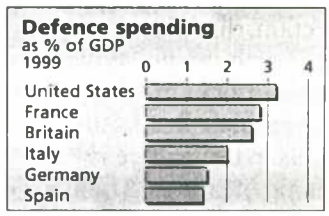
The European way of defence



On the cheap doesn't pay

IF THE road to a stronger European defence identity could be paved with good intentions, this week's European Union summit would have laid out all necessary milestones along the way. The EU's leaders insisted (under prodding by France) that they could make their own defence decisions, while also agreeing (under prodding by Britain) to keep shoulder-to-shoulder with NATO. The EU 15 have agreed (under prodding by America, worried that they would march off in a huddle) to consult regularly with six other European countries, including Poland, Turkey and Norway, who are members of NATO but not of the EU, and also with nine other potential EU recruits. By the end of this year the EU hopes to have set up co-ordination mechanisms with NATO, whose equipment it will need to borrow for even the modest Europeans-only missions it has in mind, and started mustering the 60,000 troops it wants to have at the ready by 2003. But from here on the going gets a lot tougher.

There is no doubt that rich and militarily capable Europeans ought to be shouldering more of the alliance's military burdens, both in Europe and beyond. They were rightly embarrassed, during NATO's Kosovo campaign last year, that America had the most advanced equipment, did the lion's share of the bombing raids over Serbia, and then found most ships and planes to ferry in the peacekeepers. Encouragingly, some of the bigger European states, particularly France, more tentatively Spain and Italy, and most recently Germany, have started to follow Britain in training more professional, rapidly deployable soldiers, available for real soldiering, not just barracks duty. Discouragingly, even in Britain, which along with France has led the new European defence effort, there is little sign that the money will be found to do it well.

Finding enough well-trained frontline soldiers to field a force of up to 60,000 for up to a year out of Europe's 2m-strong armed forces ought not to be that hard. But the EU's pledging conference planned for November is supposed to spot other gaps in defences too. That is easy. They are being jointly identified with America in NATO: the need for more "smart" weapons and equipment, certainly, but also ships and aircraft able to move and supply a fighting force swiftly, more reconnaissance aircraft, and the means for all the national contingents to talk to each other on compatible equipment and use each other's ammunition and supplies.

Investment in these sorts of capabilities, carried out in co-ordinated fashion, would help strengthen both NATO and the EU. The trouble is that the money needed is unlikely to be found simply by rattling existing defence budgets, as Germany, one of the lowest spenders, was still doing this week. New money will be needed up-front to buy the ships and aircraft Europeans lack, and more imaginative arrangements need to be found for pooling some activities—for example, in logistics—to avoid wasteful duplication.

Credibility on the front line

When Britain and France first pushed for a stronger European defence identity through the EU rather than simply by making a better European effort within NATO, the biggest danger seemed to be from Euro-exuberance: excited talk of EU "autonomy" in defence matters raised fears that, instead of complementing NATO, the Europeans would go their separate way, thereby endangering the continent-stabilising link with America. That could still happen, if in the NATO-EU talks the EU insists on deciding everything itself first, expecting the rest of NATO to fall in obediently later.

But now a different danger looms: that by failing to find enough money the EU will fall short even of its own officially more modest defence expectations. European efforts to do NATO defence on the cheap, relying too much on American help, have caused irritation for years. Attempts to do the EU's defence the same way would only pile on the frustrations, while undermining the EU's credibility all round.

Putin à la Pinochet?

Maybe that's not how Russia's new leader sees himself. But don't let him think he'll win western approval if it is

THREE months after Vladimir Putin won Russia's presidency, some ugly things have been happening in his benighted country. The new man, a former KGB officer, has been cracking his whip. He has sounded belligerent towards several of Russia's former vassal states on its rim, and shows little sign of softening towards Chechnya, the rebel republic devastated at his command. He has told the leaders of the outlying regions within Russia that they must step back into the Kremlin's line—or else. And he has frightened the press by resorting to the bullying of media groups and journalists critical of the new regime. Most notably, the owner of the only independent nationwide television station, Vladimir Gusinsky, was arrested earlier this month, and freed without charge a few days later, amid flimsy-sounding allegations of embezzlement. Virtually the entire country presumed that Mr Putin, who breezily denied foreknowledge of the arrest, simply wanted to silence the voice of opposition.

Yet, despite all this, it is still possible to paint a less bleak picture. After eight years with the wayward Boris Yeltsin fitfully in charge, Russians—it can be argued—need an ener-