



EU and NATO Strategy: A Compass, a Concept, and a Concordat

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A concordat is an agreement between the church authorities and the state that regulates the activities of the former on the territory of the latter. Since both European Defence and the Transatlantic Alliance are churches with their zealous high priests and devoted believers, the term seems apt enough for the EU-NATO package deal that I propose in this paper. The coincidence that in 2021-2022 the EU is drafting a Strategic Compass and NATO a new Strategic Concept should be put to use to mend the schism between them. Can a miracle be worked?

An EU-NATO package deal would not change either's authority. But it would recognise that one can voluntarily refrain from exercising one's authority in areas where the other delivers more. The well-established military principle of "supporting and supported" organisations should apply, as Thierry Tardy also advocates:¹ where the concordat puts NATO in the lead, the EU limits itself to supporting it, and vice versa. A concordat would thus be a practical division of responsibility, which can be pragmatically revised

over time, as the strategies and capabilities of both organisations' member states evolve. The aim is to ensure that everything is done by the one who does it best, nothing is done twice, and nothing is left undone – unlike the current state of affairs, in spite of all pledges, binding commitments, and joint declarations.

My proposed package deal is composed of a trinity: the Father, the original task of territorial defence and resilience; the Son, the late offspring of expeditionary operations; and the Holy Spirit that animates it all, defence planning and capability development.

TERRITORIAL DEFENCE AND RESILIENCE

The primary task of the armed forces remains the defence of the Holy Land: collective territorial defence.

There is a widespread perception that deterrence and defence are credible only because the US has the will and the forces to act, and can cajole its allies into action. Consequently, hints that the aspiration to EU strategic autonomy stretches into territorial defence antagonise many who fear that this might undermine the US' commitment

to NATO's Article 5, while they don't trust their fellow Europeans to defend them instead. This has created a strange paradox: Europeans feel weak and reliant on the US; therefore they shrink back from any initiative that might upset Washington; and so they remain forever weak and reliant on the US. American policy tends to reinforce rather than break this cycle: the US continually exhorts its European Allies to do more, yet pushes back the moment it feels any European initiative could lead to heresy and threaten its leadership (or its arms exports).

Europe's ingrained subservience anyhow rests on a somewhat distorted version of history, in which the US rushed to aid the European democracies whenever they were threatened. The reality is that in 1914 and again in 1939 Britain and France went to war to aid Belgium and Poland whereas, as Field Marshal Montgomery (NATO's first Deputy SACEUR) wrote: "In two world wars Europe has seen the United States watching from the touchline during the first two years of the war; the European nations do not want this to happen again".² Unlike during the Cold War that followed the two world wars, for the US today Europe is the secondary theatre to Asia. US defence planning has moved to a "one-war standard", aimed at defeating one great power: China.³ Europeans must take into account, therefore, that if the US was engaged in a major contingency in Asia, American reinforcements in case of a simultaneous crisis in Europe might arrive later and in smaller numbers than hitherto foreseen.

US commitment may decline in any case if Donald Trump, another Trump, or any Trumpist wins the US presidential elections in 2024. Trump won 74 million votes in 2020, and the Republican Party seemingly remains in awe of him, in spite of the storming of the Capitol that he incited on 6 January 2021. Trumpism and the isolationist and anti-EU sentiments that it stands for cannot be discounted, therefore.

At the same time, many also underestimate Europe's capacity to defend itself against conventional attack. During the Cold War, Western European forces could not match the massive conventional power of the Warsaw Pact. Today however, Barry Posen argues that Europeans alone, with their current forces, could fight a Russian conventional invasion to a standstill and hold a line until American and Canadian reinforcements arrived.⁴ A line in Poland, though, not at the border of the Baltic states – but who could hold the line there, given their exposed geopolitical position? (Not unlike that of the Netherlands in 1940).

NATO and Defence

These arguments do not amount to a case for organising territorial defence in an EU context instead of NATO, however. First, Europeans could keep up the fight against Russia (bolstered by their massive economic and demographic overweight) but with current capabilities may not be able to liberate any conquered territory without their North American allies. Second, European nuclear capabilities and arrangements lag far behind. Third, the UK has of course left the EU. Finally, in a world that is dominated by continent-sized great powers, Europeans would do well to maintain their alliance with one of these powers, and even strengthen it – by making it more evenly balanced. As long, that is, as American Grand Strategy is sufficiently in line with the European interest (and if another Trumpist president does not fatally damage the alliance first).

The first part of the concordat, therefore, is that NATO will continue to take the lead in collective defence, with the EU in a supporting role. EU strategic autonomy, in other words, will not extend to planning for territorial defence (even though Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union provides a legal basis for it). That should

put the eastern European states at ease.

Within NATO, however, the European Allies and Partners who together make up the EU, should drastically increase their level of ambition. Given the US focus on China, NATO's "first line" of conventional deterrence and defence is in fact European already today. The few American combat troops that remain in Europe fulfil only the classic tripwire function: they are there not to halt any invasion, but to ensure the US' full commitment as soon as one of them becomes a casualty. The "EU Allies & Partners" need to build conventional forces of sufficient strength to send a strong message to Russia and any other potential adversary: even if there were not a single American soldier present in Europe, still nobody could win a short and sharp conventional war against the Europeans alone. That would greatly strengthen conventional deterrence (which is a vital complement to nuclear deterrence).

In concrete terms, the only respectable target for the "EU Allies & Partners" is that together they contribute half of all the conventional capabilities that the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) requires. While they build that force over time, in the short term already the "EU Allies & Partners" ought to step up their role in Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland and the Baltic states: three of the four multinational battlegroups ought to be led by an EU Ally, instead of just one.⁵

The EU, Resilience, and China

Furthermore, while NATO maintains the lead in collective defence against military threats, the EU as such must take the lead in building resilience against non-military threats. The EU is a single market, so any act of coercion or subversion by a foreign power against a Member State affects the Union as a whole. In many of the geo-economic areas that are key to prevent subversion and

coercion, the EU has either exclusive or shared competences with its Member States. When it comes to reacting to subversion and coercion, diplomatic and economic sanctions are also adopted through the EU – few Member States will dare confront another power alone. On the other hand, not every act of subversion or coercion against the EU has an effect on or calls for measures from the US and other non-EU Allies, while NATO as such has but limited instruments in these areas.

NATO should therefore assume a supporting role vis-à-vis the EU. It can coordinate, exert peer pressure, and propose standards (such as its seven baseline requirements on resilience).⁶ But only to the extent that this is reconcilable with EU norms and standards (as regards investment screening and access to the single market, for example). The EU for its part should use the mutual assistance guarantee of Article 42.7 to build strong solidarity against all non-military forms of subversion and coercion, and design a common policy on deterrence and retaliation. A cyber-attack on one Member State, for example, should be responded to as a cyber-attack on all.

On the European side, the EU obviously takes the lead on China, because this is primarily a foreign policy and not a defence issue. NATO's supporting role should be limited to assessing the potential impact of developments in Chinese defence on its own defence. The Allies can, of course, consult and coordinate all aspects of their China policy, just like they can discuss resilience, the climate crisis, energy, and migration around the NATO table. But that does not mean that NATO is best suited to make and implement policy on these issues, or that NATO Headquarters should add a branch to the curia to deal with them – it is not, and it should not.

EXPEDITIONARY OPERATIONS

While NATO takes the lead in territorial defence, it should abandon its missionary zeal. The second part of the concordat is that the EU and its Member States assume the lead in expeditionary operations, with NATO in the supporting role. The focus will naturally be on the southern flank.

The Strategic Compass should provide clarity where the 2016 Global Strategy obfuscated: when and why should the EU consider intervening in the south? Protecting the citizens of other countries trapped in conflict can be a positive side effect of EU interventions, but not its main purpose, as the Global Strategy seemed to pretend. In a crisis, the EU should only consider direct intervention if its vital interests are directly at stake and the states of the region cannot master the situation. For example, if a crisis threatens to spill over onto EU territory, to sever its connectivity, to generate terrorism against the EU, or to cause refugee streams towards the EU that can only be managed by ending the crisis. If this is the case, the EU must be ready to take the lead, even in large-scale combat operations. But if this is *not* the case, and unless the UN Security Council activates the Responsibility to Protect, the EU should limit itself to diplomatic and economic instruments of crisis management, and indirect military measures, such as enforcing sanctions and supporting local and regional actors.

The overall long-term objective for the southern flank is not to deter aggression against European territory or to militarily defeat an adversary. Rather, the aim is to build up states that provide sufficiently effective and inclusive government to gain the support of the majority of their citizens, so as to motivate their security and defence forces to fight for them, and be able to defeat their adversaries themselves. This calls for a comprehensive strategy that the EU is best placed

to design and implement. Within that framework, the EU should favour an *indirect* military approach: supporting the states of the region through long-term capacity-building, rather than assuming executive tasks itself.

The EU's responsibility for the southern flank includes maritime security, which is vital for the Union's connectivity. From the Mediterranean to the western half of the Indian Ocean, where maritime security is eminently linked to the stability of the littoral states, the EU should assume the lead, with NATO again in a supporting role. Further afield, notably in the main Indo-Pacific theatre, neither NATO nor the EU but the US has the military lead. Beyond its broad southern neighbourhood, the EU's military role is one of supporting EU diplomacy, through port visits, combined exercises, exchange of officers and cadets and other forms of military partnership, as well as Freedom of Navigation Operations.

Strategic Direction

In many southern neighbours, the indirect military approach requires a semi-permanent presence. For where the EU leaves a void, others move in: Russia, China, the Gulf states, and indeed Turkey. The EU cannot afford these powers to gain a permanent military foothold and steer countries in a direction that runs contrary to its interests. This demands a delicate balance: doing enough to bolster the host state and keep other powers at bay, without taking over what ought to be the host state's tasks or being instrumentalised by it.

This more geopolitical approach calls for an annual regional assessment, that takes into account all national, coalition, and UN operations in the same theatre in which EU Member States are engaged, rather than reviewing and prolonging EU operations under the Common

Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) one by one as is current EU practice. Only if there is full transparency about Member States' intentions, can resources be allocated to EU operations, or existing operations be "Europeanised", on a rational basis.

Europeans are in the lead already in operations in the Sahel, with the US providing support in specific areas. The US interest in active operations in the Middle East is likely to decline as well. For NATO, the southern flank will always be a sideshow, in light of the more limited role of the military instrument there, and of the natural focus of the Alliance's military establishment on Russia. The creation, in 2017, of the so-called "Hub for the South", under Allied Joint Force Command Naples, did not change that reality. Instead, NATO should create a new mechanism to allow the EU, or a coalition led by EU Member States, direct and flexible access to JFC Naples itself, bypassing the moribund Berlin-Plus arrangement (which is such a cumbersome delegation that it amounts to an abdication).

The EU's tiny Military Planning and Conduct Capacity (MPCC) will never provide the backbone in terms of command and control that the EU's expeditionary role demands. Making JFC Naples permanently available to the EU will. Confident that a headquarters would always be on standby, the EU should then task the EU Military Staff (EUMS) with permanent contingency planning for the southern flank, without having to wait for political authorisation on a case-by-case basis as today.

The current absence of clarity has been a great weakness of the EU: without an internal consensus on which expeditionary role it is playing or should be playing, the EU has been unable to be consistently proactive.

Fundamentally, taking charge of expeditionary operations in the broad neighbourhood is what EU Member States decided in 1999 already, when they launched what was originally called the European Security and Defence Policy. It was not controversial then, and should not be controversial now, not even if one calls it "strategic autonomy". Twenty-two years later, the EU Member States should just finally do it.

DEFENCE PLANNING AND CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

Oftentimes competing centres of pilgrimage lay claim to the same relics; thus several saints appear to have possessed multiple arms and legs, or even heads. States really have but a single set of forces though, and no miraculous multiplication is possible. Yet both NATO and the EU seek to guide the development of those forces – the latter with even less success than the former. The EU Member States meanwhile since more than twenty years ritualistically incant that they will pool their national defence efforts, but actually never do.

The NDPP sets binding targets for every individual Ally. But it does not take into account the need of the "EU Allies & Partners" for strategic enablers for autonomous expeditionary operations on the southern flank; today, these enablers are very unevenly spread across NATO, and are in fact mostly American.⁷ Nor does the NDPP seem to take cognisance of the fact that in many areas many European Allies no longer have the scale to build significant capabilities in a cost-effective way. At most, therefore, they could only partially meet their targets, and even then in a far too costly manner, thus wasting limited resources.

On the EU side, the Capability Development Plan (CDP), building on the Headline Goal Process⁸ and the findings of the Coordinated

Annual Review on Defence (CARD), sets collective targets aimed at building an autonomous expeditionary capacity, while Member States outline their plans to meet their commitments under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in a National Implementation Plan (NIP). But as none of these processes is binding, unsurprisingly, their influence on national defence planning is marginal. Sinning against one's NDPP targets carries with it the penalty of some uncomfortable moments during the regular confessionals (or self-criticism sessions, to use an image from another ideological framework); ignoring the CDP not even that.

Since neither the NDPP nor the CDP achieves its targets, a major rethink is imperative.

Planning for One Force Package

The third part of the concordat is that the “EU Allies & Partners” adopt a single defence planning process geared to a single force package. NATO and the EU should interlock their defence planning, and the “EU Allies & Partners” must use PESCO as the core instrument to build a comprehensive full-spectrum force package that meets all their needs.

The “EU Allies & Partners” should decide on a set of *binding collective* targets, and integrate them in the NDPP in between the national targets and the target for NATO as a whole. On the one hand, these collective targets should focus on the strategic enablers that the “EU Allies & Partners” identify through the EU's Headline Goal Process as required for expeditionary operations. On the other hand, they must provide for the firepower and additional enablers that the “EU Allies & Partners” need to strengthen their conventional deterrence and defence. The aim is to design the capability mix of the “EU Allies & Partners” in such a way that within their contribution of half

of the NATO force posture they have the means of undertaking autonomous expeditionary operations on the southern flank. Other European NATO members, such as Norway, could associate themselves with this EU dimension within the NDPP.

The “EU Allies & Partners” should meet these targets by using PESCO as it was meant: a move from cooperation to integration. PESCO today is a “mini-European Defence Fund” for a plethora of mostly unimportant procurement projects, serving to equip national units: its impact will be minimal. The Strategic Compass must rectify what the PESCO Strategic Review failed to do in 2020.

The way forward is to turn the existing PESCO project of creating a Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC) into the core of PESCO as whole, and to tailor the other projects to it. This means building a modular multinational force package, with army brigades (or air force squadrons or navy ships) as the national building-blocks but with multinational support units, all permanently anchored in standing multinational divisions and corps. Member States can then launch other PESCO projects to fully harmonize the equipment of these brigades, and to build the strategic enablers to deploy them (to the benefit of the EU's defence industrial base, and with the support of the EDF).⁹

The CROC can become one of the three army corps envisaged by NATO planning. It would take its place in the line in case of an Article 5 scenario, while modular formations could be readily generated from it for expeditionary operations. The CROC should thus comprise both heavy armoured formations and more rapidly deployable motorised and airmobile formations (plus naval and air forces), allowing all “EU Allies & Partners” to play a useful part in

the domain that best suits them. The key is top-down guidance, to ensure that all modules combined do constitute a comprehensive full-spectrum force package. That requires a strengthening of the institutional framework and political ownership on the EU side, notably the creation of a Council of Defence Ministers (who until now only meet informally).

CONCLUSION

As the catholic priest explained to the nun: if you became pregnant, that would be a mystery; if I became pregnant, that would be a miracle. In spite of all the obvious drawbacks of the current arrangement, it would probably require a miracle for an effective EU-NATO concordat to emerge from the various conclaves. If it fails to, the reasons why will not be a mystery.

One cause would certainly be Greece and Turkey shamelessly continuing to abuse their position in the EU and NATO to fight out their dispute over Cyprus (which really must finally be allowed to become one of the “EU Allies & Partners”). One must also blame the leading states, on both sides of the Atlantic, however, that continue to tolerate this situation.

If for this reason the miracle of an actual EU-NATO concordat does not come to pass, the EU could still deliver its part of the bargain and adopt an ambitious Strategic Compass that clarifies

what Member States will do for defence and deterrence as well as expeditionary operations – and holds them to it.

But there is a more fundamental reason for the current stalemate. On the one hand, Atlanticist dogmatism refuses to depart in the slightest from the scriptures and adapt NATO to the emergence of the EU – as if the defence arrangements of the 1950s were ipso facto suitable for the world of today and saying otherwise was blasphemy. On the other hand, European mysticism is forever preaching that European defence will bring salvation, without taking any real steps to bring it about. Dogmatism and mysticism are enemies of sound strategy, which must be based on reason.

From his pulpit at Ghent University and the Egmont Institute, Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop has been pontificating about European defence for over two decades, without ever once losing faith (which some of his colleagues think is a miracle in itself).

The author warmly thanks his co-disciples Jo Coelmont, Jolyon Howorth, Tania Latici, Thierry Tardy, and various Belgian and other European officers and diplomats for their insightful exegesis of the first draft of this sermon.

ENDNOTES

¹ Thierry Tardy, [For a New NATO-EU Bargain](#). Brussels, Egmont, Security Policy Brief No. 138, February 2021.

² Bernard Law Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Montgomery*. London, Collins, 1958, p. 512.

³ Hal Brands & Evan Braden Montgomery, [“One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great Power Competition”](#). In: *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, 2020, No. 2, pp. 80-92.

⁴ Barry Posen, [“Europe Can Defend Itself”](#). In: *Survival*, Vol. 62, 2020, No. 6, pp. 7-34.

⁵ Iulian Romanyshyn, [Breaking the Law of Opposite Effects: Europe’s Strategic Autonomy and the Revived Transatlantic Partnership](#). Brussels, Egmont, Security Policy Brief No. 140, March 2021.

⁶ Continuity of government, energy, population movement, food and water resources, civil communications, transport systems, and the capacity to handle mass casualties.

⁷ Notably in the area of C4ISR: command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, and reconnaissance.

⁸ The Headline Goal is the objective to deploy up to an army corps, plus naval and air forces, for expeditionary operations, within one or two months, and to sustain it for at least one year.

⁹ For more details: Sven Biscop, [“Battalions to Brigades: The Future of European Defence”](#). In: *Survival*, Vol. 62, 2020, No. 5, pp. 105-118.