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The Bucharest NATO Summit: Washington and London Must Not Give in to French Demands

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy is expected to unveil a series of proposals for rejoining NATO's integrated military command structure at the Bucharest Summit on April 2–4. Sarkozy will hold talks this week in London with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown aimed at securing British support for the French proposal. Paris will reportedly offer an additional troop contribution for the NATO mission in Afghanistan, including a deployment of elite paratroopers to the east of the country, allowing the United States to move more troops to the main theater of operations in the south.¹ In return, Paris will seek British and American backing for an independent European Union defense structure.

Sarkozy first announced the possibility of a French rapprochement over NATO in an interview in September 2007. According to *The New York Times*, he made two demands: "American acceptance of an independent European defense capability and a leading French role in NATO's command structures."² He repeated the theme in his address to Congress in November, where he called on "the Alliance to evolve concurrently with the development and strengthening of a European defence."³

Sarkozy's offer of an olive branch to the NATO Alliance will be France's second attempt to rejoin the organization's command, following former President Jacques Chirac's unsuccessful effort in 1997, when Paris was rebuffed by the Clinton Administration. However, once again, the ransom being demanded by Paris for a return to the NATO fold is too high a price for the United States and Great Britain to pay.

It is important that Washington is not tempted to bargain away the future of the transatlantic alliance for the promise of a few hundred or perhaps a thousand more troops in Afghanistan. As former U.K. Shadow Defence Secretary Bernard Jenkin has noted, France's involvement with NATO should be considered only if Paris reaffirms NATO supremacy in European defense and security and if NATO can be confident that France will not engage in deliberately disruptive policies.⁴

France's relationship with NATO has always been complex and troubled, and it is highly unlikely that her introduction into the organization's command structure would improve the effectiveness of NATO's operations. Indeed, it would have the opposite effect by creating a rival E.U. command structure among NATO member states, a move that could tear NATO in half and ultimately destroy it.

The French Proposal: A Shift Away from Berlin Plus. The full development of an independent European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP)⁵ is a long-term French policy goal and will be the centerpiece of the French Presidency of the European Union, starting July 1, 2008. In terms of French strategic thinking, the NATO issue is an important bar-

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gaining tool for Paris to strengthen its own vision of a French-driven E.U. as a powerful world player in the political, economic, and military spheres.

Under the Berlin Plus arrangements,⁶ not only does the NATO Alliance maintain the right of first refusal to conduct crisis management operations (if the E.U. wishes to use NATO resources, it may act independently in an international crisis only if NATO chooses not to), but all members have an effective veto by virtue of the fact that the E.U. may draw on NATO assets only if the whole Alliance approves. Turkey has chosen to exercise this veto power in the past, delaying the deployment of Operation Concordia in Macedonia by more than five months to get adequate mutual assurances from the E.U. and NATO.⁷

If French ambitions for a separate defense identity are realized, the United States will effectively lose its veto power. The ESDP would become a powerful autonomous force within the Alliance, with access to NATO's resources and capabilities, as opposed to an instrument that should be activated only where NATO does not want to act as a whole. An autonomous E.U. defense identity within NATO could become the motor of the Alliance, representing a significant dilution of U.S. and British influence over decision-making.

A Shift in U.S. Strategic Thinking on Europe?

Ironically, Paris sees London and not Washington as

the main barrier to French reintegration into the upper echelons of NATO. Gordon Brown is known to be skeptical regarding the French proposal, and according to *The Guardian*, “French officials have expressed disappointment at the lukewarm reaction so far,” with a French diplomat quoted as saying, “we had hoped for a more welcoming response from Britain.”⁸

In contrast, Bush Administration officials have begun to send positive, conciliatory messages to the Sarkozy administration, which clearly indicate that the United States may be open to a French proposal to rejoin the NATO club on Paris's terms.

In a major speech to the Press Club in Paris last month,⁹ Ambassador Victoria Nuland, U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO, said the following to her French audience:

So I am here today in Paris to say that we agree with France—Europe needs, the United States needs, NATO needs, the democratic world needs—a stronger, more capable European defense capacity. An ESDP with only soft power is not enough. . . . [W]e need a stronger E.U., we need a stronger NATO and if Afghanistan has taught us anything, we need a stronger, more seamless relationship between them. I would go further: If we truly believe in a transatlantic comprehensive approach to security—one that combines the best of our soft

1. See Julian Borger, “Sarkozy Hopes Talks with Brown Will Cement Anglo–French Alliance to Steer E.U. Policy,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2008, at www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/20/france.E.U.?gusrc=rss&feed=politics.
2. Elaine Sciolino and Alison Smale, “Sarkozy, a Frenchman in a Hurry, Maps His Path,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2007, at www.nytimes.com/2007/09/24/world/Europe/24sarkozy.html.
3. Speech by Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the Republic, before the Congress of the United States, November 7, 2007, at www.ambafrance-uk.org/President-Sarkozy-s-speech-to-US.html?var_recherche=sarkozy%20congress%20US.
4. Bernard Jenkin, “A Defence Policy for the UK: Matching Commitments and Resources,” *Conservative Way Forward*, pp. 37–38, at http://accessible.bernardjenkin.org.uk/files/pdf_pdf_5.pdf (February 11, 2008).
5. For an in-depth assessment of the ESDP, see Sally McNamara, “The European Security and Defense Policy: A Challenge to the Transatlantic Security Alliance,” *Heritage Foundation* Backgrounder No. 2053, July 18, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/bg2053.cfm.
6. “NATO–E.U.: A Strategic Partnership,” at www.nato.int/issues/nato-E.U./evolution.html.
7. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Southeast Europe Project, “Greek–Turkish Dispute Leads to Extended NATO Command of Peacekeeping Force,” October 18, 2002, at www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=109941&fuseaction=topics.documents&doc_id=115724&group_id=114885.
8. Borger, “Sarkozy Hopes Talks with Brown Will Cement Anglo–French Alliance to Steer E.U. Policy.”
9. Victoria Nuland, U.S. Ambassador to NATO, speech in Paris, February 22, 2008, at www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/February/20080222183349eaiifas0.5647394.html.

and hard power—we need a place where we can plan and train for such missions as a NATO–E.U. family.... In this city, we have a president that is prepared to use his E.U. presidency to strengthen Europe’s defense contribution and then bring France back into a renovated NATO. With a French engine in both organizations, we have an opportunity now to bring them closer together. In Washington, leaders of all stripes are calling for more, not less Europe, and applauding President Sarkozy’s appeal for the European Union and NATO to “march hand in hand.”

Ambassador Nuland’s support for “a stronger, more capable European defense capacity” stands in stark contrast to earlier warnings by U.S. officials against what former Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to as “independent E.U. structures that duplicate existing NATO capabilities.”¹⁰ In a 2003 press briefing,¹¹ U.S. Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns made it categorically clear that under the Berlin Plus agreement, “the E.U. will not seek to create duplicative institutions”:

We could not support and will not support the creation of an alternative E.U. military headquarters, whether it’s in Tervuren or some other place, in Brussels or elsewhere. That would be, we think, duplicative, needlessly costly, and that would in essence, we think, be a contradiction to the Berlin Plus Agreements. Neither will we support a planning facility either.

In January 2007, the E.U. established a military Operations Center in Brussels, which last year conducted “a nine-day exercise involving the virtual deployment of 2,000 European soldiers to deal with a crisis in the fictional country of Alisia.”¹²

The operational center, a Franco–German-inspired project, is without doubt a fledgling E.U. military headquarters that will eventually compete with the NATO command. As Robin Harris, a former member of the Downing Street Policy Unit, has written, “The NATO Web site proudly boasts that there is a ‘strategic partnership’ between NATO and the E.U. There is no such thing, only an incipient strategic competition between America and Europe.”¹³

The French proposal for an independent European defense structure will build upon the foundations laid by the new E.U. military headquarters. If the United States agrees to the French plan, it will represent yet another reversal of the Berlin Plus arrangements and a further erosion of the supremacy of NATO in Europe.

France’s Existing Role in NATO. France’s exclusion from NATO’s integrated military command structures does not prevent it from being a full and active member of the Alliance. The command issue is largely a political one and has little practical impact on France’s day-to-day involvement in NATO operations. The notion that Paris has to be brought into the NATO command in order to play a full role in the Alliance is a myth.

France is already an active (though at times half-hearted) NATO member, and approximately one-third of its 10,000 forward deployed troops are currently under NATO command.¹⁴ More than 1,500 French troops participate in NATO’s ISAF mission,¹⁵ and more than 2,200 troops participate in KFOR in Kosovo, of which Paris recently took command. Detachment from NATO’s military command structures, following General Charles De Gaulle’s withdrawal in 1966, merely excludes Paris from NATO’s overall defense planning. However, it is a full member of all key decision-making bodies and

10. “Bush Reaffirms Warning Against Undermining NATO,” Agence France-Presse, December 4, 2003.

11. Press Briefing by Ambassador Nicholas Burns, September 30, 2003, at <http://nato.usmission.gov/ambassador/2003/s030930a.htm>.

12. Associated Press, “E.U. Says NATO Will Benefit from New European Military Center,” *International Herald Tribune*, June 13, 2007, at www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/06/13/Europe/E.U.-GEN-E.U.-Military.php.

13. Robin Harris, “Beyond Friendship: The Future of Anglo–American Relations,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1091, May 24, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm1091.cfm.

14. “En Garde: French Defense Policy,” *The Economist*, January 19, 2008.

15. International Security Assistance Force, NATO, February 6, 2008, at www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/isaf_placemat.pdf.

transformation initiatives, including the Military Committee, the Allied Command Transformation, and the NATO Response Force,¹⁶ and there are 290 French military staff currently serving with NATO.¹⁷

No Quid Pro Quo with France. For the Bush Administration to endorse the French plan for rejoining NATO's command, agreeing to support an independent E.U. defense structure, would represent a sea change in U.S. strategic thinking that would have a dramatic, negative impact on the future of the Alliance. It would shift the political balance of power within NATO away from Washington and London and toward the main centers of power within the European Union: Paris, Berlin, and Brussels. Far from encouraging European countries from spending more on defense, it would foster an even greater culture of dependence on NATO resources within continental Europe. It would lead to a duplication of the NATO command structure without a doubling of manpower or material.

It is vital that both Washington and London reject any French proposal that calls for American and British support for an independent European defense organization that would undermine the centrality of the NATO Alliance. Paris should be welcomed back into NATO's leadership club only on terms that are acceptable to all NATO members.

It is difficult to see how a greater E.U. defense capability will actually strengthen the NATO mission or the broader transatlantic alliance. As a supranational body, the European Union has frequently clashed with the United States over major foreign policy questions—from Iraq and Iran to America's overall handling of the war against Islamist terrorism. Washington and Brussels are frequently oceans apart on some of the biggest issues of the day, and encouraging a bigger military role for the E.U. can only make NATO's task more complicated.

NATO has been the most successful post-war multilateral organization because it is a truly transatlantic defense and security alliance of independent nation-states with a single command. The French proposal to build up a separate E.U. defense structure—a competitor to NATO sucking up valuable NATO resources—is simply unacceptable and should be firmly rejected.

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16. "News from France," French Embassy Press and Information Service, Vol. 08, February 1, 22, 2008.

17. Leo Michel, "What Place for France in NATO?" National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, at www.ndu.edu/INSS/Repository/Outside_Publications/Michel/Michel%20Point%20de%20vue%20Le%20Monde%20June%205%202007%20English%20version.pdf.