



Strategic autonomy and EU-NATO Cooperation: squaring the circle

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Since the publication of the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) in June 2016, there have been innumerable calls for the re-launch of the EU's much misunderstood Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). One can call this CSDP-redux. What is the objective behind this renewed energy?

The keyword in the EUGS is “strategic autonomy”, an aspiration regularly repeated in that document. Yet the foundational logic behind CSDP was, from the outset, “autonomy.” At the Franco-British summit in Saint-Malo in December 1998 (the birthplace of CSDP), it was believed that only via a European agency would the member states develop genuine military capacity and generate a strategic approach to regional security challenges. This would have the additional benefit of allowing the US to focus its activities on more urgent regions of the planet. But, after fifteen years of efforts, CSDP failed to deliver on autonomy. NATO had to be called upon for leadership during the 2011 Libya crisis, and the emerging security threat from Russia brought NATO firmly back to Europe. At the same time, the US message became ever more intense: US allies should take primary security responsibility for their neighbourhood. We are therefore faced, once

again, with a major paradox. The EU aspires to strategic autonomy, the US concurs with that ambition, yet in practice the EU finds itself once again dependent on NATO for its collective defence and even for its collective security.

Since the EU's December 2013 European Council meeting on CSDP, there has been quasi-unanimity within the security community that greater cooperation and complementarity between CSDP and NATO is urgent and indispensable. But what precisely is being called for? The documents themselves are extremely vague in this respect. The EUGS refers to NATO on no fewer than ten occasions. On three of these, it speaks simply of “deepening the transatlantic bond and our partnership with NATO” (twice), and of “working closely with [our] partners, beginning with NATO”. Specific cooperative projects include cyber threats, security sector reform, capacity building, strengthening resilience among neighbourhood states, global governance, maritime security, parallel and synchronized exercises and hybrid warfare. This is really a laundry-list of issues on which cooperation ought to be taken for granted rather than needing to be proclaimed. The same laundry-list of cooperative projects is to be found in the *EU-NATO Joint Declaration* of 8 July 2016.¹ How can this insistence on cooperation and complementarity be

reconciled with the aspiration towards “strategic autonomy”?

The “official” explanation plays on institutional niceties. This is what the EUGS says:

“When it comes to collective defence, NATO remains the primary framework for most Member States. At the same time, EU-NATO relations shall not prejudice the security and defence policy of those Members which are not in NATO. The EU will therefore deepen cooperation with the North Atlantic Alliance in complementarity, synergy, and full respect for the institutional framework, inclusiveness and decision-making autonomy of the two.”

In other words, being different entities, with somewhat different members, and having different objectives, the two must live with and respect that difference. This is a largely legalistic argument (the two are indeed different legal entities), but one with clearly substantial political connotations (their policies and activities in the security and defence realm overlap to a considerable extent). This political dimension is rendered all the more acute in that clear and undisputed leadership in NATO lies with the United States – which is a completely different actor from either the EU or NATO.

This is where the discussion becomes interesting. In most of the major statements I referred to, there are sentences to the effect that while NATO remains the primary actor in European collective defence, the EU should be able *both* to contribute more substantially to that objective, *and* to undertake robust missions in which the US has no interest. The apparent implication here is that the EU (via CSDP) aims to become a military actor *comparable* to NATO – while not undermining it or questioning its supremacy. But what

exactly does that mean? What is it that the EU wishes to bring to the collective defence table that would give it the ability to act without NATO if necessary, but that would not question the need for or the preponderance of NATO? If the EU actually achieves strategic autonomy, what is NATO for? And conversely, if the EU does not achieve strategic autonomy, what is CSDP for?

VIEWS FROM THE US

Here’s where the US debate comes in. For our purposes, the key issue has become President Trump’s cavalier suggestions that the US is fed up with paying for European free-riders and is rethinking the very bases of the Alliance. His favourite taunt is that NATO is “obsolete”. But let’s not forget that Eisenhower said in 1949, “If NATO is still needed in ten years, it will have failed in its mission”. However, Trump’s (apparent) position on NATO is not as outlandish as some commentators have suggested. He was not alone in expressing exasperation with NATO. Bernie Sanders expressed a very similar message, as did Rand Paul. These ideas also have a very strong pedigree among US international relations experts. MIT professor Barry Posen, in a path-breaking book, *Restraint*, called for a gradual, ten-year, American withdrawal from NATO, accompanied by the progressive transfer of all its functions to Europeans.² Allies, he insisted, are costing more than they are worth. Posen’s conclusion: NATO can be transferred to the Europeans and, if they don’t want it, “it can be allowed to lapse”.

His proposals are echoed by another high-profile US public intellectual, Boston University’s Andrew Bacevich:

“Should it choose to do so, Europe—even after the British vote to leave the EU—is fully capable of defending its eastern flank. The next administration should nudge Europeans toward making that choice [...].”

He proposes that the next SACEUR should be

a European officer. Then a firm date for ending US membership in NATO and withdrawing the last US troops from Europe. The next administration's message to Europe, he argues, "should be clear from day one: 'ready your defenses; we're going home.'"³

The same message came in summer 2016 from two of the most high-profile neo-realists in the US academy, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer:

"In Europe, the United States should end its military presence and turn NATO over to the Europeans. There is no good reason to keep US forces in Europe, as no country there has the capability to dominate that region."⁴

Far from being outlandish, such sentiments are becoming mainstream in the US.

So the key question really is the level of EU ambition. If we take seriously the four major objectives set by the EUGS, we are clearly talking about the highest possible level of ambition: 1) protection of the "European way of life"; 2) maintaining security in both the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods; 3) helping keep open the commercial sea-lanes between Suez and Shanghai; 4) assisting and complementing UN peacekeeping. This ambitious reading of the EUGS poses a huge question about the ultimate state of EU-NATO relations. That question becomes all the more acute in that there are parallel calls for NATO to boost its capacity, in view of Russian aggression in the East, chaos to the South, and with an insurgent in the White House. Karl-Heinz Kamp, in a recent seminal paper, argues that NATO's most recent 2010 strategic concept is already out of date. NATO must massively "adapt its strategic foundations".⁵ But if both NATO and the EU were significantly to enhance their existing capabilities, would this not inevitably call for a radical rethink of the connection between them?

FOUR SCENARIOS

I perceive four scenarios for the EU-NATO relationship over the next decade or so. The first, which cannot entirely be ruled out, would see the gradual unravelling of European integration in general, given the EU's inability to solve its three "crises of sovereignty": money, borders, and defence. This scenario has been rendered even more plausible by Brexit, by Trump and by the spread of populist forces hell-bent on breaking up the Union. For lack of leadership, the EU will fail in its efforts to coordinate defence policy and will simply fall back on the US as in the past – in effect, a return to the 1950s. This would be the worst of all possible scenarios, both for the EU itself and for the US.

A second scenario, would be the status quo, in which CSDP would continue along the same old track, with modest improvements in both EU capacity-generation and decision-making. This would constitute an admission of failure to meet even the minimal expectations written into the EUGS. It would not even approach strategic autonomy, it would not allow the EU to achieve any significant progress in improving the resilience of the neighbouring states, and it would not meet any of the expectations articulated by a range of voices across the US. From the EU-NATO perspective, CSDP, far from increasing cooperation with NATO, would remain a passenger.

A third scenario would be one in which significant, but still limited, progress were made via CSDP-Redux. The instruments that are being widely discussed – the European semester, R&T in military procurement, the OHQ, battle-groups and especially (most analysts' favourite) Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), if cumulative, could well produce a far more effective CSDP, capable of making a difference particularly in the Southern neighbourhood. This would not

quite amount to “strategic autonomy”. It would not allow the EU alone to offer a containment and deterrence posture against Russia, or indeed against an eventual nuclear-armed, ballistic-missile-carried threat from Iran (or any other state in the Middle East). It would represent a serious step beyond the status quo, but would still leave the EU as a subordinate security entity to NATO, while at the same time expending a great deal of money duplicating capabilities largely provided to NATO by the US. In my view, this is the most likely scenario, but it would ultimately prove frustrating for both sides of the Atlantic. If the EU can get this far, why not go the whole way?

The final scenario, which I favour but which I suspect is unlikely to happen, would take the dynamics and energy of the post-Brexit CSDP-Redux, situate them in the historical context of the post-Cold War world, the post-9/11 world, and indeed the post-Trump world, and lead them to their logical conclusion. There is no God-given law whereby Europe should be *reliant in perpetuity on an ally* for its regional security. Powerful forces in both parts of the North Atlantic space have been unleashed since the end of the Cold War calling upon the EU to become an autonomous and mature actor in international affairs. It is far from clear that the US will remain willing – or indeed able – financially, politically or even militarily – to play the role of global or regional policeman that it assumed in 1945. The world is undergoing a process of power transition and the greatest challenges to the US in the remainder of the 21st century will come from the Asia-Pacific region. Europe is confronted with a set of challenges in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods that the EUGS outlines with great clarity. Ultimately, it has to solve those challenges itself. The US cannot “solve” Europe’s “Russia problem”. Only the EU can do that. But it can only do it with genuine strategic autonomy.

This means ending its dependency on the US; it means becoming a security actor that is at least comparable to NATO. Many US voices have called on the EU to step up to the plate and assume leadership in its neighbourhood. The EU should take up that American challenge and progressively assume leadership in meeting its own regional challenges. The US can be a key enabler of that apprenticeship in leadership. It can continue to back-stop EU security policy with critical enablers such as intelligence, logistics, heavy lift, command and control – but only as a temporary measure while Europe acquires the experience and the confidence to meet future challenges on its own. Such a development would be massively in the US’s best interests: to have a competent, mature and self-reliant partner with which to face the global challenges of the 21st century. When the EU reaches that stage, the need for a US-dominated NATO will fade. The best way of reaching that stage is progressively to merge CSDP into NATO, to take over, step by step, command of the major agencies in NATO, and to allow the US to focus on the areas of the world that are of the most strategic importance to Washington. At that point, the Europeanised-NATO, incorporating CSDP-Redux, can sign a bilateral, co-equal and different type of alliance with the US. That is the ultimate logic of the EUGS. Anything else would be simply to repeat the story of the past 15 years. It would be déjà vu all over again. It would be a half-measure that would ultimately satisfy nobody.

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Endnotes

¹ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133163.htm

² Barry R. Posen (2014), *Restraint. A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2014.

³ Andrew Bacevich (September/October 2016), “Ending Endless War: A Pragmatic Military Strategy”, *Foreign Affairs*.

⁴ John Mearsheimer & Stephen Walt (July-August 2016), “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy”, *Foreign Affairs*.

⁵ Karl-Heinz Kamp (September 2016), “Why NATO Needs a New Strategic Concept”, *NATO Defence College Research Report*.



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