

Greece blocks accord with Turkey

By Judy Dempsey, Diplomatic Correspondent in Brussels

The European Union's plans to give its 60,000-strong rapid reaction force access to Nato's planning and assets were set back at the Laeken summit after Greece blocked a recent accord forged between Turkey and diplomats from the UK and US.

EU leaders had been hoping to clinch a deal with Athens, ending the last chapter in a dispute that has plagued the development of their European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

But Constantinos Simitis, Greek foreign minister, said he could "not accept" what was agreed with Turkey. "It undermines the autonomy of the EU," he added.

Diplomats said Greece's objections had more to do with domestic opinion and with saving face. "Greece has only 10 days to accept the 'Ankara document', which took two years to achieve," said an EU ambassador.

Greece, however, is also seeking assurances that Turkey, a leading member of Nato and EU candidate, will

not block an ESDP operation in the Balkans - a region seen by Athens as critical to its security and stability.

The fresh dispute with Greece centres on the Ankara Document reached by diplomats, which broke a two-year-old deadlock between Turkey and the Europeans. At the heart of that dispute was a concern by Turkey that ESDP could be used in areas regarded as Turkey's security interests and that it could be used against a Nato ally.

Turkey threatened to use its veto powers in Nato to

block the Europeans access to Nato assets unless it was given a greater say in the event of the EU carrying out a mission independent of Nato - issues all resolved in the Ankara document.

The disagreement with Greece will not in the short term disrupt plans by the Europeans to carry out small-scale operations for which they have the capabilities.

Indeed, at Laeken, EU leaders declared ESDP "operational", declaring it was ready to "conduct some crisis management operations".

It has its 136-member military staff in place and a policy unit for assessing crises, and diplomats say it could easily take over the Nato-led operation in Macedonia, a European-led mission.

The problem for ESDP becomes more serious if the EU wants to carry out large operations independent of Nato - not just because the bedrock of ESDP rests on its access to Nato's planning and other assets on a case-by-case basis. The Europeans want to avoid going down the costly road of duplication.