NATO Defense College

European defence:: what impact for NATO?

Author(s): Thierry Tardy

NATO Defense College (2018)

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep20034

NDC POLICY BRIEF

No. 5 – December 2018

European defence: what impact for NATO?

Thierry Tardy *

The story of the EU's efforts to acquire some kind of autonomy in the security domain has always been told with reference to NATO. Back in Saint-Malo in 1998, French President Chirac and UK Prime Minister Blair framed the idea of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), partly in response to NATO's primacy in handling the Yugoslav conflicts. The objective at the time was for the Union to be given the "capacity for autonomous action",[1] with "autonomous" referring to freedom from NATO and the United States.

In this endeavour, the perception in NATO has always oscillated between indifference *vis-à-vis* a process that did not seem credible, and concern that an increased EU role in defence could undermine NATO's centrality and the transatlantic link.

Over the last few years, the EU has embarked upon a process of beefing up its defence profile, raising anxieties in NATO circles. Most recently, references to the need for Europe to acquire strategic autonomy or to move towards a European army, have added to the concerns. But are there reasons for NATO to worry about what the EU and its member states are doing? Is the EU aspiration in defence threatening the transatlantic link? Does the EU have the power to unsettle NATO?

[1]   Franco-British Summit, Final Declaration, Saint-Malo, 4 December 1998.

* Head of the Research Division, NATO Defence College.

Defence matters to the EU

The EU has, over the last 20 years, undoubtedly fostered its own security and defence identity, through a mix of doctrinal, institutional and operational developments. From 2003 to 2015, the EU created and ran more than 30 Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations – of which 12 have been military in nature. Currently, the EU is running 16 operations, six of which are military.

This said, EU efforts to assert its defence profile have from the very beginning, been hindered by a series of difficulties: a lack of member state support, the weak impact of operations (although the military ones are often portrayed as more effective than the civilian ones), and the inadequacy of policy responses to threats. The EU's autonomy and credibility *vis-à-vis* other actors, NATO included, has suffered in consequence.

The EU has, over the last 20 years, undoubtedly fostered its own security and defence identity

In this context, the process that, as of 2015, accompanied the drafting and release of a new Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy, confirmed a new level of commitment to the EU's defence profile.

First, although it did not lead to obvious tangible results, the EU's defence clause was invoked for the first time in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks against France in November 2015. Second, while the very idea of such a structure had long been opposed in the past, the EU established a permanent military headquarters for non-executive missions (Military Planning and Conduct Capability, MPCC). Third, and most importantly, the European Commission has emerged as an actor in the defence sector through the creation of the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the allocation of up to EUR13 billion for the next budgetary cycle (2021-2027), split between capability development (EUR8,9

billion to be matched by national contributions), and defence research (EUR4.1 billion). Last but not least, 25 EU member states[2] in December 2017 established the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PeSCo) that aims to incentivize parties to spend and cooperate more in the defence domain. In this framework, member states have taken on a number of commitments towards a more visible and efficient defence posture, proposing 17 initial projects for cooperation (including a European Medical Command, a Crisis Response Operation Core, and Military Mobility), while a second list of 17 projects was finalized in November 2018.

> *The "strategic autonomy" and "European army" narratives should not hide the fact that the European Union will remain a relatively modest defence actor*

Noticeably, the December 2013 European Council Conclusions started with the words "defence matters". Three and a half years later, in her first report on the implementation of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS), the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Mrs Mogherini stated that, in the security and defence field, "more has been achieved in the last ten months than in the last ten years".[3]

Strategic autonomy, the *self* and the *other*

To a certain extent, those initiatives are responses to the credibility deficit that the EU has suffered from over the last 20 years. They show that the EU wants to do more as a defence actor at a time when one key member state pulls out, the transatlantic bond is being shaken, and the security environment is increasingly destabilizing.

Those efforts have also led to the notion of "strategic autonomy", first in the EUGS, then in subsequent debates and policy documents. "Strategic autonomy" remains ill-defined, and means different things to different EU members. The EUGS states that an "appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy is important for Europe's ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders", and that a "sustainable, innovative and competitive European defence industry is essential for Europe's strategic autonomy and for a credible CSDP".

There are at least two dimensions to strategic autonomy, in reference to the *self* (the EU) and to the *other* (NATO). The first dimension pertains to the necessity for the EU (the *self*) to assert itself as a defence actor by displaying a capacity to deliver on its ambition with its own capabilities. The EU defines for itself a number of strategic objectives, and needs to have the capacity to meet these objectives by solely resorting to the assets of the institution and its member states. It will become autonomous once these capacities have been acquired and can be used following a self-ruling decision-making process. The second dimension implicitly refers to NATO (the *other*) and the transatlantic link: strategic autonomy here implies a capacity to do *without* the support of the US or NATO. In the military domain, this means a capacity to plan and run operations on various scales of the spectrum, including kinetic, with no resort to NATO or US assets. What those operations are about is not specified, and the recent statements by French and German leaders regarding a European army or the need to "give more substance to Article 42(7) [defence clause]"[4] of the EU Treaty may legitimately be interpreted as laying the ground for an all-encompassing military ambition.

However, all EU texts to date assert that collective defence remains a NATO prerogative for all EU members that are also NATO member states, and that there is, therefore, no EU collective defence ambition.

This said, given the level of strategic intimacy between the EU and NATO, the EU's aspiration to be strategically autonomous can only raise questions, if not concerns, within NATO circles, about the possible impact of such an ambition on NATO's role. As put by Jolyon Howorth, "if the EU actually achieves strategic autonomy, what is NATO for?"[5] And if, as stated by European leaders, the EU's efforts in the defence domain are necessary because "the era in which we could fully rely on others is over",[6] or because "Europe can no longer entrust its security to the United States alone",[7] then it is fair to ask what this all means for NATO.

---

2   Denmark, Malta and the UK have not joined PeSCo.

3   High Representative, "From Shared Vision to Common Action: Implementing the EU Global Strategy. Year 1", Brussels, 2017, p. 5.

4   Speech by President Macron at the Ambassadors' Conference, Paris, 27 August 2018.

5   J. Howorth, "EU-NATO cooperation: the key to Europe's security future", *European Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2017, p. 457.

6   Speech by Chancellor Merkel at the Trudering Fest, Munich, 28 May 2017.

7   Speech by President Macron at the Ambassadors' Conference, Paris, 27 August 2018.

Should NATO bother?

International organizations with overlapping mandates inherently compete. They must permanently justify their existence by asserting their added-value to their constituencies. As intergovernmental actors, they are also tools in the hands of their member states that see them as channels of their own foreign policies. When two such institutions operate in similar places, with similar activities and similar memberships, then what one does inevitably impacts – positively or negatively – on what the other does. Complementarity may exist, and synergies may be developed, but competition is also part of the game.

NATO and the EU are in this situation, characterised by cooperation and rivalry, and this has been the case since the very beginning of ESDP. Back in 1998, the framing of ESDP led to cold reactions from the Clinton administration around Madeleine Albright's "three Ds" – ESDP should not *duplicate* what NATO does, should not *discriminate* against European non-EU members, and should not *decouple* Europe from North America.

Since 2016, the two institutions have launched a process of renewed partnership, in keeping with two Joint Declarations and the identification of ten areas of cooperation. While this has already produced some positive results, the NATO-EU relationship is also hampered by two critical obstacles: one is the Cyprus dispute, the other is broad inter-institutional rivalry.

The EU momentum on defence cannot be analysed *in abstracto* from this rivalry. Soon after the launching of PeSCo in December 2017, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed "EU efforts on defence" as an "opportunity to further strengthen the European pillar within NATO and contribute to better burden-sharing". But he also revisited the 1990s "three Ds" by warning against the risk of "weakening the transatlantic bond", "duplicating what NATO is already doing" and "discriminating against non-EU members of the Alliance".[8]

The debate over European strategic autonomy has stirred similar concerns about intended or unintended consequences for NATO. Issues like the alleged protectionist dimension of PeSCo (fencing off non-EU companies from the European market), restrictions on third states' participation in PeSCO and EDF-funded projects, and coordination between the European Capability Development Plan and the NATO Defence Planning Process, have also raised concerns within NATO and for NATO non-EU member states.

Five reasons why it should not (bother)

In this context though, there are at least five reasons that play down the risk of EU defence efforts weakening NATO and the transatlantic bond.

First, if the transatlantic link has objectively been under stress over the last few years, no matter how positive one is about the recent EU defence momentum, it is difficult to establish causality between the two phenomena. Or if any causal link exists, it is more likely that the EU defence efforts are a consequence of current tensions rather than their cause. The burden-sharing debate, divergences about the East vs South priorities or the more recent tensions around the INF Treaty, provide examples of friction that have little to do with the EU agenda.

Second, transatlantic or internal NATO frictions may well be partially addressed by European determination to do more on defence. At least two trends can weaken the transatlantic link: the US losing interest; and European states becoming too weak to be good allies. In this context, rather than weakening it, an increased effort on defence by European states is likely to strengthen the transatlantic bond. PeSCo aims to encourage European states to spend more, develop capacities together, and conduct operations, in a way that, if successful, will benefit European security and the institutions that support it. Whether one labels it CSDP or the European pillar of NATO, the fact is that a greater number of militarily-capable European states will benefit the institutions that draw on the resources and capabilities of their member states. The PeSCo Military Mobility project offers a good example of this mutually beneficial process, as it clearly benefits the NATO agenda of moving troops rapidly around Europe. In many respects therefore, PeSCo is an answer to the burden-sharing debate.

Third, although the EU is the institutional framework in which the above-described actions have taken place, there is to an extent a non-institutional dimension to European defence efforts. Capabilities developed within PeSCo will remain national and potentially used in any framework: the EU, NATO, the UN or coalitions. It is even theoretically possible that "PeSCo-developed" capabilities will never – or seldom – be used in EU-led operations, but always – or more often – within other frameworks. Furthermore, the French-proposed European Intervention Initiative (E2I) that includes the UK and eight other European states,[9] is intentionally institutionally agnostic, so that what Europeans can do in coalitions may well have a non-EU colour anyway.

---

8   Speech by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, Munich Security Conference, 16 February 2018.

9   The E2I brings together nine countries: Belgium, Estonia, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the UK.

Fourth, the "strategic autonomy" and "European army" narratives should not hide the fact that the European Union will remain, for the foreseeable future, a relatively modest defence actor. With the UK exiting the EU, the 27 remaining EU members will spend approximately 20 percent of what NATO member states spend on defence (USD190 billion for EU countries *versus* USD917 billion for NATO countries in 2017).[10] Beyond the figures, the 2017 debate over the nature of PeSCo revealed how most European states were reluctant to consider the "most demanding missions"[11] as an objective for PeSCo capability development. The inclusive approach, by which in the end 25 member states were able to join PeSCo, also demonstrated the limited defence ambition it could ever carry. As a matter of fact, none of the 12 EU military operations to date has involved a significant level of coercion, while all suffered from weak political backing by member states. Also, the newly-created Military Headquarters brings together fewer than 40 personnel (up to 60 according to the most recent decision), whereas its NATO semi-equivalent counterpart – SHAPE – numbers some 800 personnel. The EU does not aspire to conducting the same types of mission that NATO anticipates, and this *de facto* places the two institutions in different categories, thus limiting the risk of duplication. Even if successful, the combination of all recent defence initiatives is unlikely to transform the EU into a defence institution comparable to NATO. Such an objective has simply not been set.

Finally, the states that push for an ambitious EU defence role are in the end a tiny minority. Most EU member states do not see in the EU an alternative to the transatlantic link, and are therefore unconvinced by the strategic autonomy or European army narratives. Those states are also unfailingly committed to the collective defence role of the Alliance, which poses a clear limit to what the EU can do. Short of a collective defence role, the EU could theoretically conduct kinetic expeditionary opera-

tions. However, the likelihood that the EU could/would plan and run such operations in the coming years looks remote even in the most optimistic EU circles.

An inevitable debate?

Incrementally, the European Union is moving towards a defence identity that is embedded in a much broader security domain. Initiatives taken over the last four or five years corroborate this evolution, and will in many ways benefit the EU, but also NATO as an alliance, and more broadly the emergence of a European strategic culture. Whether this makes the EU become a credible military actor, or whether EU member states aspire to that, is nevertheless uncertain. The qualitative shift that would transform the EU into an autonomous, credible military actor has not yet taken place. And there is a long way to go before the ideas of strategic autonomy or a European army, mature into more than concepts or aspirations. For NATO, the benefits of current developments are higher than the costs, and the concerns expressed are largely defused by a closer look at the nature of European efforts.

Most EU member states do not see in the EU an alternative to the transatlantic link

This said, three additional issues need to be factored into the analysis. One is that if in the military domain, NATO has a lasting lead over the EU, the latter displays comparative advantages in NATO's projecting stability agenda. Here, competition will remain. Second, if the NATO-EU relationship is to move forward to the mutual advantage of both organizations, some kind of division of labour – be it functional or geographic – will need to be agreed. Third, if the EU's military aspirations are remote, at stake is also a long-term EU vision in a debate that is sensible but which raises important and necessary questions, including that of the sustainability of the US protection of Europe.

---

10   The Secretary General's Annual Report – 2017, p. 108; and *EUISS Yearbook of European Security 2018*, pp. 199-200.

11   PeSCo was defined in the Lisbon Treaty as being about the "most demanding missions".