

A major step for European militarism

## EU takes over NATO's mission in Macedonia

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On March 31 the European Union (EU) took command of the NATO mission in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). During a military ceremony at the NATO headquarters in the capital Skopje, Lord Robertson, secretary general of NATO, handed the NATO mission over to EU command Operation Concordia.

In the face of deep divisions amongst the European powers, the EU continues to take its first tentative military steps—as the Belgium Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt cautiously noted—“not against the US but as a counterweight”.

To the strains of a military band and in front of 320 EU soldiers, wearing the EU emblem on their fatigues, and 80 civilians, the NATO flag was lowered and the EU flag hoisted. In the speeches that followed Robertson declared, “The EU is demonstrating that its project of a European Security and Defence Policy has come of age.”

The EU Operation Concordia is due to last six months, after which it is anticipated the EU will hand security back over to the Macedonian government. In 2001, 3,500 NATO troops occupied Macedonia, after Albanian separatists from the National Liberation Army (NLA) crossed from Kosovo and attacked local villages and FYROM troops. During the conflict 1,500 people were killed and over 100,000 displaced.

Since then the NATO operation has been scaled down to its present levels after the FYROM government were forced into an agreement to integrate the NLA into the structures of the state. Present at the Skopje ceremony was Ali Ahmeti, the former leader of the NLA and now a minister in the FYROM government. Ahmeti remains on the US list of wanted terrorists and cannot officially enter the US.

The operation is seen as a crucial test for EU military crisis management capabilities and the future deployment of the European Rapid Reaction Force (EURRF)—expected to be operational this summer. As one observer in the *Daily Telegraph* suggested, “The low key mission, Operation Concordia, is a gentle start for the rapid reaction force, which is designed to draw on up to 60,000 men, 100 warships and 400 aircraft for world wide operations lasting up to a year.”

One senior EU official spoke privately to *ABC online* on his ambitions for the fledgling force: “If we were asked to, EU forces could be deployed in [the] Caucasus or in Africa (in the

longer term).”

However political leaders in Europe have been more circumspect. Javier Solano, the EU foreign minister, played down its significance. It was not “EU in, NATO out”, but a closer relationship between NATO and the European Union. Germany’s Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer declared the mission an “improvement in the EU’s capacity to act in terms of European security and defence policy.”

The EU force was deployed after diplomats overcame a series of obstacles placed in its path by the United States, Turkey and other European powers. Against the urging of French President Jacques Chirac and senior military officers to use non-NATO facilities for the operation, an accord (Berlin Plus) was in the end reached between the EU and NATO. The accord guaranteed EU access to NATO planning facilities. France is providing half the troops and a French officer will take command of the troops on the ground. Under present EU law, the military mission cannot be financed from the EU budget. Each individual participating country will foot the bill.

The EU force will patrol the ethnic Albanian regions of Macedonia that border Albania, Serbia and Kosovo. It will be lightly armed, supported by heavy armour.

A BBC correspondent suggested that the mission appeared to be more important to the EU than to Macedonia. This is not strictly true, as Macedonian politicians hope the mission will bring it closer to membership of the EU.

Since the invasion of Iraq the European press has taken a greater interest in Operation Concordia. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* argued, “It is a small mission, but of great historical significance. With this what has up to now been a purely civilian EU is advancing irreversibly into military territory.” A BBC correspondent penned an article entitled “The EU gets its gun.” It described the particular importance of the mission at a time of serious setbacks, due to deep rifts in Europe over Iraq.

Romano Prodi’s March 26 speech to the European parliament, responding to the US-British invasion of Iraq, declared it was time for member states to put aside secondary disagreements and militarise. “The moment of truth for Europe’s foreign and defence policy has arrived... The choice is clear: do we want to be left out, all of us, from the management of world affairs? Or do we want to play a part, on

an equal footing with our allies, in building a new world order?”

France, Belgium and Germany were unable to win a majority for their position of opposing war against Iraq in the European Parliament. In response they are forming a group of “core Europe” countries to force the pace of a European military cooperation.

Operation Concordia is a relatively small operation, but for these powers it has become an historical turning point in an ongoing military development that will be discussed at a mini-summit of Germany, France Belgium and Luxembourg on April 29. According to the Belgian prime minister, they will reactivate old ideas on common defence, a common armaments agency and the formation of common military headquarters.

But the moves have also served to deepen existing divisions within Europe over the possibility and advisability of challenging the military might of the US. Britain’s Tony Blair—somewhat pointedly, but also pointlessly since he had not been invited—declared he would not attend the summit unless it was designated an official EU event. The Italian European Affairs Minister Rocco Buttiglione, whose crisis-ridden right-wing government is under siege from antiwar protests that have left parts of Italy ungovernable, declared, “This meeting is a mistake and risks accentuating the divergences between partners.”

Prodi made an impassioned speech to the European Parliament supporting the proposed military initiative, appealing to the historical experience of the EU with monetary union and the creation of a single currency. He said that this situation required a similar response. “The road we have travelled in the last 60 years towards a united Europe has not been easy. There have been many rough patches. But Europe has always drawn courage from its deepest crisis and used them as a springboard for its most spectacular advances.”

Prodi continued, “The United States decision to float the dollar and the resulting collapse of the Bretton Woods (agreement) set Europe on the long road to monetary union.... In the field of defence, the last few days have brought an initiative that could take us far. Belgium, France and Germany have decided to look jointly at closer integration.” Prodi cited a series of measures to strengthen military cooperation that have culminated in the launch of Operation Concordia—the “first military operation in EU history”.

EU strategists are engaged in a sober appraisal of the implications of the US abandoning Cold War western political relations, which has thrown the European project into turmoil. Fraser Cameron is a director at the European Policy Centre and author of a new “Working Paper on The Convention and CFSP” (Common Foreign and Security Policy). He demanded an end to the trading of insults across the Atlantic as a prerequisite for overcoming EU divisions. He added that an enlarged EU will become the largest economic power in the world. Despite this, he complains, there has been no debate

within the EU on its strategic aims and global interests nor how to deal with the now sole superpower across the Atlantic.

Some of the more bellicose voices are demanding the EURRF gains experience out of the glare of world publicity by reorganising Central Africa. But others such as Catriona Mace of the European Policy Centre see Macedonia as the key experience. She produced a study of Operation Concordia entitled “European Union security and defence policy comes of age in the Balkans”. She declared, “This week saw the EU launched operation Concordia in Macedonia, building on the police mission in Bosnia that started on January 1.... It is clear that, whilst the crisis in Iraq has led to deep divisions both between the US and the EU and within the EU itself, this has not disrupted progress toward the Europeanisation of security in the Balkans.”

She concluded, however, that “Whether EU military operations using NATO assets become an integral part of the European Union’s response to crisis management elsewhere in the world is much more problematic.”

The EU is also planning to take command of the much larger and more complex NATO operation in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) involving 12,000 NATO troops. Despite its desire to free up US troops from Balkan operations, US officials are still cautious about extending EU operations into BiH. The *New York Times*, while pouring scorn on EU efforts to create its own army, correctly notes the parallel diplomacy now practised by the main EU powers towards the US and reveals underlying concerns for its long-term implications:

“Like the French, the Germans are pursuing two tracks simultaneously. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder’s top aides are strategizing about ways for Germany to take part in the post-war reconstruction of Iraq, which they see as part of an effort to re-assert the German-American alliance. Meanwhile, Mr. Schroeder is making bold public statements about the lessons of the failure to prevent war in Iraq and has developed a concept of ‘core Europe’ or ‘more Europe’ in which France and Germany, but not Britain, will lead Western Europe toward a common defence and foreign policy.”



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