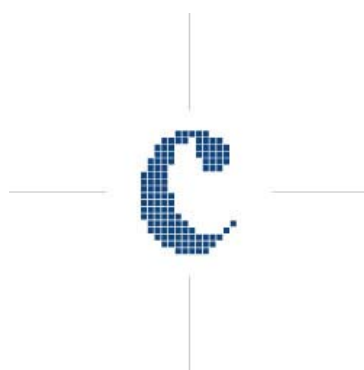


EUROPE'S VIRTUAL SECURITY DEBATE AND A NEW TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP

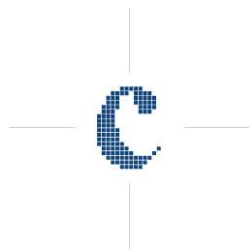
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This Clingendael Security Paper was written in the framework of the Clingendael strategic research project ‘The Netherlands in a changing world’, in which all Clingendael programmes are involved. The paper is part of a broader study into the future of the European security architecture. The author, Hugo Klijn, is a senior research fellow of the Clingendael Security and Conflict Programme.

Introduction

More than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall the intensity of the debate on European security leads many to believe that the continent's stability is in jeopardy. Numerous strategy papers on European security refer to historically unprecedented challenges and threats, such as terrorism, failed states, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber attacks and energy security. Apart from this daunting security environment, strategists point to shifting geopolitical balances: with the emergence of new sovereign powers we are heading towards a messier, multipolar world that will no longer be primarily dealt with by the current multilateral mechanisms that were inspired by the West. All this uncertainty generates uneasy debates among Europe's security establishments. Later this year, NATO is about to produce a new strategy while the alliance is bitterly divided over Russia and its ISAF mission in Afghanistan, with another decisive summer upcoming, is not going well. After the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU is bogged down in institutional turf wars over its external policy, while the currency crisis is calling the entire European project into question. The OSCE, the only truly pan-European security forum, is having a hard time explaining its relevance and Russia has tabled a new draft European Security Treaty, because it considers itself a strategic outcast. So much for the euphoria that erupted after the end of the Cold War about Europe's prospects.

However, is it really all that bad? Or is there something virtual about considering Europe as a danger zone. Maybe we need to take a fresh look at European security. We may get one by zooming in on one of the remedies invariably suggested for improving our security: better NATO-EU cooperation. At the same time, we should evaluate Europe's overall security situation and NATO's current position as the most important vehicle for transatlantic relations. Finally, we should examine the question whether it is imperative that Europe further develops a common foreign and security policy to become a significant international player and, if so, how to translate this assignment into a new partnership with the US.

Tearing down the Brussels Wall

Most observers find it nearly impossible to explain why two Brussels-based organizations, with their overlapping memberships, find it so difficult to get their mutual act together. This act ideally consists of combining the two organizations' unique qualities into a *comprehensive approach* to crisis management. This concept has become fashionable in the framework of the international community's presence in Afghanistan and amounts to fusing military, development assistance and diplomatic instruments into a single, aggregate policy. Actually, a comprehensive approach is about everything that the US did *not* apply in Iraq. In the case of NATO and the EU, this would mean linking the former's hard power tools to the latter's soft power tools, preferably under the aegis of the United Nations. Some observers even consider bringing these two primary Western institutions together as a strategic fix to re-establish the West's dominance in the world.¹

Cyprus

The most cited and conspicuous reason for the lack of cooperation is the political stalemate surrounding Cyprus. In short: ever since Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, the NATO member Turkey has been blocking Cypriot cooperation with the alliance, while Cyprus prevents Turkey's access to institutions such as the budding European Defence Agency. Thus, the NATO-EU debate is confined to the realm of the so-called 'Berlin plus arrangements', the mechanism hammered out in 2003 that provides for EU-led operations making use of NATO assets and capabilities. Cyprus, which for obvious reasons does not have a security agreement with NATO, is excluded from these arrangements. In practice, therefore, the main topic that NATO and the EU can discuss safely together is Bosnia-Herzegovina, the only theatre where Berlin plus – an already 'uncomprehensive' concept since it rules situations that do involve the EU but *do not* involve NATO – is applicable.

Of course, this political issue is a major obstacle to improving NATO-EU ties – and a stark reminder of the sound advice that institutions shall never import trouble, the way the EU did when admitting Cyprus without the island's partition being settled. But if by some magic this stalemate would all of a sudden be lifted, do we really believe NATO and the EU would together live happily ever after? Maybe the Cypriot question serves as a useful pretext behind which more structural problems are lurking. Apart from their different scopes, NATO and the EU have their own, distinctive characteristics. The former is a US-led and highly political military alliance, while the latter is more of a regulatory body under alternating lead-coalitions, aspiring towards a more political external role. Next to this, NATO's consensus principle works differently from the EU's unanimity rule that governs its external policies. Is it

1 'The Brussels Wall: tearing down the EU-NATO barrier' William Drozdiak in Foreign Affairs May/June 2010.

plausible that these heterogenous entities would manage to agree on some kind of complementary division of labour? Probably not.

Different animals

Both organizations are engaged in complex transition processes with uncertain outcomes. NATO is thinking hard about a new Strategic Concept that must guide the alliance through its next ten years. NATO is supposed to be transforming from a classical self-defence organization into a more general security organization able to project power far beyond its treaty area. But the intake of former Warsaw Pact countries and Soviet republics necessitates reassurance measures against perceived threats emanating from Russia, while ISAF, NATO's most ambitious out-of-area mission to date, is straining the alliance's cohesion. Most likely its new strategy will be a politically correct, but half-baked compromise between collective defence and collective security.

Hopes for NATO-EU rapprochement ran high when last year France finally rejoined NATO's military structures. But the flipside of this deal was a stronger commitment to the EU's common security and defence policy: a deal that mainly concerns London, since Anglo-French cooperation will be crucial in fulfilling this ambition which ultimately will have to cause friction with the alliance. Last year, too, the EU adopted its long awaited Lisbon Treaty that would pave the way for more concerted policies. But ever since, the Union has been struggling how to make the treaty's complex provisions work in practice, while the current financial crisis is consuming most of the EU leaders' attention, raising even more fundamental questions about Europe than its external dimension. To sum up: the current environment seems particularly hostile for these two altogether different organizations, both in the process of (re)formulating their goals and ambitions, to strike a deal that would position the one vis-à-vis the other. In this context, the fact that no fewer than 21 countries are members of both NATO and the EU distorts the picture and appears to be a liability rather than an asset, given these governments' talent for institutional schizophrenia and separate chains of instruction within their bureaucracies.

But how bad is sub-optimal NATO-EU cooperation?

Does a lack of NATO-EU cooperation spell the end of the Western world? No, it does not. The era of Western pre-eminence on the global stage, which has lasted for almost three centuries, is anyhow coming to an end. Estimates indicate that by 2025 Asia's economic output will be on a par with the OECD countries' output, while by that time the United States and Europe together will account for only 9% of the world's population.² The relative decline of the West

2 Cited in 'Reshaping EU-US Relations: A Concept Paper' (Notre Europe, March 2010).

and the ‘rise of the Rest’ will be dominant features in the coming decades. This course of events should not be dramatized: ‘our’ decline will not be absolute and only a very gradual process, while ‘they’ will encounter many problems of their own, whereas this ‘Rest’ hardly constitutes a like-minded caucus. But having NATO and the EU act hand in glove will not change this trend. Besides, despite institutional obstacles, NATO-EU cooperation is not all that bad. Wherever the organizations meet in theatre, whether in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan or off the Somali coast, practical arrangements work out fairly well. Furthermore, a *comprehensive approach* to crisis management makes sense but does not exclusively hinge on NATO-EU cooperation. And given the precarious state of the ISAF operation, the main driver of this approach, it is not a foregone conclusion that this mission provides the format for future engagements.

So, basically, let NATO and the EU do what they are doing right now: work together in a bottom-up way as well as they can. With an eye to both organizations’ ultimate incongruity, it may be wiser not to waste time trying to merge their respective policies but rather to manage them by making use of the possibilities for cooperation that present themselves. Since NATO-EU synergy is not going to save the world, or Europe for that matter, we should be able to live with a less-than-perfect level of interaction.

Europe is not under siege

Another reason why this state of inter-organizational affairs should not keep us awake at night is that security-wise Europe is not under threat, at least not to the extent that many gloomy forecasts tell us. When in 2003, two years after 9/11 and nine months after the US-led invasion of Iraq, the EU for the first time formulated a security strategy, it came up with a bold first sentence: *Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free*. This statement seems to capture the state of the Union surprisingly well. Admittedly, this highly readable and concise document, which is still in force today, also invokes the prospect of *greater threats than we have known*, but the elaborations under the headings terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure and organized crime suggest that these are very serious issues rather than existential threats to Europe’s security. Instead of being defensive, the EU strategy breathes a fair amount of self-confidence and idealism, viewing itself as *inevitably a global player [which] should be ready to share in the responsibility for global security and a better world*.³

Still, the myriad of security organizations dealing with Europe; the often vitriolic debate about European security, especially when it features Russia; the ‘frozen conflicts’ imbroglios; the number of sub-strategic nuclear weapons

3 A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy, Brussels, 12 December 2003.

deployed in Europe and the controversies related to missile defence systems: all this suggests a security situation that needs urgent attention. But are we not, to a certain extent, chasing phantoms? It seems we have grown so accustomed to regarding Europe as a battlefield, both as an arena for internal European strife and as a bone of contention for outside powers, that we find it difficult to assess our environment as it is. When it comes to the abovementioned new threats and challenges, some of which are actually not so new, none of these require primarily military answers, while all of them are transnational in nature and therefore do require international cooperation.

Russia

In some European capitals, Russia looms large as a remaining physical threat, but this has more to do with the past than with the present. For some reason, we tend to make Russia bigger than it is. It is a nuclear giant but apart from being diplomatically isolated it only has one third of the EU's population, spends about one-tenth of what EU countries spend on defence and its economy adds up to one-fifteenth of that of the EU. Even if the EU is not capable of wielding these levers effectively, it puts Russia's might somewhat into perspective. Russia is managing the current financial and economic crisis relatively well, but its exclusive dependence on oil and gas revenues, which mainly come from Europe, will sustain its vulnerability to global market trends. And in order to upgrade its inefficiently run economy, including its energy industry, Russia will need Western technology, know-how and capital. Economic entanglement in a globalizing world does not always prevent warfare – it certainly did not manage to do so in 1914 – but under current circumstances it seems to bring an appetite for stability. Apart from a host of other domestic problems, Moscow will have to deal with its restive Northern Caucasus in a more structural way, in order to secure the Federation's integrity. The way Russia is defending its interests in neighbouring countries is hardly sophisticated, to say the least, but the fact that this 'near abroad' represents a zone of interest, and an outlet for its resources, should not come as a surprise. Like it or not, power status implies some degree of regional dominance. How else is NATO's enlargement policy or the EU's Eastern Partnership to be interpreted but as efforts to extend a zone of interest to our neighbourhood? Even Russia's 2008 military expedition against Georgia, which by the way highlighted serious shortcomings in its armed forces, was a post-imperial reflex provoked by Tbilisi's reckless behaviour, rather than a prelude to a series of neo-imperial campaigns. That is why Moscow got away with it fairly easily.

Most likely, all the professed nervousness about European security is not entirely justified. Certainly, tomorrow's world is fraught with risks and dangers, many of which are as yet unknown, but it does not appear that these warrant the kind of security debate we still have in Europe. We are *prosperous, secure and free* but we prefer to base our views on past experiences. In this regard, let us take a look at NATO and examine to what extent the alliance's endurance is

instrumental in perpetuating our thinking and keeping us from turning the page.

NATO as an optical illusion

At the venerable age of sixty-plus, NATO is very much alive and kicking. Over the last decades its agenda has broadened significantly and the alliance is operationally more active than ever before. Its membership has grown to 28 and there are still a number of aspirant countries in its waiting rooms. For most European countries, NATO remains the cornerstone of their security policies. Since it was established in 1949, NATO's original purpose has been twofold: to deter the Soviet Union and to allow for European integration. Since at least 20 years, almost half of the entire Cold War period, the Soviet threat has gone and European integration has resulted in a Union that claims global prominence on its own. In this respect, NATO has been a resounding success.

NATO is changing

The sudden demise of the Soviet bloc caught the world by surprise, so no wonder at the time the alliance did not contemplate disbanding itself. And given its continuation, it would have been politically impossible to reject newly independent countries' wishes for accession. And yes, it took NATO to intervene in the Yugoslav civil war, be it belatedly in Bosnia and controversially in Kosovo. But it is obvious that the original gist has been taken out of the alliance, and judging by the arduous strategy debate it has not been replaced by a successor gist. In essence, NATO has been and is changing from a single-minded military alliance into a multi-purpose platform enabling countries to cultivate their bilateral ties with the US. That is why it will prove impossible to erect a European pillar *within* NATO, as some commentators suggest should be done. Why else would recently acceded member states, apparently not trustful of NATO's consensus machinery in article 5 situations, be lobbying so actively with the US for additional security guarantees? And would most allies send their units into Afghanistan because they feel their national security is at stake in the Hindu Kush or because they want to curry favour with Washington? When last February the Dutch coalition government fell over the extension of its Uruzgan mission, the first question raised was whether this implied that the Netherlands would be kicked out of the economic G20 forum.

Of course, it makes sense for countries to ally themselves with the world's foremost power, and only for that reason NATO will continue to exist for some time to come. But increasingly, the *de facto* EU-US-NATO triangle is becoming untenable. On the one hand, sustaining US-led NATO as Europe's primary security forum at the end of the day runs counter to EU ambitions in the field of foreign and security policy; on the other hand it ties Europe to a more global US security agenda that, deep down, it does not subscribe to and that it is certainly not willing to shoulder financially. Finally, as long as Europe remains

a function of US security policy, this will put a curb on its ability to forge comprehensive partnerships with third parties.

Revamping the transatlantic relationship

The transatlantic relationship, North America's partnership with Europe, is still the world's most vital economic, strategic and political bond, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. The question is, however, whether NATO should remain its ultimate embodiment, or whether this relationship should be remodelled and based on a broad and new strategic EU-US partnership, including provisions on security and defence such as a mutual assistance clause. Such a recalibrated partnership would leave room for differences in approach and be more informal in nature, while not necessarily always involving all 27 EU members, but still important when crises erupt. We have seen examples of this kind of cooperation on Iran, with the EU3 teaming up with the US, and the Middle East, where the EU sits next to the US, the UN and Russia in the Quartet: both cases that do not allow for direct NATO involvement.

Good old NATO

Critics will maintain that we cannot do without NATO's unique capabilities, in terms of joint planning and interoperability. No other organization but NATO can conduct an operation like ISAF, the argument runs. But in many respects ISAF is a revealing operation. What we really see in Afghanistan is an able and willing coalition that runs the demanding southern and eastern regional commands, and a host of other countries doing something else in the more benign provinces. Out of ISAF's 46 contributors, non-NATO member Australia seamlessly joins combat operations in the South, while NATO member Germany is carrying out its national stabilization operation in the North, steered by the Bundestag rather than by NATO. And none of these countries would be able to sustain their operations without US enablers. So it is rather the US, and not necessarily NATO, which is pivotal within ISAF.

Trading NATO for the EU-US does not mean doing away with the *acquis atlantique*, but it would mean doing away with a top-heavy alliance that served its purpose well but increasingly stirs unease in Europe, while becoming less relevant to Washington – even if the newest US National Security Strategy routinely speaks of NATO as the *pre-eminent security alliance in the world today*.⁴ NATO, or Europe, is nowhere as central in US security thinking as many Europeans like to believe. When 9/11 occurred, invoking the alliance's article 5 only came as an afterthought. Paradoxically, this trend may be reinforced under a less traditionally inclined President Obama, no matter how enthusiastically his inauguration was celebrated in Europe. Moreover, building a new relationship

4 United States National Security Strategy, May 2010.

with the US which is more balanced than it is now would likely stimulate Europe to further boost its post-World War II integration process.

Third parties

Last but not least, a new transatlantic partnership more firmly based on both participants' autonomy would enable the EU, but also the US, to review their relations with third parties. Take, for example, Russia. Among other reasons, the EU-Russia relationship, important because of the density of trade, investment and energy links but marred by endless negotiations on a new strategic agreement, is held back because of Moscow's frustration that it cannot discuss security with the EU, which tends to refer to NATO instead. As long as Europe labels NATO as its primary security organization, Moscow is likely to regard the EU's neighbourhood policies as affiliated with the alliance's enlargement agenda, given the expressed synergies between these two 'Euro-Atlantic organizations'. More broadly speaking, the outside world will look at Europe as a more serious interlocutor as it depends less on US security guarantees. Sticking to the Russia example, the US, lacking the economic dimension in its relationship with Moscow, is perfectly capable of concluding deals on strategic issues, such as the recent START agreement on nuclear arsenals. But many, not all, of the bilateral irritants concern Europe and are NATO related. It is probably no coincidence that Russian compliance with START has been made dependent on missile defence developments in Europe.

Long term and big ifs, but a necessary way forward

Without any doubt, a process away from NATO and towards an EU-US framework, including reserved seats for NATO's non-EU members, would be a long-term affair, more likely to be driven by crises than to evolve in a linear fashion. But no matter what, we will have to start preparing ourselves for a changing environment, not so much from a European believer's point of view but simply from a realist angle. Anyhow, it looks like fixed alliances have had their day and will give way to more informal partnerships. Right now, there is not a single operation that NATO conducts on its own, and it is highly unlikely the alliance ever will. And the EU is trying to develop its 'permanent structured cooperation', meant to create core groups of member states sharing higher security and defence ambitions.

Will Europe ever manage?

It goes without saying that such developments depend on major ifs. The most fundamental question in this regard would be whether the European project, which does not have a given end state, will proceed. In other words: will Europeans trust each other, or themselves for that matter, to the degree that they will carry on accomplishing this essentially political project, current predicaments notwithstanding? Or do we still need the US as an

institutionalized security provider to keep us from lapsing back into bad European habits?

These questions defy simple answers. But global trends seem to lead Europe towards more integration rather than less. Were Europe to fail in mustering the vision and will to seize this opportunity, then at least its much debated *finalité politique* will be known and will oblige us to settle for a more modest outcome of the European project. And indeed, maybe Europe will survive as a glorified economic union protected by the US through NATO. But alliances are not made for eternity, and the chances are that at some point the US, due to conflicting interests and competing distractions, may earmark more worthy destinations for its security investments and troop deployments than Europe. So the EU had better prepare itself to rise to the occasion. There is no convincing reason to assume that in the 21st century Europe can do without more traditional instruments of power to protect its interests in the world. If someone else will not provide these, we will have to do so ourselves.

Politics over accountancy

In order to get there, it is imperative that Europe starts thinking and acting more politically. Sometimes it does, for instance during the summer of 2008 when on behalf of the EU French President Sarkozy jumped in to broker a ceasefire agreement between Russia and Georgia. The EU should then overcome its internal divide between those who do conceive of the EU principally as a political idea, and those who consider the Union first and foremost as a technocratic device, with strict rules that must be obeyed at all times. If the latter school of thought prevails, it will keep the EU from doing what is politically sensible, such as inviting Turkey to join the Union. Apart from the fact that it concerns an economically vibrant energy hub with a young population, taking this moderate Muslim country on board will reap huge benefits from a security point of view, for instance in dealing with the Middle East. The EU, although largely being framed in an idealistic manner, should then start engaging more in power politics as well. If one wants to leave a mark on the global stage, human rights strategies will not suffice, certainly not when national interests will be more brazenly pursued by others. A reconfiguration of Europe's security ties with the US might just provide the impetus needed for a reality check of Europe's strategic outlook.

A managed realignment of transatlantic forces would of course be an enormous *tour de force*, for which there seem to be few, if any, historical precedents – a reconfiguration of US-Japanese ties may be a case in point. Taking into account Europe's inclination for introversion and a lack of bold visions,⁵ such a process may very well have to be kick-started by the US. Once this happens, it may

5 For a less than bold vision, see for example PROJECT EUROPE 2030, Challenges and opportunities; A report to the European Council by the Reflection Group on the Future of the EU 2030, May 2010.

provide the blessing in disguise allowing old Europe to come of age in the new world.

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