



EU-NATO partnership in stagnation

SUMMARY *EU-NATO relations are stagnating while the alliance goes through an identity crisis and the EU makes slow progress on the path towards a European Defence and Security Policy,*

The "participation problem" caused by Turkish-Cypriot bilateral disagreement is often named as the root of difficulties in cooperation between NATO and EU. Nevertheless some commentators stress that this issue may also be seen as a convenient excuse to avoid any serious attempts to address strategic internal divergences between allies. Nonetheless, both the civilian and military staffs in the two organisations work to try and overcome these differences through pragmatic and intensive cooperation on a daily basis.

The current economic crisis, and the pressure it is exerting on defence budgets, is a major incentive for decision-makers to seek improvements in cooperation and find new synergies through pooling and sharing military capabilities.

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Issue definition

In assessing EU-NATO cooperation, the majority of commentators use negative terms such as "mutual suspicion", "institutional fatigue" and lack of "meaningful substance".¹

From the other side, diplomatic language stresses the progress already made while acknowledging that the EU-NATO relationship has yet to fulfil its potential.²

Calls for better cooperation between the two organisations, whose memberships largely overlap, have become more insistent in times of austerity and economic crisis.³

In this perspective the Chicago summit launched the "[Smart Defence](#)" initiative aimed at enhancing synergy between allies' military capabilities. In particular, it seeks to do so through more cost-effective [multinational projects](#), aimed at reducing duplicate capabilities, and encouraging states to rely on allies. As stated in the [Chicago summit declaration](#), the challenge is to ensure that Smart Defence and the EU's "[pooling and sharing](#)" initiative will complement and reinforce each other, despite the ongoing difficulties in EU-NATO relations.



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Political basis for strategic partnership

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has gradually widened its focus from collective security to include stabilisation operations in conflict prevention, crisis management

and more general security concerns. In parallel, the EU has evolved from a purely civil and economic focus to a more comprehensive organisation, dealing with similar issues under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

The increasing convergence of NATO and EU tasks has pushed both sides to develop a formal framework for cooperation. It is currently based on the [EU-NATO Declaration on ESDP](#) of 16 December 2002. The declaration sets the framework of cooperation based on political principles: strategic partnership; effective mutual consultation; equality and due regard for each organisation's decision-making autonomy; respect for the interests of EU and NATO member states; respect for the principles of the UN Charter; and coherent, transparent and mutually reinforcing development of the military capability requirements common to the two organisations. These political principles were made operational by the [Berlin+ arrangements](#), finalised in March 2003, for the use of NATO assets and capabilities in EU-led operations, including command arrangements and assistance in operational planning. The framework also includes the Nice implementation provisions regarding the involvement of non-EU European allies in ESDP, endorsed by the [October 2002 European Council](#).

NATO's [new strategic concept](#) adopted at the Lisbon summit in November 2010 recognises the EU as an essential and unique partner of NATO, which contributes to the overall security of the Euro-Atlantic area. Despite these developments, cooperation

continues to encounter longstanding political obstacles.

Stumbling blocks

Divergences on NATO's mission

The disappearance of the Soviet threat that provided a strong consolidating factor for the alliance caused the emergence of deep internal divergences concerning NATO's overall role, its operating mode and relations with partners, such as the EU and Russia. The differences have characterised allies' views on such different issues as:

- *Out-of area engagement of NATO forces*

This is linked to the evolution of NATO from territorial collective defence only, to broader missions linked with new security threats and the balance between the two. While both the EU's [European Security Strategy](#) (2003) and NATO's Strategic Concept, recognise a similar set of security threats, allies differ on the approach the alliance should take. The USA, as well as

traditional "atlanticist" states such as Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal would like to see NATO engage more in facing security threats outside the Euro-Atlantic area. France and Germany, which play a key role in determining CSDP, and other countries, are more reticent about NATO in such a new role, fearing it could be used to pursue mainly US interests.⁴ France's position has evolved to some extent: under Nicolas Sarkozy, France rejoined NATO's military command and played a leading role in the 2011 Libyan campaign.

- *Pre-emptive attacks*

EP position

In its [resolution of 19 February 2009 on the role of NATO in EU security architecture](#), the EP stresses that NATO forms the core of European military security. Thus the EU and NATO must improve their cooperation and develop a comprehensive approach to crisis management. The EP calls on Turkey to cease hindering cooperation between the EU and NATO and on the Member States to be more flexible, pragmatic and goal-oriented in implementing the EU-NATO partnership. The EP also supports the establishment of a permanent EU headquarters to plan and conduct CSDP operations.

This divergence on NATO's priority mission is reflected in allies' approach to pre-emptive attacks. For the US, whose main strategic goal is to prevent, deter, and defend itself from, terrorist attacks, as well as from the proliferation and possible use of weapons of mass destruction, the pre-emptive attack is a valid option. As the Iraq war showed, EU NATO members are much more reluctant to use this means, at least without UN legitimisation.

- *Out-of-area operations*

Moreover, EU NATO members have often put stronger emphasis on the need to "legitimise" out-of-area engagement by NATO through UN resolutions, but this does not seem to be necessary for the US.⁵

- *EU command structure*

The US, supported by the UK and other atlanticist NATO members, is extremely suspicious of attempts to build an autonomous EU military structure. This led in 2003 for example to the failure of an initiative, backed by France, Germany and Belgium, aimed at establishing an EU headquarters. The compromise found was the deployment by the EU of a small group of operational planners to SHAPE, NATO's planning headquarters near Mons, Belgium.⁶

- *The role of nuclear weapons*

Some EU countries, (Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) given pressures of public opinion, call for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe. Debate on this issue has been reinitiated under NATO's ongoing Deterrence and Defence Posture review.

- *Increasing gap in military capabilities*

The Libya crisis showed EU NATO members' dependence on US capabilities, such as air-defence suppression, smart munitions and aerial refuelling. The US is more and more critical of the widening gap between US and EU Member States' military capabilities, caused by repeated cuts in EU defence budgets. The US now accounts for 75% of NATO defence budgets.⁷

"Participation problem"

The Turkish-Cypriot dispute is frequently presented as a major stumbling block in the development of EU-NATO cooperation. Since Cyprus joined the EU in May 2004, Turkey has consistently opposed Cypriot participation in formal EU-NATO meetings under the pretext that non-NATO members must first conclude security agreements with NATO. The EU refuses to participate in formal cooperation with NATO at ministerial level if all its Member States are not present.

Cyprus, from its side, has blocked administrative arrangements between the European Defence Agency (EDA) and Turkey, as well as the signature of a security agreement with Turkey necessary for EU secret documents to be transmitted to NATO.⁸ This issue, known as the "participation problem", has drastically reduced the scope of effective cooperation between the EU and NATO.

Cooperation in practice

High-level contact

Since 2003, because of the participation problem, there have been no formal meetings between the two organisations at ministerial level. To overcome this deadlock high-level informal meetings, so called Transatlantic events are held biannually in New York or in European capitals. The highest point of institutional contact is currently in the meetings between the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC). This formation meets with varying frequency (roughly every six weeks) at ambassador level.

NATO's highest military body, the [Military Committee](#) and the [European Union Military Committee](#) (EUMC) have strong personal links since the Chiefs of Defence and their Military Representatives of 21 EU Member States sit on both. Furthermore the EUMC Chair attends joint NAC-PSC meetings, as well as EU Council and NATO Military Committee meetings.⁹

Commentators note that since the 2004 EU enlargement, informal contacts between staff of both organisations have increased to compensate to some extent for the political blockage.¹⁰ Focusing the political "red lines" at the highest levels of cooperation leaves more flexibility at lower levels.

Limited use of "Berlin plus"

Of [16 EU operations](#), only two – CONCORDIA and ALTHEA – have benefited from the "Berlin-plus" arrangements. One of them is the coordinating role of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR). This double-hatted NATO-EU post is held in principle by a European, today General Sir Richard Shirreff, current [ALTHEA](#) operation commander. However in other operations cooperation in the field is based on *ad hoc* arrangements between staff. For example, both NATO's operation [Ocean Shield](#) and EU' Operation [ATALANTA](#), which have the same mission (fight against piracy) and operate in the same region (Gulf of Aden), are supervised from Northwood, England, via EU and NATO command centres operating side by side. In theatre, commanders coordinate their actions on a daily basis via electronic communications and regular cross-deck meetings.

In Kosovo and Afghanistan, NATO and the EU operate in parallel without a formal

framework. The EU's exclusively civilian mission is reliant on NATO's military component for the protection of its civilian personnel. In Kosovo four technical agreements were signed on the ground in order to facilitate cooperation. In Afghanistan, with no such agreements, the EU had to negotiate 14 separate agreements with different EU and individual nations to ensure protection and transport of its personnel. The search for case-by-case solutions on the ground is frustration to both civilian and military personnel, being time-consuming and inefficient.¹¹

Further reading

[NATO no longer fits the bill. We need more European Alliance/](#) T. Sommer, Körber Policy Paper, No 15, June 2012.

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Endnotes

- ¹ [The EU, NATO and Lisbon Treaty: still divided within a common city/](#) S. Duke, 2011, p.23; [The EU NATO cooperation the case for institutional fatigue?/](#) S.J. Smith, European Security, 20:2, July 2011, p.243.
- ² [NATO-EU: working to fill gaps in defence capabilities/](#) NATO website, 13 August 2012,
- ³ [Europe: NATO-EU cooperation remain difficult/](#) Oxford Analytica, 4 June 2012.
- ⁴ [Combining Realism and Vision: options for NATO's strategic concept/](#) R. Alcaro, Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI 10/07 May 2010.
- ⁵ [NATO and the EU/](#) Congressional Research Service, January 2008.
- ⁶ [Big Three join forces on defence/](#) C. Grant, 2004.
- ⁷ [Keeping NATO Relevant/](#) J. Shea, Carnegie Policy outlook, April 2012.
- ⁸ [Better NATO-EU relations require more sincerity/](#) C. Buharah, EDAM, Discussion Policy paper, 1/2010.
- ⁹ [The EU NATO cooperation the case for institutional fatigue?/](#) S.J. Smith, European Security, 20:2, July 2011, p.251.
- ¹⁰ [NATO and EU: Cooperation?/](#) P. Sturm, European Security Review, no.48, February 2010.
- ¹¹ [The EU NATO cooperation the case for institutional fatigue?/](#) S.J. Smith, European Security, 20:2, July 2011.