SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

For a New NATO-EU Bargain

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NATO and the European Union (EU) are both engaged in a continuous cycle of adaptation, witness in 2021 the NATO 2030 process on the NATO side, and the Strategic Compass on the EU side. These two exercises aim to look forward to how both institutions can better respond to ever-changing risks and threats. One key dimension in this debate is the optimal division of tasks between NATO and the EU, so that what they do together and in a coordinated manner is bigger than what they do separately or in a disorderly way.

The issue of NATO-EU cooperation is obviously not new and has been at the heart of the development of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) since the late 1990s. This ties into at least three levels of debate that pertain to: the relationship and complementarity between the two organizations; the issue of what European states do within NATO; and the broader transatlantic bond.

This said, twenty years of debates and inter-institutional cooperation have fallen short of clarifying what the two institutions must do in relation to each other. Most importantly, the NATO-EU conundrum is hampered by a series of never-met objectives and pledges, as well as by frictions on issues such as duplication, overlap, European strategic autonomy and burden-sharing.

Against this background, this paper takes stock of these unmet objectives and offers a broad picture of what a division of tasks between NATO and the EU could possibly look like. The analysis is intentionally bold and puts forward a number of proposals that are undeniably contentious. It nonetheless draws on an observation of long-term and more recent trends, and aims at feeding the debate about the future of the two main European security institutions and the way they can interlock better.

LESSONS OF 20 YEARS OF NATO-EU PARALLEL AGENDAS

More than 20 years after the birth of the EU aspiration to play a role as a defence actor, while NATO has been going through a process of profound mutation, ten general, strategic-level,

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lessons can be empirically drawn from their parallel agendas.

First, NATO remains the central defence guarantor for most of its member states, while four years of a NATO-sceptic Trump administration have not revealed a particular appetite by Allies to look for alternatives to NATO or to the US defence guarantee.

Second, NATO is a credible territorial defence organization; yet it can only go out-of-area (meaning out of Europe) at great risk to its own long-term effectiveness, credibility, and local acceptance, as illustrated by the operations in Afghanistan and Libya. The overall sentiment among Allies is that crisis management operations are no longer NATO's main added-value.

Third, NATO's embrace of a Projecting Stability agenda in lieu of crisis management and cooperative security has not met with a large consensus among Allies. Nor, arguably, has it made the Alliance a central stabilizer of its periphery, as demonstrated by the persistent volatility in the Middle East and North Africa.

Fourth, twenty years of CSDP have largely failed to position the EU as a credible defence actor, and there is little evidence that any EU member state seriously wants to pursue that goal. EU member states have shown little will to provide the forces required for the EU operations that they themselves voted for in the Council, and it is hard to conceive of a scenario of a robust military operation conducted through the EU and without the Americans. The EU is structurally and politically far from the ability to run Operation Unified Protector (Libya) or Operation Barkhane (Sahel).

Fifth, if in the short term Brexit may have facilitated some EU achievements in the defence domain, in the long run the absence of the UK from the EU can only further undermine the latter's aspiration to become militarily credible.

Sixth, in the same twenty years the EU has become an imperfect but tangible security actor, through actions that lie at the nexus between security and development, and between internal and external security, making the Union an increasingly essential actor of the European security architecture.

Seventh, the evolution of the security landscape is such that there are many issues and tasks that belong to the realm of security without necessarily having direct military implications. Such is the case with sanctions, building resilience, security sector reform, good governance, cyber threats, counterterrorism, civilian capacity-building, police training and reform, tackling disinformation, illegal migration, energy security, pandemics, etc.

Eighth, over time those Western states whose strategic culture makes them prone to conduct high-end military operations have proven disillusioned by international organizations, which they tend to see as too constraining. In Europe, the practice of European defence increasingly conveys the message that expeditionary operations shall be a task for states and ad hoc coalitions rather than for the EU or even NATO. To a large extent, future high-end military operations are likely to be de-institutionalized rather than run through international institutions.

Ninth, twenty years of NATO-EU parallel development makes it difficult to discard critiques of possible overlap and duplication between the two institutions. Debates about the EU's defence clause (while NATO has its Article 5), the set-up of EU planning structures, or more recently the controversial notion of European strategic autonomy (and what it would mean for NATO were it to be achieved), have attested to this difficulty.

Finally, the process of adaptation of international security organizations in response to the broadening security agenda implies a never-ending increase of tasks, which is hardly sustainable, and which inevitably leads to maladaptation. Both the EU's CSDP and NATO run

the risks of dilution if they try to embrace a too large agenda, and there is virtue therefore in concentrating on a relatively narrow segment of activity.

FOR A REALISTIC NATO-EU DIVISION OF TASKS

I assume that these ten lessons are supported by sufficient empirical evidence over the last two decades of what NATO and the EU can and cannot do, to be considered structural variables of the European security architecture. If this is correct, then the dynamics of the parallel agendas of NATO and the EU and of NATO-EU burden-sharing need to be revisited to better reflect these lessons.

On this basis, I propose a sobering yet realist scheme for a NATO-EU division of tasks that takes account of the political frictions observed, as well as of the respective comparative advantages and recent best practices of the two organizations.

Comparative advantages

To start with, security actors display comparative advantages that theoretically determine their role in security management, as first or second responder, based on the needs of the situation. As an example, NATO logically was the first responder to reassure the Baltic states and Poland in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, but it was not in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the EU has been the first responder in civilian crisis management in the Western Balkans, but not whenever the use of force was necessary in the same region. One can find many examples of NATO and the EU displaying their comparative advantages, which leads to a possible division of tasks; yet this has neither been conceptualized nor institutionalized, mainly due to a lack of consensus between member states on the organizations' respective roles and long-term goals.

What I suggest is that NATO and the EU think in terms of first or second responder, and engage in a process of

conceptualizing a division of tasks and its operational implications. By doing this, not only could the two organizations draw some harsh lessons from the past two decades, but they could also better ensure an optimal response to the threats out there, in contrast to what one currently sees, and therefore enhance their own credibility.

Collective defence vs. human security

At the centre of such a division of tasks is a bargain under which NATO would concentrate on collective defence and the EU would concentrate on a wider security agenda. This means that NATO would be in the lead (the first responder) for all collective defence-related activities, while the EU would be in the lead for all crisis management and human security-related activities, and each institution would come in support (as second responder) of the other when it is not in the lead. In such a deal, NATO would be a second responder in crisis management activities such as KFOR in Kosovo, Unified Protector in Libya, most maritime operations that do not have a collective defence component, and defence capacity-building in partner countries. Those would be the responsibility of either the EU or an *ad hoc* coalition of states (if the contemplated action would include the use of military force).

Indeed, in case an emergency calls for a robust military operation falling outside of collective defence, it is assumed (and suggested) that neither NATO nor the EU would initially intervene; states would, in a coalition, as was or is the case for the first two years of ISAF in Afghanistan, the Coalition against ISIL, and the French-led operation Barkhane in the Sahel. One of the lessons mentioned above is that the more a projected operation is coercive in nature, the more states become sceptical about the role of institutions. When it comes to war-fighting, states are reluctant to take the institutional route and tend to prefer a state-centred approach. The US has demonstrated this inclination time and again. On a different scale, the French-proposed European Intervention Initiative provides another example of a

preference for a de-institutionalized approach to military operations. This observation tends to narrow down the spectrum of military activities that NATO and the EU can be in charge of. Yet not only does it support the idea of an EU retrenchment from military robustness, it also allows NATO to concentrate on its core task of collective defence.

In this scenario, NATO would still play a role in projecting stability (and could even make it a core task, probably under a different name, in a revised Strategic Concept), but with the assumption that it would do that *in support* of the EU or other security actors. The Alliance would also keep its prerogatives in the nuclear deterrence (and nuclear sharing) domain, which no country is willing to transfer to the EU anyway.

Likewise, the EU would, at least temporarily, give up on collective defence and high-end military operations; it would continue to develop capabilities in the framework of the [Permanent Structured Cooperation](#) (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), with the assumption that such capabilities would be resorted to either by the EU or by a coalition of EU member states in a crisis management scenario (in an operation such as KFOR, for example), or by NATO itself. EU-led crisis management would thus come in support of NATO in an Article 5 scenario, while NATO would come in support of the EU in any large-scale complex emergency that is not Article 5-related.

This does not imply that the EU would no longer aspire to become strategically autonomous, which the wider security agenda no doubt calls for. It rather signifies a shift in the meaning of autonomy, and puts its military dimension in the hands of the (European) states rather than the EU as such, at least for the coming years. For European states that want to pursue the strategic autonomy objective, starting by developing a European "warfighting culture" outside of the EU is not necessarily a bad idea, especially if it allows the UK to be part of the game (and to demonstrate, outside of the EU, how it can

work). Once some of the pillars of autonomy and robustness are established by European states, a process of re-institutionalization is possible, as the need for an EU foreign policy approach will remain.

Geography

The further NATO and the EU operate from their base, the more challenging operations are both in political and operational terms. Furthermore, the defence/security agenda in the vicinity of Europe is complex and unstable. It follows that it makes sense for the two organizations to concentrate on their own periphery, and to intervene beyond it only in support of others or exceptionally. This of course does not mean that EU or NATO members are absent from the international arena, but rather that they intervene there *outside* of the EU or NATO. NATO's area of responsibility is the one defined by Article 6 of the Washington Treaty in its collective defence role, and I argue that the Alliance should intervene as second responder outside of this area. As for the EU, its wide security agenda implies a role within EU territory as well as in its periphery, but it should refrain from intervening beyond its broad neighbourhood. In this context, whether CSDP should also cover internal security issues needs to be thoroughly examined, as some PESCO projects (such as Military Mobility or the various cyber security projects) already suggest, and as the [broad civilian crisis management agenda](#) (implying CSDP, but also the European Commission and Justice and Home Affairs agencies) calls for.

Sequencing

A sound division of tasks calls for some sort of sequencing between various security actors, especially when a military operation is being considered. This is implied by all concepts of rapid reaction as well as by the security-development nexus: a situation may require an initial robust intervention before a different set of actors takes over for longer-term stabilization activities. Applied to NATO-EU cooperation, outside of collective defence scenarios (in which NATO would be involved

from the beginning), the sequencing could only start with an *ad hoc* coalition that may, in due course, hand over to other actors, including the EU that may take the lead of stabilization efforts (as first responder), with the support of NATO (as second responder). Here again, what security actors do best drives the division of tasks.

CONCLUSION: THE VIRTUES OF THE NATO-EU DEAL

Over the last 20 years, NATO and the European Union have largely failed to design an effective division of labour. What we have seen instead is a mix of political frictions, unmet pledges, and frustrations on the part of the states that are at the forefront of security governance in the Euro-Atlantic area, in particular the US and France. What this paper has argued is that NATO allies and EU member states must agree on a new bargain that would clarify the division of tasks, set more realist objectives, and better ensure the relevance and credibility of the two organizations.

According to this bargain, NATO primarily does collective defence and comes in support of the EU for activities for which it is not the first responder. The EU embraces a broad (human) security agenda and continues to support member states' capability development, but does not pursue, at least for some time, a *stricto sensu* defence operational role; European states do.

Were the two organizations to follow what is suggested here, quite a few issues would still hamper the partnership, and many sources of friction would probably remain. However, clarity on what NATO and the EU do would allow for: (1) an increased credibility of NATO, which would concentrate on its core collective defence task; (2) an increased credibility of and consensus within the European Union, which would concentrate on the human security and resilience-building agenda and put temporarily an end to the ambition of EU defence actorness, which only states can probably acquire in the current environment, before the EU hypothetically takes over after a transition period; (3) strengthened Transatlantic relations, as a result of a clearer division of tasks between NATO and the EU and of the absence of ambiguity about the EU's ambition.

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