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Could France Bring NATO and the EU Closer Together?

Options for the French EU Presidency

Ronja Kempin

In August 2007 Nicolas Sarkozy announced that he wanted his country to rejoin NATO's integrated military command. The French president believes that if substantial progress is to be made in establishing a capable European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), France has to become a full member of the alliance once again. Yet as the French EU Presidency approaches, the formula of "rejoining NATO equals more ESDP" seems to have lost its power. It could only work if France were to use its EU Presidency for a masterstroke: connecting NATO and the EU by creating an operational civil-military EU planning and conduct capability closely linked to NATO's capacities at SHAPE. This would be an option with no losers, and one that also could reward France with a central EU leadership position, for example the post of the first "EU foreign minister."

Nicolas Sarkozy frequently makes puzzling statements, throwing "smoke bombs" to prevent his partners from gaining a clear impression of his political intentions. At the recent NATO summit in Bucharest, for example, the French president stressed that the moment for France to decide to return to NATO's integrated military structures would arrive during its upcoming EU Presidency. Sarkozy first announced such a move just a few weeks after he was elected. Only by normalizing France's relations with the North Atlantic Alliance, he said, it would be possible to decisively strengthen the ESDP during France's EU Presidency. But so far Sarkozy has not said how he intends to connect the two briefs—

reintegrating France into NATO and making progress on the ESDP.

The Difficulties of Rejoining NATO's Integrated Military Command

There is no sign that the French president is looking to gain advantage from a French return to NATO's integrated military structures, nor is it apparent how this step would strengthen the ESDP.

In France approval for Sarkozy's NATO plans is reserved. Neither the generals nor the arms corporations are terribly keen for their country to participate in the alliance's joint military planning, because that would oblige them to account for procurement

deals and progress in reforming the armed forces. Consequently it would involve a considerable loss of national autonomy in security and defense policy—something on which public opinion in particular places considerable weight, regarding NATO as a relic of the Cold War. Ultimately, the political clashes in Paris in advance of the Bucharest NATO summit show that the president has no backing for his NATO policy, and the pressure on him will increase as soon as he announces a specific date for France to fully rejoin NATO.

There is another reason to doubt whether France rejoining NATO's integrated military command would benefit Sarkozy's plan to make progress on Europe's security policy. In order to be represented in NATO on equal terms with Germany and the UK, the president would have to increase France's personnel in NATO structures tenfold, from the current 120 to about 1,200. And for that he currently has neither the money nor the suitable staff. France's return to the alliance can only be accomplished in stages. Consequently, an increase in France's weight in the transatlantic alliance on a scale that would allow the country to exert decisive influence on the development of the ESDP is not to be expected during the French EU Presidency.

Ultimately a French return to NATO would reduce the relative importance of Germany and the UK within the alliance (although both are fundamentally open to reintegrating France). These two neighbors have profited most from France's withdrawal from the integrated military structures and have been able to divide NATO's European command posts among themselves. If France were to return they would have to give up some of these positions. London in particular is therefore unlikely to see any reason to approve French plans aiming to strengthen the ESDP.

A Modest EU Presidency or a Masterstroke?

Given this background it is no surprise that the ESDP plans announced so far for the French EU Presidency are modest. It is planned to add an additional protocol to the European Security Strategy, to create a European Air Transport Command based on the A400M, and to set up a military exchange program (Erasmus Militaire). These measures without doubt represent sensible expansions or developments of the existing arrangements. The same applies in the fields of procurement (with the planned expansion of the remit of the European Defense Agency to include coordinating permanent structured cooperation) and operations (increasing the strength of the civilian and military planning and command units by 20–30 staff). But this does not bring Sarkozy any closer to the goal of making “decisive” progress on the ESDP. He could, however, realize this project if he proposed setting up a permanent operational civil-military EU planning and conduct capability (OHQ) close to NATO's strategic headquarters (SHAPE).

Strengthening the EU's operational capabilities has long been a goal of French policy. In recent years Paris has repeatedly called for the EU to be given its own planning and conduct capacities. But for two reasons France was unable to make any decisive progress. For one thing, such a policy was rejected because there were always fears in Washington and in the EU that Paris was looking for an ESDP directed against the North Atlantic Alliance. For another, Paris proved unable to persuade its partners of the necessity of establishing EU-level military capacities that NATO already has and—through the Berlin Plus agreements of March 17, 2003—makes available to the EU in cases where NATO itself is not active. So it is no surprise that the EU currently possesses nothing more than the rudiments of military planning and conduct capacities. At the military level the Military Staff of the European Union (EUMS) is responsible for the strategic

planning of EU operations. But its resources are hardly enough to even plan a military operation (for example on the battlegroup scale), let alone to conduct one. In order to run military missions the EU must resort either to a member state's headquarters or to NATO's planning and command capabilities (Berlin Plus). The same applies on the civilian side. Like their military colleagues, the staff of the Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) that was set up in June 2007 are only on paper capable of conducting a civilian ESDP mission. In order to conduct ESDP operations the EU has to activate national conduct capacities on both the military and civilian levels, so it has so far been impossible for it to intervene in acute security crises.

Strengthening the ESDP, Connecting NATO and the EU

Nicolas Sarkozy could put an end to this unsatisfactory state of affairs through the aforementioned option. The attraction would be that the civilian and military capabilities of the EU and the military capacity of NATO would be geographically close.

Because this would lead to a situation where the EU and NATO were closely connected, none of the partners would be likely to raise serious objections to such a proposal. On the contrary, this proposal would convince Washington and London that Sarkozy's assertions that France now sees NATO and the EU not as rivals but as complementary security organizations—tirelessly repeated in recent weeks—are indeed genuine. The proposal would also satisfy the Americans' regular calls for Europe to at last strengthen its operational capabilities. Finally, connecting the two organizations would open the way for the United States (and Turkey too) to participate in the planning of military EU operations. In view of these positive incentives, the UK, the United States, and Turkey would be likely to approve the initiative, as would the EU's Nordic member states,

because realizing the "Sarkozy option" would fulfill their political wish to strengthen the civilian character of the ESDP. All the other member states would likely welcome the plan too, because it would enable the EU to cope with its growing needs for civilian/military interaction in crisis management operations.

In this constellation of interests the EU could succeed in bringing together existing capacities and for the first time establishing an autonomous, permanent planning and conduct capacity with an order of magnitude of about 400 staff.

No Losers

For the French president this potential masterstroke would represent a good deal more than simply a European policy success. He could also use the prestige he would stand to gain through the proposal to connect NATO and the EU to strengthen his position at home and abroad.

The move would silence Sarkozy's critics at home for two reasons. Firstly, if a civil-military EU planning and conduct capability were to be established near SHAPE, Paris could call into question the need to develop NATO's own civilian capacities, because under the motto "Berlin Plus Reversed" NATO could be granted the opportunity to draw on the EU's civilian capacities. Under these circumstances there would be little in the way of plausible arguments for NATO to strive to build civilian capacities of its own. To that extent, Sarkozy would have blocked the concept of a "global NATO" for the time being. This could very well be sold to France's political class as a positive side-effect. A second argument the president could use to placate his domestic political critics would be to point out that the success of this option would not require a full-scale French return into NATO's structures. Simply proposing to connect NATO and the EU would increase France's weight in the alliance to such an extent that it would occupy a central position in the process of NATO reform

(command structure reform, drawing up a new strategic concept). Because Paris would thus already have gained decisive influence on the process, Sarkozy would be able to afford to scale down the actual magnitude of French commitment to the military structures. To send about 300–400 soldiers—numbers that are already being openly discussed in Paris—to join NATO’s integrated military command would then be enough to back up the credibility of French policy and guarantee France’s political influence in the alliance.

In this way Paris would be able not only to spare its overstretched defense budget by returning to NATO’s integrated military structures in an almost cost-neutral manner; it would also save its most important partners, Berlin and London, considerable material and immaterial costs. The latter effect would occur if it made use of the possibility of linking the negotiations over NATO posts with the discussion of the appointments to new EU positions that will come up under the French EU Presidency (assuming the Treaty of Lisbon can be ratified). None of the three states could have any interest in altering the existing division of key NATO posts between Germany and the UK, because if they did, Berlin and London would have to accept a reduction while Paris would not be certain of gaining, because a redistribution would also awaken ambitions in other member states that would be difficult to reject. To that extent it would be an obvious idea to link the questions of posts in NATO and the EU. Paris could propose doing without a redistribution of NATO posts if it was given corresponding consideration in the appointments to leading EU positions. Its main interest might be directed toward the office of Council President, but also to that of the “EU foreign minister.” The first EU foreign minister will play a defining role in shaping the contours of this post. If he uses his opportunities cleverly, he will be able to exert decisive influence on the course of the ESDP and thus on relationship between the EU and NATO.

If Nicolas Sarkozy were to solve the riddles thrown up by the formula “rejoining NATO equals more ESDP” through the option of setting up a civil-military EU planning and conduct capability near SHAPE, Berlin should support him in this venture. This option has one winner—but no losers. For Berlin it would offer the opportunity to preserve its status quo in NATO, the most important security organization for Germany.

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