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CAN INTERNATIONAL FORCES RESCUE THE ROAD MAP?

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Ongoing actions by Palestinian terrorist organizations to thwart implementation of the road map have prompted many observers to advocate the dispatch of an international force to stabilize developments on the ground and permit movement on the Israeli-Palestinian political front. Notwithstanding a clear lack of enthusiasm in the White House for this idea, it is therefore appropriate to consider the potential contribution of two such emerging entities: the European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF) and NATO Reaction Force (NRF).

In the Nice Treaty of December 2000, the European Union agreed to create a 60,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force. The ERRF's missions were defined as "humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking." In May 2003, EU Defense Ministers meeting in Brussels declared the Force to be operational. The ERRF is already involved in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo and has formally assumed responsibility from NATO for peacekeeping in Macedonia. In 2004, it is scheduled to take over responsibility for NATO's 17,000-strong operation in Bosnia. And Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, informed the Brussels meeting of a request by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

that the EU also contribute troops to a peacekeeping force in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

At the same time, European defense officials admit that the ERRF still lacks critical capabilities, including air-to-air refueling; combat search-and-rescue; nuclear, biological and chemical protection; special operations forces; theater missile defense; unmanned aerial vehicles; space-based assets and strategic airlift; and maintenance and logistics assets. Moreover, dedicated troop levels must reach at least 180,000, and perhaps 240,000, before an active duty force of 60,000 can be maintained over the course of a full year. And the \$6-8 billion budget needed for ERRF missions has not yet been allocated. Finally, intra-European and trans-Atlantic rifts provoked by the war in Iraq have not yet healed.

All this suggests that the ERRF is still only an emerging reality. For it to become a truly effective and relevant peacekeeping force, two main obstacles need to be overcome: the gap in capabilities, and the political disunity and confusion in Europe, exacerbated by the "double-enlargement" of the EU and NATO.

The NATO Reaction Force initiative was launched at last November's Prague Summit. American proponents of the initiative speak in

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terms of a force of some 20,000 troops, backed by substantial air and naval support. And by "rapid" they mean an ability to deploy within seven to thirty days for "search and destroy" missions against terrorist organizations and bases. This is a very ambitious goal, perhaps prompted by the lessons drawn from the war in Afghanistan; according to some NATO officials, the lack of a rapid reaction capability was one reason why the United States declined NATO's help in its campaign to oust al-Qaeda from that country.

The NRF project has rather demanding target dates: October 2004 for initial capability and October 2006 for full-fledged operational status. Initial capability may imply the allocation of existing special forces and other elite elements of NATO members' current military establishments. However, it remains to be seen if and how NATO will manage to construct a self-sustaining force, ready for worldwide operations.

In this context, the attitudes of the accession countries of NATO and the EU merit particular attention. The Czech Republic, for example, was approached by the US and NATO with a proposal to form the first multinational NRF battalion for defense against weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, this subject is on the agenda of the ERRF. The Czechs will have to balance competing demands for their WMD defense resources. For its part, Poland offered 1500 soldiers to the ERRF but remains very careful not to be implicated in disputes between EU, with its plans for the European Security and Defense Policy, and NATO, with its post-Iraq agenda.

Based on recent developments, it is possible to make a preliminary judgment about the suitability of these two international forces as conflict-management mechanisms in the present stage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a "low intensity combat force," the European Rapid Reaction Force seems better designed to carry out monitoring and truce observation roles. Although it is not yet fully equipped – for

example, it still suffers from a severe lack of airlift capability -- it could assemble the needed formations for a mission assigned such a high priority by the European Union. But at least two important conditions need to be met before the ERRF can be introduced into the region: (1) Phase I of the road map must be truly underway following a proven effort by the Palestinian Authority to stop terrorist attacks and curb the ability of terrorist organizations to continue their preparations for future attacks; and, (2) the Israeli army must have withdrawn to its pre-September 2000 positions and a serious effort must have begun to dismantle unauthorized ("illegal") settlements. Even a ceasefire of six months may not be sufficient to meet these conditions. And even if it is, there is a further obstacle: the deep-seated Israeli distrust of the EU as biased in favor of the Palestinians.

NATO is less exposed to this disability. On the other hand, the NATO Response Force, if built according to American specifications as a "high intensity combat force," will be more appropriate for "search and destroy" operations against bases of terrorist organizations in countries like Indonesia, Yemen and Morocco. Even if the NRF meets the ambitious timetable set for it, it will not be optimally designed for the task of monitoring an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire. If Phase I of the road map is accomplished, there will be no need for an NRF-type fighting force. Conversely, if there is no progress on the road map, the nature of the terrorist organizations and their methods of operation will limit the NRF's ability to cope with the problem. Instead, the NRF will simply provoke violent opposition from Palestinians convinced that an American-led force is little more than a substitute for the Israeli army.

All in all, it appears that in the current circumstances, neither the ERRF nor the NRF provides a viable solution to the problem of rescuing the road map from those determined not to follow it.