

Sarko's window of opportunity

By Leo Michel

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France's NATO equities – measured in force contributions, military representation and what it pays into the budget – far exceed its investment in European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which enjoys pride of place in French political discourse. President Nicolas Sarkozy has not challenged that paradox, but events may force his hand.

In Afghanistan, NATO's 40,000-strong International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) includes 1,000 French troops around Kabul. Last autumn, France declined to send reinforcements to assist other allies fighting the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. NATO is planning Isaf rotations for 2008-09. The UK contingent (approaching 7,700 soldiers) is likely to stay beyond 2009, but the Canadians, Dutch, Poles and Romanians will find it harder to sustain current commitments in the most contested regions. Will France be ready to share the burden there given German, Italian and Spanish reluctance to do so?

An ineffectual response would hurt French credibility, given past affirmations of Afghanistan's importance. In May 2006, General Henri Bentegeat, then French chief of staff, acknowledged that "multiple caveats imposed by nations hobble commanders on the ground and increase risks to forces". Now chairman of the EU Military Committee, he must fret that such caveats in NATO could prove contagious and hobble the ESDP.

Indeed, NATO and the ESDP are increasingly interdependent in today's complex stabilisation operations. The EU is seeking to launch a 160-person ESDP police training mission in Afghanistan and a 1,800-person police and rule-of-law mission (with unprecedented American participation) in Kosovo, where 2,000 French soldiers operate in NATO's 16,000-strong Kosovo Force.

The previous French government was ambivalent about the "strategic partnership" pledged by NATO and the EU in 2002. Top French officials publicly accepted its logic, but European and US complaints of French behind-the-scenes manoeuvring were legion. NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer pointedly declared in February that "some deliberately want to keep NATO and the EU at a distance from one another".

Some French diplomats retort that serious, ongoing disputes between Turkey and Cyprus have stymied NATO-EU relations; others pretend that relations are fine. But General Jean-Louis Georgelin, France's top military officer, has acknowledged that those relations pose "the major strategic question in terms of capabilities, organisations and political control". Yet contradictions persist: France reportedly resisted NATO's role in a strategic airlift consortium (mainly benefiting EU members), while hinting at ambitious ESDP operations in Africa where airlift shortfalls pose major difficulties.

French officialdom's mantra that NATO must remain an exclusively "military organisation" and their frequent "zero-sum game" approach to NATO-EU relations risk compromising the two organisations' capacity to handle crisis management with other international actors, such as the UN and African Union.

The run-up to the French EU presidency in 2008 offers Sarkozy an ideal chance to set things straight. If he is successful, additional opportunities might arise, such as

increasing French participation in NATO's transformed structures. Former president Jacques Chirac arguably crossed the Rubicon when he returned France to the Military Committee in 1995 and placed general officers in NATO's two strategic commands in 2004. France's military representation has grown from 117 liaison officers in 1992 to some 290 personnel today, including 110 in key posts of the "integrated" structures detested by Charles de Gaulle. (By comparison, the EU Military Staff and European Defence Agency total about 300 personnel.) French personnel participate in operational planning and ensure France's forces are aligned with NATO standards, concepts and doctrine; these are critical to interoperability with American and indeed British and German forces. Their presence also facilitates French defence industrial participation in NATO programmes. Yet the French account for only 1% of the entire NATO military staff; the British and Germans devote four to six times as many personnel. In 2006, France paid €138 million to NATO's civilian and military budgets and another €18m for its operations budget, making it the fourth contributor after the US, Germany and UK. (The EU's 2007 Common Foreign and Security Policy budget is around €200m.) In 2009, a new administration will be in place in Washington and the alliance will hold its 60th anniversary summit. A Sarkozy government able to reconcile its EU ambitions and transatlantic loyalties might by then have succeeded on both fronts.

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