



The future of EU-NATO relations: doing less better

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Disagreements among the transatlantic allies abound. In the run up to the NATO summit in London on 3-4 December 2019, for instance, French President Macron's diagnosis of NATO's brain-death prompted harsh criticisms from his American, Turkish, and some European counterparts. Citing the lack of strategic consultation in Syria, Macron renewed his calls for a strategically more autonomous EU that has both the will and means to act independently of the US in particular. The timing of Macron's remarks was of course not coincidental. The post-Cold War hopes for an interconnected and peaceful world have been disappointed. Amid the wider power shifts from west to east, NATO allies have not seen eye to eye on crises in the Middle East, the growing challenge to Western predominance from China, and to lesser extent Russian aggressions in Ukraine and beyond.

Beyond the substantive merit of what proved to be a highly disruptive intervention, the French President notwithstanding succeeded in sparking a debate about the strategic future of NATO and its relationship to the EU. In London, NATO leaders agreed to launch a 'forward-looking reflection process [...] to further strengthen NATO's political dimension.' At first sight, EU-NATO relations appear to be flourishing. Joint declarations in 2016 and 2018 testify to unprecedented cooperation in a plethora of security fields ranging from cyber-security to maritime cooperation. The European External Action Service (EEAS) refers to 74 concrete actions that the EU and NATO are currently jointly engaged in. These operational achievements cannot, however, conceal the strategic dissensus among transatlantic allies.

In part, the lack of a common strategy stems from increasingly divergent security interests. The era when US interests were almost synonymous to EU interests is over. Engulfed by the emergence of an increasingly adversari-

al great-power competition with China, the US priorities have shifted away from Europe and the Middle East to the Pacific, a process that already began under the Obama Administration and is unlikely to change regardless of the outcome of the next US presidential election in November. Although the EU has become markedly more critical of China of late, it cannot afford to succumb to the bipolar logic of having to choose one side. In contrast to the more and more energy-independent US, the EU also has growing security interests in the Middle East and Africa – recent refugee and migration movements are only one example of the increasing interdependence – while it is directly affected by Russian aggressions in its neighbourhood. But the lack of a common strategy is reinforced by a general lack of consultation on critical issues in the North Atlantic Council.

Strengthening the transatlantic bond needs honest reflections of these changing security interests and priorities. This is not to deny the continued relevance of close



U.S. President Donald Trump participates in a working breakfast with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in London, England, on December 3, 2019. Joint declarations, like the London declaration, have not been able to compensate for the strategic paralysis that has characterized the relations between NATO and the EU for the last 15 years (photo: Flickr/State Department)

transatlantic cooperation. Instead, this policy brief makes the case that the EU and NATO need to take one step back to move two steps forward: they should soberly assess their interests, agree to disagree on some issues, but intensify their cooperation on those issues where they share interests. To do so, the EU and NATO should use the momentum precipitated by the reflection process announced in the NATO London Declaration and proclaimed aspirations of the new European Commission to act more geopolitically to 1) draft a joint strategic concept as soon as possible and 2) invest in further strengthening and formalising institutional relations at ministerial level. This brief initially demonstrates the (non-)development of the strategic relationship since the end of the Cold War, before analysing the security landscape in greater detail and ending with concrete recommendations to strengthen the EU-NATO relationship.

EU-NATO Relations 1989-2019: Strategic Paralysis

Having lived separately for more than thirty-five years, the first rapprochement between the EU and NATO finally started to take shape in the late 1990s. After the end of the Cold War, the clear-cut division of tasks, whereby NATO focused on collective defence and the European Communities provided the motor for economic integration, came to an end. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that NATO expanded its core tasks and, in the Saint Malo Joint Declaration of 1998, the EU expressed the ambition for 'autonomous action backed up by credible military forces'. Within a context in which both organisations developed crisis management roles, formal institutional relations were first developed in 1999. This culminated in the 2002 with an 'EU-NATO Declaration on ESDP' establishing a strategic partnership in crisis management. One year later, the Berlin Plus arrangements made the cooperation concrete by allowing EU-led crisis management operations to make use of NATO capabilities.

Despite a promising start with Berlin Plus operations in Macedonia (2003) and Bosnia Herzegovina (2004-), the cooperation did not really take off. A key player like France had a strong preference for autonomous EU-led operations and the EU enlargement with Cyprus led to the so-called 'participation problem' with Turkey opposing its participation in formal EU-NATO meetings (Duke 2008). In the absence of a NATO equivalent of the EU Foreign Affairs Council, political interaction remained under-institutionalised and there were no real efforts to come to a common strategic vision. (Duke and Vanhoonacker 2016). Most successful were ad hoc forms of informal cooperation in common operational areas such as in the Gulf of Aden, Afghanistan and Kosovo (Smith 2014). The aforementioned joint declarations of 2016 and 2018 on cooperation in priority fields ranging from hybrid threats to supporting Eastern and Southern partners' capacity building efforts have not been able to compensate for the strategic paralysis that has characterised the relations between both organisations for the last 15 years.

Identifying common and diverging interests

NATO can only be an effective player when EU and US security interests align. Unlike during the Cold War, such alignment, however, cannot be taken for granted. While in some regions the transatlantic allies continue to share broad security concerns, in others they no longer see eye to eye. This policy brief therefore calls for an honest assessment of where common interests lie, and where not, as an essential foundation for reaching a joint strategic outlook. The following paragraphs provide a first mapping of the constellation of security interests across several regions.

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Middle East

Syria tragically illustrates the divergence of security interests, or at least priorities, between the EU and the US. While the EU favours a political settlement by active involvement of the international community in line with UNSCR 2254, Trump succumbed to his isolationist rhetoric and pulled the US forces from Syria. This not only shocked and undermined the US' European allies, but also opened the way to Turkey, Russia and President Assad becoming the main power brokers in Syria (Tocci and Ecim 2019). It also reiterated that while the Western powers share the goal of resolving the conflict in Syria, they fundamentally differ on the ways to achieve it.

Another example of the growing rift between US and EU was the US' targeted killing of Iranian General Suleimani on 3 January 2020, widely criticised by the EU. The EU and US are also at odds over the Iran nuclear deal. While the Europeans are heavily invested in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as the best means to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, President Trump has not only withdrawn the US from JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions on Iran, but also threatened to



Syria illustrates the divergence of security interests, or at least priorities, between the EU and the US. While the EU favors a political settlement by active involvement of the international community, Trump pulled the US forces from Syria. Here American troops are pictured in Syria in December 2018 (photo: Sgt. Arjenis Nunez/Wikimedia Commons)

sanction European companies. Meanwhile, his recently published peace plan for the Israel-Palestine conflict met with fierce opposition in the EU.

In part, these clashing policies are of partisan nature. Democratic candidates for the US Presidency like Bernie Sanders or Joe Biden committed to, for instance, re-entering JCPOA and would likely provide less enthusiastic support for Israel and Saudi Arabia. But in part, these clashes also stem from diverging security interests. The US is decreasingly dependent on energy resources from the region and, in the context of the emerging great-power competition with China, shifts its attention away from the Middle East towards the Asia-Pacific. In contrast, the Middle East becomes an ever-greater priority for the EU. As the refugee crisis demonstrated, geographical proximity means that Europe cannot isolate itself from instability and conflict in the region and will thus have to intensify its engagement.

Russia

In the 1990s the EU policy of structural diplomacy with Russia based on respect for human rights and principles of good governance proved only modestly successful. The relationship steadily deteriorated throughout the 2000s with Moscow refusing to join the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and rejecting the EU's normative agenda (Casier 2016). By 2016, the Russian interference in the Maidan revolution, the annexation of Crimea, and the shooting down of the MH17 had transformed the relationship from competition to confrontation. On the surface, NATO and the EU agree on Russia's illegal actions and the threat they pose to Euro-Atlantic security. In their official discourse they have openly rejected Russia's aggressive actions, while also recognising the importance of sustaining a mutually beneficial relationship (NATO Strategic Concept 2010; EU Global Strategy 2016; NATO London Declaration 2019). Yet, on a number of issues, their security interests do not overlap, exposing divisions even within the EU's and NATO's respective memberships.

When the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) expired in August 2019, the EU did not support the US accusations that Russia had unilaterally violated it. In fact, when Russia called on the United States and other countries to declare a moratorium on nuclear missile deployments in Europe, Macron surprised many by

hinting that the EU should discuss it internally. Although in November 2019, he clarified his remarks in coordination with NATO's Secretary General Stoltenberg, Macron still insisted on having a dialogue with Moscow. This sent a clear message to the US that parts of Europe see their security interests differently. Similarly, the EU did not unequivocally support the US position on the Nord Stream-2 pipeline project, sparking threats from the Trump administration that the US will not defend the West if it continues to align itself economically with Russia. The EU decision to regulate but ultimately approve the pipeline was not without controversy among the EU membership. Divergent views on the economic and geopolitical consequences of the new pipeline divided the EU member states. Germany, having clear economic interests in the pipeline has been opposed by the Commission, France, Italy, Poland, and a few other member states from Central, and East Europe for whom the geopolitical considerations of growing dependency from Russia mattered the most. Yet, these divisions played out alongside issues of regulatory governance with Germany opposing (and the group around the Commission supporting) an exclusive EU jurisdiction over Nord Stream-2. Surprisingly however, in February 2019, Macron performed a U-turn siding with Germany, and brokering a compromise: the Commission and the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) would have an oversight but not a full jurisdiction over the fate of the project. This clearly diverged from the US sanctions-based approach.

Recently, Erdogan has surprised many in the transatlantic community by aligning Turkey closer to Moscow rather than the US or the EU on a number of issues. Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 air-defence system was an especially painful slap in the face of Washington that had offered an equivalent system to Ankara. Similarly, by partnering with Russia on the TurkStream pipeline, Turkey tied itself closer to Moscow's economic influence in the Black Sea region. These actions can be brushed aside as *realpolitik*, having nothing to do with strategic considerations. Yet, they are not isolated, but only the latest iteration of growing Turkish confidence and competitiveness in its relationship with both the EU (on migration) and with NATO (on the use of its military bases and its Syrian policy) showing that Ankara's security interests diverge. Thus, while the EU and NATO interests on Russia seem to converge on a declaratory level (EU Global Strategy and NATO Strategic Concept), the day-to-day



US President Donald Trump meets with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen during the 50th Annual World Economic Forum meeting. To remain a relevant and effective security provider for both the US and EU, NATO and the EU need to adapt by doing less better (photo: Flickr/The White House)

politics reveal a number of divergences between the Euro-Atlantic allies. Although these divergences have not yet led to the dismantling of the Western security community they have nevertheless highlighted the need for investing in a fresh strategic stock-taking between the EU and NATO.

China

In the emerging multipolar order, China is undeniably one of the key geopolitical players. Over the past decade, both the US and the EU have been pondering how to politically and economically position themselves towards this rising superpower. Since Obama's pivot to Asia announced in 2012, China and the Indo-Pacific region have gradually risen to the top of the US foreign policy agenda. And under Trump, relations with Beijing have more and more been reoriented from a policy of engagement to one of strategic competition. Concerned about China's rapidly developing military, technological capabilities, and the huge US trade deficit, the Trump administration increasingly frames China in adversarial terms and the on-going trade conflicts have aggravated the relationship. The Huawei 5G debate illustrates well how Washington does not hesitate to push its allies in Asia and Europe to choose side in the US-Chinese rivalry and bully those not bowing to the US pressure.

The EU's attitude towards China has in general been more positive, even though also here the tide is changing. Since 2003, Beijing and Brussels have been working on the development of a strategic partnership. China has become the EU's second largest trading partner and following the 2008 financial crisis, several member states, especially in central and southern Europe, welcomed the soaring Chinese investments as an opportune source of income. In 2013, both partners adopted an EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation and started negotiations on a bilateral investment treaty. Many years of unsuccessful discussions about unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and lack of respect of human rights and rule of law have, however, made the EU come to the conclusion that a change in strategy is necessary. The 2019 Strategic Outlook on EU-China not only presents Beijing as a partner but also as an economic competitor and systemic rival which requires a 'principled defence' of EU interests and values (Commission and HRVP 2019). China's major investments in several European seaports and the ambition to become a key provider of critical 5G infrastructure

have made Brussels more conscious of the potential security risks of the increasing engagement with China.

This more critical approach brings new opportunities for enhanced strategic cooperation with the US. As the global governance system projected by China is radically different from the post-1945 Western order based on the core principles of democracy and free trade, the case for joining forces is evident. In a Declaration adopted at the occasion of NATO's 70th anniversary, the allies for the first time identified China's growing international influence and international policies as a strategic challenge which can best be addressed together (London Declaration 2019). It is clear that in any strategic discussion within NATO, the development of a policy towards China should take a central place.

Africa

As a region, which is growing economically and transforming rapidly, Africa should certainly be included in the transatlantic strategic discussion. Yet, the approach of the American and European allies towards this part of the world is quite different.

Due to the colonial past, the EU has a long-standing engagement in Africa. There is a strong legacy of preferential trade agreements, humanitarian and development aid, and more recently also crisis management operations in sub-Saharan Africa: the Sahel and the Great Lakes regions in particular. The 2015 refugee crisis as well as the Chinese scramble into the continent have made the European countries aware that the relationship needs to be given a new boost by moving away from outdated policies characterised by providing financial aid in return for tighter border controls. While the new approach is currently still taking shape, the first impressions of it transpired in a speech to the African Union (AU) by the European Council President Charles Michel in February 2020. He pleaded to turn the page of the past and forge a common approach in tackling the two greatest modern challenges: climate change and the digital revolution. These ambitions denote the importance the EU grants its relationship with the AU, insofar as a stronger AU reinforces the EU's commitment to multilateralism and rules-based approach to international relations. In doing so, the EU is positioning itself as an alternative to the bilateralism and zero-sum business approach of both China and the US in Africa.



In contrast to the EU, the US approach towards Africa revolved for a long time around containment of the Soviet Union and humanitarian aid. After the end of the Cold War, Asia became a top priority, while Africa was relatively low on the list. Against the background of surging Chinese investments in economic and military infrastructure, the Trump administration has in 2018 presented a new Africa strategy¹ aimed at countering the Chinese influence through increased commercial and security presence. So far the strategy seems to have had little effect: trade volumes have been declining and the Trump administration left important diplomatic posts unfilled while other powers were investing in higher level representation.

It is clear that Africa is much higher on the EU's strategic priority list than it is in Washington D.C. Given the historical legacy and geographical proximity of Africa to Europe, this should not come as a surprise. While in principle the US and the EU share important strategic reasons to upgrade the Western presence in Africa, it is questionable whether this will happen at a moment when the US is absorbed by the Asia Pacific region.

Recommendations

The EU and NATO need to adapt by doing less better:

1. Draft a joint strategic concept
2. Based on its results, the EU and US need to further institutionalize their security relations at the ministerial level.

This brief demonstrates that the sources of transatlantic strains are not merely personal antipathies between US President Trump and European leaders, or his belligerent unilateralist foreign policy. US and EU security interests in some parts of the world have diverged since the end of the Cold War, and the EU rightly seeks to take on more responsibility for providing for its own security. NATO cannot ignore this reality. Nonetheless, views that advocate an EU strategy of equidistance between the US and China are misguided, as the EU and US continue to share some fundamental interests and values in the world. In a world where China is becoming increasingly assertive abroad and authoritarian at home, and Russia continues to destabilise Ukraine and aides in committing atrocities against the civilian population in Syria, the NATO allies

should find common ways to confront both competitors. To remain a relevant and effective security provider for both the US and EU, this brief suggests that NATO and the EU need to adapt by doing less better – i.e. focussing on key common threats and acting more strategic rather than ad-hoc.

Concretely, this formula yields two policy advices. **First**, the EU and NATO should use the reflection process launched at the London summit to draft a joint strategic concept to outline common purposes and goals as soon as possible. This exercise should develop this brief's assessment of security interests with the objective of establishing where the US and EU share a common outlook on the world to highlight the realms in which NATO and the EU should intensify their cooperation. No common strategic concept exists and the old NATO strategic concept dates to 2010, prior to the US pivot to Asia or Russia's intervention in Ukraine. The joint strategic concept should also engage with the security ramifications from climate change or arising tensions in both cyber and outer space. The prerequisite for an honest and effective assessment of common interests, however, is the willingness among NATO members to spell out differences and think through their consequences, which has hitherto been found wanting. For too long, NATO has papered over disagreements to avoid appearing weak and divided, and thereby failed to address structural problems besetting the alliance.

Second, and based on the results of the joint strategic concept, the EU and US need to further institutionalise their security relations at the ministerial level. While the US and individual EU member-states consult in the North Atlantic Council, the EU dimension rarely features. Vice versa, NATO issues are rarely discussed in EU meetings, from which the US is obviously absent anyhow. Thus, no forum for an EU-US-NATO strategic dialogue exists to systematically discuss strategic questions. Consequently, this brief suggests creating a regular and institutionalised EU-US-NATO dialogue between: the US' National Security Council, the EU's High Representative (representing the EU institutions), the EU's Foreign Affairs Council (representing the EU member-states), foreign ministers of other NATO member-states, and NATO's Secretary General. While institutional reforms by themselves cannot be a panacea to NATO's ills, they are crucial in forging common outlooks and cooperation.

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