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Rethinking European defense policy

With Sarkozy contemplating bringing France back into the NATO fold, the need for a strong European defense force is at the forefront, writes Daniel Rackowski for ISN Security Watch.

Commentary by Daniel Rackowski in Brussels for ISN Security Watch (02/05/08)

At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that they would jointly host NATO's 60th anniversary summit next year in Strasbourg and its German sister town of Kehl - shortly after Sarkozy plans to announce his decision on whether France will become a full NATO member. What better timing could there be to show a much needed political breakthrough for the alliance?

Recent statements made by Merkel, UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Sarkozy regarding the sorry state of European defense capabilities have spurred the debate over struggling armies on the continent and the need for enhanced military cooperation. But this debate predates even the European institutions without yielding much return, and one might be excused for asking what could give new impetus to an essentially old idea.

For one thing, these comments come from the EU "big three." While an accord on such a major policy issue among these leaders is in itself a sign that the message should be taken seriously, they are also known to be in favor of stronger trans-Atlantic ties and as such, they arguably helped to generate a paradigm shift in US attitudes toward a strong and more independent European military.

This shift was perhaps most vociferously articulated by US-NATO Ambassador Victoria Nuland in a landmark speech in Paris in late February during which she went as far as to call for "a place where we can plan and train for such missions as a NATO-EU family."

The location and timing of Nuland's speech were by no means a coincidence. The main thrust behind European defense has traditionally emanated from the Elysée Palace, but it was Sarkozy's bid to re-join the NATO military integrated command and the suggestion that an EU bloc within the grouping with a more synchronized voice would be mutually beneficial to the US and EU, that really did the trick.

Curiously, the US may give the EU a decisive push toward a "permanent structured cooperation" within the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) framework, as set out in the Lisbon Treaty.

With France poised to take over the EU presidency this summer, the US and NATO have lent their support at a critical juncture. Sarkozy has been pushing heavily for a defense bloc consisting of, at least initially, the EU's six biggest member states. What would be novel about this force is not so much the idea, but rather the fact that under the Lisbon Treaty, single member states would not be in a position to veto such a push forward. One of the envisaged requirements for membership would however be a minimum allocation of 2

percent of their respective GDP, a condition currently met only by the UK and France.

This of course is emblematic of the European defense predicament. While there have been complaints about the lack of a European strategic vision for defense and the absence of real common institutions, the actual problem seems to lie in the reluctance to invest in the necessary military equipment and training as well as a disinclination to create comprehensive synergies between member states that would make Europe ready for the security challenges of the 21st century.

The figures are in fact staggering.

While the defense expenditures of EU member states collectively match more than half the US expenditure (3.7 percent of its GDP), for defense, it does not even come close to reaching 50 percent of America's military capabilities.

Less than 5 percent of the armed services in Europe are currently deployed abroad, and vast deficiencies in military gear and training suggest no chance for an increase.

There is a dire need for UAVs, helicopters and special forces, to name but a few areas where Europe's armies suffer from significant shortcomings. And the Atlantic gap is widening.

The US increases spending in strategic areas such as research and development by about 9 percent each year, compared to a meager 1.5 percent in Europe.

The EU will clearly have to spend more, but it will also have to spend more wisely. A structured defense policy would help to save costs for member states, make European forces more effective and foster cohesion. Interoperability and the harmonization of equipment are prerequisites for at least the restoration of the *status quo ante* at NATO.

A strengthened ESDP does not have to produce a zero-sum situation; rather, it has the potential to complement NATO structures as long as existing structures are not unnecessarily duplicated.

The realization on the part of the US administration that the US needs a strong partner - both in terms of soft and hard power - is to be welcomed. And the thought is not a new one. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower were enthusiastic about the prospects of a European army at a time when few Europeans would have even considered doing away with what many still consider an essential pillar of national sovereignty. Ripeness is considered a decisive factor for a political sea change. NATO's 60th anniversary could mark the beginning of such an event.

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