

Sarkozy Trip Gets Boost as Washington Salutes Reinvented NATO Role

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President Nicolas Sarkozy will today complete a two-day visit to New York and Washington, at a time of insecurity in Europe about the EU's relationship with the Obama administration, and flux in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato).

"I know people don't always understand how the EU functions, but you have to realise it's comprised of 27 countries who fought each other for centuries," Mr Sarkozy told students at Columbia University yesterday. To complicate matters, he added, "Within the 27, there are 16 of us who decided to use the same currency."

The Obama administration's impatience with or indifference to the EU became obvious at the beginning of February, when Mr Obama decided to skip a US-EU summit scheduled for Madrid in May. "The Americans thought European decision-making would be streamlined with the Lisbon Treaty," says a European official here. "They don't understand why there are still three presidents of Europe attending international meetings."

Mr Barroso, the president of the commission, made a plaintive call for "a more dynamic partnership between the two sides of the Atlantic" on March 26th. To win back the Americans' affection, Mr Barroso concluded, the EU needs to adopt two principles: "strategic priorities over endless lists of issues, and substance over process. The summits must be agenda-setting and decision-making events." But it may be too late. "On big issues, the Americans have decided it's easier to deal with the 'big three'," says a European diplomat. This was virtually confirmed by Mr Sarkozy yesterday when he noted that he, Gordon Brown and Angela Merkel talk with Mr Obama by video-conference every month.

"This is a reaffirmation of the longstanding pattern in the Atlantic Alliance since the 1950s," says David Yost, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate Academy in Monterey. The "quad" or "Berlin Four" determined the fate of Germany during the cold war and continued to dominate Nato policy, Dr Yost said. Now the same de facto directorate is the dominant factor in EU-US relations.

France rejoined the Nato integrated command a year ago, after a 43-year absence started by Gen Charles de Gaulle. "As long as we weren't in it, there was a suspicion of incomplete entente," Mr Sarkozy said yesterday.

Washington rewarded France for its renewed Nato engagement by assigning Gen Stéphane Abrial, a former chief of staff of the French air force, to one of Nato's top posts: commander of Allied Command Transformation (ACT). Gen Abrial is "co-located" with the US Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Virginia.

“Gen Abrial is the first non-American Nato strategic commander,” retired general and former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft noted when introducing Abrial at the “Commanders Series” of lectures at the Atlantic Council here in Washington earlier this month. “Not since Lafayette in 1781 have we had a French officer in command down in the tidewater of Virginia,” Scowcroft added, calling Gen Abrial “the embodiment of France’s full return to the alliance’s integrated military structure”.

At a summit in Lisbon next November, Nato will announce its new strategic concept to update the one last defined 11 years ago. Gen Abrial’s command is in essence a Nato think tank for transforming and modernising Nato forces and doctrine.

In addition to its historic role of ensuring security in Europe, the alliance has taken on three additional functions, Dr Yost notes in the current issue of *International Affairs* : “opposing the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction; supporting EU-led crisis management operations; and serving as a general ‘toolbox’ for ad hoc security operation”.

The EU and Nato have sought to increase co-operation since the 2003 “Berlin Plus” agreement. The subject was an important theme in Gen Abrial’s talk. “It makes little economic or operational sense for Nato and the European Defence Agency not to better co-ordinate our efforts,” he said.

“Both organisations . . . have much to gain by better synergising their resources and complementary fields of expertise.”

Frederick Kempe, the president of the Atlantic Council, said, “A lot of the enthusiasm in this town and elsewhere about a French general at ACT had to do with the fact that perhaps this would open the way for strengthening Nato-EU relations on a practical level.”

European defence and Nato “cannot be, in my mind, totally reunited, since the missions aren’t the same,” Gen Abrial said. “But they could be synchronised.”

The presence of neutral countries like Ireland was “not a problem”, Gen Abrial said. Without naming them, he implied enmity between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus was the greatest impediment.

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