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## **ESDP and NATO: Different actors, common objectives**

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# ESDP and NATO: Different actors, common objectives

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Most of the academic or policy discussion about the relations between the two main security actors in the Euro-Atlantic area refers to “EU and NATO”, not (as it should do) to “ESDP and NATO”<sup>1</sup>. This may seem like a small point but it is a crucial one. The EU does not have a relationship with NATO, nor could it, nor should it<sup>2</sup>. There are two – and only two – appropriate couplings. One is the EU and the US; the other is ESDP and NATO. For the moment, the latter – ESDP-NATO – is the main focus of much attention, but for the future, the former – EU-US – needs to move centre-stage.

Implicit in the majority of the analytical literature on the ESDP-NATO relationship are three assumptions. First, that there is some inherent similarity and proximity, as well as considerable comparability and synergy, between the two entities, deriving from the fact that they are both geared to delivering security and/or defence in the Euro-Atlantic space. Second, that there is some “natural” partnership between the two, based on what is often portrayed as a fairly self-evident division of labour. Third, that NATO, because of its history, its size and capacity and the fact that it features US leadership, will function as the “senior partner” in the relationship. However, twenty years after the end of the Cold War and ten years after the birth of ESDP, none of those assumptions can be taken for granted. ESDP and NATO, while remaining partners in the Euro-Atlantic security framework, have followed quite distinct trajectories and have emerged as very different types of security actors. Neither entity is interested in a division of labour. And US leadership under George W. Bush became a highly controversial issue. Most analysts feel that, with a new administration in Washington, the ESDP-NATO relationship should be easier to manage<sup>3</sup>. This may be true up to a point, but it overlooks the deep *political confusion* surrounding the relationship which, in large part, prevents practical cooperation (irrespective of the mechanics of “Berlin Plus”, of which more below).

During the Cold War, EU/US relations were dominated by the existential threat from the USSR. Hence, transatlantic relations – appropriately – were essentially “managed” by NATO. The organisation was designed to guarantee US commitment to European security. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the EU-US relationship has become infinitely more complex, multi-

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<sup>1</sup> Quinlan 2001; Hunter 2002; Brimmer 2002; Howorth & Keeler 2003; Pond 2004; Flournoy & Smith 2005; Serfaty 2005; Burwell et al 2006; Cornish 2006; Dufourq & Yost 2006; Keohane 2006; Valasek 2007; SDA 2007; Kramer & Serfaty 2007; Chivvis 2008; Hamilton 2009.

<sup>2</sup> There are formal contacts between the officials involved in the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and their NATO counterparts, but there is no legal or institutional basis for formal EU-NATO links as such.

<sup>3</sup> Allin 2007; Asmus 2008; Korski 2008; RAND/Bertelsmann 2008; Vasconcelos & Zaborowski 2009.

level and multi-dimensional and has vastly out-stretched the capacity of NATO to act as production manager. For a start, the Alliance itself, by “going global” has inverted the original relationship. Today, it looks much more like a body designed to guarantee European support for US global grand strategy. That is why NATO is encountering all sorts of *political* problems in Afghanistan. But the broader EU-US relationship now covers everything from climate change to development aid, from culture to energy security, from finance and economics to science, the environment and intellectual property. That vast agenda can only be managed by a direct EU-US relationship which does not yet exist in any practical institutional form. Some in the United States have called for a new body which would combine NATO and the EU. Simon Serfaty and Franklin Kramer have evoked

The formal establishment of a council, including all EU and NATO members, as well as the EU itself [as] the appropriate forum for the discussion of the critical challenges to the 21st century Euro-Atlantic community. The NATO Secretary General would also be offered a seat at the table to enhance communication and implementation. This council could be called the Euro-Atlantic Forum.”<sup>4</sup>

There are five major reasons why NATO-EU is an inappropriate and indeed quite invalid framework for such cooperation. First, the two entities are entirely different in essence, and asymmetric in form and scope. It is for this very reason that they do not have any formal institutional relationship. Second, in terms of membership, such a framework would in fact mean 28 member states talking to Austria, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, Cyprus and Malta – or else 27 member states talking to the US, Canada, Turkey, Norway, Iceland, Croatia and Macedonia. What could be the political agenda for such discussions? It is often noted that NATO and the EU share 21 members. But what is not too often stressed is that one organisation contains the world’s only superpower and the other does not. And that makes all the difference. Third, as a follow-on to this, and perhaps most significantly, there is the fact that NATO carries with it so much historical and politico-cultural baggage. That baggage is difficult enough for NATO to manage, without projecting it to the EU-US level. Fourth, NATO is first and foremost a military alliance with a necessary diplomatic and political agenda. Why should it embrace issues connected with economics, energy, environment, climate, development aid? Fifth, it is self-evidently inappropriate for it to do so. The legitimate and necessary framework for a comprehensive strategic dialogue between the US and the EU covering the entire range of relevant policy areas has to be some direct EU-US forum<sup>5</sup>.

This is all the more true in that both Europe and the US have changed in important ways, both entities *geo-strategically* as a consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall; and the USA *psycho-defensively* as a result of 9/11. The EU’s quest for “autonomy” at the end of the 1990s was not a knee-jerk desire to spring free from its former protector. It did not happen because Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair came up with a clever political idea in Saint-Malo. It is driven by the movement of history’s tectonic plates<sup>6</sup>. The EU still has a very long way to go before it consolidates its CFSP/ESDP profile. But it is already way past the stage at which it might be expected simply to follow US leadership in global politics.

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<sup>4</sup> Kramer & Serfaty 2007

<sup>5</sup> Howorth 2009

<sup>6</sup> Howorth 2007

We need therefore fully to appreciate these profound changes and distinctions in order to help the debate move beyond the normative and the exhortatory – “NATO and the EU *must* cooperate because they share values”... True, the EU and the US almost certainly agree on more issues than those on which they disagree and should try on every occasion to cooperate on the international stage. They are closer to one another than either is to any other global actor. NATO and ESDP have common objectives (security and stability in the areas where they operate, especially the Euro-Atlantic area; support for liberal democratic values; conflict prevention; crisis management). But each is still in transition and requires the *autonomy* to work out its own geo-strategic ambition *before* engaging in bilateral discussions with the other. The big picture is therefore very complex. Enormous political sensitivities and interests are involved. Assumptions about approaches and methods derived from past practice are no longer valid. Experimentation is the order of the day. New political, strategic, institutional and cultural realities must be properly understood and absorbed before the two parties can relate to one another on roughly equal terms. There is schizophrenia on both sides. This will take time to work itself out and settle down.

The reality is that, over the past twenty years, NATO and ESDP have each evolved in very different ways. What eventually became ESDP began life as a sub-set of NATO which did indeed correspond to the three assumptions I referred to earlier: similarity, division of labour, US leadership. It was called the *European Security and Defence Identity* (ESDI). Many opponents of ESDP call for a return to that cozy hierarchical relationship. But the fact is: it was unsatisfactory for both sides and it did not work. That is why ESDI was abandoned in favour of ESDP, with the crucial assertion of European autonomy, not as a principle or as an objective *per se*, but as an *outcome* – one which would (will) allow the EU to play the sort of role on the international stage that almost everybody now agrees it should play<sup>7</sup>. ESDP has now become a vast panoply of instruments at the service of a political project, the European Union, the like of which the world has never seen. Through its experimentation with (to date) no fewer than 23 overseas missions it, has become a unique and *sui generis* type of civilian-military crisis management entrepreneur. It is very different from NATO in this respect for two reasons. First, because the EU can bring to any crisis management mission a range of policy instruments which is unavailable to NATO as such. Second, because the EU enjoys a very different type of political legitimacy. NATO remains essentially a military alliance dominated by the US. There are places in the world that the EU can go where NATO, for one reason or another, cannot. ESDP may be in its infancy, but it is beginning to look like something recognisable and identifiable. It *is what it does*. What it does, increasingly effectively, is *international civilian and military crisis management*. Some analysts would like it to become a strategic actor, rather than one that still seems struck with stage fright<sup>8</sup>.

NATO, for its part, has also evolved in ways few foresaw in 1990. It has constantly re-invented itself, *adding and accruing* functional responsibilities at the same time as it enlarged geographically<sup>9</sup>. But its core reference remains article 5 and its core function collective defence. That is why NATO declared article 5 and went into Afghanistan in 2001 – one of the allies was physically attacked. Why the Alliance is still there *today* and what the definition of success might be, is another issue. It is not entirely clear *what NATO currently is*. And it is in large part in order

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<sup>7</sup> Howorth & Keeler 2003. During George W. Bush's second term, the US officially came to support and encourage ESDP. That encouragement has increased under President Obama.

<sup>8</sup> Biscop, Howorth & Giegerich 2009

<sup>9</sup> Yost 1998; Sloan 2005; Medcalf 2009;

to help answer that question that France has returned fully to the fold<sup>10</sup>. This is not to say that NATO will rapidly decline or go out of business. It is likely to remain for some time the primary body for coordination of military, security and defence policy among its 28 member states. Whether one takes a sceptical view of NATO's future<sup>11</sup> or sees it as a body with enormous future potential<sup>12</sup>, nobody is today predicting that NATO is about to fade away. However, the Alliance's future after Afghanistan will be decided by the necessary and inevitable political debate among its member states over its core mission and its long-awaited new strategic concept. France's return to the fold will ensure that that conversation will be lively. As Nick Witney recently remarked, "there is life in the old dog yet". And the current debate over the new strategic concept<sup>13</sup> will hopefully figure out exactly what sort of life we are talking about – because the present is unsatisfactory to everybody. NATO has become a bit like an albatross. Having soared magnificently over the oceans of containment and deterrence, it is now firmly down on the ground, where, as Baudelaire noted, "Ses ailes de géants l'empêchent de marcher... »

### **Berlin Plus:**

Until we really understand these fundamental differences between NATO and ESDP, we will not be in a position properly to figure out how the two bodies can and should inter-relate. These considerations are necessary to place in the proper context what ought logically to be largely technical discussions about practical cooperation between the two bodies, generally referred to as "Berlin Plus". One huge – again *fundamentally political* – problem is posed by Turkey's long-standing obstruction of the smooth functioning of the ESDP-NATO relationship. Ankara's official explanation is that it cannot agree to pass NATO intelligence to the EU (a fundamental precondition for the Berlin Plus agreement<sup>14</sup>) for fear that that intelligence would be acquired by non-PfP EU members Cyprus and Malta. That "explanation" is entirely specious. Turkey has had a hugely complex attitude towards ESDP from the very outset. Unhappy to swap strong US leadership over European security (via NATO) for weak EU involvement (via ESDP), and reluctant to abandon its active decision-shaping role in WEU for a virtually non-existent role in ESDP, Ankara has also had to contend with its highly complex EU accession negotiations, a growing popular domestic anti-Americanism, plus all of the repercussions arising from the stand-off with both Athens and Nicosia over Cyprus<sup>15</sup>.

What can be done about this "participation problem"? The short answer is probably "not a lot". The US feels no compelling reason to try to force Turkey to cooperate with ESDP – even though logically, from a US perspective, it should try to do so. The EU could make more of a concerted effort, as was attempted under the French Presidency, to include Turkey in various EU bodies – by offering observer status or even associate membership in instances such as COREPER, the PSC, the EDA or even the Council of Ministers<sup>16</sup>. But, apart from the prospect of a Cypriot veto<sup>17</sup>,

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<sup>10</sup> Bozo 2008

<sup>11</sup> Rupp 2006; Witney 2008; Betts 2009

<sup>12</sup> Rynning 2005; Moore 2007; Hamilton 2009

<sup>13</sup> Kamp 2009

<sup>14</sup> In fact, it took until March 2003 for agreement on the exchange of classified information between NATO, the EU Council, the HR-CFSP and the Commission, to be hammered out.

<sup>15</sup> Missiroli 2002

<sup>16</sup> Grant 2006

another problem with this is that Ankara fears it would spell the beginning of “special partnership status” whereby full membership of the EU could be avoided by ad-hoc inclusion in some policy areas but not others. In any case, Berlin Plus was negotiated on the assumption that ESDP would operate *independently* of NATO. In fact, on the few occasions when Berlin Plus has been invoked, the two organisations have both been in theatre. Berlin Plus is, in fact, increasingly irrelevant. What is needed now is a new set of political arrangements for cooperation when *both* organizations are acting together. For that to happen, far greater clarity needs to emerge about precisely what type of actor each has become. Watch this space...

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<sup>17</sup> Cyprus has, in fact, accommodated the EU's wishes to take the Afghan and Kosovo missions forward even though, on Turkey's insistence, it has been refused access to classified ESDP-NATO data.

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