

TIME TO REVITALIZE THE NATO ALLIANCE AND DEAL WITH ESDP

European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) adds nothing to military capabilities. It should be seen for what it is - part of the process of European political integration, intruding into the most sensitive areas of national sovereignty, undermining NATO and widening the gap between the U.S. and Europe. But fresh thought needs to be given to NATO itself which seems to have lost its way.

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NATO is in trouble. There is a loss of affection for the U.S. in quarters where previously the transatlantic alliance was an article of faith. The wrangling over the Iraq War has created fractures and there is a lack of enthusiasm for the ongoing Alliance combat operations in Afghanistan. At the same time, the EU has been emboldened in its pursuit of a fully autonomous defense policy –contributing to and benefiting from NATO’s difficulties.

Not since the end of the Soviet threat has there been greater need for unity of purpose among the democracies. Rarely has there been such distraction and loss of focus. The opportunity should be seized at the NATO Summit in Riga to revitalize the Alliance with fresh political, financial and military resources. Turkey has a key role to play in this. It has been a long-standing and loyal NATO ally, while its own dilemmas reach to the heart of the problems of the Alliance.

It is France that has created the deepest fault line in NATO, which has regularly obstructed timely NATO intervention in crises and which has been the most consistent advocate of an autonomous EU role in defense. But it is France in particular that Turkey feels it must woo in order to realize its ambition of EU membership.

Competing Defense Structures

At this time of threat to the democracies, when solidarity is needed, it is disastrous for Europeans and Americans to have competing strategic visions or, indeed, to have two defense organizations, with overlapping membership, making competing claims on the same limited defense resources.

NATO’s role as the lead Western security organization was compromised dramatically at St. Malo in December 1998, when Prime Minister Blair reversed the position of all previous British governments, and agreed with France that the EU should have “the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces”.

Prior to St. Malo, successive British governments provided the brake on efforts to create military structures separate from NATO as these would inevitably lead to “decoupling” (from the United States), “discrimination” (against non-EU Allies such as Turkey), and “duplication” (of planning, command, communications and decision-making structures). All three ill effects are already visible in the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP).

As at NATO, there is now an EU Military Committee, composed of national Chiefs of Defense represented on a day to day basis by their Military Representatives. Just as there is an International Military Staff at NATO, there is now an EU Military Staff, and, just as at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), there is now an EU Operations Centre, designed to enable the EU to run military operations without recourse to the operations centers of EU Member States or NATO.

Instead of the United States and its key European allies having one forum for joint discussion and decision-making in relation to crises, different permutations of more or less the same actors now assemble at separate locations -except the U.S. is present at one but not the other.

The Effect of Duplication

The effect of this duplication and division is threefold. Firstly, different political signals are transmitted to potential adversaries, offering scope for exploitation of divergences. This was certainly the case in the lead up to the Iraq war when, for example, Turkey applied for Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty to be put into effect and consensus was blocked by France, Germany, and Belgium. Saddam took heart and Turkey was rightly offended. Secondly, commitment to NATO is weakened because an alternative structure for international military expeditions is available. European nations will point to their military contributions in Bosnia, Congo, and even Lebanon, which reduce their ability to reinforce Afghanistan. Thirdly, competitive deployments into the same theatre of operations are wasteful and potentially dangerous.

There is only one set of military forces in each nation for the full range of military tasks. With minor exceptions (e.g. AWACS), NATO owns no military forces, nor does the EU. If troops are made available for an EU operation then clearly they are not available for NATO or other tasks. EU talk of a 60,000 strong rapid reaction force or indeed its less ambitious 'battle group' concept is smoke and mirrors in that these draw on precisely the same forces that a country might also make available for NATO, UN or national military tasks. The requirement for transformation in the structure, deployability, equipment, and interoperability of armed forces is the same whether it is driven by national priorities, by NATO, or imitated by the EU.

It was to be hoped that there would never be a repeat of the ridiculous situation of ten years ago when both NATO and the WEU had fleets in the Adriatic enforcing the same embargo on the former Yugoslavia, usually drawing on the same ships. But now we have competition in Darfur, of all places, with the EU as well as NATO providing military airlift support.

In April 2005, NATO responded to a request for logistical support for the African Union's military operation in Darfur, but the EU also decided to get involved militarily. There was some discussion as to whether EU and NATO efforts could be managed jointly but there was no agreement on this. As a consequence, the NATO airlift support is planned at Mons while the EU effort is directed up the road in Eindhoven. Given this duplication and confusion it is not surprising that the overall international intervention in the Darfur tragedy has been so unsuccessful.

In Afghanistan, NATO's ability to generate the forces it requires to sustain its operations is constrained by competing demands and politically-imposed caveats that limit the operational flexibility of many of those troops actually made available. While the U.S., UK, Canada, and the Netherlands bear the brunt of combat operations, only Poland has responded positively to an urgent request for more combat troops.

The vital need to consolidate military successes with immediate reconstruction and development assistance is frustrated by separate decision-making chains. For many years, the EU has sponsored humanitarian and development assistance in Afghanistan mainly through NGOs. The EU has its own Special Representative in Afghanistan answerable to the EU Foreign Policy chief, Xavier Solana. The lack of coordination and cooperation between this 'civil' effort and the military campaign has created a situation which the NATO commander has described as "close to anarchy". He wants to synchronize the civil and military effort and provide a 'security cloak' to enable reconstruction programs to push ahead in areas of instability. This presupposes a common strategic approach and shared political objectives.

We have a situation now where both NATO and the EU act 'out of area' - NATO is going global, but so is the EU, which doesn't want to be restrained to a regional role; where both are engaged in military, humanitarian, and reconstruction operations; where both are involved in crisis management, and both insist on a collective defense obligation. There is nothing going on in the EU, including the work of the European Defense Agency, which is not already happening in some form in NATO. ESDP is the proverbial elephant in the NATO corridors that no one likes to mention.

The EU has moved onto defense territory, not in order to add military value but because there are those in its ranks that wish to see the EU acquire more state-like attributes and become a global actor pursuing its own distinct foreign policy objectives – and to do this it wants the full range of foreign policy instruments at its disposal, including armed forces.

Of course there will be times when Europeans may wish to act alone or bear the heaviest responsibility for a particular military action, especially in their own backyard. But this sort of decision should be taken around the NATO table with the Americans and other allies and with their full support. Not only is there no need for meetings to take place in separate buildings or for separate military staff structures to pore over such matters, but such separate activities will only undermine confidence between the U.S. and its European allies and give comfort to our common enemies.

Now that the EU has created this artificial divide, time, resources, and diplomatic effort is being expended on trying to find ways to coordinate the efforts of two organizations whose membership largely overlaps. This is wasteful and obstructive. No fresh synergy or new capabilities are created as a result.

Not just Brussels and Paris, but the United States too must bear some responsibility for the turn of events. It has made major strategic errors. We still live with the consequences of its failure to support the Anglo-French intervention in Suez fifty years ago and Iraq will undoubtedly be seen as another watershed. We have yet to see Iraq's full consequences for Turkey.

The U.S. has failed to take proper account of the advice and concerns of key allies in handling crises, it has invested insufficient political capital in NATO, its most important multilateral alliance, and it has been indifferent to the emergence of ESDP.

What is to be done?

There is a choice to be made. We can either follow the Franco-Belgian line and destroy the strategic structure that has served us so well for over fifty years. Or urgent action must be taken by like-minded states that attach primary importance to the transatlantic alliance as the cornerstone of their security policy.

As it now stands, ESDP is established but not yet entrenched. European military capabilities should be brought back under the NATO umbrella. For this to be more widely acceptable, and for its own sake, it is clear that NATO must also change. Fresh strategic thinking is required on the future role, structure, geographical reach, and capabilities of the Alliance. NATO needs to be reinvigorated to concentrate on what it does best - the application by the democracies of military force covering the full spectrum from peace support operations to warfighting.

Firstly then, the NATO allies need a fresh political compact which defines the nature of the Alliance and what it is for. Through what means, for example, are the problems of terrorism, WMD proliferation, energy security, cyber security, protection of critical infrastructure, and civil protection best addressed? The command structure may need revisiting. If the Europeans committed more then it could become more European. Of course, if France were to rejoin the integrated military structure of NATO, and if the United States would accept that its forces may operate under foreign command, then many of the problems of recent years would be resolved at a stroke.

The capabilities and skills of the United States and its European allies are complementary in terms of regional and global power projection. The United States provides the ultimate backstop and clearly has the capability to impact any area of potential conflict. As a specific example, at a time when energy security is of increasing importance, the United States is the only country with sufficient naval assets to defend all the maritime “chokepoints” where the flow of oil might be interrupted and with the capability to provide the necessary surveillance of potential chokepoints in the land pipelines. The UK and France have a more limited ability to project power globally. Turkey is a major player in the Black Sea/Caspian area and the Middle East. At the same time, its actions have influence in the wider Islamic world.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for the democracies to generate more defense capabilities, but the response of the Europeans has been to create more institutions. European nations already spend very little on defense. Even the UK – among the most active military powers – is spending less now as a proportion of national wealth than at any time since the 1930s. But the UK’s 2.3 percent of GDP puts it in a super league compared with Germany’s 1.4 percent or Spain’s 1.3 percent. Turkey meanwhile is spending 3.2 percent

The United States might quite rightly complain that it bears a disproportionate share of the allied defense effort. More equitable burden-sharing is not a new concern. The Europeans’ share of the defense burden certainly needs to increase, but that does not require the involvement of the EU institutions whose meddling in military matters has proved divisive and a distraction from real security needs. Given the motives that drive it and the track record of declining defense expenditure among so many European nations, ESDP will not provide the solution.

Budget reform has been on the NATO table for many months. There is an agreed cost share for each country calculated on gross domestic product. The question is whether more elements could be covered by the common funded budget. NATO Common Funding currently totals about 2 billion dollars and comprises three elements: the Military Budget, the Civilian Budget, and the Security Investment Program. The main contributors are the U.S., Germany, and the UK. There is a case for rebalancing this budget – for a start, France needs to pay more for her seat at the top table. There is also a case for more common assets, such as a strategic airlift component.

Thirdly, more attention needs to be given to so-called ‘soft power’ non-military capabilities. Maybe the EU could play a useful role in ‘soft’ security – conflict prevention, humanitarian aid, development assistance, post-conflict reconstruction – leaving military matters to NATO. Such an institutional division of labor would be enormously helpful. On this basis, an EU representative could be invited to sit at the NAC (North Atlantic Council) table.

Finally, fresh attention should be given to regional alliances to which NATO could provide support. This would take account of the growing importance of regional powers such as India, the role of Australia and perhaps South Africa, and the need to support moderate Islamic countries in North Africa and the Gulf.

It is certainly time for plain speaking about ESDP. We live in a dangerous world. The forthcoming Riga Summit must be the moment that we decide to revitalize NATO as the primary instrument of Western security and rebuild a common Western "strategic culture".