

European Rapid Reaction Force to deploy in Macedonia

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The European Union (EU) is preparing in March to replace NATO's Amber Fox mission in Macedonia. Javier Solano, EU foreign policy chief, has said this first military deployment of the EU Rapid Reaction Force (EURRF) will put EU-NATO relations "on a different footing." As his remarks suggest, EU officials aim to use the mission in Macedonia to prove that Europe can and must develop a military capability independent of the United States.

The NATO mission in Macedonia was launched in spring 2001 after Albanian separatists from the National Liberation Army (NLA) crossed from Kosovo and began an armed insurgency against the Macedonian government. The NLA had close ties with US forces and was rescued from Macedonian troops by a US military convoy. Subsequently the NATO mission has been scaled down from 3,000 to 800 mainly EU troops, assisting observers.

The EURRF will be deployed wearing sky blue EU berets, with EU insignia stitched onto their national uniforms. After an agreement signed with NATO last December, headquarters for the operation will be in NATO facilities at Mons in Southern Belgium, and commanded by Germany's Admiral Rainer Feist, Deputy NATO Supreme Allied Commander for Europe.

This first military mission will follow hard on the heels of the deployment of an EU police force in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the beginning of January. Five hundred officers, led by a Danish police commissioner, will train a civilian police force in the protectorate over the next three years.

At the inaugural ceremony for the force in Sarajevo, Solano said, "it was not without emotion that we will see for the first time our European colours adorn the national uniforms of our police officers in a mission on

the ground ... a strong symbol of the collective will of Europeans to act jointly in this key task of consolidating stability and security in our continent."

During last December's EU conference in Copenhagen, the president's summation included a surprise demand that NATO hand over the entire Bosnia-Herzegovina mission to EU command. In response, a NATO official declared, "The first we heard of it was in the (EU) presidency conclusions. The EU has not consulted NATO, SFOR or the Bosnians. It was a less than optimal way of announcing it." Since the announcement, Paddy Ashdown, the international representative in Bosnia, has been summoned to a meeting with Solano to discuss the proposal.

The EU has missed two previous deadlines for taking control of the mission in Macedonia. In the first instance they were unable to assemble a military force due to political divisions between and within European governments. Secondly, access to NATO facilities, seen as crucial to the planning of the mission by a majority of those involved, was blocked by Turkey's veto. Turkey demanded that the EU force should not be used in any dispute between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus. Also Turkey wanted agreement that they would be considered for membership of the EU in the next wave of expansion.

During the recent round of EU expansion negotiations, Turkey secured agreement that the EURRF would not be deployed in any future crisis over Cyprus. However the EU, led by Germany and France, refused membership to Turkey, declaring only that its application would be "reviewed" in 2004. One French diplomat commented in reference to Turkey's close alliance with the US that if Turkey was admitted it would be tantamount to granting America membership of the European Union.

The EU's knock-back angered both the Turkish government and the Bush administration. US Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a strongly worded letter attacking the EU's decision.

In a clear attempt to disrupt the formation of the EURRF, last September US NATO commanders unveiled their proposals for a NATO Rapid Response Force. This force would be manned by 20,000 mainly European troops consisting of land, sea and air units. According to reports from the *Euobserver*, US officials asserted that the NATO force would take on missions "unsuited to the European army".

Without consulting with the EU, NATO officials revealed detailed proposals for the proposed force at December's summit of the alliance in Prague. As yet, however, no cooperation agreements exist between the two forces. NATO officials have insisted that its force be given priority access to NATO facilities, thereby limiting the remit of the EURRF.

Since 1999 senior French generals have argued, without consideration for diplomatic protocol, that the EURRF should develop free from NATO interference. In March 2002, when the EU first publicly discussed the details of taking over command in Macedonia, French President Jacques Chirac said, "Europe ought to go into action under its own steam, without having to be systematically subject to NATO."

France argued that instead of using NATO facilities, the EU should use its own non-NATO headquarters. Other European governments at this point rejected the French proposal out of concern that one European power may use this to strengthen its position in the command structures of the new force.

The Bush administration's attempts to disrupt the formation of the EURRF are giving French arguments greater credibility. As the EU force is becoming a reality it is forcing political parties and parliaments in Europe's capitals to take a political stand, for or against the development of the EURRF.

Last March an exchange of letters between the British Foreign Office and the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) revealed serious political differences within the British establishment. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw demanded that British troops be despatched to join the EU mission in Macedonia and expressed the fear that the British could be excluded in the future. But the MoD opposed Straw's proposal, insisting that the EU

force is incapable of conducting such a mission. Its officials insisted that the EU force was incapable of such a mission and if an already unstable political situation in Macedonia got out of control it would threaten the stability of the whole Balkan region. For the time being the MOD position has won the day.

Senior European military analysts regard this year as "critical" in the formation of a European response to the challenge of US military predominance. On January 1, 2003 Greece took over the rotating EU presidency and has said its tenure would be judged on the success of the Macedonia mission. It also announced that, with French and German support, the presidency would work toward the creation of a "common market for defence products" and the formation of an EU arms agency.

It has also been proposed that the new EU constitution, currently being drafted, should contain a "solidarity clause" based on Article 5 of NATO's Charter, specifying that an attack on a member state will be regarded as an attack on all the EU—effectively establishing a military alliance.

All eyes will be on the success or failure of the EU command in Macedonia. According to a series of Reuters articles the US is engaging in measures to delay and disrupt the handover deadline. Germany's *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* has reported that the Bush administration had written to a number of European governments, and to Solano, insisting the EU can take over the mission in June only after a detailed discussion on the relationship between the two fledgling forces.

The Macedonia mission is a risky politically motivated adventure by the European bourgeoisie. It can be said, with a degree of certainty, that one casualty of the EURRF's deployment will be the myth of a more "reasonable and understanding" European foreign policy.



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