

The Path to Full Membership

By *Stefan Simons* in Paris

The French president wants to tie his country's return to full NATO membership to the development of the European Defense Pact. In return, he is offering a stronger French commitment in Afghanistan. The NATO summit in Bucharest will be a testing ground for French foreign policy.

The French Foreign Ministry's pious hope for the upcoming NATO summit in the Romanian capital Bucharest reads almost like the diplomatic squaring of a circle: "Joint success through an emphasis on the importance of trans-Atlantic solidarity, which unites the alliance." In light of capital challenges, the meeting, scheduled for April 2-4, promises to be a political endurance test for the alliance, even though Paris has stressed a course of rapprochement with NATO since President Nicolas Sarkozy took office.



IFRI

Etienne de Durand, director of the Center for Strategic Studies at the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI): The French are "rather lukewarm" about the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe.

In Bucharest, Sarkozy hopes to initiate the return to a full-fledged position in the military alliance, where France's chair has been unoccupied since the days of President Charles de Gaulle. At the same time, he plans to use the high-level forum to announce, in a showy public performance, his country's stronger military commitment in Afghanistan. Paris newspapers predict a French force of about 1,000 troops, whose primary mission will be to provide security in eastern Afghanistan.

This pledge of military assistance is nothing if not calculated. "The president hopes that France's support of the NATO mission will lead, in return, to progress on the common European Defense Pact," says Etienne de Durand, director of the Center for Strategic Studies at the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), in Paris. According to Durand, many neighboring countries, as well as the United States, still view the project, dubbed the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), as a "French Trojan horse" -- or even suspect that it is an attempt to torpedo NATO. "Sarkozy's vision, on the other hand, emphasizes transparency and support for NATO, and reintegration into the alliance structures in order to promote the ESDP project, especially with the British."

Bitter Resistance in Paris

Sarkozy also aims to establish a new basis for France's long-troubled relationship with the United States. "He wants the interminable dispute over the war in Iraq and its consequences," Durand says, "to finally give way to a healthy relationship."

In Bucharest, France and the other NATO partners will also be discussing the group's redefinition. For 15 years, the alliance has been searching for a new *raison d'être*. The defense alliance, originally established as a counterweight to the Communist threat posed by the Warsaw Pact, has been busily gathering additional responsibilities since the collapse of the Soviet Union, "partly because it is always easier to create large administrations than to make them disappear," IFRI director Durand sardonically notes. Initially NATO discovered these new obligations in the Balkans, but Washington has consistently seen the group as more than a geographically limited alliance for Europe. Instead, the current lame-duck US administration is pursuing an old goal with its new missions: worldwide "burden-sharing," in other words, the redistribution of military burdens among the partners in the Atlantic alliance, even beyond the old operational areas -- and all the way to Afghanistan. It is an idea that was still met with bitter resistance in Paris in the 1990s.

Naturally, the government in Paris is skeptical about US visions of NATO playing a more global role. And, of course, Sarkozy has distanced himself from what Durand calls the "minimalist intentions" of his Socialist predecessor Francois Mitterrand, who saw NATO and US protection as a last-ditch security lifeline for Europe.

As long as the European Union is still busy with its own problems and unable to shoulder strategic responsibilities, NATO will unavoidably play the role of a military and political transition organization with a steadily growing Eastern European membership.

"Expansion Fatigue"

"The expansion has been conducted extremely quietly so far," says Durand. "Neither in Europe nor in Paris did anyone consider the consequences of this growth. NATO expansion and democracy went hand-in-hand." Since then, "expansion

fatigue" has taken hold in Europe, but not in Washington. There are growing doubts over further expanding NATO beyond the current Eastern border, stretching from the Baltic states through Poland and Bulgaria. The Bucharest summit meeting could see the alliance voting to accept Albania, Croatia and Macedonia as new members. But when it comes to Georgia and Ukraine, French foreign policy officials are increasingly doubtful whether NATO can truly benefit from the membership of these former Soviet republics. "Enthusiasm? Guess again," says Durand. "The French are rather lukewarm about this expansion."

And for good reason: Georgia's dowry would include internal strife, while the Russian minority in Ukraine could spell trouble for the alliance. Besides, it is still very unclear whether and when the new NATO members would be in a position to do their part for the defense alliance. And an alliance without a military core runs the risk of losing credibility, warns Durand. He recommends, as a possible solution, an extended application period for the NATO hopefuls. The question remains whether one of the European leaders would openly defy Washington in Bucharest. France is betting on tactical restraint, even though Paris is not necessarily in favor of the new additions. "Under the current circumstances, do we want to oppose the United States? And do we want to give the impression that we are now giving in to pressure from Russia?" Durand asks. "The answer to both questions is no."

Thus, for tactical reasons alone, there will be no revolt among the Europeans against US expansion plans -- after former Russian President Vladimir Putin spent months openly campaigning against the NATO expansion. In taking this position, Moscow, ironically, is doing the European skeptics of NATO expansion a disservice. "Of course, we must ask ourselves whether we can afford to continue putting Russia off in the long term," says Durand. "On the other hand, NATO cannot allow Moscow to veto new members."

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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