

EU-NATO relations

Internal Food for thought paper, NATO Task Force, Barbara Kunz, kunz@ifsh.de

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Given the need for a holistic take on Euro-Atlantic and European security, close and constructive relations between the two key institutions of regional defense cooperation – NATO and the EU – are crucial. Both organizations face the same security challenges. In light of single sets of forces and limited resources, those NATO allies who are also members of the European Union cannot afford to pursue divergent objectives in both settings.

NATO and the EU have been “strategic partners” since 2002; a Joint Declaration¹ was signed in 2016 at the Alliance’s Warsaw Summit, followed by the definition of more than 70 projects in seven key areas². A second Declaration was signed in July 2018³. A third declaration, although envisioned for December 2021, has so far been blocked. The flagship project of EU-NATO cooperation is Military Mobility, which also is a PESCO project and which has the potential to significantly enhance Europe’s security. However, to this day, the only legal framework for EU-NATO relations continues to be the 2003 Agreed Framework (sharing of collective NATO planning structures, assets and capabilities with the EU when it comes to the planning and conducting of EU CSDP military operations in accordance with the 2002 ‘Berlin Plus’ arrangements). That said, in recent years and months, there has been unprecedented high-level EU-NATO interaction.

At the strategic level EU-NATO cooperation yet remains complicated, largely due to the unresolved Turkey/Cyprus issue and its spillover effects. The effects AUKUS and France’s reactions have on EU-NATO relations remain to be seen, notably in light of Macron’s general assessment that NATO was essentially “braindead” as a political alliance. Most of the obstacles standing in the way of “real” strategic cooperation between the two organizations are in any case unlikely to disappear anytime soon. While imperative in theory, leaps forward in EU-NATO cooperation are therefore not to be expected. Progress will remain incremental, and matters that would really contribute to rethinking the European security order – such as a definition of a division of labor between the two organizations – are simply not on the agenda. It is of course an open question whether opening this kind of Pandora’s box would be wise, notably in light of the lack of unity among Europeans. This will not change with the EU adopting its Strategic Compass in March 2022.

Complementary tasks, interoperable capabilities

That said, a number of measures and approaches can still be taken in order to increase coherence between NATO and the European Union/CSDP and create more synergy effects. The philosophy to adopt is complementarity in terms of tasks and interoperability in terms of capabilities. Several detailed proposals have been made. This first and foremost applies to the political/strategic dimension. Stronger political consultation between the two organizations would be unequivocally beneficial. This could imply NAC-PSC meetings with more targeted exchanges, and making sure language issued in both contexts is at the very least compatible (if not identical), in particular on fundamental issues such as approaches to Russia or cyber-attacks. The same applies to areas such as EDT, cyber, hybrid etc.

¹ See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21481/nato-eu-declaration-8-july-en-final.pdf>

² These are: Countering hybrid threats, operational cooperation including at sea and on migration; cyber security and defense; defense capabilities; defense industry and research; exercises; supporting Eastern and Southern partners and capacity-building projects.

³ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36096/nato_eu_final_eng.pdf

Seeking complementarity also means keeping in mind that “no duplication” works both ways. The focus usually is on avoiding recreating structures within the EU that NATO already has. Yet, there are also areas in which the EU is a stronger actor. It indeed has legislative powers NATO completely lacks. Equally important, the EU has funding at its disposal in certain policy areas in which it is competent, in addition to its member states’ financial means. These factors are important in many of the “newer” fields of security cooperation, such as the climate-security nexus or the resilience agenda. It also matters when it comes to developing capabilities and novel technologies. Many in Europe therefore see initiatives such as DIANA with skepticism, effectively viewing them as duplicating EU initiatives (with less means available). These are valid concerns.

Work remains to be done in national capitals

The lack of strategic cooperation between the two organizations is not least problematic in a context in which the EU steps up its efforts on defense planning (by definition centered on crisis management), while NATO saw a “return” of collective defense in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea. For the first time ever, the 2018 EU Capabilities Development Plan (CDP) takes NATO planning into account. Due to the above-mentioned obstacles, however, joint, complementary planning is not possible. Rather, it falls upon member states to ensure coherence between NATO’s Defense Planning Process (NDPP) and the CDP process. That said, defense planning ultimately remains the planning of national capabilities anyway. In both the NATO and the EU contexts, planning objectives are never entirely met by member states.

This points to a factor sometimes overlooked in the debate on EU-NATO cooperation: creating coherence between these organizations is also a responsibility of the countries who are members in both. Even beyond the technicalities of defense planning, there could at times be more coherence between individual states’ behavior in the North Atlantic Council and the Political and Security Committee. Not all the shortcomings in EU-NATO cooperation are a consequence of strategic roadblocks. For instance, the fact that EU matters and NATO matters are essentially dealt with in relatively separate silos in member states – who themselves lack a clear and unified vision of European and Euroatlantic security – is not helpful. In that sense, a lot of work remains to be done in national capitals rather than in Brussels alone.

European strategic autonomy as burden-sharing

CSDP was once designed for crisis management operations outside its borders, and has since moved into capability development as one of its key fields. In the current Euro-Atlantic security context, the EU’s role in the European security architecture remains somewhat underdefined – notably when it comes to territorial defense, which is (currently) not on the EU’s menu (and where Europe remains blatantly dependent on the United States). Against that backdrop, the debate on European strategic autonomy that started with the 2016 EU Global Strategy has led to a lot of irritation. Yet, large portions of that debate were strawmen debates from the outset, with participants arguing against decoupling European security from the United States. In reality, decoupling was never on the agenda; not even Paris pursued decoupling as an objective⁴. In that sense, much of these debates were a complete loss of time, standing in the way of discussing the real question at hand: what is the EU’s role in Europe’s security architecture? With newly increased focus on a “European pillar” within NATO, European debates have come full circle and seem to be back where they were decades ago, albeit in a different security environment.

As of 2022, the narrative on “European strategic autonomy as transatlantic burden sharing” has become the prevailing one. Not directly linked to this development, but pointing in the same direction, is the

⁴ France merely has defense objectives that differ from those of most other European countries, i.e. fighting terrorism in the South and its own nuclear deterrent.

emergence of closer US-EU cooperation under the Biden administration, including a dialogue on security.⁵ What this means, concretely, yet remains to be seen. Europe becoming a more capable military actor certainly also benefits NATO, not to mention Europe itself. Why this would at all be controversial remains one of the mysteries of past years' debates.

It is in the industrial field that European strategic autonomy is the most problematic from a transatlantic perspective. Yet, these challenges do not pertain to the Alliance as such, but stem from European (national) and U.S. industrial interests being incompatible. Framing these challenges as NATO challenges (e.g. as a challenge to interoperability) is somewhat questionable. In a certain sense, the issue may yet be overstated anyway: recent procurement decisions across Europe clearly illustrate a continued interest in buying American for both technical and political reasons. Ideally, transatlantic debates would deal with the industrial strand of European strategic autonomy as separate from the strategic/institutional dimension (which, of course, is easier to do in theory than in practice – not least because France as the main driver of these debates sees the two as inextricably intertwined and because the industrial field is where the European Commission as an emerging actor has the strongest role to play).

In sum, the struggles of EU-NATO cooperation mostly illustrate the lack of coherent visions on Euro-Atlantic security – on both sides of the Atlantic. Seeking more cooperation between both organizations is obviously the right approach. Yet, it is mostly driven by exercises aimed at identifying possible issues where they can work together, rather than the other way around: there is a problem, and then the question is what organization is best suited to tackle it.

⁵ Recurring to US-EU formats may also appear tempting in light of roadblocks in EU-NATO cooperation, yet it should not replace efforts in the context of both organizations.