EU-NATO Relations:
A Long-Term Perspective

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Abstract

EU-NATO relations have long amounted to a beauty contest. In reality, the EU and NATO are very different organisations: the former is an actor, the latter is an instrument. Taking this into account, and leaving behind the often emotional and ideological debates, an effective division of labour can be designed for the three key functions of security and defence: strategy, operations, and capabilities. The result can be a European pillar of the European allies and partners of NATO – which also make up the EU – that contributes to collective defence while achieving strategic autonomy for expeditionary operations. The questions remains whether such a pillar should eventually also seek strategic autonomy in territorial defence. Eventually, a new NATO could emerge: a US-EU alliance.

Resumo

As Relações UE-NATO: Uma Perspetiva de Longo-Prazo

O artigo analisa as relações entre a UE-NATO na perspetiva do que as diferencia, considerando a primeira como um actor e a segunda como um instrumento. Partindo desta base analítica, rejeitando os debates emocionais e ideológicos, o autor considera que uma divisão eficaz do trabalho estratégico pode ser equacionada em três funções centrais nos domínios da segurança e defesa: estratégia, operações e capacidades. O resultado poderá ser o do desenvolvimento de um pilar europeu dos aliados europeus e dos parceiros NATO – que também integram a UE – que contribua para a defesa colectiva e ao mesmo tempo que assegure a autonomia estratégica na vertente expedicionária. A questão mantém-se se tal pilar deve ou não alcançar a autonomia estratégica europeia no que respeita à defesa territorial. Eventualmente uma nova NATO poderá emergir sob a forma de uma aliança entre os EUA e a União Europeia.

Introduction

If one could start from a blank page, one would not create two separate organisations, the EU and NATO, but assemble European cooperation on all dimensions of foreign, security and defence policy under one roof. But we cannot. Europeans organize their collective territorial defence in NATO, which can also deploy expeditionary operations of any type anywhere in the world. The EU as well, through its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), can deploy all types of expeditionary operations across the globe. When a crisis demands a military response, the question thus inevitably arises under which flag Europeans will act. Neither NATO nor the EU have armed forces of their own, so they must appeal to the same pool of capabilities for any operation.

A Beauty Contest

As a result, a beauty contest has arisen between both organisations, which have almost come to see deployments as a market. Both absolutely want to maintain their market share and their consequent claim to their members' military capabilities.

For example, there was great frustration in NATO headquarters in Brussels when after the November 2015 terrorist attacks, France invoked Article 42.7 of the EU Treaty rather than NATO's Article 5. This was read as a direct threat against what NATO considers to be its exclusive market: the security of our own territory. Many in NATO also felt overshadowed by the EU's maritime operations, notably against Somali piracy. When the EU launched Operation Sophia in the Mediterranean, NATO perceived a new market and quickly followed up with its own operation in the Aegean Sea, between Greece and Turkey. This operation could not have been done under the EU flag, for that would have been unacceptable to Turkey, a member of NATO but not of the EU and highly critical of the EU's defence dimension. This shows that the beauty contest is totally meaningless. Europeans cannot but assess on a case-by-case basis under which flag they can operate most effectively.

The EU for its part often feels marginalized, because when its Member States decide to launch combat operations they seldom, if ever, consider the CSDP as a framework. It goes further than that though: in fact states prefer to pass NATO by as well. The states that decide on combat operations prefer to conduct them themselves (such as the French in Mali) or through an ad hoc coalition outside the EU and NATO (such as the coalition against ISIL), so they can retain maximal control. Under the EU and NATO flag we patrol the seas, we train partner countries' forces, and we preposition forces in Eastern Europe. But if there is any chance of combat, it appears that states prefer not to use either organisation – which makes the competition between them even more absurd.

Apples and Pears

In order to put a stop to this meaningless competition, one must understand the nature of both organisations and how their tasks relate to each other. During the long years of the Cold War, NATO acquired such centrality in European foreign and defence policy, and in Europe's relations with the US, that many cannot, or do not want, to see that this centrality has long since come to an end. Topping the agenda of Europe's foreign policy no longer is the threat of invasion, but climate change, energy dependence, international trade, terrorism, the rise of China, etc.: issues on which NATO has little to contribute. On these issues, the EU mostly interacts directly with the US, outside the NATO framework.

The EU and NATO cannot be compared, in fact. The EU is a supranational organisation in which states share sovereignty. No EU Member State has abandoned any sovereignty, but on many issues Member States can only decide collectively, and by majority. This makes the EU a unique type of actor, something in between a state and an organisation. NATO on the contrary is an entirely intergovernmental organisation, where all decisions are taken by consensus, and there is no question of pooling sovereignty. In the EU this intergovernmental system applies only to foreign, security and defence policy: in these domains European integration has advanced the least and the EU too for the time being operates in an intergovernmental way. In general, however, the political centre of gravity of the EU lies in between Brussels and the national capitals, whereas in NATO it clearly is in the capitals (and in one capital in particular: Washington).

Consequently, the EU is an actor, whereas NATO is an instrument. The states remain the most important actors, of course. Each state wages a foreign policy and defines a strategy to that end. Through the EU, the EU Member States in addition also pursue a collective foreign policy, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP, into which the CSDP is integrated), for which in 2016 they have defined a collective strategy, the *Global Strategy*. If in a given case EU strategy requires military intervention, the Europeans have several options. A military operation can be conducted by the EU itself (through the CSDP), but also by NATO (which can thus be an instrument of EU strategy), by European forces under UN command, or by an ad hoc coalition of Member States (and non-members). It can even be a national operation, conducted by one Member State with the logistic and other support of fellow members.

NATO does not wage its own foreign policy and therefore does not determine European strategy: EU strategy sets the context within which NATO operates, not the other way around. The only exception is collective territorial defence under Article 5, because for now the EU does not really play a role in this field. Hence for collective defence, and for that only, NATO is the forum where Europeans and Americans together decide on strategy. For all other issues, Europeans set strategy

through the EU, and Americans have their own US strategy. Many still think the opposite holds true, however, as if NATO in all areas determines the strategy within which Europeans, including the EU, must then act.

The Ukraine crisis can easily demonstrate that this latter interpretation is faulty. NATO conducts the military response to the crisis: prepositioning forces on our eastern borders, as a message to Russia and to our own public opinion. That response takes place within the framework of an overall vision on the future of Europe's relations with Russia, in all areas, including energy for example. This vision is not crafted in NATO. Europeans decide on this collectively in the EU, starting from their interests and priorities as Russia's neighbour, while the Americans develop their own views in Washington. The combination of those European and American visions then determines the margin within which the military instrument is put to use, via NATO.

Apparently it remains difficult to accept this new reality. Many refuse to see that in today's multipolar world European and American interests and priorities are too divergent to pretend there can be a single NATO view of the world. Moreover, in US strategy China and Asia is now priority number one, no longer Europe, hence the US (rightly) expects Europeans themselves to ensure the stability of Europe's periphery. So whether they act under the NATO flag or the EU flag: it will in any case have to be European states that take the initiative to resolve crises around Europe – the US will no longer automatically do that in its stead. At a stroke, this new American position renders EU-NATO competition entirely obsolete.

In such a context, the EU must be an autonomous strategic actor. This implies that NATO operates within a strategic framework that is determined by the US on the one hand, and by the EU on the other hand. And that NATO can be the instrument of an exclusively European or even EU strategy, if in a specific contingency only Europeans want to act and use the NATO command structure to that end. On the other hand, this also implies that the EU must stop debating EU strategy as if the implementation of its military aspects is undertaken entirely through the CSDP, while the reality is that the majority of military operations take place in other frameworks.

Division of Labour

In order to optimise EU-NATO relations and, at the same time, achieve the strategic autonomy that the EU absolutely needs, one must address the three main functions of security and defence policy. Leaving all dogmas and emotions behind, rational analysis can determine how to organize them most effectively.

Strategy

First comes the strategic function. In this area things are clear-cut: the European states wage a foreign policy through the EU and to that end define a grand strategy

that integrates diplomacy, defence, trade, and aid. Only in the specific area of collective defence do the individual European states enter directly into a dialogue with the US and are the strategy and the military plans crafted in NATO. When a security problem arises in the periphery of Europe that may require a military response, i.e. in all non-Article 5 scenarios, it is through the EU as well that the Europeans states should assess the situation, in view of their values, interests and priorities as codified in the *Global Strategy*, in order to decide which action to take. In doing so, they have to take into account their overall foreign policy towards all states concerned, a foreign policy which in any case they wage through the EU.

Operations

Second, there is the operational function. There is no doubt who will have to launch future operations: increasingly, that will have to be the Europeans. Possibly with specific US support in well-defined areas (such as intelligence, special forces, and transport) as long as Europe itself does not possess all the required strategic enablers. But the condition for US support will be that the Europeans themselves take the initiative – if we don't act to resolve crises in our own backyard the US is not going to either. Under which command Europeans will then deploy cannot be defined beforehand. It can only be decided on a case-by-case basis, depending on the scale of operations and which command and control structure they require, on which countries want to participate, and on which flag is politically acceptable in the country where we have to deploy and which is not. There's no harm therefore in maintaining various options: the CSDP, NATO, the UN, a temporary coalition, or a national operation by a single state.

A contentious issue is whether the EU needs its own military headquarters. True strategic autonomy implies that one possesses all the means that one needs to act, without being dependent on the means of other actors. That includes the operational headquarters required to plan and conduct military operations up to the scale of the EU's Headline Goal (50 to 60,000 troops). Today only NATO is capable of that. In addition, some individual countries have national operational headquarters that can conduct operations of some scale, and which can be made available to the EU on a case-by-case basis: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom. The EU as such has within its structures but a small cell of just over 30 officers: the Military Planning and Conduct Capacity (MPCC). This is to conduct only non-executive missions, such as capacity-building and training. Many EU officials have declared that in term the MPCC can grow into a real headquarters, but for now it is very far from that. Hence, when in a crisis Europeans decide to deploy troops under the EU flag they must sub-contract command and control, either to one of the five national headquarters, or to NATO.

This is what the discussion is about: how certain can one be that one of those head-quarters will always be available if and when Europeans want to launch an opera-tion? The five national headquarters are not automatically geared to conducting multinational operations. Staff officers from all Member States must be trained in all five, year after year, which is a costly affair. As regards the various NATO head-quarters, the EU in principle has a guaranteed access, thanks to the 2002 Berlin Plus agreement. In practice, however, NATO decides on a case-by-case basis, hence many fear that a non-EU NATO Ally could veto the EU's access. This is not a hypo-thetical scenario. When in 2011 the British and the French had convinced the Amer-icans to support the intervention in Libya, the US demanded that this would be a NATO operation. France, which had wanted to make this an EU operation, had to accept, only for Turkey then to state that it could not accept a NATO operation in that area. Washington then had to lean heavily on Ankara before NATO could finally assume command of the operation, which by then had already been going on for several days. The US itself is unlikely to refuse access to NATO command and control, for it wants Europe to assume more responsibility. But Washington will of course have a lot of influence on those operations, because American officers occupy most key posts in NATO headquarters.

There are but two possible solutions. The EU could create a fully-fledged opera-tional headquarters. In a way that is a duplication of NATO, which is why the UK has always blocked this option, but it's not necessarily an unnecessary one. As seen above, it is useful to be able to operate under more than one flag, since one can never know the exact circumstances of any contingency beforehand. The EU could use this opportunity to construct a unique civil-military operational headquarters, integrating all dimensions of crisis management. The other option is to give the EU direct access to the NATO command structure. The Libyan air campaign, for example, was run by the NATO headquarters in Naples. If the EU has recourse to the NATO command structure according to the Berlin Plus agreement, it does not enter into communication with a headquarters like Naples, but with SHAPE, which passes on EU directives to the headquarters conducting the operation. As a result, the EU has but little control of its own operation. One could however grant the EU direct access to a headquarters like Naples, so that the headquarters is much closer to the political decision-making.

Capabilities

The third and final function is capabilities: the decision which different capabilities in army, navy and air force, in which quantities, are required. NATO has construed an elaborate mechanism, the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which defines precise capability objectives for each Ally and closely monitors perfor-mance. The Alliance defines a level of ambition for NATO as a whole, for all Allies

including the US, for Article 5 (collective territorial defence) and non-Article 5 (expeditionary operations). That level of ambition is naturally higher than that of the EU-countries alone, which moreover includes only expeditionary operations, not territorial defence. What the NDPP cannot guarantee, however, is that the group of just the European NATO Allies (and partners) can act alone if necessary. NATO only looks at two levels: NATO as a whole and each Ally separately. One objective, for example, is for NATO as a whole to have sufficient strategic enablers, but the system is not built to ensure that those enablers are spread around the Alliance, and so they are not. Most strategic enablers are American capabilities. As a result, the sum total of the capabilities of all EU Member States that are members or partners of NATO does not suffice to allow that group of countries to mount operations by themselves, without US support. An additional cause is that no single European country can afford to acquire strategic enablers in numbers that matter. If the European Allies want strategic enablers, they will have to pool their means and acquire them collectively.

In order to achieve strategic autonomy, the EU Member States should therefore first define their own military level of ambition: which operations do the EU countries always want to be able to launch, if necessary by themselves, without any support from the non-EU NATO Allies? Which capabilities, including strategic enablers, does that then require?

That collective capability target of the EU countries could then be incorporated into the NDPP, so that NATO can elaborate a mix of capability targets at three levels instead of just two: for NATO as a whole, for the EU Member States that are members or partners of NATO as a group, and for each individual NATO Ally. The result should be that the EU Member States collectively hold a range of capabilities that allows them to contribute to collective territorial defence together with all NATO Allies, to contribute to expeditionary operations with all NATO Allies, but also to conduct certain expeditionary operations alone if necessary, in accordance with an EU-defined level of ambition.

If the EU Member States were to integrate their armed forces ever more, through EU mechanisms such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a real European pillar will emerge, which can contribute to NATO operations together with the US and other non-EU Allies, but which could also mount operations alone – under the EU flag or the NATO flag, but relying on European capabilities only. In political terms, there really already are two pillars in NATO today, even though Allies like Canada and Turkey don't like to hear it: the US and the EU, i.e. the two strategic actors within the Alliance. But the EU as such is not represented in NATO. There is a lot of consultation between the two organisations, at different levels, from NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and EU High Representative Federica Mogherini to the military staff and the civilian administration. The

atmosphere between both is better than ever, though that does not necessarily mean that a lot happens in terms of concrete cooperation – then the beauty contest kicks in again. Mogherini and Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, are also invited to NATO summits of heads of state and government. Yet fundamentally the EU voice is not present in the Alliance.

As the European pillar solidifies, it would only be logical for the EU Member States to speak with one voice in NATO. Even though the EU as such is not a member of NATO, nothing prevents the EU Member States from sitting together prior to NATO meetings and agree on a common position. This has always been a red line for the United Kingdom, but after 'Brexit' they will no longer be able to block this – if the remaining Member States would want to go that way. Constituting an EU block within NATO would be but a logical consequence of the progressive development of the EU as a strategic actor.

Conclusion: Towards an EU-US Alliance?

One question has been left unanswered: should the autonomous EU level of ambition be limited to expeditionary operations? Or should Europeans ultimately also be capable of defending their own territory? Whatever the answer, Europeans do have to reinforce all of their capabilities, for collective territorial defence as well as for expeditionary operations. The reason that today we don't need to fear a direct invasion of our territory is not our own military strength but rather the military weakness of our potential opponents, especially Russia. And that we can count on the US, of course, thanks to NATO.

But will the latter always be the case? President Donald Trump has made it appear as if those who have not contributed enough, should not count on the US anymore. The US did continue to increase the budget for its military presence in Europe. And yet it may not be unwise to start planning for the defence of Europe by Europeans alone, just in case. NATO could undertake such planning, or the EU, its European pillar. Not with the aim of abandoning the Alliance, but to ensure that there is a plan B, so that Europe is not entirely dependent on who happens to reside in the White House. For in that regard there are no more certainties.

Perhaps Barry Posen's (2014) idea is the best solution in the long term, because it is the most flexible: to replace NATO with a new alliance between the US and the EU as such (and other non-EU NATO allies could of course join this new format too). In such a constellation, the EU Member States would define an autonomous level of ambition for all military tasks, including territorial defence, and build an integrated set of forces to that end, but they would maintain an alliance with the US at the same time. Our capacity to deter or defeat any attack would still be underpinned by an obligation of mutual assistance between the EU and the US, but if it comes to the worst plans would be ready to defend ourselves alone. In this scenario, the various

NATO headquarters could be transferred to the EU, while the US could maintain liaison officers (just like today there are European liaison officers in the different American headquarters). All of these headquarters would be under the strategic control and political direction of the EU. Only the strategic headquarters, SHAPE, could remain a joint EU-US headquarters, alternating between a European and American commander (whereas today the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, SACEUR, always is an American). NATO would thus be Europeanised, as it were (Howorth, 2017).

In an unpredictable world this does seem like a commendable option for the future. Furthermore this probably is what it takes to really generate an autonomous mind-set in Europe. Because after the end of the Cold War NATO just carried on, Europeans never really stopped looking to the US to know what to do. That's our mistake, not theirs. In a balanced alliance, between the EU and the US, we could finally emancipate ourselves.

References

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