

# Nato's potential rival

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AS if tensions created by rupture over Iraq were not enough, European Union's efforts to set up an independent military structure outside Nato are likely to further widen the gulf of differences between the United States and its western allies.

The latest dispute has more profound and far-reaching implications for trans-Atlantic relationship than the name calling over the Iraq war. Decisions taken in the coming months about Europe's military ambitions will not only shape the political geography of an expanded European Union (EU) but also determine the future of Nato.

The dispute started after the tripartite summit in Berlin in September when Britain sought to patch up its strained relations with France and Germany by supporting plans for more European cooperation on defence. When European leaders met recently at Brussels to negotiate a new constitution for an expanded EU, raising its membership from the current 15 to 25 states in 2004, they also discussed how to make European defence more effective and independent. This led to the U.S. calling an extraordinary Nato meeting to challenge the creation of a new defence and security structure for the European Union.

Nicholas Burns, US ambassador to Nato warned the EU, in no uncertain terms, that his country had serious misgivings about the EU's military ambitions. He was particularly unhappy that Britain — once opposed to any non-NATO based European defence cooperation — was now willing to work more closely with its EU allies in improving defence structure and military capabilities of Europe. Independent EU defence represents "one of the greatest dangers to trans-Atlantic relationship," warned Mr. Burns.

Washington's growing unease at EU defence moves actually reflects tensions in relations between the United States and what defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld once derisively called "old Europe". The US sees any future EU defence structure as a potential competitor to Nato and an attempt to undermine Atlantic alliance and strike at American influence and primacy. The United States has so far used Nato as the most effective way to keep western powers in step over military and security issues.

The most interesting aspect of the new development is that British prime minister Tony Blair sits awkwardly at the centre of the storm; this time, though, the winds are taking him to Europe. Washington's unhappiness with Tony Blair began with the Berlin meeting in September between British prime minister, Germany's Gerhard Schroeder and France's Jacques Chirac.

The agenda for this meeting went far beyond EU defence; the real significance of

the Berlin meeting was that it discussed the issue in its wider strategic context and led to political commitments by Europe's three most important leaders. Their talks marked the beginning of an historic effort by Messrs Chirac, Schroeder and Blair to set the direction of European Union after next year's expansion, with the admission of ten new member countries. The three leaders agreed that Europe must be better able to project its military force; and to that end, Mr. Blair indicated that he was ready to add more substance to the bilateral defence accord struck with Chirac at St. Malo in 1998.

British role is crucial in any European defence planning and structure. As French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin has graphically put it: "There will be no Europe without European defence — and no

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European defence without Britain." In a speech recently shown on BBC television, the French foreign minister further acknowledged that France needed Britain to build a credible European military strategy. Washington was taken aback by media reports that Mr. Blair had agreed to a statement proposed by Germany that EU should be able to "plan and conduct operations without recourse to Nato resources."

Officials in Downing Street and the UK ministry of defence, according to British press reports, have, however, insisted that such claims are an "over-ambitious interpretation" by German diplomats. Seeking to reassure Washington, Mr. Blair recently told EU summit "NATO is the basis and cornerstone of our defence." He also underlined that he was a "staunch ally and friend" of the United States. Mr. Blair went on to argue that there was nothing wrong with the EU developing its own military planning capacity for operations that Washington did not wish to undertake, but the EU must not set up separate military command structure.

France and Germany are not likely to give up their defence ambitions. Nor are they likely to be discouraged by Britain's dilly dallying because they firmly believe that EU, after its expansion next year, is destined to play a global role and it cannot hope to be taken seriously unless it has a military arm. That ambition necessarily implies acting independently of Nato both in Europe and abroad.

Proponents of Europe's military independence argue that the Pentagon has treat-

ed the trans-Atlantic alliance with scarcely disguised contempt in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. They think it is time Europe took command of its destiny in the diplomatic as well as military domain.

The argument about European defence is not a new one. The US attitude has been ambivalent on this issue. On the one hand it has been arguing, and rightly, that Europe must bear more of the collective security burden, on the other, it is unhappy over Franco-German plan for European defence. Washington suspects that Paris has a hidden agenda to gradually strengthen EU's military capabilities so that it eventually moves away from Nato. It is more than likely that building of European defence will not be without a price. If EU leaders seek to build defence structure independent of Nato, the

United States may decide to withdraw into resentful unilateralism which may lead to American detachment from the various multilateral bodies set up after the Second World War.

The real reason for the US furore at efforts to create a credible European defence, independent of Nato, is that Washington does not want to encourage the emergence of a new pole of power that could become a potential rival to the US. This has been one of the central points of American foreign policy since the end of the Second World

War. As Dean Acheson, then secretary of state, put it: "Americans wanted to preclude western Europe from "becoming (a) third force or opposing force."

It may be recalled that the United States did not like Charles de Gaulle's efforts to do something about American supremacy by building an independent French nuclear force. We may recall the eloquent words of President John F. Kennedy, giving vent to US concerns: "If the French and other European powers acquire a nuclear capability, they would be in a position to be entirely independent and we might be on the outside looking in."

The above explains why Washington has never wanted a western Europe of equal power because such a Europe could follow policies that might clash with US interests. This also explains the current US opposition to Franco-German efforts to set up an independent military structure outside NATO.

The real cause of tensions in trans-Atlantic relations is that Washington, under the Bush doctrine, appears to believe that American hegemony is an unchallengeable fact of international life while the EU believes it is not.

The real purpose of building an independent EU military capability is to create a European pole of power to balance the US in a multi-polar international system. If that happens, Mr. Bush will be remembered for galvanizing international opposition to American supremacy.

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