
Sarkozy's Dilemmas, the Forthcoming French EU Presidency and ESDP: What's in it for Europe?

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Theme: This ARI aims to identify the key policy and political aspects of the debates on ESDP during the French EU Presidency (July-December 2008) and beyond.

Summary: The considerable improvement in both transatlantic and inter-European relations experienced over the past year or so has resulted in France expressing its wish to return to NATO's integrated command structure and Washington's explicit support for European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). In this context, the French Presidency of the EU Council, that has just taken off on 1 July 2008, opens an important window of opportunity to facilitate further progress in the area of ESDP over the coming months and years. This ARI offers a brief overview of the key policy and political issues of the forthcoming debates on ESDP during the French EU Presidency and beyond.

Analysis:

The Ongoing Quest for European Strategic Autonomy

One of the worst-kept secrets in Brussels is that real progress within European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) is largely a function of particular developments within or among certain European capitals. At least as badly kept a secret is that Paris and London are at the very top of that list.

Since Nicolas Sarkozy's arrival at the Elysée over a year ago, policy analysts and political pundits alike have kept busy trying to report and analyse yet another episode of *rapprochement* between France, the UK and the US; strong winds of change in the Paris-London-Washington triangle always hit hard on the Western academic, think-tank and media markets. As of today, the literature devoted to joining the dots between foreign policy change in Paris and the evolution of NATO and ESDP has become challengingly rich. However, it remains particularly difficult to go much beyond plain speculation in a rapidly changing policy context in which a single development can make a thoughtful analysis be out of date in a matter of days. But regardless of the particular evolution of the various processes at play, what is really at stake for ESDP?

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In aiming to conceptualise what is at stake for ESDP, one risks being dragged into a futile exercise given the very essential contestability of ESDP itself: whereas Eurocrats might be tired of what they perceive as outdated *teleological* nuances (as they like to put it) and instead praise the benefits of a *getting-things-done* approach, national capitals know differently. In other words, any assessment of whether a particular development will or will not be positive for ESDP will inevitably be perceived as politically motivated, and rightly so. Indeed, most insiders agree that the whole ESDP story has so far been a success thanks to the recurring resort to constructive or calculated ambiguity. Perhaps more commonly associated with the world of marketing and communication, constructive ambiguity is a recurrent device in the realm of international cooperation in general, and that of the European integration process in particular; it is aimed at making enough room for a diverse array of political priorities to fit together harmoniously. That ambiguity has allowed European leaders to remain aloof from potentially politically explosive arguments such as the appropriate level of military ambition for the EU or the ends of ESDP (*finalité*). However, and in spite of its many advantages, ambiguity can turn out to be self-defeating for ESDP, particularly given the characteristically long cycles of defence procurement and defence planning exercises.

As rising powers are more assertively claiming a greater share in their respective regional scene and even beyond, we are witnessing the consolidation of a complex world in which old and new threats and paradigms coexist. A consolidated and robust ESDP is not only a primary need for an increasingly *political* EU, but also an important means for re-launching a much needed strong and effective transatlantic relationship and a potentially constructive development for enhancing global security and stability. Europeans must realise the urgency in complementing their many valuable economic, diplomatic, civilian and other political assets with a stronger competence in military affairs –since military strength not only stimulates the revaluation of all other foreign policy means, but it is also the military realm where Europe’s deficit is most alarming–. Beyond the visible and more immediate need to improve its *readiness* and *deployability*, two attributes that are highly valued in the post Cold War and post 9/11 strategic context, it is of utmost importance that the Union addresses its deficit of strategic assets –ie, planning and command, strategic transport, defence procurement, intelligence and other space-based assets, etc– if it is to realise its full potential on the international stage.

This ARI aims to identify the key policy and political aspects of the debates on ESDP during the French EU Presidency (July-December 2008) and beyond. The first section introduces some important policy items and makes a brief assessment of their potential contribution to enhancing European strategic autonomy. The second section looks at the opportunities and challenges that an increasingly constructive transatlantic and European political context offers to the prospects of enhancing European strategic autonomy in the months and years to come.

The Road to European Strategic Autonomy through the French EU Presidency: The Policy Dimension

France’s EU Presidency arrives in a context characterised by an increasingly constructive transatlantic and intra-European environment, only recently obscured by Ireland’s rejection by referendum of the Lisbon Treaty. Some of the most visible signs of this positive turn are France’s alleged return to NATO’s military structures –accompanied by a growing momentum in Franco-American and Franco-British relations–, improved German-British and German-American relations and Poland’s renewed enthusiasm for the EU –mirrored by a substantial improvement in Franco-Polish and German-Polish relations–.

The transatlantic and inter-European wounds that resulted from the 2003 Iraq invasion are healing. In this regard, and beyond whatever limitations that different national interests and priorities might dictate, the currently favourable environment offers the French EU Presidency a good opportunity to revitalise ESDP and advance on the road to European strategic autonomy.

The significant divergences between the respective strategic cultures of the 27 EU Member States, the many national sensibilities linked to the realm of security and defence or the long cycles of defence procurement make the path towards European strategic autonomy a characteristically slow one. Success needs, therefore, to be measured prudently. Beyond her traditional role as the leading advocate of European strategic autonomy, France's protagonism in the current transatlantic and European *making-up*, the recent adoption of a *Livre Blanc* (Strategic Review) that provides a framework for the country's foreign, security and defence policy during the next 15 years or the fact that Paris will be holding the Presidency of the EU Council at such a *convenient moment*, place the French EU Presidency in a good position to play the role of a *facilitator* for ESDP to develop in the months and years to come. The concrete proposals of the French EU Presidency on ESDP are yet to be known, and both their initial form and evolution will be necessarily tailored to how certain developments evolve –notably the EU Council's reaction to Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty–. However, the *Livre Blanc*¹ sketches France's vision over how to best realise European strategic autonomy through short-and medium-term measures, most of which will be introduced during the course of the French EU Presidency –and some of which will be pursued more eagerly than others–.

First things first: without a greater convergence at the level of strategic thinking, the potential for further institutional engineering and capability development to translate into European strategic autonomy will be seriously curtailed. Both top-down and bottom-up measures are needed. The French have highlighted the importance of strengthening the resources and role of the European Security and Defence College –including the possible creation of a permanent site in Brussels–, and suggested ideas such as the creation of an Erasmus military programme to foster exchanges among European military officers or the reinforcement of common schemes for training European military and civilian personnel. The expected revision of the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) by the end of 2008 is a good opportunity to check the state of European strategic convergence in a changing strategic environment.

At the functional level, France is particularly keen to remind her fellow Europeans about the commitments they have made in the past in order to emphasise the need to move towards a higher level of military ambition in the realm of crisis management, but also to expand the functional reach of ESDP beyond crisis management proper. When it comes to crisis management, the French insist on the need to refocus on the more ambitious, earlier, targets such as the 60,000 men mentioned in the 2003 Helsinki Headline Goal; the more recent initiatives (ie, the 1,500-2,000 strong Battlegroups) are just a complement, not an alternative, to a much wider and more ambitious European Rapid Reaction Force. Furthermore, the expansion of ESDP beyond the realms of crisis management is a top priority for Paris: whereas the activation of the so-called 'D' (Defence) dimension of ESDP is a longer-term French aspiration, the *Livre Blanc* considers the strengthening of the internal dimension of European security an urgent matter.

¹ For a detailed overview of France's proposals for ESDP see 'L'ambition Européenne', *Livre blanc pour la défense et la sécurité nationale*, chapter four, p 81-99, http://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/120276/1053255/version/1/file/LB_tome1_partie1%5B1%5D.pdf

The French contend that, in order to reach the necessary level of civilian and military capabilities to meet Europe's proclaimed ambitions, the strengthening of the mechanisms of common funding for ESDP operations and progress towards a European defence procurement market must be vigorously pursued. Finally, the prospect of improved EU-NATO relations at the strategic level offers invaluable potential benefits to EU-NATO cooperation on the ground but also in the realm of coordination between the capability development processes of the two institutions.

Arguably, the most urgent objective for the French is to adopt measures that imply a concrete and visible progress in the EU's capability to conduct military operations, including the ability to plan and command such operations. It is at the service of this more immediate and concrete objective that France's calls for putting into play the new instrument of Permanent Structured Cooperation –something the French are particularly keen to present at an ambitious 'Big Six' package involving the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland– and for setting up a Permanent Operational Headquarters (OHQ) within the EUMS in Brussels, next to the PSC and EUMC, should be read.² The most likely outcome will be that discussion over the details of Permanent Structured Cooperation will be neither substantial nor official during the French Presidency, not least because the very mechanism of Permanent Structured Cooperation is pending the Treaty reform that has been placed on hold after Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon accord. However, progress on both operational capabilities and operational command is indeed critical to any advance on the road towards European strategic autonomy, and the French Presidency will try to push these two issues forward.

On the one hand, in a context characterised by the perpetual frustration of the many multinational initiatives –whether conceived in an EU or NATO framework– to boost national defence spending, Permanent Structured Cooperation has been presented as the latest device of political engineering: its alleged added value lies in an approach that combines the carrot of influence with the stick of exclusion. It is in this spirit that France has *thrown in* the idea of the 'Big Six' –the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland– committed to a joint intervention force and to spending 2% of their GDP on defence. Beyond the visibly unrealistic figure of 2% defence spending, the specifics of an idea which has, so far, been only sketched in a very raw form are still to be worked out. The 'Big Six' or, for that matter, any alternative initiative that aims to build upon an ambitious form of Permanent Structured cooperation still needs to overcome important hurdles, namely how to achieve the right balance between pressure for the effectiveness that previous initiatives have lacked and the spirit of inclusiveness so inherent to the EU *acquis*. However, and beyond whatever problems that alternative envisaged formats of Permanent Structured Cooperation might trigger, trying to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a device such as Permanent Structured Cooperation to stimulate the leadership potential of the bigger States is a smart move. Ideas *along the lines* of the 'Big Six' offer the potential to concentrate on the real critical mass (money and men) that only bigger States possess, by offering them the political sweetener of being at the vanguard of ESDP, at the vanguard of the EU. This is something that should prove particularly attractive to Rome and Madrid, for whom asserting their influence over the EU seems something like an *ongoing unfulfilled promise* and where their degrees of defence

² Jean Pierre Jouyet (French Secretary for European Affairs) expressed the importance of these two issues at the WEU Assembly in Paris (3/VI/2008), as did Anne-François de Saint Salvy, Deputy Director of the Delegation for Strategic Affairs (French Ministry of Defence), at the conference 'NATO in the Next Decade', organised by the Security and Defence Agenda (Brussels, 3/VI/2008).

investment are especially alarming; it will be very difficult indeed to convince States to spend more on defence if no tangible benefits are foreseen, ie, more influence in decision-making. In this regard, the rationale behind the 'Big Six' idea is to offer larger Member States a 'special' role in exchange for a 'special' effort (by virtue of their 'special' size) so that effective progress is made in generating European capabilities –an enterprise very much critical to the improvement of European strategic autonomy and so far marked by considerable disappointment–.

On the other hand, the underlying premise that seems to be driving French thinking is that in order for any initiatives aimed at boosting Europe's capabilities (including potential formats for an effective form of Permanent Structured Cooperation) to be politically fruitful for the EU, they will need to be accompanied by parallel inroads on the debate over strategic command, namely making progress on the specific issue of an EU Permanent OHQ. Arguably, the issue of a Permanent EU OHQ seems to have become the most urgent item for the French, a sort of visible thermometer for checking the progress towards European strategic autonomy –not least because of its enormous symbolism–.³ Thus far, ESDP operations can investigate two options for strategic command: a line of command at SHAPE in NATO, or resorting to one of the five national HQ's (in the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Greece) identified as fit to run multinational operations. A third option was conceived for the strategic command of ESDP operations in late 2003: an Ops Centre was created within the Civ-Mil cell of the EUMS in Brussels. The new Ops Centre, however, has been *crippled* by significant technical and political caveats. For one thing, rather than resembling a proper Permanent HQ, the Ops Centre consists of a small Permanent Nucleus that has the ability to set up an *ad-hoc* command capacity drawing from *augmentees* from national capitals and the EUMS should the European Council, unanimously, decide upon its activation. Whereas any debate on developing a Permanent European command capacity has always been dominated by the concern not to duplicate costly structures already existing in the framework of NATO (ie, SHAPE), the creation of an Ops Centre in 2003 seemed to hint towards a change of attitude in this regard, so long as the emphasis was placed on the idea of an integrated Civilian-Military capacity –something that did not exist in NATO–. Despite the modest nature of the Ops Centre initiative, there has been some progress in the course of the last year, reflected in the so-called post-Wiesbaden measures –a rearrangement of the EUMS structures including the approval of five extra personnel for the Permanent Nucleus of the Civ-Mil cell–.

ESDP, the French EU Presidency and Beyond: The Political Puzzle

For the French Presidency to set the right tone to facilitate substantial progress towards European strategic autonomy, Paris will need to tread a very fine path through three fronts it has already been working on for quite some time: the American, the British and the 'Continental'.

The first step is to get the Americans on board, in itself both an end (American blessing and support is positive for its own sake) and a means (American lobbying can prove a crucial asset for marketing the goals of the French Presidency in key European capitals). Paradoxically, this first step seems to be the easiest one. In fact, a remarkable change of language in the last few months can be observed on the part of Washington, most eloquently illustrated by Victoria Nuland's speeches in London and Paris in late February: 'Europe needs a place where it can act independently, and we need a Europe that is able

³ I Traynor and P Wintour, 'European HQ Heads Sarkozy Plan for Greater Military Integration', *The Guardian*, 7/VI/2008.

and willing to do so in defence of our common interests and values'. Having a US Ambassador to NATO say that Europe needs to *act independently* marks a groundbreaking change in the US attitude towards ESDP; if expressed at all, US support for ESDP has been normally accompanied by a reminder of the dangers of duplicating NATO work. America's loyalty to this new language will be certainly tied to European support on the ground, mainly in Afghanistan –the French have already committed 700 troops to the East and the Italians have most recently removed their caveats– but also in having an *open* attitude towards agreeing on a new strategic concept for the Alliance. A word of advice: as much as America's blessing might be necessary for progress in ESDP, it is not sufficient: progress towards European strategic autonomy will ultimately depend upon the political will of the Europeans.

The second front, arguably the most critical, is to court London. For reasons that are both strategic (Britain's performance in the realm of military capabilities is second to none in Europe) and political (Franco-British agreement on ESDP has so far acted as a sort of pan-European rubber stamp), Britain is the key link when it comes to ESDP. While a favourable political context has certainly opened the door to a more constructive attitude towards the ESDP from the British, it remains to be seen to what extent this will translate into actual support for specific proposals. So far, Britain has been a champion of the capabilities approach (being at the vanguard of both the Helsinki Headline Goal and the Battlegroup initiatives) and is therefore likely to support France's call for stronger capabilities. On the one hand, the *constructive environment* resulting from France's new attitude towards NATO could translate into the British being favourably disposed towards *some* advancement on *less visible items* such as the status of the European Security and Defence College or a *prudent* increase in the EDA's budget. On the other hand, Britain will most certainly oppose any qualitative revision of the EDA's role, let alone any discussions on the 'D' (Defence) dimension of ESDP. The British see the EDA as a *dating agency*: the EDA's goal should be that of easing *ad-hoc* bilateral or multilateral procurement deals rather than aiming at pan European one-size-fits-all enterprises. They are also reluctant to engage in any potential discussions over collective defence, an enterprise they only consider to be conceivable in the NATO framework. Finally, although the idea of the 'Big Six' is still at an early stage, it surely contains the seeds of disagreement between London and Paris. Divergences between the British and the French around the principle of accepting flexibility in the EU have already been aired before, the former attaching more importance to *inclusion* and the latter to *effectiveness*. This takes us to the most urgent matter: selling London the idea of a Permanent EU OHQ in Brussels.

The British welcome France's rapprochement with NATO and look forward to the potential benefits it might bring to EU-NATO cooperation. They also welcome the fact that the French are stepping it up in Afghanistan, something London has been requesting for quite some time. In fact, Britain's openness to discuss the eventuality of ramping up the EU's command options over the last year, illustrated by their blessing for the so-called post-Wiesbaden measures, needs to be partly seen as a sign of reciprocity towards Paris. However, while the British might be more open minded to progressively (and slowly) strengthening some sort of an EU command capacity, they will be reluctant to accept France's instinct for more visible and symbolic deals. Paris and London are not on the same wavelength either domestically or (yet?) internationally.

There is also the issue of the domestic political situation in Britain, which will be critical to any real progress over ESDP in the coming months: an increasingly weak Labour

government will seek to escape from the kind of noisy headlines about a European Army or a European Superstate that any debate on the issue of Permanent OHQ will surely trigger. Secondly, it remains unclear to what extent the British might be interested in moving too far on the issue of a Permanent OHQ from a strictly strategic viewpoint. France's NATO bid –aimed largely, but not exclusively, at getting a US blessing for ESDP– has been accompanied by an explicit will in Paris to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Washington. Although the French have not shown a particularly strong interest in working their own *special relationship* with the Americans in the past, today it appears that they might be contemplating new options beyond an exclusive focus on Europe as the one and only channel for power multiplication. Paris is particularly impatient with what it perceives as a widespread reluctance among its European partners to take the EU beyond a *civilian power* attitude.

Beyond the official joy naturally accompanying France's decision to rejoin NATO, the idea of a strong Franco-American relationship is not viewed in such glowing terms in London. There are various and complex dynamics at interplay here. On the one hand, the financial and political burdens of Afghanistan and Iraq are raising legitimate questions in London about the value for money of the *special relationship* with the US. On the other hand, conventional wisdom suggests that the British having a *special relationship* with the Americans should be no impediment to the French building up their own –this is not a zero sum game–. However, and beyond the advantages that the British might gain from their special relationship with Washington in specific areas, such as state-of-the-art technology or know-how, the rationale goes that it is precisely an image of exclusivity (the relationship is special because of its uniqueness) that provides London with the advantage in terms of credibility in Europe and elsewhere. The widespread perception in Europe and beyond (partly true but inflated) that the British have the ear of Washington has compelling diplomatic advantages. Although the British might not seek to withhold forever from making substantial progress on ESDP, how one couches policy changes through time matters greatly in politics, and there are good reasons of both domestic and international political opportunity for London to hold its ground in making any substantial progress on the issue of Permanent OHQ in the short term.

Finally, there is the issue of selling the French Presidency's ESDP agenda in Berlin, Rome, Madrid and Warsaw. The Germans, Italians and Spaniards seem to be *relatively* open to the idea of a Permanent OHQ and have a considerably *clean* record on European industrial collaboration and *Europeanness* in general, ie, they are active members in ESDP missions. The Poles, for their part, have quite rapidly played down earlier rumours accusing them of being Washington's Trojan horse in Europe: their degree of commitment to the ESDP and the EU is exemplary. The recurring problem here is getting some of these countries (especially Germany, Italy and Spain) to increase their spending on capabilities: they have not done it before, so why should they do it now (particularly in an economic downturn)? Here, it has already been argued, lies the supposed beauty of Permanent Structured Cooperation when presented in an ambitious 'Big Six'-type package: a juicy carrot (influence) and a hard stick (exclusion).

Of particular importance is Germany, given her role as France's key partner in the enterprise of developing a political Europe and her growing importance in the area of CFSP-ESDP. Berlin has its own views regarding what the EU's priorities should be in the realm of foreign and security policy. While the Germans do not formally question the importance of military power, they are visibly more eager to emphasise the virtues of a comprehensive approach and to point at Europe's civilian capabilities as the very essence

of the EU's added value. Whereas Berlin might be positive about making further progress towards a European defence market or about initiatives aimed at fostering a European strategic culture (bumping up the status of the ESDC or fostering initiatives for common training), its ideas over the object of such measures are likely to differ from those Paris might have –Germany always focuses on the importance of being *comprehensive*–. Regarding France's insistence on the need to strengthen the mechanisms for common funding of ESDP operations, Berlin is most likely to continue resisting such pressures, much as it has done in the past –the Germans are more *comfortable* with the currently accepted principle of 'costs lie where they fall'–. On the issue of a Permanent OHQ, the Germans believe that the focus should be on the added value of an integrated Civ-Mil command. In this respect, Britain's instincts for modesty and non duplication and Germany's preferences for Civ-Mil solutions give a fairly clear sense of where the boundaries of the debate of a Permanent European OHQ will be.

The French (not least because they do not have much room for manoeuvre) must understand that any progress on the issue of a Permanent OHQ will necessarily go along the lines of the Civ-Mil added value that the EU already has. Not taking into account the EU's ability to provide for integrated Civ-Mil solutions to crises would be most unwise, more so in a context in which setbacks in Afghanistan or Iraq are only reinforcing the perception that coordinated comprehensive solutions are a must in the business of modern crisis management. Beyond this, the bottom line for the French Presidency should be that the EU's existing value in civilian and integrated Civ-Mil crises should not come at the expense of her competence in military crisis management, including the ability to plan, command and conduct operations in highly demanding scenarios. If Europeans are serious about becoming strategically relevant, they cannot surrender military strength and hope that others will just take care of it.

Conclusion: We live in an increasingly complex and interdependent world where old and new threats coexist, a world in which the cohesion of the transatlantic community is not forced upon Europeans and Americans by an overwhelming and single common threat, but which is largely at the mercy of their political will and behaviour, a world in which the EU is, regardless of the many hurdles that might remain on the way, emerging as a political actor with its own identifiable political interests. This calls out for European strategic autonomy, notably in the realm of military capabilities. In the light of the improvement in both the European and transatlantic political context over the last year or so, the French presidency of the EU Council offers a great opportunity to facilitate progress toward European strategic autonomy in the months and years to come. For the French, progress on a substantial number of policy items, the most visible and symbolic being the creation of a Permanent EU OHQ in Brussels, holds the key to progress towards European strategic autonomy. At the political level, the reservations that the British and the Germans have, for different reasons, about EU assertiveness in the military realm are the biggest obstacle on the road to European strategic autonomy.

Given London's leadership in the realm of military capabilities, the French are investing a great deal of time and energy in getting Britain to support the key elements of their ESDP agenda –convinced that if they have the British on board the other Europeans, notably the Germans, will most likely follow–. The French would also do well to mobilise other EU Member States for this purpose, especially Italy and Spain (overtly pro-European and with fewer taboos than Germany might have regarding the use of military force), or Poland – whose commitment to the ESDP and the EU must not only be applauded but also further encouraged–.

France's NATO bid has sent out a signal that is likely to resonate strongly in both Berlin and London: rapprochement with Washington is not a bluff but a consequence of France's growing impatience with Germany's *civilian power* biases and the half-heartedness of the British when it comes to channelling their *forward-looking* strategic culture through the EU. The expectation in Paris is that the Germans will respond (to the prospect of a renewed hard-power Paris-London-Washington trio) by more explicitly embracing the need to strengthen the military side of ESDP. As for the British, they are expected to acknowledge that France's bid to challenge them as Washington's best buddy is for real, and therefore respond with a symmetric move –ie, increasing their share of ESDP–.

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