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NATO AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: INEVITABLE PARTNERS

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Sometimes in international politics, it is useful to take a step back and ask the question: “What is all the fuss about?” This question, surely, needs to be asked with regard to the continuing squabble over relations between NATO and the European Union – in particular, the EU’s European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). [1] After all, the grand strategic interests of all members of both NATO and the European Union, with some relatively marginal exceptions, are at least compatible if not similar if not the same. None of the member countries is likely to attack one another or – more to the point here – something (such as a country) held dear by another member. And while one or another member of one or the other of these institutions might employ power – most consequentially military force – where not all the others may agree, this circumstance is certainly highly limited, at least in terms of what either of the institutions, as an institution, might do.

Thus many of the EU countries – most of whom are also NATO countries – had difficulties with the US decision to attack Iraq in 2003 (with a limited range of European coalition partners) – in vivid contrast to virtually unanimous support for the US-led attack on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan a year and a half earlier; but this was not a political conflict between the two institutions, as such. Nor, on inspection, should this be remarkable, since both NATO and the EU operate in the domain of the use of military force on the principle of unanimity, and membership in the two institutions (among European countries) is largely overlapping. As a result, while the EU as a whole might – theoretically – object to something the US (or, say, Turkey) chose to do, that would be an objection directed against a country or small group of countries, not against NATO as a whole. The contrary also applies: it is hard to conceive of a circumstance in which all the EU countries – at least those without an opt-out from ESDP – would want to take a military action to which the United States, which most commentators would argue is NATO’s most important “stakeholder,” would object. [2]

Thus, again, “what is all the fuss about?” History can help illuminate.

During the Cold War, the United States supported a strong European “pillar” to the Atlantic Alliance, formally so from the administration of President John Kennedy onward. But there was an implicit limit: this support was conditioned on the understanding that the “European pillar” would do what the United States wanted it to do – in the American idiom, not “getting off the reservation.” There was merit in this view. The United States had to assume the basic responsibility for containing the Soviet Union, at least in the nuclear deterrence dimension, even though allied forces did outnumber American in terms of conventional confrontation. Central management of the Western part of the Cold War was necessary; the United States was quite unabashed in asserting this role for itself, and the Europeans were by and large content with it. [3] WEU – a practical, institutional expression of one element of the European pillar, namely, giving some semblance of future ambition for the then European Community/Communities to have foreign and defense policies – was very much a poor stepchild, not to be taken seriously in military or even political terms.

The US Turns: Accepting WEU and ESDP

US attitudes shifted after the end of the Cold War. Not only was there no need any longer to assert the virtual exclusivity of NATO (i.e., the US foot-on-the-ground in Europe and centralized influence) to confront an enemy that had dissolved; but there could be benefits in seeing a spur to further integration of what became the European Union and political/institutional reasons for its leaders, parliaments, and peoples to continue taking security seriously, at least to the degree that the post-Cold War situation in Europe seemed still to require: the provision of an insurance policy against the untoward and unforeseen. Thus, in 1993, the US reversed field and supported a stronger WEU and began favoring a relationship between NATO and WEU in which the latter could, in certain circumstances, be able to call upon NATO “assets” – in practice, military assets of the United States, like strategic lift – on the basis of the “separable but not separate” concept.

Nevertheless, it took several years before either political or practical arrangements could be worked out. The Berlin/Brussels agreements of June 1996 created the basic framework, and the so-called “Berlin-plus” agreement at the Washington NATO summit in 1999 filled in some of the blanks. [4] And still disagreements continue. One set has focused on what the US called the “three D’s” – decoupling, duplication, and discrimination; [5] to which NATO Secretary General George Robertson replied with his “three C’s”: capabilities, capabilities, capabilities. Of course there were some legitimate American concerns, shared by some of the other NATO allies – something that might seem

remarkable, given that most of these allies also belong to the EU; the explanation lies largely in the fact that different parts of most European governments dealt at the bureaucratic (and sometimes ministerial) level with NATO/WEU as opposed to the EU: political-military versus political-economic officials. [6] This situation is changing rapidly, however, now that WEU is moribund and ESDP has been fully integrated within the EU (along with the foreign policy component, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP).

The most important of these US concerns are 1) that ESDP will become so elaborated that it will develop completely separate planning and command functions, to the point that it will both sap energies that should otherwise be devoted to NATO or will make more difficult the “handing over” of responsibilities to NATO if/when the level of crisis or military action were to require the intervention of the more robust alliance; and 2) that the European Union countries will decide upon positions among themselves and then present them as a unified bloc when debate takes place within the North Atlantic Council—indeed, such a process is implied in the new European Constitution and is to some degree already being seen in practice.

But since the problems have been identified, the search for solutions has proceeded, if by fits and starts. Thus, at the Helsinki European Council summit in December 1999, the EU decided that its rapid reaction force would only be used “when NATO as a whole is not engaged.” [7] Further, NATO and ESDP now do most of their military planning together, at NATO’s European military headquarters, and the two processes are, in practice, transparent to one another (as should be expected, since most of the people involved in the two efforts are either the same or are from the same countries); and at least the notional commander for an ESDP operation that is not just led by one of the member states is the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (at the moment a German general). As for the potential problem of bloc EU positions at the North Atlantic Council, this could have serious consequences if, indeed, the EU ambassadors (or ministers) took rigid, unbending positions, or had to refer everything back to the EU – e.g., to the General Affairs and External Relations Council. That could, indeed, be stifling and could deprive the NAC of its key role as a place to craft compromises and build political support – a great strength of NATO over the years. But this concern begs the question whether the EU members of the alliance will still value NATO – as well as the US role in allied security – as opposed to cutting off their noses to spite their faces for institutional reasons. Indeed, if this became a real worry, NATO would surely have a lot more important things to worry about concerning the state of transatlantic relations.

When these matters are cleared away, it becomes difficult, indeed, to see “what the fuss is all about.” ESDP is part of forging a strong European Union, a goal to which the US has long been committed for obvious geopolitical reasons. And even though some American commentators are beginning to question this half-century perspective – in particular regarding economic competition -- they remain very much in the minority. Some of the European allies are likely to spend more money on defense because of ESDP than without it. There is little prospect that the EU would become competitive with NATO in terms of tasks to be performed or, if it did, what real harm would there likely be in that, other than a sense of “who is in charge?” Thus the EU has taken over NATO’s responsibilities in Bosnia, it took the lead in Macedonia from the outset, and it has acted in Africa (Congo) in what could be argued was a common interest without having to invoke NATO and the obvious complications of its being asked to act that far “outside of area.” [8] It can be argued, therefore, that the “issues” as between NATO and the EU (CFSP/ESDP) are more about institutional inertia and some broader political issues.

Bridging the Gulf between NATO and the EU

Until the mid-1990s, there was literally no formal relationship between NATO and the European Union. [9] It has only been with the negotiated NATO-ESDP arrangements, along with the development of the European Union (leading to the European Constitution) that these barriers have begun to come down. And even though, today, there are many interactions, of both a formal and informal nature – e.g., meetings of the EU High Representative and the NATO Secretary General, and meetings of the NAC with the EU’s Political and Security Committee – these are still quite limited; and even the progressive integration of staffs at the EU, bringing together people with political-military and political-economic backgrounds, have not yet gone far enough to have a critical effect on NATO-EU relations. It is a matter of cultures, both institutional and substantive. [10] In time, however, these cultures will change.

Indeed, there is an added reason for getting NATO and the EU (CFSP/ESDP) closer together: it is that the nature of crises and conflict will increasingly require this cooperation. Already, the EU has developed one institutional advantage over NATO, in that it has the capacity (at least on paper) to deal with a crisis “from soup to nuts” – from the first glimmerings of a problem through the use of force and “Phase IV” – post-conflict operations – though, admittedly, the military actions would be at relatively

modest levels. NATO, by contrast, has to wait until it is asked to do something – a hand-off from the strictly political-diplomatic to the political-military. In time, perhaps NATO can develop capabilities for crisis management across the board, but that would require major changes that are not now in prospect: in particular, NATO is not a sovereign body and does not have a “foreign minister,” and – except when given a specific mandate by the member nations – the NATO Secretary General does not act like one. At the EU, by contrast, there is a process for pre-military crisis management and the prospect of a foreign minister, under the European Constitution, even though he will not for some time be truly “sovereign” as opposed to the continuing “foreign policies” of EU member states.

Thus the future effectiveness of either NATO or the EU, as demonstrated by the agendas now facing each of them beyond Europe, must be based on their acting both cooperatively and collaboratively. Neither will be able to succeed without the other – and, in the process, there will need to be a means for the North Americans to work more closely with the EU on a wide range of related activities – a new “strategic partnership” between the US (and Canada) and the European Union. [11] These activities are not just political and military but also economic and, in general, in the realm of “nation building” in all its aspects.

Are the Strategic Visions Different?

It can be argued that the “EU” and “NATO” look at the world in different ways and thus will not be able on a sufficiently regular basis to put cooperation ahead of differences in perspective. This, of course, refers more to some different perspectives involving the United States (or Turkey) as opposed to at least some European states. As noted above, it is not an institutional difference, except to the degree that the United States would continue to be the “800-pound gorilla” at NATO. Even here, the differences can be exaggerated. The idea that Europeans resist the use of military power while the US embraces it, to the degree this idea has much validity, is less about something inherent in the nature of the societies and more about respective views of immediate challenges that could require a military response: One should not underestimate the psychological impact of 9/11 in the United States, nor the likelihood that it will not be of as lasting duration as the Cold War, since what it is based upon is far less substantial. And the idea of fundamental differences regarding the use of force also has to do with the relative “reach” of interests and engagements as between the United States and virtually all European states – begging questions of the degree to which these engagements are based primarily upon responses to threats and challenges as opposed to the seizing of opportunities to try reshaping different parts of the world (an ideological more than geopolitical matter). Even so, these differences should not be the stuff either of transatlantic divorce or of separation between NATO and the EU.

Further, when it comes to formal expressions of intent, the US and the European Union are not that far apart, at least in theory if not always in practice. It has been noted that the only European statement of collective EU “national” interests – A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy of December 2003, lists (in order) challenges to Europe as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime. [12] The US government would not take vigorous exception to this list of priorities for concern. And this does indicate a significant basis for cooperation between the US and the European Union or – put more broadly -- between NATO and the EU. As noted above, a lot is already being done. Even when there are disagreements across the Atlantic on specific issues – as the Iraq war and aftermath still stick in the craws of both some Europeans and some Americans, and as differences on Iran and perhaps also Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking may boil over later this year or next -- this is not about basic relations or the possibilities of cooperation between NATO and the EU, as institutions. The basis – and the need – is there for a strategic partnership, both in dealing with the likely nature of crises that pose threats to interests held in common by member states of the two institutions and in meeting demands far beyond military affairs (e.g., health, education, development, human rights, governance, as well as intensified cooperation across the Atlantic in arms and technology transfers, including “transformation” of both NATO and EU forces and processes.).

“How Dare they?”

Finally, in assessing the tensions that continue in relations between NATO and the EU, especially as viewed by some circles in Washington, it is important also not to discount the quality of amour propre. Many Americans liked the situation in the Cold War when the US had the bulk of influence in the Western alliance and made most of the decisions: indeed, much of the US negative response to early efforts to strengthen the WEU reflected a sense of European lèse majesté more than rational calculation of interests. This is still true to some degree. It is even inflated into fears that “the Europeans” will seek to develop a counterweight to American power and influence, perhaps in league with Russia and China. This fantasy of a few – more among American opponents than European proponents -- is, alas, sometimes fed by some people in France, which gives it added resonance in Washington.

For their part, many Europeans resent that the United States continues to want to dominate the Western alliance even though the Cold War is over, and some even suspect that the US is exaggerating – in their view – the so-called “war on terror” (and certainly situations like the purported threat from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq) in part as a means of reestablishing discipline within the Western alliance and America’s own leadership and influence within it. Even if this is not true, there is natural resentment in many parts of Europe to some largely independent decisions taken by the US that also affect EU and non-US NATO countries, as well as what is widely seen to be a US desire to have Europeans share risk and responsibility, especially in the Middle East, without a concomitant willingness by the United States to share influence and decision.

These two visions – or psychological preoccupations – came together at the 2005 Munich Security Conference, when, in a speech read for him by German Defense Minister Peter Struck, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, asserted that NATO “...is no longer the primary venue where transatlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies.” [13] He also proposed “...the governments of the European Union and the US should establish a high-ranking panel of independent figures from both sides of the Atlantic ...” Much of the reaction to the Schroeder remarks has focused on the idea of the “high-ranking panel,” a hoary suggestion whose need has been belied by so many of the practical steps at adapting NATO and transatlantic relations since the end of the Cold War, plus the nature of some of the underlying political disagreements that have affected the alliance (e.g., over Iraq) that are not likely to be ameliorated by a panel of outside experts and luminaries, however distinguished and experienced, that is separate from the exercise of leadership by governments on both sides of the Atlantic. [14]

At Munich, criticism by many Americans present of what Schroeder had to say was immediate and intense; but it clearly misinterpreted what he said. He was not saying that NATO should not be “the primary venue where transatlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies,” but that it “no longer” plays that role. This is patently obvious, not only because of the differences of view over Middle East issues as between different members of the alliance but also because the United States has in recent years chosen not to use NATO in this way. It has, indeed, ceased to be a forum for strategic discussion, at least beyond NATO’s immediate business of conducting its current operations. Thus the informal, ritually-denied but universally understood coordination of the NATO agenda by the four key powers (“the quad”) was abandoned at US behest at the time of intensified debate over Iraq. Schroeder was clearly bemoaning its passing. [15] Indeed, he also expressed concern at Munich about “...the dialogue between the European Union and the United States which in its current form does justice neither to the Union’s growing importance nor to the new demands on transatlantic cooperation.” This could be interpreted as a call for a new “strategic partnership” between the US and the European Union.

None of this should have been found to be objectionable. The reflexive response of some US commentators at Munich should thus be put down either to the classic problem of miscommunication within the Alliance – parties tend to hear what they expect to hear -- or to the phenomenon explored here of “how dare they?” on one side or the other. [16] Leaving aside Schroeder’s proposal for a high-ranking panel, his broader comments should be taken at face value and acted upon. Indeed, as part of the allies’ rebuilding relations across the Atlantic in order to deal effectively with 21st century problems, using NATO as “the primary venue” for strategic discussions, plus enhancing the US-EU dialogue as the author has long proposed, should be obvious steps.

In It Together – So What’s the Fuss?

Thus if there is an answer to the question “What is the fuss about?” in terms of rendering it unimportant, it lies in the coming to terms on both sides of the Atlantic with the fact that all these countries are fated to live and work together – in their mutual, common interests – and that the issue of historic importance is whether they will do this well or badly. That means finding the best in both the EU and NATO, forging and fostering cooperation (and some division of labor) between them, and putting to one side the psychological competitions that, while quite ephemeral in relation to what has to be done, have been permitted to get too much in the way. There will be a “fuss” only if serious people permit there to be one; and that is in no one’s interest on either side of the Atlantic or in either the EU or NATO.

[1] Even the name of the EU’s effort has been in question: NATO has called it an “initiative” – ESDI – rather than a “policy,” in order to emphasize the long-held NATO view that an expression of European defense should be “separable but not separate” from NATO.

[2] For a decade, the author has had a standing bet -- \$20US -- for anyone who contrives a plausible scenario that violates this generality.

[3] Thus if President Charles deGaulle had not been content with the primacy – and reliability – of the US role, he never would have been able to seek room for diplomatic maneuver, in particular to meet West German needs for some amelioration of the rigidities of East-West confrontation (détente), by taking leave of NATO's integrated military command structure, though not of NATO itself.

[4] See the following NATO documents: 3 June 1996 - M-NAC-1(96)63, Final Communiqué of the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council; 13 June 1996 - M-DPC/NPG-1(96)88, Final Communiqué of the Meeting of the Defence Planning Committee in Ministerial Session; and NAC-S(99)64 - 24 April 1999, An Alliance for the 21st Century: Washington Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C .

[5] Decoupling was a rehash of the old Cold War concern that for some unknown reason the Europeans and the Americans would lose a sense of common interest in European security and defense/military cooperation. This was a red herring. Duplication was a concern that the Europeans, in developing WEU and, latterly, ESDP, would waste money on buying two of everything. This point, too, was exaggerated, both because the forces deployed by European allies – for NATO or for the EU's Headline Goal Task Force ("rapid reaction force") were largely the same forces and because, without the incentive of building defense capabilities for reasons of European integration, some European countries would be likely to spend on defense even less than they otherwise would do. Discrimination had a more substantial basis, and that meant Turkey: would it be further excluded from engagement with the European Union?

[6] During the author's four and a half years as US ambassador to NATO, only one of his European colleagues on the North Atlantic Council had ever had senior responsibilities at the European Union, either representing his country or attached to the EU bureaucracy.

[7] There has been some debate within the EU about whether the operative word is "when" or "where," a theological dispute about the degree to which ESDP should defer to NATO.

[8] Notably, during "Operation Alba" in 1997, to assist Albania, the WEU was not directly involved (in major part because of institutional politics), and the lead was taken by Italy, in particular. But considerable logistical and other support was provided by Allied Command Europe, without asking the leave of the North Atlantic Council – and "open secret" in which the allies tacitly acquiesced.

[9] The author characterized this as "NATO and the European Union are two institutions living in the same city on different planets."

[10] Thus in the last two NATO Crisis Management Exercises – CMX04 and CMX05 – major elements of the notional scenarios should have led NATO's "players" to reach out to the European Union. But except in a very desultory and afterthought way, this did not happen.

[11] The author formulated this new US-EU strategic partnership several years ago and has written extensively about it. See, for instance, Robert E. Hunter, "A Forward-Looking Partnership," Foreign Affairs, September/October 2004.

[12] A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003.

[13] Because what Schroeder said has become such an object of controversy and has been prone to misunderstanding, it is worth presenting the key passages of his remarks presented at the Munich Conference on International Security on February 12, 2005:

"I believe that the transatlantic partnership must take such changes into consideration. And, to be honest, it does so insufficiently at present. This becomes clear when we look at the institutions which are supposed to serve this partnership. The admission of new members is proof that NATO continues to be attractive. And NATO's presence in Afghanistan has highlighted how helpful its military organization can be even in distant crises. However, it is no longer the primary venue where transatlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies.

"The same applies to the dialogue between the European Union and the United States which in its current form does justice neither to the Union's growing importance nor to the new demands on transatlantic

cooperation. I hope that new impetus will be generated in both areas on 22 February when the US President visits Brussels.

"Today, no-one can produce ready answers. However, we should focus with even greater determination and resolve on the task of adapting our cooperation structures to the changed

conditions and challenges. To this end, the governments of the European Union and the US should establish a high-ranking panel of independent figures from both sides of the Atlantic to help us find a solution. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan set us an example by establishing such a panel to deal with the necessary reform of his organization. This panel should submit a report to the heads of state and government of NATO and the European Union by the beginning of 2006 on the basis of its analysis and proposals, the necessary conclusions could then be drawn.”

[14] The response to Schroeder's proposal recalls an earlier foray into alliance-shaping by a German Chancellor, that by Helmut Schmidt in a speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in 1977. That speech, which also was not well-considered, launched a several-year “crisis” over so-called decoupling of US and European security that culminated in the struggle over Euro-missiles – a struggle that probably did not have to take place.

[15] Just prior to the Munich Security Conference, the author was present at an informal occasion in Brussels that included several NATO ambassadors, including from “non-quad” countries, who expressed regret and concern that this long-standing effort to coordinate leadership of the Alliance at NATO had been abandoned.

[16] At Munich, the author was struck at the immediate and reflexive interpretation of Schroeder's remarks as an assault on NATO by several Americans present, who made their objections known, despite prompt explanations provided by German officials at the conference.

15 TEXTOS RELACIONADOS:

2012/05/14

“SMART DEFENCE” NA CIMEIRA DE CHICAGO

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2012/04/28

A POSTURA NUCLEAR DA NATO. DA CIMEIRA DE LISBOA PARA CHICAGO

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2012/03/02

AS ILHAS FALKLAND. TRINTA ANOS DEPOIS DO CONFLITO DE 1982

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2009/03/25

A CIMEIRA DOS 60 ANOS DA NATO E A UNIÃO EUROPEIA

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2008/11/14

EUA. O QUE SE PODE ESPERAR DE OBAMA

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2007/12/12

A MELHOR FORMA DE COMEMORAR OS 60 ANOS DA NATO

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2007/10/02

OS PORTUGUESES NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DA AMÉRICA – O DIAMANTE ESQUECIDO DA POLÍTICA EXTERNA PORTUGUESA[1]

Nuno Manalvo[2]

2007/06/25

A DEFESA COLECTIVA DA EUROPA. RESPONSABILIDADE DA NATO? (II PARTE)

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2006/10/04

A EUROPA NOS PLANOS DOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

Marcelo Rech[1]

2006/07/18

O FUTURO DA NATO

António Borges de Carvalho

2006/07/17

A CIMEIRA DA NATO EM RIGA

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2005/07/13

AS RELAÇÕES TRANSATLÂNTICAS: GALILEU VS GPS

Vera Gomes

2005/02/26

BUSH NA EUROPA

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2004/11/27

PARCEIROS OU RIVAIS?

Alexandre Reis Rodrigues

2004/05/22

AS RELAÇÕES TRANSATLÂNTICAS

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