

ISSUE BRIEF

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The United States, NATO and the European Union: Partnership in the Balance

The drafters of the new Strategic Concept for NATO must realize that the transatlantic context in which the Alliance operates has changed fundamentally. Accordingly, in addition to improving NATO-EU relations and streamlining the NATO apparatus, basic changes in the organization of transatlantic relations overall are required, taking into account two major developments.

Key Developments in Transatlantic Relations

Imperative of a Comprehensive Approach. First, for some time now, the most important challenges to the United States and Europe, where they share interests in common, no longer fit into neat packets of “military” and “non-military,” but rather relate to the two together. This means among other things that civilian capabilities which the European Union can command – along with individual European countries – are becoming more important, if not in absolute terms at least relative to the traditional roles of NATO. While NATO clearly remains the United States’ preferred locus for strategic discussion and debate across the Atlantic, increasingly it is proving insufficient for considering the full range of North American and European political and even security debate and cooperation. While the EU is still in the process of developing its capacities in the areas of foreign policy and defense – with the significant changes mandated in the Lisbon Treaty – on many issues direct dialogue between “EU-Brussels”

The Strategic Advisors Group

To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft and former Norwegian Minister of Defense Kristin Krohn Devold, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

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and Washington takes place. This is particularly so as the definition of “security” has broadened. Many of the priority issues on today’s agenda are only indirectly related to defense and classic security issues. Not only does NATO have little or no expertise on the financial crisis, climate

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change, energy and other key issues, but it would also send a strange signal if we would task a predominantly military alliance to address them. Furthermore, even with regard to security and defense issues, a comprehensive or holistic approach is required that also integrates the political, economic and social dimensions of foreign policy, and thus requires cooperation with other organizations.

Evolution of Two Pillars. Second, because of this development, the overall Atlantic Alliance is evolving into “two-pillars,” but very different from the way that this concept was first bruited during the 1960s: the EU (along with individual European governments) now plays a growing role in overall transatlantic relations, including security relations writ large, along with NATO. And the EU, unlike NATO, is much more than a mere intergovernmental organization; rather it is a state-like actor which in numerous policy areas has supranational authority. The emergence of the EU as an actor in its own right, building up capabilities in both defense and in the field of diplomacy, is a new structural factor in the transatlantic relationship. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty greatly strengthens the EU’s potential in these areas.

Institutional Underperformance. This “pillarization” need not be problematic, if it were not for the fact that the European pillar is still very much internally divided. There are two levels of concern. One is the classic differentiation between those European NATO allies that “pull their full weight” and those that clearly do not – and this is not just in terms of relative size but of defense burden shouldered as a percentage of GDP. The other is that while some EU member states welcome its evolution and are prepared to see the EU as an actor, even beyond Europe, in all dimensions of foreign relations, others resist it. The end result is that the EU does not yet live up to its potential and NATO lacks all the capabilities that are needed. Both institutions thus underperform.

A Fundamental Reconfiguration

A fundamental reconfiguration reflecting the evolution of the transatlantic relationship should actually support the trend towards a stronger EU, as well as the breaking down of barriers to cooperation between it and NATO. By stimulating Europe to live up to its full potential, it will ensure that ultimately the transatlantic community as a

whole will emerge stronger than before. Flexibility rather than institutional dogmatism will keep the overall Atlantic relationship viable.

Restructuring the transatlantic relationship along these lines has **six main implications:**

- (1) Both NATO allies and EU member states need finally to understand that the two **institutions must work together** if either is to succeed in providing security for nations on the two sides of the Atlantic. Change is facilitated, politically, by France’s rejoining the NATO integrated military command structure and by the practical end of U.S. resistance to a strong European defense personality outside of NATO (i.e., within the EU). But it is inhibited by bureaucratic inertia, by Turkey’s objection to EU-NATO cooperation (including in Afghanistan, where the consequences are severe for all), by limitations on cooperation among defense industries on the two sides of the Atlantic and continued resistance to defense rationalization in Europe, and by the continuing “two cultures” problem within European foreign and defense ministries (which should begin breaking down as a result of the Lisbon Treaty and the new European External Action Service). Leadership in both institutions is needed to foster practical as well as political cooperation – e.g., with NATO’s Allied Command Transformation also serving the European Union.

“I do not consider the development of European Security and Defence Policy as competition with NATO, but complementary to NATO.”

*NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen,
November 18, 2009*

- (2) In today’s world, **the EU must have the necessary margin of maneuver to interact flexibly with all global actors.** Of course, the United States will remain the closest to Europe. In league with the U.S. engagement in NATO, the EU-U.S. partnership therefore must be deepened, made more comprehensive and become more operational, so that Europeans and Americans have a forum where they can jointly discuss

global challenges in all dimensions of foreign affairs and key areas of domestic policy, beyond what is possible just at NATO. This political partnership must be much more than “summitry” – perhaps permanent bodies are in order. In any case, Europeans must increasingly speak to the United States as the EU, in addition to those bilateral relationships that will no doubt continue, certainly for the larger European powers. Within such a political partnership, NATO will continue to be important (and, for the United States, it will continue to be most important, at least for the years immediately ahead; and the United States will continue to resist the idea that an EU “caucus” should come to the North Atlantic Council with a single, agreed position). But because the European Security Strategy and the U.S. National Security Strategy cover a broader remit (at the level of “grand strategy”), where they coincide should play a major role in shaping NATO’s new Strategic Concept, along with the input of individual European countries. It would be logical therefore to have a contribution to the current debate about the NATO Strategic Concept from the EU as such, next to those from the individual allies; indeed, the EU should be continuing its own strategic review and translate its European Security Strategy into more concrete objectives, to be ready for discussion and decision in parallel with NATO’s November summit in Lisbon. There would also be value in a U.S.-Canada-EU summit the following day.

- (3) **The primary levels of decision-making within the Atlantic relationship, including on security and defense, should be three-fold: NATO, the EU, and the U.S.-EU.** Over time, the chances are growing that in non-Article 5 situations, it will be in the EU where Europeans take the primary political decisions on whether to act in a given crisis, as they did recently with regard to Lebanon and Georgia. If military action is called for and a U.S. role is required, NATO will have primary responsibility; if not, then the operational framework can be the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or the United Nations. That choice will always be a tailored decision, a function of which partners want to go along and which organization is best suited for the crisis at hand – reality is too complex for a fixed division of labor to work.

- (4) **Europeans have a capability problem, caused by the fragmentation of their defense efforts, which only Europeans can solve,** through increased cooperation and pooling, both within NATO and within the EU. At the EU level, in the context of CSDP, the further development of European military capabilities can notably be done via the “Permanent Structured Cooperation” provided by the Lisbon Treaty. This permits the autonomy of CSDP, while even pooled multinational capabilities can be deployed for NATO (or UN) operations if that framework is decided upon for a specific mission.
- (5) **Precisely because in some crises not all operational frameworks (CSDP, NATO, UN) will be available or advisable, each must be a fully-fledged alternative,** relevant to the level and character of military action required, so as to guarantee at least one option to deploy forces rapidly, safely and successfully in every crisis. In addition to existing NATO capacities, that requires permanent EU command and control structures, including an integrated civil-military standing Operational Headquarters for CSDP. At the functional level, CSDP already has guaranteed access to some NATO assets, including planning capabilities, under the “Berlin-plus” agreements. This access can be extended, while in order to strengthen CSDP’s capabilities, some NATO staff officers from EU countries could be shifted to a civil-military EU Operational Headquarters without ill effect.

“More Europe is not a strategy directed against anyone. No one has any reason to fear Europe, but everyone should be able to depend on Europe.”

*Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany,
Guido Westerwelle, February 6, 2010*

- (6) With regard to the EU’s civilian assets, **an EU-NATO cooperation agreement needs to be concluded, providing for full EU involvement from the start** in planning for scenarios in which NATO would lead a military operation and the EU would lead a concurrent civilian deployment. A similar arrangement can be created with the UN.

A Strong, More United Europe as the United States' Partner

The United States rightly has great expectations vis-à-vis the EU, especially now that the Lisbon Treaty has finally entered into force. Washington should not hesitate to encourage the more Atlantic-oriented EU members to make the fullest possible use of the new Treaty provisions, and to take a stronger EU role into account when revising the NATO Strategic Concept. Indeed, to find a dynamic relevant to foreign policy and security challenges facing the transatlantic nations, fundamental debates need to take place and be resolved, including the issues of European unity and autonomy, incentives for European countries to take security issues seriously, including beyond Europe, and for making possible a level of cooperation between the EU and NATO that has eluded both institutions for so long. Included in these efforts is the need to stimulate a stronger and more united Europe, which will undoubtedly demand a greater say in decision-making, but with which true burden-sharing will be possible. For the United States, sharing influence and decision-making is a wise choice, given its own requirements for effective partners in meeting so many of today's and tomorrow's security and security-related challenges.

“We also support the further strengthening of European defense, an increased role for the European Union in preserving peace and security, and a fundamentally stronger NATO-EU partnership...”

Vice President Joseph R. Biden, February 9, 2010

So the ball is now in both the U.S. and European camps – but is either ready to catch it? A de facto evolution towards a “two-pillar” transatlantic security relationship – in the broadest sense – is beginning to take shape, but for the model to work effectively and a true partnership to emerge, both between the EU and NATO and between the United States and the EU for the broader range of issues, the United States, its NATO partners, and the EU must all act decisively. This must be done at the highest political levels on the two sides of the Atlantic, recreating an overall sense of common strategic purpose, even when there can be differences of view about the precise security challenges facing different countries and the precise means needed to counter them. NATO and the EU should thus no longer be seen as competitors, but instead as two institutions serving essentially the same ends, and they need to be restructured with this vision in mind.

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STRATCON 2010

The Strategic Advisors Group's STRATCON 2010 project seeks to shape and inform the transatlantic debate over NATO's new Strategic Concept. STRATCON 2010 will issue publications to define the critical issues NATO must confront in drafting a new Strategic Concept. For more information about the SAG or STRATCON 2010, please contact Vice President and Director of the Program on International Security Damon Wilson at dwilson@acus.org or Program Associate Director Jeff Lightfoot at jlightfoot@acus.org.

The Atlantic Council of the United States has as its mission the renewal of the Atlantic community for 21st century global challenges through constructive U.S.-European leadership and engagement in world affairs. Led by Senator Chuck Hagel, Chairman, and Frederick Kempe, President and CEO, the Atlantic Council embodies a network of policy, academic and business leaders who foster transatlantic ties through non-partisan and cross-national discussions and studies.

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