

'Chirac wants an autonomous European defence capability' from Le Figaro (20 October 1999)

Caption: In its issue of 20 October 1999, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro reports on the French President's determination to equip the European Union with the institutional resources and military capabilities required for an autonomous European defence capability.

Source: Le Figaro. 20.10.1999. Paris. "Chirac veut une défense européenne autonome", auteur:Bollaert, Baudouin , p. 2.

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Priority for the French Presidency of the Union in 2000

Chirac wants an autonomous European defence capability

While not calling the Atlantic Alliance into question, he believes that ‘the time has come for the Fifteen to equip themselves with the military means to react whenever necessary.’

STRASBOURG:

from our special correspondent

Baudouin Bollaert

For those who were still questioning his determination to ensure that Europe acquires a genuinely autonomous defence capability, Jacques Chirac gave a speech in Strasbourg yesterday that put his intentions beyond all doubt. European defence will be the central concern of the French Presidency of the Union that begins in July 2000.

‘The time has come for the European Union to equip itself with the institutional means and military capability required to act whenever necessary, either together with the Atlantic Alliance or autonomously’, the President announced to the delegates at the 45th General Assembly of the Atlantic Treaty Association.

Jacques Chirac was at pains to convince his audience that the proposed course of action was in no way directed against the Atlantic Alliance. ‘To say that we must have either the Alliance or European integration would be historical nonsense,’ he said. ‘Disputing Europe’s right to its own approach would not strengthen NATO. On the contrary, it would weaken the collective efforts of the European allies.’

In short, the President sees the need for ‘a genuine European pillar’ (the word ‘pillar’ is apparently no longer taboo) in an ‘enlarged NATO’ including the countries of Eastern Europe.

After remarking that the US Senate’s refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) scarcely strengthened ‘the necessary cohesion of the Alliance’, Mr Chirac added: ‘I would like to see an end, once and for all, to certain ambivalent statements accusing the Europeans of failure to shoulder their responsibilities in defence matters while criticising them roundly as soon as they prepare to do so.’

Secondly, Jacques Chirac emphasised the ‘new spirit’ displayed, in his view, by France’s main EU partners. ‘What we were able to do in the commercial and monetary fields, we must now achieve in the field of security and defence,’ he said. Not everybody, perhaps, will follow at the same pace, but France will be in the forefront ...

There has been a major leap forward in European defence thinking since the Franco-British Summit held in Saint Malo almost a year ago, but the institutional framework is no clearer. With the EU intent on adopting a ‘common foreign and security policy’ (CFSP), Western European Union (WEU) seemingly soon to be absorbed by the EU, and NATO promising to develop a ‘European defence identity’ within its own ranks, the situation is somewhat confusing.

Eurocorps in Kosovo

The President accordingly devoted the third part of his speech to some of his earlier proposals, such as the creation of a permanent body in Brussels chaired by the new ‘Mr CFSP’, Javier Solana, in which each country would be represented by an ambassador. ‘Every international organisation involved in crisis response has a permanent council,’ he pointed out. So the EU must have one, just like the UN and NATO, backed up by a military committee and a ‘sufficiently high-level’ European military staff headquarters.

The President went on to argue that the Fifteen must set ‘qualitative objectives’ in the fields of intelligence, command and strategic transport. He added that France was engaged in ‘detailed deliberations’ with its main partners on the essential resources that the EU needed in order to ‘carry out its intended tasks in a credible

fashion'. To circumvent the budgetary difficulties, 'priority should be given to those resources which Europe lacks,' he said.

Jacques Chirac is aware of the Union's present limits. But he believes that it will soon be able to deploy a force on a par with KFOR. Now that the five member countries of Eurocorps have decided to convert it into a rapid reaction force, he wants the European military headquarters to be capable of 'carrying out this mission by taking over soon' in Kosovo. When? According to an Élysée source, 'it could be one year from now.'

In short, before giving the floor to NATO's new Secretary-General, George Robertson, the President made it clear that, in his view, European defence must be more than a simple subcontracting mechanism controlled by the Americans.

In reply, Mr Robertson also called for 'greater visibility' of the Fifteen in defence matters. But there were limits, he warned: 'More Europe must not mean less United States.'

B. B.