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Embedding NATO into the European Union Global Strategy: the missing link?

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- **With the upcoming publication of the European Union Global Strategy, expectations around a stronger foreign policy role for the EU are rising. This leads to a rethinking about its role as a security actor, which cannot be thought without NATO. While there are difficulties in advancing the agenda of institutional cooperation, there now exist clear incentives, due to the nature of threats or the economic situation to warrant the beginning of a changed relationship.**



The “need for enhanced cooperation between the EU and NATO” may well constitute one of the most employed truisms of the international security community. Countless publications, studies and conference discussions state this goal as being self-evident and lament the lack of progress in this realm while quoting the usual brakes (the Cyprus-Turkey issue; institutional reticences) to strengthened cooperation. While being largely under the radar before the onset of the Ukrainian-Russian crisis and limited to expert circles, this narrative got a second - and decisive? - lease on life as the reconfiguration of security in Europe’s neighborhood opened debates about institutional cooperation on hybrid warfare, counter-terrorism, defense planning and capabilities and the partnership and membership agenda.

In addition to that, the recent period has coincided with an increased level of thinking regarding the EU foreign policy and defense. The ongoing drafting process of the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), whose final version is to be discussed at the June 2016 European Council, shall attempt to chart a new strategic roadmap for the EU, one in which a concrete framework of cooperation with NATO should be introduced (and is explicitly identified by Central Europe as a priority). In parallel, the decision by France to activate the mutual assistance clause of the TFEU (article 42(7)) following the November 13 attacks, instead of asking the North Atlantic Council to discuss Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, has raised a certain amount of questions about what this text underpins. As the internal think tank of the Presidency of the Commission, the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC), notes: “CSDP is today primarily a peacemaking and crisis management instrument, but **what about the EU’s pledge to mutual assistance and territorial defence?**¹”. This important question spells out some of the difficulties that structure the EU’s efforts in defining a role for itself on defense and security issues, and in the second place on its ability to actually articulate efforts

with NATO, given the potential overlap between the two institutions on these issues.

Implementing the EUGS: making security count

The EUGS represents a necessary first step in reinforcing the foreign policy arm of the EU. However, as has been said by many experts who have been asked to feed into the process, the document can only be actionable if it sets an agenda. Sven Biscop says that the EUGS is itself “only the necessary first step to arrive at the crucial second phase: prioritization” and the need to identify “which existing instruments have to be strengthened or revised – or alternatively what new instruments need to be created and by when”². Therefore, as was already the wish of certain countries such as France, any new European strategic document shall be followed by a European security strategy, in which the instruments that are used to fulfill these goals will be made clear. This step could not be combined with the EUGS because of the British reluctance to envisage a (clearer) role for the EU in military affairs. While it is unlikely that British reluctance on this front would stop, especially in the context of a divisive BREXIT debate, it will however remain crucial for the EU to be able to complete this step and address this issue of what instruments it will use to carry out not only territorial defense but also any mission that relates to the security of its borders and of its member states. In such a context, a concrete and rational agenda of work that involves NATO, alongside the UN, the OSCE and select regional actors will be the expected, tangible deliverable of any security strategy.

Any such discussion quickly is derailed by the prospect of an institutional and/or geographical division labor between the EU and NATO, which understandably provokes fears about a dilution of unity in deciding on institutional priorities and a subsequent inability to carry them out

¹ Emphasis in original text.

² *Towards an EU Global Strategy: Consulting the experts*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, p. 15. Available at

http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/EUGS_Expert_Opinions.pdf

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efficiently. That should not however mean that any discussion of this sort should be judged as unwelcome: any rational discussion about security in Europe, bearing in mind its growing afferent costs for member states, should allow for discussions about ad hoc collaboration (for example, on cybersecurity, where an agreement was recently signed³) or on informal division of labor. As the EPSC points out, “there is an emerging division of roles where the CSDP takes on increased responsibility for crisis management”. As NATO’s crisis management capabilities have slid down the priority ladder, a strong recognition of an EU role on these issues at the NATO Warsaw Summit would certainly provide useful strategic clarity for EU member states and NATO Allies in the future, especially the ones who have taken leadership on crisis management missions.

Converging threats, converging roles?

The nature of these discussions is also influenced by the changing security perception within the member states. Undoubtedly, the rise of domestic terrorism, as proven by the attacks in Paris, Copenhagen and Brussels has reshaped the domestic impact of foreign policies for certain EU member states, while others remain most concerned by an aggressive Russia. Beyond this division, which has unhappily tended to frame Europe in two camps, the security situation in Europe is marked by the preeminence of so-called ‘transversal’ threats and strategic challenges. These are “problems that cannot be defined by geography or classified as clearly military or non-military threats” and that “generally have a powerful impact on the EU”⁴. Among this classification, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism policies outside of national territories and border management rank high in order of magnitude and potential disruptive effects on European societies.

Seeing that these threats contain both military and civilian aspects to their management, there is here a natural role for the creation of a rational agenda between the EU and NATO. The example of NATO maritime policing in the Aegean, in support of the Frontex mission to protect the EU’s external borders, constitutes the first step of a mutually reinforcing relationship on the ground. While the mission is modest in nature, the added value is to be found in the dialogue that has been fostered between the two institutions on issues of mutual interest. Discussions have also started, at the behest of President Obama, towards committing NATO assets off the Libyan coast in order to fight human trafficking and stop the inflow of refugees crossing at this treacherous point⁵. The extension of this cooperation to the Libyan coasts highlights how rational cooperation can be created between the two institutions, and how new institutional reflexes can potentially be fostered. The possibility of such a common approach to crises in the European neighborhood should be enshrined in a European security strategy, recognizing each institution’s strengths on specific areas.

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This would constitute an actionable framework for a rational NATO-EU cooperation agenda, which would allow for each institution to also reach specific goals that it sets out for itself. For example, such approach would contribute to the enhancement of the EU’s much-vaunted comprehensive approach, by reducing its area of application and focusing on areas where it can efficiently contribute, in the development and security realms. This light form of specialization would also in turn incentivize member

³ *EU and NATO cyber defence cooperation*, European External Action Service, 10 February 2016. Available at http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2016/100216_eu-nato-cyber-defence-cooperation_en.htm

⁴ *Towards a new European security strategy? Assessing the impact of changes in the global security environment*. European Parliament, June 2015, p. 69. Available at

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/534989/EXPO_STU\(2015\)534989_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/534989/EXPO_STU(2015)534989_EN.pdf)

⁵ *US backs NATO blockade of Libya to close refugee route*. Euractiv.com, 26 April 2016. Available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/us-backs-nato-blockade-of-libya-to-close-refugee-route/>

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states to engage with this agenda, with the understanding that conventional military concerns remain covered first and foremost by NATO and that the Alliance does remain the ultimate security guarantee. On the NATO side, this would also have the benefit of streamlining the crisis management leg of the Alliance, by focusing on the areas where it is useful, namely in providing capabilities on the ground and training for local forces. NATO's partnership policy could also benefit from a more structured approach, given also the fact that some partners remain hopeful of EU membership. Therefore, it is not inconceivable to think that a better partnership between the EU and NATO on crisis management issues could also increase the two institutions' normative power.

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From an artificial opposition to a natural cooperation?

The integration of a role for NATO in the follow-up to the EUGS could also serve to buck the trend of the regionalization of defense and security policy. After a first period of renationalization of foreign policy following the economic crisis⁶, and the Ukraine crisis that exacerbated national positions (and especially European divisions), there was hope that recovering defense budgets would lead to a more European approach to current geopolitical challenges. However, the artificial divisions that have been created between the so-called 'eastern' and 'southern' flanks of NATO, have as a matter of fact had the effect of fostering a regional approach to security issues, and even to a certain extent pitting the flanks one against the other

in competing for both institutional attention and resources (mostly from the U.S.).

Therefore, the idea of linking the implementation of the EUGS' goals to specific NATO structures would create a European consensus around the use of proper instruments that would help move away from these reflexes, and additionally provide a clearer role for countries such as the Czech Republic who are nominally not part of any of these flanks. This is absolutely essential in order to reinforce the sense of ownership of the EUGS from this category of member states, and to make concrete for them what linkages exist between the EU and NATO in carrying out their own interests. The consequences of regionalization process also highlights one of the limits of any rigid institutional division of labor: countries that maintain a global outlook (France, the UK, Germany) and represent the bulk of usable military capabilities in Europe⁷, or countries that don't neatly fit into these artificial divisions that are created (Czech Republic, Croatia, Norway, Denmark), can feel removed from these dynamics, which can in turn diminish the sense of ownership of common priorities.

Elephants in the room: capabilities and the role of the U.S.

The setting of common priorities also reinforces the ways in which militaries can work with one another. For all the (understandable) criticisms that have been levied about ad hoc coalitions fighting in the Southern neighborhood, it is essential to remember that these would never have been able to operate together without a certain level of interoperability. Therefore, there exists an operational baseline on which common thinking about missions can take place. If the EU is to carve out for itself a role on crisis management, as seems to be desired, then this important lesson will have to be taken into consideration. In this context, the EPSC's proposal

⁶ See notably: Telo, Mario, Ponjaert, Frederik, *The EU's Foreign Policy: What Kind of Power and Diplomatic Action?* (Routledge,

2016) for a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of "renationalization".

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to rekindle the fire of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) on matters of European defense capabilities, would go a long way in preserving certain key capabilities already in the European toolkit and uniting a group of countries around other projects, such as “an integrated European Medical Command or a joint Helicopter Wing”⁸. The ability of Europeans to count on their own key enablers has been long documented in the context of a diminished reliance on American capabilities, a message that President Obama has repeated in Hannover on April 24th⁹.

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Of course, such planning does not come without difficulties, given the fact that the NATO Defense Planning Process (NDPP)¹⁰ has no proper equivalent on the EU level, and that the question of duplication of capabilities is at the heart of the last American reticence regarding EU-NATO cooperation. Even if the Wales NATO Summit declaration recognizes that “a stronger European Defence will contribute to a stronger NATO”¹¹, David Yost writes that “the duplication that could be the most harmful to the Alliance’s political cohesion would be establishing a separate EU defense-planning process and command structure”¹². Despite uncertainties about future global U.S. leadership, the most the EU should aim for in order to preserve a strong working relationship with the U.S. should be the acceptance of a stronger European pillar within NATO. A reinforcement of European key enablers would allow for this and help Europe answer challenges in its own neighborhoods, especially on issues where the leadership

of the U.S. to act decisively is under question. A strong European pillar in NATO that would be able to decisively use the NATO command and control structures in the case of operations, would smartly enhance European strategic autonomy; it would also leave unharmed the fundamentals of the relationship with the U.S. and alleviate fears of the Allies for whom NATO represents first and foremost the security guarantees provided by the U.S.

Conclusion

The striking of such a balance with NATO should be part of an ambitious European security strategy that creates new, actionable responsibilities for Europe. Any strategy should also highlight the means to carry out these responsibilities, and NATO should undoubtedly be part of the picture. A stronger NATO-EU cooperation can decisively contribute to reversing some of the worrisome economic or political trends that ail the two institutions, such as threat perception, defense spending and lack of capabilities and help address the transversal threats that the EU and NATO face.

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Of course, there remain doubts regarding the political will in Europe to move forward with such ambitions, due to the ‘NATO-first’ outlook of certain countries, and the fact

⁸ *In Defence of Europe: Defence Integration as a Response to Europe’s Strategic Moment*. European Political Strategy Centre, 15 June 2015. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/epsc/publications/notes/sn4_en.htm#h22

⁹ *Remarks by President Obama in Address to the People of Europe*, 25 April 2016. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/25/remarks-president-obama-address-people-europe>.

¹⁰ By which “NATO identifies capabilities and promotes their development and acquisition by Allies so that it can meet its security and defense objectives.”

¹¹ *The Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond*. NATO, 5 September 2014. Available at http://www.nato.int/cps/on/natohq/official_texts_112985.htm

¹² Howorth, Jolyon, Keeler, J. *Defending Europe: The EU, NATO, and the Quest for European Autonomy*. Palgrave, 2003, p.96.

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that doubts about the validity of the European project are at an all-time high. This makes more likely the idea that PESCO will be the path for future integration on European defense issues, as suggested by the EPSC, in order to channel the voices of European countries that are keen on building a strong European defense identity. After the first use of Article 42(7) and discussions between France and Central Europe on the deployment of the EU Battlegroup (for which the V4 is on operational standby for the first semester of 2016), the first signs of a reinforcement of European defense are on the horizon. The launch of the EUGS, and hopefully of a European security strategy further down the road, can help precise these new ambitions and create a rational agenda for cooperation with NATO, and together with resuscitating the Group of External Action Commissioners (Blockmans and Russack, 2015), HRVP Mogherini has diminished the disproportionate influence of Member States on the EEAS, shifting the balance with supranational

institutions back to where it should belong according to the Treaties. Mogherini should nevertheless watch out that the EEAS does not move 'too close' to the Commission, as some Member States have started warning she might risk alienating them along the way, potentially hampering the effectiveness of the EU's external action.

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