

WHAT PLACE FOR FRANCE IN NATO?

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In his March 7 speech on defense issues, Nicolas Sarkozy included an extensive discussion on European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). In contrast, NATO was mentioned in precisely six sentences, half of which were, in effect, warnings to the United States not to push the Alliance beyond its “geopolitical anchoring in Europe and its strictly military vocation”—language that echoed that of Jacques Chirac at the Riga Summit in November 2006.

But will the new president continue in this vein or seize the opportunity to reshape French policy toward NATO in a manner that strengthens both Europe and transatlantic relations? Afghanistan might be a first (and critical) challenge. Some 1,050 French troops operate under the command of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the Kabul region, with some 3,000 others providing maritime and ground and sea-based air support within the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom that operates in synergy with NATO forces.

The recent upsurge in fighting in the south of the country today poses a question: if an emergency occurs in the near-term, how will the new French chief of state act? If his response appears ineffectual, his credibility with Allies would suffer—and not only in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, where the reluctance of important Allies to “share the risk” in ISAF preoccupies parliamentarians as well as military leaders. And how would the French military leadership react, given their repeated statements that Afghanistan constitutes a crucial test for NATO?

General Bentegeat, then Chief of Staff of the Armies (CEMA), recognized the problem of “caveats”—restrictions on how and where an Ally’s units can be used by the ISAF commander—when he told NATO parliamentarians a year ago that “multiple caveats imposed by the (Allied) nations hobble commanders on the ground and increase the risks to their forces.” Now chairman of the EU Military Committee, Bentegeat cannot ignore the risk that precedents on caveats set in NATO operations could be contagious and damage cooperation among Europeans within ESDP missions.

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Other decisions likely will be required later this year, when NATO will seek to finalize planning for its Afghanistan troop rotations in 2008-9. The British defense minister recently told Parliament that he expects their contingent—which will soon reach some 7,700 soldiers—to remain beyond 2009, but it is less certain that the Canadians (with 2,500 soldiers), Dutch (with 2,100), and Polish (who recently sent more than 1,000 troops) can sustain their current commitment. Will France be ready then to share the burden in the most contested regions, given German, Italian and Spanish refusal to do so?

A second challenge is taking shape in Kosovo. France, to its credit, has been a leader within the EU in supporting UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari's proposal that the province accede to independence, initially under international supervision. But even if Russian resistance in the Security Council can be overcome, NATO's 16,000-troop KFOR, including 2,000 French, will not necessarily have an easy task to maintain calm between ethnic Albanian and Serbian populations. And if Kosovo proves unable to establish itself as a viable multi-ethnic state, the risk of instability and separatist temptations in neighboring states will increase.

At bottom, the question is: how to realize the "strategic partnership" between NATO and the EU that the two organizations pledged solemnly, in December 2002, to create. Here there is work to do. For many Americans—and, to be honest, for many of France's key European partners—the Chirac government adopted an ambiguous stance. On one hand, in public statements, French officials accepted the basic logic of such cooperation. But on the other hand, complaints of French resistance "below the radar screen" to closer NATO-EU cooperation—for example, in developing military capabilities, in operations involving Africa, and on terrorism—have become commonplace. When NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer remarked last February that "some deliberately want to keep NATO and the EU at a distance from one another", European security *cognescenti* understood that his remark targeted Paris.

Certain senior French officials dispute such accusations, pointing out that Turkey, a NATO Ally, does not recognize Cyprus, an EU member, which leads to contentious debates over how the two organizations share information and the format and agendas of their meetings. Others insist that the NATO-EU relationship is excellent. Yet General Jean-Louis Georgelin, the current CEMA, seemed to acknowledge otherwise when he told his staff last October: "The question of relations between NATO and the EU is complex...In my view, it is the major strategic question in terms of capabilities, organizations, and political control, and it must enlighten our thinking on our military tool and guide our relations with our Allies."

As he prepares for the coming debate on European institutions and the French EU Presidency during the second half of 2008, President Sarkozy might see reasons to heed Georgelin's advice. For complex operations such as Afghanistan and Kosovo—and there surely will be others—NATO and the EU need to cooperate closely in applying the range of both military and civilian capabilities. The French mantra that NATO must remain an exclusively "military organization" conflicts with the facts on the ground today, and there

is in truth no appetite in NATO (including the United States) to transform it into a civilian relief or reconstruction agency. The “French paradox”—arguing within NATO against efforts to better integrate civilian and military components of stabilization operations, while simultaneously obstructing closer cooperation between NATO and the EU, which prides itself on its blend of civilian and military crisis-management tools—hardly seems sustainable.

This paradox, at a minimum, risks compromising the operations where France’s major European partners are, in some cases, even more heavily invested. It also weakens the ability of the two organizations to work together in crisis prevention or in support of other international actors, such as the UN or, as in Darfur, the African Union.

Thanks to decisions taken by the former chief of state in 1995 (to return to France’s seat on the Military Committee) and 2004 (to place a French general officer in each of NATO’s two strategic commands), the French military presence in NATO has grown from 117 “liaison officers” in 1992 to some 290 personnel today, including 110 serving in some of the key posts of the “integrated” structures so disliked by de Gaulle. (By comparison, the entire EU Military Staff and European Defense Agency combined totals hardly 300 persons.) The French military presence at NATO assumes three large roles: to participate in NATO’s planning and implementation of operations; to ensure the French military’s alignment with NATO standards, concepts and doctrines, which is critical to interoperability not only with American forces but also with those of other Europeans, above all the British and Germans, regarded as France’s most capable and natural partners; and, why not, to help ensure opportunities for French defense industries in areas such as strategic transport, communications, surveillance, and theater missile defense.

Certainly such participation is not cost-free: in 2006, France paid nearly 138 million Euros to NATO’s civilian and military budgets, making it the fourth contributor after the United States, Germany and United Kingdom. Yet France still represents only one percent of the entire NATO military staff. Is this level really adequate when, for their part, Germany and the United Kingdom have each judged it useful to devote four to six times the number of military personnel to NATO’s structures as has Paris?

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