



Joschka Fischer takes time off from the meeting of foreign ministers taking place in Rhodes yesterday

STRATEGY MEETING

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Greece calls for EU policy to include the use of force

By Judy Dempsey in Rhodes

Greece yesterday called on Europe to develop a security doctrine that would include the option of using force.

The direct challenge by Greece, holders of the European Union's rotating presidency, was made to foreign ministers meeting in Rhodes in a bid to repair the transatlantic relationship and start bridging their own divisions caused by the war in Iraq.

George Papandreu, Greek foreign minister, said Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, would today be given a green light to start developing such a doctrine, possibly in time for the EU-US summit in Washington next month. Before then, he said, the issue will be debated at another foreign ministers' meeting later this month and at next month's EU summit in Thessalonika. "We hope to have some framework in place ahead of Washington," said Mr Papandreu.

Several countries, led by Britain, the Netherlands, France said they supported the Greek initiative. Jack Straw, British foreign secretary, last night welcomed the move.

But diplomats warned that the real test would be at what stage EU member states would be prepared to sanction the use of force. "These are hard questions we have to ask," said Mr Papandreu.

Germany also supports the idea of security doctrine but, as the Iraq crisis showed, Berlin would have deep reservations in accepting any use of force if it was not sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.

Joschka Fischer, German foreign minister, was in favour of the EU security doctrine. "It was time for this to happen," he said.

There is a growing consensus among the 15 EU member states – and the 10 candidate countries who for the first time attended this informal meeting – that Europe had to develop a security doctrine to deal with the threat from weapons of mass destruction.

Diplomats said the Iraq crisis showed that because Europe had no common position on such weapons or the use of force, it allowed the US to set the agenda and to divide Europe over the issue.

"Iraq was the turning point for the transatlantic relationship," said Mr Papandreu.

Diplomats said the growing concern among EU countries is that if they fail to establish a doctrine they will again be powerless to influence the US administration. Many fear that Iran might become a target because of Tehran's alleged non-compliance with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Mr Straw also said that plans to boost Europe's defence capabilities must continue to underpin and not challenge Nato.

On Tuesday, Germany, France, Luxembourg and Belgium had held a mini-summit calling for deeper military integration by proposing their own command headquarters for military operations outside the Nato arena – a move said to have dismayed Washington and London.

The informal meeting agreed in principle to send diplomats back to Baghdad, now that the US has announced the end of hostilities.

The foreign ministers also discussed the Middle East "road map" for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

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