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EUROPE

SEVILLE SUMMIT ENLARGEMENT NEGOTIATIONS TAKE A NEW TWIST AS TURKISH LEADER SAYS HIS COUNTRY NEEDS MOTIVATION FOR REFORM

Turkey seeks launch date for accession talks

By Judy Dempsey in Seville

European Union enlargement negotiations took a new twist at the Seville summit after Turkey demanded a date for starting accession talks during December's Copenhagen summit.

The request by Ahmet Necdet Sezer, Turkish president, is likely to put additional pressure on Denmark, which next week takes over from Spain the EU's six-

monthly rotating presidency.

Denmark is saddled with one of the most ambitious agendas of any presidency. By the Copenhagen summit, it intends to complete enlargement negotiations with up to 10 candidate countries.

Yet member states are divided over the financing of enlargement. Ireland has still to ratify the Nice Treaty, which sets out institutional changes required

for enlargement. And prospects for reaching a settlement over the divided island of Cyprus are uncertain.

Since January, the United Nations has been hosting direct talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders, hoping to reach a settlement before Copenhagen.

Although the EU has agreed to accept a divided island, the last thing it wants is to inherit a dispute with the potential for desta-

bilising the region. Diplomats said Turkey, which occupied the northern part of the island in 1974 after the Greek junta tried to launch a coup, will try to link concessions over Cyprus with receiving a date for starting enlargement negotiations.

Their real concern is that enlargement, Cyprus and Turkey's demand for a date, the three issues the EU has wanted to keep separate from each other, could be

used by Ankara as trade-offs ahead of Copenhagen.

In Seville, Mr Sezer said "a date should be fixed for launching full membership negotiations". If there was no definite date, "it could damage the motivation for reform in Turkey. The sincerity of the EU will be questioned by the Turkish population".

Germany and other countries oppose giving Turkey any date.

To make matters more complicated for Denmark is the defence issue. Denmark has an opt out on EU-related military or defence issues. This means Greece, holders of the presidency from next January, will chair all the EU's Political and Security Committees specifically related to defence.

Yet Greece and Turkey are at odds over any military operations carried out by the EU's European Security

and Defence Policy (ESDP).

The wrangling over ESDP does not bode well for the EU. With Greece in the defence chair from July 1, it will have to negotiate with Turkey over resolving the long-running EU-Nato dispute. "I promise you," said an EU foreign minister, "the next six months will not be boring."

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Self-service

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The European Union is, after all these years, still struggling to balance national interest with the common good. The shocks that electorates have recently delivered to mainstream politicians made it unsurprising that government heads spent this weekend's Seville summit watching their backs. Over the next six months, the challenges will be tougher, and the need to be far-sighted all the more urgent.

It was an unambitious summit that produced an uninspiring result, dominated by fear of voters back home. Thus France's President Jacques Chirac, while newly empowered, won leeway in controlling his budget deficit, watered down Spanish-British plans to get tough with non-EU countries over illegal immigration, and fought off German and British proposals for some majority voting at future summits.

He was not alone in guarding his perceived national interest. Bertie Ahern, Ireland's prime minister, won backing for a declaration that his country's military neutrality will not be undermined by Europe's defence initiative. Greece won assurances that Nato assets would not be used to threaten its interests - provoking renewed objections from Turkey. And several countries sought to modify reforms of the council of ministers that they feared would downgrade their foreign ministers.

True, the summit gave impetus to the search for a common asylum and immigration policy. The setting of timetables should help to concentrate minds, though for three years good intentions have been thwarted by sensitivities about national sovereignty when it comes to detailed negotiations. Furthermore, the leaders are putting most of their efforts into putting up walls against asylum seekers, rather than trying to persuade their publics of the need for a more rational strategy of managed migration.

The summit's decision to revise by December the Dublin convention, determining which EU state should handle an asylum application, adds another goal to the daunting list facing the Danish presidency - fishing, the mid-term farm policy review and the climax of enlargement negotiations with 10 candidate countries. It is a lot for a small country, particularly with fear of another Irish referendum defeat over Nice overhanging it.

The European Council agreed to streamline future summits and gave itself the task of setting long-term strategic goals. Countries such as France, Britain and Spain want the Council, rather than the Commission, to be in the driving seat as the EU reshapes its future. National leaders, if they want to justify that, must show they can look beyond self-interest.