

'Europe is asserting its influence on every front' from Le Figaro (1 September 2006)

Caption: In its issue of 1 September 2006, to mark the occasion of the informal meeting between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the European Union, held in Lappeenranta in Finland, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro reports on the diplomatic and military efforts undertaken by the Union worldwide, particularly in Iran, Lebanon and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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Europe is asserting its influence on every front

Diplomacy

The Foreign Ministers of the Twenty-Five are meeting informally today and tomorrow at Lappeenranta in Finland, with Iran, Lebanon and Congo on the agenda.

From our Brussels correspondent

Europe's Foreign Ministers are meeting in Finland today with their heads held high. Proud of having managed to line up 7 000 troops to police the ceasefire in Lebanon, the EU Ministers will be trying to adopt a strategy for breaking the deadlock over Iran's nuclear programme. They will also be discussing the involvement of EU troops in Congo between the two rounds of the parliamentary and presidential elections. Iran, Lebanon, Congo: as the summer draws to a close, Europe is asserting its influence on all fronts, and quite successfully, too.

The EU's military involvement in the Middle East marks a historic turning point for EU foreign policy. 'After having long been a "payer" of economic assistance [in the Middle East], the European Union is now showing its willingness to become a "player"', says Italy's Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema. By urging its neighbours to get involved in the Middle East, Italy hopes that the EU will be able to bring its full weight to bear in the search for a settlement to the Palestinian question, 'the mother of all conflicts'. Skilfully and quietly, Italy has seized the initiative on the European diplomatic stage, which has been called upon to put the Arab case without antagonising the USA.

On Iran, closely monitored by Italy, the European troika (France, Germany and the UK) is continuing to talk to Teheran, but is not finding it easy. Less hardline than the USA, the EU is persevering with its 'carrot and stick' approach which, although it has not hitherto prevented Teheran from pushing ahead with its nuclear programme, has at least dissuaded the USA from military intervention and steered it towards economic sanctions instead. Despite provocation from Iran, the Europeans have managed to keep America onside, and thus will try to pursue this same line for as long as possible.

EU torn between different capitals

In Congo, where the first free elections since independence are being held, Europe has deployed a sizeable force of 5 000 troops. At the end of the first round of voting, some 50 people died in violent clashes, but the European force, commanded by Germany, managed to play the role of impartial peacemaker. 'If there is now calm in Kinshasa, it is thanks to determined EU action and in particular EUFOR: I am proud to be European', General Philippe Morillon, the head of the EU's Observation Mission on the ground, said recently. 'Had it not been for EUFOR's reinforcements, the disturbances in Kinshasa would have been really bad', acknowledges the Belgian Foreign Minister, Karel de Gucht, warning that there would now be a 'difficult period' between the two rounds.

With a presence now on every front, from the Balkans to Afghanistan (where they make up the bulk of NATO forces) and from Africa to Indonesia, Europeans are beginning to forget their divisions from the time of the Iraq war. But their intrinsic weaknesses remain. Torn between a number of different capitals, the EU has no army of its own, no Foreign Affairs Minister, no seat on the Security Council. Its lacklustre diplomacy often appears to be directed by US strategy. 'Generally speaking, Europe has a reactive attitude: it fills a vacuum and limits damage caused by a policy that it has had no hand in shaping', laments Pierre Defraigne, Director of Eur-Ifri in Brussels. 'In the Middle East, Europe has always paid the bill. Now it is also paying with troops! But the strategy remains American and Israeli', he concludes, convinced that European military involvement will not reverse such an ingrained trend.

Alexandrine Bouilhet