

Washington warns EU over NATO unity

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Antagonisms between the United States and Europe's major military powers have erupted in a public row over the European Union's (EU's) plans for a new defence policy.

A special meeting of all 19 members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was called on Monday, October 20, after the US responded with naked hostility to proposals that would enable the EU to plan and conduct limited military operations independently of NATO. Senior US officials proclaimed the creation of an independent EU planning and command headquarters located in the Brussels suburb of Teruven to be particularly unacceptable.

The plans for a separate EU military command were first drawn up by France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg in April. The four countries were at the time the most open opponents of US plans for war against Iraq. The Republican administration expressed its anger towards this move to forge an independent military capability by the contemptuous epithet "the chocolate makers" attached to the European powers by a US State Department spokesman.

According to documents obtained by the *Guardian* newspaper, Sir David Manning, Britain's ambassador to the US, reported back to the Foreign Office, "The chocolate summit reflected the worst fears of US hardliners about the dangers of ESDP [EU security and defence policy] going off in a NATO-incompatible direction."

US fears of an emerging military rivalry with Europe were made worse by the apparent shift in the position of its most loyal European ally, Britain. Ever since the St. Malo meeting between Prime Minister Tony Blair and France's president Jacques Chirac in 1998, the Labour government has made clear that it favours the development of a European military capability, such as the establishment of a 60,000-strong rapid reaction force. But Blair has always stressed that this must continue to function within the overall command structures of NATO and in alliance with the US.

In September, however, the Bush administration was alarmed by reports that, at a mini-summit in Berlin with Chirac and German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Blair had agreed to back Franco-German plans for an EU military command structure independent of NATO.

The plans were contained in a joint paper that proclaimed, "We are together convinced that the EU must be able to plan and conduct operations without the backing of NATO assets and NATO capability." It added, "Our goal remains to achieve such a planning and implementation capacity either in consensus with the 25 [member states] but also in a circle of interested partners."

In other words, even if the move were blocked by US allies in Europe, the core countries involved might go ahead anyway.

The proposal for a command headquarters was included in the plan. Previously, the inaugural mission of the EU's Rapid Reaction Force in Macedonia was carried out using NATO's command structures at operational headquarters in Mons.

A draft treaty drawn up subsequently also contains a "solidarity clause" obliging member states to come to each other's defence if attacked. The US insists that this cuts across Article 5, NATO's own mutual defence clause.

At the time, Blair denied any long-term threat to NATO, and a British official called claims by the German government that Britain had made major concessions "spin from the chancellery which has not been agreed with us. We're all for a European defence policy but it has to be compatible with NATO." Still, Blair stressed, "I think we can see now that European defence is actually taking place, is engaged in real activity on the ground in different parts of the world."

Washington was not mollified by assurances that there was no threat to NATO, and hence its own veto on European military actions. Instead, the perceived ambiguity in Blair's position set alarm bells ringing and led to intensive transatlantic dialogue, with Britain trying to "contain US jitters" about the Berlin summit, according to the *Guardian's* sources. But hawks in the Pentagon in particular, who are always keen to whip up antagonisms with Europe, were not appeased so easily. The *Wall Street Journal*, which articulates the views of the most hard-line sections of the Bush administration, commented on October 20:

"Nobody should have any doubts that [the] plan to set up an independent European defence organisation...aims to effect a transatlantic break-up." It threatened, "Europeans tempted to go it alone militarily should consider long and hard whether they want to inhabit a world where the US has turned truly isolationist after being deserted by its allies."

Washington increased the political pressure on Blair by every means available, including through its contacts within Britain's Conservative party. Brigadier Geoffrey Van Orden, MEP, the Tory defence spokesman and a former top NATO official, said in September, "Blair always claimed EU defence had to be grounded in NATO. It was his red-line because NATO's operational capability goes to the heart of the alliance. Clearly he has now backed down on this whole issue."

And most recently, Shadow Defence Secretary Bernard Jenkin, who is close to the Republican administration, said, "There are voices in the US administration that now realise the French are out to deliberately sideline NATO. They are finally blowing a fuse."

The fuse was blown on October 15, when US ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns described the EU policy as the "most

significant threat to NATO's future" and called the emergency meeting of the 19 NATO allies, one day ahead of a scheduled monthly meeting with their EU counterparts.

His actions overshadowed the already problematic two-day EU summit to discuss plans to finalise a European constitution. It had the desired impact of chastening Blair and making clear that his efforts to be a bridge between the US and Europe must be informed by a recognition that Washington calls the shots.

Blair was forced to publicly acknowledge his difficulties at the summit when he explained "there are people who want to pull me away from Europe and people who want to pull me away from America," while promising to "remain strong with both."

He stressed, "Nothing whatsoever must put at risk our essential defence guarantees at NATO," and that he was pressing for its pre-eminence to be clearly established in the future EU constitution. "It is ambiguous at the moment," he said.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told Britain's parliament on October 20 that it was "unacceptable" for the EU to try to assume a "territorial defence" role. "That must be a matter for NATO," he said.

In Kiev on October 20, NATO secretary general George Robertson was much more explicit. He called any moves by the EU to duplicate the military role of the Atlantic alliance "deeply unsatisfactory" and a waste of money. Europe needed more "more usable soldiers and fewer paper armies" to fill the gap between its defence capabilities and that of the US. Referring to a NATO-EU accord giving the latter access to Alliance resources, he said it allowed "countries like Belgium [to] invest in the usable capabilities we desperately need for multinational operations of all kinds...rather than wasting money on duplicating in the EU expensive assets and headquarters which already exist in NATO."

The other European powers made great play of belittling US fears and giving the appearance that this was a storm in a teacup. Chirac (who was also speaking on behalf of an absent Schröder), Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt all made speeches insisting that EU plans were entirely compatible with NATO and agreed to drop plans for a Brussels-based command headquarters.

The concessions made are of either a verbal or at best a somewhat cosmetic character, however, and the Franco-German initiative is still going ahead. EU foreign policy representative Javier Solana said work would continue on increasing the EU's ability to operate military or peacekeeping missions independently of NATO. He insisted, "The EU needs to have military capability. Nobody doubts...that." He also implied that a new planning headquarters was not necessary, since several EU states already have such centres. "And today...there are several countries that do have headquarters that can be multinationalised," he said.

The French headquarters in Paris ran the EU's second peacekeeping operation, from June to September, in the Congolese town of Bunia.

The tensions between the US and Europe cannot be wished away so easily because they are rooted in the drive to re-divide the world's strategic resources between the major imperialist powers in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Washington has been able to press its predatory ambitions to the full—first in

Afghanistan and then in Iraq, which together give the US a possibility of controlling two of the world's most important oil reserves—by relying on its present overwhelming military advantage over its European rivals. To date, the most common reaction elicited—not only from London, but also from Paris and Berlin—has been efforts to appease Washington by acceding to its demands. Indeed, the past months have seen repeated overtures by Chirac and Schröder to the Bush administration, attempting to put the disagreements over Iraq behind them. But still, antagonisms not only persist, but even worsen.

The US responds to every concession made by Europe with additional demands, which inevitably run contrary to the interests of the continental powers. Not content with securing the UN Security Council's endorsement for its occupation of Iraq, for example, Washington is demanding that the EU put up cash and manpower to help police the conquered country. And the Pentagon's ongoing efforts to make Iran its next target also run directly against efforts by the Europeans to cultivate economic and political relations with Tehran.

In the long term, the European bourgeoisie cannot avoid the conclusion that without greater military muscle, even a strategy of compromise and appeasement will not work. At the very least, the EU must have something to bring to the table if it is to secure concessions from its US rival. And it needs an effective armed force if it is to press forward its own colonialist ambitions in Africa and elsewhere. The stage is therefore being set for a tit-for-tat military buildup that threatens the peoples of the world with further examples of barbarism such as the bombing of Baghdad.

On the very day Burns made his attack on the EU's military plans, NATO inaugurated its own global strike force as a deliberate counterblast to the EU's rapid reaction force. The 9,000-man "response force" will be ready within five days to carry out missions by air, land and sea anywhere in the world. It will eventually have 20,000 troops. The force will be under the operational command of Britain's General Sir Jack Deverell, while a Turkish general will command the ground troops and a Spanish admiral will command the naval task force. In short, every command position has been assigned to countries considered loyal allies of the US.



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