

Greece adds to dispute on Turkey's role in EU force

By Kerin Hope in Athens

Costas Simitis, prime minister of Greece, has raised the stakes in a dispute over the terms of Turkey's role in a planned European Union rapid reaction force, by securing support for his position from opposition political parties before today's Nato summit.

In an unusual show of consensus, Costas Karamanlis, leader of the right-of-centre New Democracy party, publicly backed the government, which has been blocking Nato from co-operating with European Union officials over the issue.

After a meeting with Mr Simitis last Friday, he echoed the prime minister's objections to assurances given to Ankara by Nato that the force would not use automatic access to Nato assets to undermine Turkey's interests. Greece's small leftwing parties endorsed this view.

Greece's hardline stance threatens to derail the EU's plans to launch its first military operation in Macedonia this year. The peacekeeping operation "Amber Fox", currently led by Nato, was to be taken over by the Europeans under the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) in October.

Turkey, a member of Nato but not the EU, was reluctant to give the force the access it needs to Nato planning and assets, and worries it may be used against it in the strategically important Aegean Sea or Cyprus. Mr

Simitis's willingness to stir nationalist feeling over ESDP follows unsuccessful efforts to persuade Javier Solana, the EU foreign policy chief, that Greece should be given similar assurances because of its differences with Turkey over sovereignty in the Aegean Sea.

"We don't accept Nato's "Ankara text" and we'll fight to make sure it doesn't pass, because we don't want Greece to have problems in the future," the prime minister told Socialist supporters in Lamia, a town in central Greece, at the weekend.

Mr Simitis's switch to populist tactics over ESDP also reflects domestic difficulties. Socialist fears of heavy losses in October's local government elections have triggered a debate about whether Mr Simitis should lead the party into a general election expected next year.

An opinion poll yesterday showed the Socialists trailing New Democracy by 8.8 percentage points, although Mr Simitis held an 0.8 point lead over Mr Karamanlis. George Papandreou, the foreign minister, is the most popular Socialist politician according to polls and the most likely candidate to succeed Mr Simitis. He has been seeking a compromise with Greece's EU partners over ESDP, but faces opposition from Yannis Papantoniou, the defence minister and a rival for the party leadership.

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