Wanted: one terrible swift sword

WHEN European foreign ministers met for dinner in Naples on November 28th they were in an awkward position. The agenda topic was the draft European Union constitution's plan for a common defence policy. But news had just broken of a tripartite deal on defence struck in Berlin between Britain, France and Germany. The British refused to confirm details of the deal, saying that they still needed to consult “key allies and partners”. The key allies, stuffed with Thanksgiving turkey, were proving elusive.

By the end of the meeting, the details were out: Britain has accepted French and German demands that the EU should be able to plan and run its own military operations. But the deal is hedged with many provisos, allowing the British to insist that NATO’s role as the main security organisation for Europe remains unchallenged.

Earlier this year France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg proposed that the EU should set up its own military headquarters in Tervuren, outside Brussels. This prospect was greeted with alarm in Washington, because it might have been the embryo of an EU military alliance that could supplant NATO. Now the Tervuren idea has been squashed. Instead the EU’s military staff (some 150 officers in the Cortenberg building in Brussels) will be beefed up by a further 30 who can run a military operation.

Britain has also established that an EU-controlled military operation would be a last resort. If NATO chooses not to be formally involved in a military venture, EU countries may run an operation using NATO facilities, as they are doing in Macedonia. Or an EU operation may be run out of a national headquarters, probably in Britain, Germany or France (which provides the headquarters for the EU’s current Congo operation). Only if all these options are rejected might an EU military operation be run from its own headquarters—and even then, say the British, it would need the approval of all 25 EU countries.

These are arcane distinctions. They matter because they symbolise different directions for the future of European defence. Those who want the EU to become a serious military power believe that a large oak will grow from the acorn being planted in Brussels. The British insist that they have killed the idea that the EU might supplant NATO as the primary European defence organisation. The Americans, although openly suspicious of French intentions, are being diplomatic—for now. Donald Rumsfeld, the American defence secretary, disappointed journalists by refusing to condemn the initiative on a visit to Brussels on
December 1st.

The “headquarters question” does not feature explicitly in the draft EU constitution. The trickiest defence issues in the draft are the plan to allow a small group of countries to forge ahead with military co-operation, and the establishment of some form of EU mutual-defence guarantee. The idea of a defence core, known as “structured co-operation”, has the ostensible purpose of ensuring that countries that take part have genuine military capabilities to contribute. But poorer, pro-American countries, notably from central and eastern Europe, sense a plot to keep them out of an inner defence group that would be dominated by France and Germany. The British, who say they must be part of any core, are campaigning to keep it as open as possible to all EU members.

A mutual-defence clause for the EU is also still controversial. Austria, Ireland, Finland and Sweden say that it is incompatible with their traditions of neutrality. Some NATO loyalists worry that, yet again, the EU may be challenging the primacy of the Atlantic alliance. The language proposed is suspiciously similar to NATO’s Article Five, which embodies the transatlantic defence guarantee: it states that, if an EU country is attacked, “other member states shall give it aid and assistance by all the means in their power.” The neutrals seem certain to demand that this clause be changed, or at least that they are allowed to opt out of it.

If these positions do not shift in the next fortnight, defence could prove a big issue at the EU summit in Brussels starting on December 12th, which is meant to finalise the draft constitution. Add in other bitterly contested areas that remained unsettled in Naples, including voting weights, tax and foreign policy, and the odds are rising that the summit will end in stalemate—and that the parties will have to fight anew next year.