

'General Bentégeat on a European mission' from Le Figaro (17 January 2007)

Caption: On 17 January 2007, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro publishes an article on General Henri Bentégeat, former French Chief of Defence and Chairman of the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) since 6 November 2006.

Source: Le Figaro. 17.01.2007. Paris. "Le général Bentégeat, en mission européenne", auteur:Bouilhet, Alexandrine , p. 5.

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General Bentégeat on a European mission

Former Chief of Defence Staff in France heads strategic command post in Brussels

From our Brussels correspondent,
Alexandrine Bouilhet

FRENCH GENERAL Henri Bentégeat, former Chief of Defence Staff in France, quietly took up his post at the head of the Military Committee of the European Union in Brussels on 6 November 2006. 'In France, the news of my new mission was received with concern and even incomprehension', admitted Bentégeat, surprised at French ignorance. Little known in Paris, his post is one of the most strategic in Brussels. As much political as it is military, it consists in directing the Union's military operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, the Congo and, soon, in Afghanistan, where Europe is considering the possibility of sending a civilian mission before the summer. By entrusting one of his best generals to the European Union, Jacques Chirac is demonstrating how much importance he attaches to the European defence policy — the only Brussels policy, in his eyes, in which it is worth becoming seriously involved these days.

If the message from the Elysée Palace is to be believed, this policy, however untried it may be, is a key means of counteracting American omnipotence as symbolised by NATO. One revealing sign is that General Bentégeat and his family have moved into a smart district of Brussels, nicknamed the 'Billionaires' Quarter', which also boasts the residence of Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Secretary-General of NATO, with whom he maintains excellent neighbourly relations. Given NATO's resources, however, the new European Chief of Staff plays down his role, refusing to 'compare the incomparable'. Asked, for example, about the benefit of the 'Battle Groups', the EU's latest device for launching rapid and powerful military operations, especially in Africa, Henri Bentégeat dismisses any comparison with the NRF, the NATO Response Force. 'Our Battle Groups are equivalent to only a third of the NRF land component', he points out, emphasising the qualities of the 'very comprehensive' and 'very ambitious' NRF, with its effective strength of 25 000 troops. In short, 'What we really need to do between the EU and the North Atlantic Alliance is to ensure that our approaches are compatible, in other words that they comply with NATO standards'.

The EU 'Operations Centre'

Being a realist, General Bentégeat takes care not to over-exaggerate the start-up, on 1 January, of the famous 'European HQ' which was the cause of a crisis with NATO in 2003, at the time of the war in Iraq. The EU 'Operations Centre' is finally up and running in an ultra-secure building on the Avenue de Cortenbergh, behind the seat of the European Commission. In spite of its bunker-like appearance, General Bentégeat acknowledges that the European HQ remains a 'modest' facility. Manned by a permanent staff of eight, which is increased to 89 in times of crisis, it will not be able to direct an operation involving more than 2 000 troops. If it had been ready sooner, it would have been able to direct the operations in the Congo, which were ultimately conducted from Potsdam in Germany. Although it does not yet possess a perfect system of satellite links, the new European HQ will be tested in June in a crisis-management exercise code-named 'Milex 07'.