Anglo-French summit takes further step towards European military independence from America

Chris Marsden
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Yesterday's Anglo-French summit in London agreed the most concrete proposal yet for the creation of a European defence identity, independent of NATO and the US. It paves the way for the issue to be discussed at the European Union (EU) summit in Helsinki next month.

Meetings took place between British Prime Minister Tony Blair, French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and French President Jacques Chirac, as well as a separate meeting at the Foreign Office between the Foreign Ministers of the two countries, Robin Cook and Hubert Vedrine.

The proposal is for the creation of a force numbering 60,000. "We expect a clear message from the Anglo-French summit to be carried forward to Helsinki," one official said.

France and Britain have played the leading role in the drive to create a new European Rapid Reaction Corps, capable of launching operations without US support. But the proposal is gathering momentum throughout Europe. Various spokesmen have stressed the need for Europe to improve the readiness and capability of its own forces as the main lesson to be learned from the war in Kosovo, which was dominated by the US.

On November 14, EU Foreign and Defence Ministers discussed the issue of a common defence policy. Former NATO Secretary General and new foreign policy head of the EU, Javier Solana, said the crises in Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina had made it clear that the EU needed "more than just declarations of intent. We need to be able to act. And that means having military capabilities." Eleven EU states have agreed in principle to an independent military capability for Europe, leaving just the four neutral non-NATO members of the EU yet to be won over.

The European powers have repeatedly stressed that their aim is not to create a European Army or a "competitor" to NATO. George Robertson, NATO's newly installed Secretary General, told the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Amsterdam that, "The division of labour we saw in the Kosovo air campaign was militarily necessary, but it is politically unsustainable in the longer term... We need to create a more balanced alliance, with a stronger European input."

The European members of NATO collectively spend the equivalent of about two-thirds of the US defence budget, but Washington had to supply about two-thirds of the air power during the Kosovo campaign, Robertson said. Europe would also have to address a manpower shortage in their armed forces, he told reporters.

Robertson and Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok stressed, however, that the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) project must maintain a strong US component. "Strengthening Europe's role in security is about re-balancing the transatlantic relationship in line with European and American interests," Robertson said.

This has failed to either placate growing US concerns or conceal a deepening transatlantic rift. Such is the tension surrounding the issue that Blair dedicated his November 22 speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet in London's Guildhall to the theme of Britain as a "pivotal power," as a broker between US and European interests. "My vision for Britain is as a bridge between the EU and the US... The EU and the US standing together, coming closer, is the single most urgent

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priority for the new international order—for reasons of economic development and global security," he said.

This did not stop Washington from seeking further assurances that the creation of an independent European defence capability would not cut across its interests. Britain's *Guardian* newspaper commented on November 24, "To put it mildly, this scheme is driving the Americans nuts... It is dismayed, despite British assurances, by Mr Blair's ever closer collaboration with Mr Chirac." Conservative defence spokesman Iain Duncan Smith said yesterday that, "This whole deal plays to a French agenda which has been going for 40 years which is about dividing NATO... The whole point is that for the past 40 years Britain has acted very carefully to block any moves that could divide NATO artificially."

He added that the US was worried about the development of "an EU-led force—let's call it a European army—eventually acting by default before NATO. In other words, NATO not having a block on operations. If that happens what you end up with is the arguments in America for them withdrawing from NATO getting stronger and stronger and then you then get the split and divide."

France has historically been the most aggressive proponent of European military independence from the US. While recognising that Europe would inevitably seek a greater military role—and even welcoming it sharing the financial burden—the US has looked to Britain and the Blair government to check French ambitions. Earlier this year the Clinton administration offered Britain a cut-price deal to buy into US espionage technology, through purchasing a new generation of spy planes. Britain declined the offer, however, and went for a cheaper system. Pentagon documents on the proposal explained that "the US is extremely keen on working together with Britain" and that adoption of the system "would further add to US, UK and NATO inter-operability."

Whatever success the US may enjoy in ensuring that Britain remains within its sphere of influence, this cannot compensate for the growing military tensions between the major powers. American concerns over ESDI are more than matched by those of Europe regarding US plans to create a national anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defence system.

Christened the "son of Star Wars", the plan to station ABMs in Alaska—ostensibly to defend America from attack by "rogue states"—breaches the 1972 anti-ballistic missile treaty with Russia. It has met opposition not only from the Yeltsin government and China, but also from Europe. France and Germany, in particular, view it as a further step towards American unilateralism in the military sphere. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said, "There is no doubt that this would lead to split security standards within the NATO alliance." But in the US, the Republicans have pressed Clinton hard for its adoption, often accompanied by overtly isolationist and anti-European rhetoric. Last month, Clinton was also forced to sign a $268 billion defence spending Bill that gives US military personnel their biggest pay rise for 18 years, and $1 billion more than the 1999 budget, despite plans to implement budget cuts.

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