Strategic Partnership or Contending Coalitions? An Analysis of EU-NATO Relations

https://www.e-ir.info/2009/09/13/strategic-partnership-or-contending-coalitions-an-analysis-of-the-current-state-of-eu-nato-relations/

ALISTAIR LAW, SEP 13 2009

This paper will contend that fundamental problems, both structural and political, continue to characterise the EU-NATO relationship as one of 'contending coalitions'. Yet the piece will also point to recent shifts in the attitudes of major actors coupled with success in simultaneous operations which suggest there is potential for a 'strategic partnership' to emerge. The analysis will highlight the primacy of member state foreign policy as a determining factor in EU-NATO relations, whilst also emphasising the impact of institutional rivalry and organisational capabilities. Following a brief synopsis of the background to the issue, the perspectives of the major actors will be examined, before key issues are considered thematically with conclusions drawn as to nature of and prospects for EU-NATO relations in these areas.

Background

EU-NATO relations revolve around the spheres of security and defence, and thus have been governed on the EU side by the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) contained within the Common Foreign and Security Policy. ESDP was borne out of a desire to deal with potential threats to European security and grant the EU a greater global role (Dinan 2005, p.589), and came into being following the election of the Blair government and subsequent St Malo declaration. This highlights an importance point – shifts in EU policy (and thus the EU-NATO relationship) frequently stem from changes in attitudes of important actors. Developments such as the Helsinki Headline Goals raised a number of questions regarding the EU-NATO relationship, such as the allocation of resources, divisions of responsibility and institutional linkages, which the Berlin Plus agreement of March 2003 attempted to answer. Berlin Plus gives the EU 'assured access' to NATO operational planning capabilities and 'presumed access' to NATO common assets for EU-led operations (NATO 2003). This was the last significant formal agreement reached by the two organisations, and is far from comprehensive – for instance, it is unclear how resources would be shared should simultaneous missions be undertaken.

Perspectives of Key Actors

Both organisations are, by their nature, constituted by their member states, whose foreign policies and security perceptions are key determinants of the institutions' directions. The EU-NATO relationship therefore reflects a number of issues – states' perceptions of security, attitudes towards the EU, bilateral transatlantic relationships and so on.

The positions of Britain, France and Germany often set the EU foreign policy agenda. In the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war, French and German hostility towards perceived American unilateralism shaped EU-NATO relations in a negative manner. Chirac was the prime instigator of ESDP and strongly believed in a European defence arm independent of NATO / American influence, whilst Schroeder had suggested in 2005 that NATO had lost its status as 'the primary venue where transatlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies' (Brimmer 2007, p.26). Yet Angela Merkel reoriented the German position firmly back towards NATO in 2006, and Sarkozy's election has produced a dramatic change in French foreign policy with a return to the NATO full command, albeit whilst still

Strategic Partnership or Contending Coalitions? An Analysis of EU-NATO Relations
Written by Alistair Law

strengthening the ESDP (Valasek 2007). Britain has always placed importance on its bilateral transatlantic relationship, and thus continues to view the Alliance as an integral partner of the EU, while most eastern European nations see NATO as the prime military organisation, attributing great value to continued US engagement in European security (Archick and Gallis 2008, pp.21-22). The interplay between these competing points of view leads to constant yet subtle shifts in EU position with regards ESDP and the role of NATO. There remains a broad desire to further the EU's military capabilities to increase its global influence and manage European security independently. Yet the 'Europeanists' are now no longer hostile to the involvement of NATO and, by extension, the United States.

The US is the largest and most prominent member of NATO, meaning American attitudes towards the EU and ESDP have a large bearing on the EU-NATO relationship. US support for ESDP has remained conditional on terms set out by Madeline Albright in the wake of St Malo – no decoupling of European defence from NATO, no duplication of command structures or operational forces and no discrimination of non-EU European states who are part of NATO. These terms clearly conflict with certain European states' desires for ESDP, and remain a source of transatlantic tension. There has however of late been a softening of attitudes on the part of the Americans towards a more fully realised EU defence identity. Difficult experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq have persuaded the US that Europe does have a role to play in global security, particularly in areas that neither the US nor NATO are particularly equipped to deal with such as the exercise of 'soft' power and post-conflict reconstruction (Brimmer 2007 pp.18-19). The 'three D's' will remain prominent in American minds, but a more positive view of Europe as an important strategic partner may persuade the US to compromise more on European defence. At any rate, as Valasek (2007, p.1) highlights, this shift in attitudes means that 'none of the governments involved in Europe's security is seeking actively to undermine either the EU or NATO'.

There is of course another element to the relationship – organisational theory highlights the role played by officials and staff in formulating policy (McCalla 1996, pp.456-457). Both bureaucracies have a natural desire to affirm the necessity of their institutions, laying claim to being the most effective vehicle for satisfying the needs of member states. Where this is no overarching coordination on matters, these efforts frequently lead to institutional competition.

Current Issues

Communication

EU-NATO communication does not take place on a broad enough level to be considered fully effective. There are significant institutional links – the NAC and PSC meet three times a semester; the Military Committees have regular contact; there are permanent NATO liaisons at EMS (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2007). Yet these interactions have been severely constrained by Turkish objections to any participation by Cyprus or Malta. Neither nation is a member of the Partnership for Peace initiative, and thus Turkey refuses to share intelligence with the EU on anything other than Berlin Plus missions and military capabilities. Similarly, the EU will not engage in wider discussions without all of its members present. Thus there is no mechanism for discussing non-Berlin Plus missions or overarching strategic issues at ministerial level. This is arguably the biggest obstacle to establishing a successful strategic partnership, preventing the EU and NATO from formulating long-term strategies or planning future cooperation (Keohane 2006). Again, the issue highlights how the foreign policy of member states (in this case Turkey's long standing dispute over the Republic of Cyprus) is a determining factor in EU-NATO relations.

The organisations have however shown they can communicate effectively on an operational level. For instance, despite damaging high profile disagreements over airlift missions to assist the African Union in Sudan in 2005, day-to-day cooperation between personnel on the ground was relatively successful (Michel 2007). Similarly, regular contact has been established in other areas where both organisations are in operation, facilitating information exchange and limited strategic consultation (Keohane 2006). Whilst these instances could undoubtedly benefit from closer cooperation in Brussels, their relative success is at least indicative of the potential for effective EU-NATO collaboration.

Functional and Geographic Scope

Strategic Partnership or Contending Coalitions? An Analysis of EU-NATO Relations

Written by Alistair Law

Since both organisations share so many key security challenges (stemming from their shared membership) it is unsurprising that ESDP objectives significantly overlap with NATO's strategic concept. Both organisations have made commitments to meet challenges on a global scale, particularly with respect to conflict prevention, crisis management, terrorism and WMD proliferation (NATO 1999, European Council 2003). Yet these similarities mean member states are frequently unsure as to which institution will best meet varying security concerns, leading to institutional rivalry which often has a damaging effect. This weakness manifested itself acutely in the response to the AU's request for assistance in Darfur, when the EU and NATO engaged in a 'beauty contest', delaying action being taken and resulting in parallel airlift missions deemed duplicative and inefficient (Michel 2006, pp.6-8). Yet whilst this uncertainty will remain, some natural divisions are beginning to emerge. NATO has experienced difficulty in post-conflict reconstruction and development in both Afghanistan and the Balkans. The US has acknowledged that integrated civilian capacities embodied in the ESDP Headline Goals can play an important role in sustaining security (*Washington Times*, 2 April 2008). This is reflected by broad support for EU missions centred on non-military security such as EULEX in Kosovo and various EUPOL missions. Similarly, Operation Althea, although a military excursion, is focused on stabilisation, and receives full NATO assistance under Berlin Plus. There is additionally an emerging geographical separation – NATO appears content to let the EU take the lead in small scale peacekeeping operations in Africa and the Balkans, where European nations have stronger historical ties. The Alliance in contrast has unique assets and developed interoperability that make it a more logical choice in the case of large scale coalition operations and 'combat focused' exercises, such as the continuing pursuit of ex-Taliban forces. Although there is no guarantee that disputes will not arise in the future, shared understandings are emerging based upon the current capabilities of the two organisations, and changes in strategic thinking from prominent actors.

Defence Capabilities

There remains a large scale defence gap between EU states and the US, both in terms of funding and capabilities, which the Europeans have acknowledged and are looking to address (Cameron 2007, p.78). However, once again this is an area where the EU and NATO have sought their own solutions without full consultation, leading to a division of resources which is detrimental to all involved. Targets for improvements in military capabilities have been set separately by the Prague Capabilities Commitment and European Capability Action Plan. Although these initiatives cover similar areas, there remain very real differences in terms of what is covered and what is prioritised. A Capability Group was set up to coordinate the two programs, but due to structural constraints already highlighted has largely failed to produce tangible results. Improvement of military capabilities is an area where effective EU-NATO coordination would produce substantial benefits – for instance, if approaches were aligned it would facilitate much more efficient procurement of enabling technology such as heavy airlift (Valasek 2007, p.6). It is also an area where there are less obstacles blocking cooperation – the issue can be discussed at ministerial level (albeit without Malta and Cyprus present) and the Americans are supportive of any European efforts to close the capabilities gap, even those that run through the EU.

Command Structures and Forces

Whilst the EU has continued to develop ESDP structures which appear to duplicate NATO, this has yet to cause severe disagreement (Grevi 2006). The EU Planning Cell of 2003 was tolerated, being based at SHAPE and thus operating within the NATO framework. The EU OpsCentre, opened in June 2007, had the potential to cause more alarm, raising the prospect of an integrated military command structure that duplicates SHAPE and giving the EU a centralised headquarters for autonomous activities. In responding to these suggestions, High Representative Solana stressed the different operational capabilities of the centre, highlighting that it allowed for coordination with civil assets – an element which SHAPE does not possess – and would thus represent a 'division of labour', an assessment shared by Secretary General De Hoop Scheffer (*EU Observer*, June 14 2007). This fits with the hypothesis outlined above, whereby a natural understanding is emerging regarding the division of operational roles between the two organisations. Any further EU developments on this front are likely to be checked 'internally' by the UK, regardless of the US position (Archick & Gallis 2008, p.22).

There is more concern raised over the duplication of deployable forces. As a consequence of overlaps in scope and strategic objectives, key operational forces resemble one another closely and naturally draw upon the same

Strategic Partnership or Contending Coalitions? An Analysis of EU-NATO Relations
Written by Alistair Law

resources from member states' militaries. The EU's Battlegroups and the NATO Response Force are both multinational rapid reaction forces designed to be swiftly deployed 'out-of-area'. It is unclear which organisation would take precedence should both forces be mobilised. Even if resources permitted simultaneous deployment, effective collaboration would be constrained by the different 'language' of command used and NATO concerns over EU training (Lindstrom 2007, pp.48-50). The parallel development of these two forces is again indicative of institutional rivalry and 'contending coalitions', with the EU and NATO pursuing their own solutions to member states' security problems as opposed to cooperating.

Conclusion

The EU-NATO relationship can still be described as one of 'contending coalitions'. The restrictions on consultation at the highest level (borne out of long-standing Turkish foreign policy) mean that wide ranging cooperation cannot be facilitated. This in turn leads to institutional competition – the pursuit of duplicative measures in offering solutions to security concerns, which divide resources and generate further tension. Yet recent events have demonstrated that the potential is there for an important 'strategic partnership' to be established. The most crucial development has been the shift in attitude of key actors, in particular the French and the United States, towards a more positive outlook on EU-NATO collaboration. Additionally, the organisations have demonstrated their capacity to work together effectively at an operational level, and recent missions have hinted at the emergence of a partial division of responsibilities. Yet for this potential to be fully realised, both parties must seek to eradicate fundamental barriers to communication to allow for effective, long-term strategising.

Bibliography

Archick, Kristin and Gallis, Paul. 2008. *NATO and the European Union* [Online]. Congressional Research Service. Available at http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32342.pdf [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

Binnendijk, Hans and Petersen, Friis Arne. NATO needs new lease. *The Washington Times* 2 April 2008.

Brimmer, Esther. 2007. Seeing blue: American visions of the European Union, *Chaillot Paper no. 105*. Paris: Institute for Security Studies.

Cameron, Fraser. 2007. *An Introduction to European Foreign Policy*. Oxon: Routledge.

Dinan, Desmond. 2005. *Ever Closer Union: An Introduction to European Integration* (3rd ed). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

European Council. 2003. *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy* [Online]. Available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

Grevi, Giovanni (ed). 2006. *The Future of ESDP*. EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 6 February 2006.

Keohane, Daniel. 2006. Unblocking EU-NATO cooperation, *Centre for European Reform* [Online]. Available at http://www.cer.org.uk/articles/48_keohane.html [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

Kubosava, Lucia. 2007. Solana defends EU military planning hub. *EU Observer* 14 June 2007 [Online]. Available at http://euobserver.com/?aid=24275 [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

Lindstrom, Gustav. 2007. Enter the EU Battlegroups, *Chaillot Paper no. 97*. Paris: Institute for Security Studies.

McCalla, Robert B. 1996. NATO's persistence after the Cold War. *International Organization* 50 (3), pp. 445-475

Messervy-Whiting, Graham. 2005. The growing EU-NATO relationship: beyond Berlin. *International Spectator* 40 (2), pp. 63-73

Strategic Partnership or Contending Coalitions? An Analysis of EU-NATO Relations
Written by Alistair Law

Michel, Leo (ed). 2006. *NATO and the European Union: Improving Practical Cooperation. A Transatlantic Workshop.* Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defence University, Washington DC, 20-21 March 2006.

Michel, Leo. 2007. NATO-EU cooperation in operations. *Research Paper* 31. Rome: NATO Defense College.

NATO. 1999. *The Alliance's Strategic Concept* [Online]. Available at: http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.htm [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

NATO. 2004. *Berlin Plus Agreement* [Online]. Available at: http://www.nato.int/shape/news/2003/shape_eu/se030822a.htm [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

NATO Parliamentary Assembly. 2007. NATO-EU operational cooperation. *2007 Annual Session* [Online]. Available at: http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=1168 [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

Ojanene, Hanna. 2006. The EU and NATO: two competing models for a common defence policy. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44 (1), pp.57-76

Serfaty, Simon. 2006. A challenged and challenging Europe: impact on NATO-EU-US relations. *International Spectator* 41 (1), pp. 61-70

Touzovskaia, Natalia. 2006. EU-NATO relations: how close to 'strategic partnership'? *European Security* 15 (3), pp. 235-258

Valasek, Tomas. 2007. *The roadmap to better EU-NATO relations* [Online]. Centre for European Reform, London. Available at: http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/briefing_tv_eu_nato_ 20dec07.pdf [Accessed: 11 April 2008]

—