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NATO AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE

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Last autumn the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, initiated a debate on European defence questions. Its aim is to ensure that Europe plays a greater role in contributing to its own security and at the same time to strengthen NATO. Is this a paradox? I believe not.

Today Europeans recognise that they need to take greater responsibility for their own security. Their record—as evidenced by Kosovo—is far from perfect. Of course, European nations need to be ready to respond swiftly when our own interests are directly threatened. But we also need to do so when crises—particularly those on the European continent—require humanitarian or rescue efforts, peacekeeping or even more robust crisis management tasks, including peacemaking. For various reasons, NATO will not wish directly to engage in every European crisis. When it does not, the collective response to these ‘Petersberg’ tasks is currently the responsibility of the Western European Union (WEU); the European Union Amsterdam Treaty states that the EU will avail itself of the WEU in order to carry them out.

So what is lacking? Kosovo has demonstrated that the existing mechanisms do not work well. And recent WEU efforts to respond to EU requests to run a de-mining assistance mission in Croatia and extend the WEU Police Mission in Albania have shown just how cumbersome the procedures are. We need to do better. On the one hand, we need a means of efficient decision-making within the Common Foreign and Security Policy pillar of the EU that will allow the EU to speak with a more united and influential voice. On the other hand, we need the ability to take prompt and effective military action. In the former case, the Amsterdam Treaty has put certain mechanisms in place, such as the office of High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy and a Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit. In the latter case, in 1996 NATO Ministers declared in Berlin that NATO was ready to provide assets and capabilities to the WEU for European-led operations. Such ideas could be developed to give Europe the means to undertake its own actions in the area of crisis management. It also introduced the concept of separable but not separate capabilities within the Alliance that could be deployed under European auspices.

Naturally too the views of NATO partners who are not EU members will be very important. Such countries anyway have a say in the use of NATO common assets; but we trust that as European nations they will wish to go further and actively support the goal of European defence, by participating in relevant operations and associated decision-making. As the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, said in his address to the North Atlantic Council on 8 December 1998, “As we take this project forward, we do not just seek the tolerance of NATO colleagues who are not members of the European Union; we want their enthusiastic support for the enterprise in which we are engaged and

also their participation wherever it is appropriate.”

As we enter into discussion on more effective crisis management by Europeans, a key constant is our commitment to NATO. This will remain the cornerstone of European defence and security, and the foundation of our collective defence as set out in article five of the North Atlantic Treaty; this was acknowledged in the Amsterdam Treaty. NATO’s article five provision will continue to apply to NATO Allies, and to these countries only. Major operations relating to European defence, even in the field of crisis management, will no doubt continue to be undertaken by NATO; our initiative relates only to occasions when non-European allies may not wish to be involved. And we have no intention of undermining NATO, or of attempting to duplicate its capabilities or structures.

In due course institutional arrangements to translate European collective political will into effective military capability will need to be discussed. Some partners have argued for the merger of the WEU into the EU. An alternative is to develop a more direct EU-NATO relationship. The watchword for us will be what provides the strongest capabilities for both Europe and the Alliance.

Initial reactions to these ideas have been positive. The Anglo-French joint declaration at St Malo on 4 December 1998 called on the Union to develop the capacity for autonomous action and the means to effect this. It also made clear that one objective of both Britain and France was to enhance the vitality of NATO. The Americans have welcomed the initiative. Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, in her statement to the North Atlantic Council on 8 December 1998 said, “The United States welcomes a more capable European partner, with modern, flexible military forces capable of putting out fires in Europe’s own backyard.” She also rightly pointed out that the key to a successful initiative is to enhance practical military capabilities.

In the weeks leading up to the Washington Summit in April marking the fiftieth anniversary of NATO, my government will be engaged in a comprehensive round of meetings with partners, to discuss our ideas in depth and listen to the views of all concerned. We hope that Britain and Turkey, which share many common perspectives, will continue to work closely together on this issue, both before and beyond the Washington Summit.
