

Greece blocks reaction force plans

F.T
15/12/01

By Judy Dempsey

Greece was last night still blocking European Union plans to launch a 60,000-strong rapid reaction force ahead of today's Laeken declaration that is supposed to declare the European Security and Defence Policy "operational".

The Greek objections, which diplomats are still hoping can be resolved by the end of the summit today, are a blow to the EU.

"Maybe Greece needs just a bit more time to win over public opinion and the parliament to an agreement that Athens thinks was foisted on them, or it has serious reservations with the accord," said an EU military official.

In any event, the EU had wanted to use the summit to settle once and for all its relationship with Nato. Indeed, this was the basis of an accord thrashed out two weeks ago by British and US diplomats with Turkey - which Greece has now refused to accept.

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The agreement gave the Europeans automatic access to Nato planning and the alliance's other assets on a case by case basis.

The Europeans need such access, as they have neither the military capabilities nor planning to carry out an operation that would entail more than 30,000 soldiers.

Furthermore, it would have been too expensive to duplicate any of Nato's assets, particularly since defence expenditure among the EU's 15 member states is still considered too low to finance a substantial EU-led mission.

Turkey, a leading Nato member and EU candidate, had for two years insisted it be given more of a say in how the EU carries out missions independent of Nato. It threatened otherwise to use its Nato veto to block European access to Nato assets. It also sought watertight assurances that under no circumstances, nor in any crisis, would ESDP be used against a Nato ally. With that agreement now forged, EU diplomats had hoped the other 15 member states would accept it.

However, the Greek government this week raised several objections at last Monday's meeting of EU foreign ministers and again at yesterday's summit of EU leaders. Greece, said diplomats, wants assurances that the deal with Ankara will not undermine the EU's autonomy in making decisions over any missions.

In addition, even though Greece is a member of the EU and Nato, it wants guarantees that since ESDP will not be used against a Nato ally, then Nato must not be used against a member of the alliance either.

"The second objection is very difficult to understand," said one EU military official. "After all, Greece, like Turkey, can exercise a veto in Nato and so block operations if it chooses. And Greece is also a member of the EU, which also gives it a power of veto."