they are not at its core. Current moves towards a more integrated European defence have an essentially political mainspring. They stem from the continuing desire of many in continental Europe to set another milestone on the road of European integration. Whether in a year's time the European Union will have made substantial progress towards a genuine common defence policy will say much about its future capacity for development. It will also say much about Britain's future role within the European Union. If Britain has decided to become an active component of this common defence policy, it will not necessarily have 'chosen Europe rather than America'. It will, however, have chosen a model for its future relationships with Europe and America distinctly different to the model it has followed until now.

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Forthcoming titles in the *European Policy Briefs* series will include contributions on national parliaments, democratic legitimacy and regional policy in the European Union.