

EU – NATO Relations: Enhanced Cooperation Amidst Increased Uncertainty

Introduction

Since 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been the main framework for European security based on the principle of collective defence.¹ Despite occasional tensions between some of the European NATO members and US President Donald Trump in recent years, the cooperation between the European Union (EU) and NATO has been deepened with unprecedented speed and scope on an institutional level, which has an overall stabilizing effect on the transatlantic relationship. Under the Trump administration, the USA has increased contributions to the Alliance, proving that European members have not lost their importance to Washington.

Against this background, the paper seeks to present an overall view of the latest trends and developments considering the Transatlantic Alliance, as well as potential implications on the future cooperation between the EU and NATO under the impact of the Covid-19 virus outbreak.

NATO Summit in London

The London Summit in December 2019 proved to be of particular importance, as it marked the Alliance's 70th anniversary. On this occasion, the Allies sought to demonstrate their unity as well as NATO's sound functionality. The Summit, however, came about at a delicate time for the Alliance and was overshadowed by major differences and disagreements. It took place in the midst of the UK's turbulent exit from the EU (Brexit) and, at the same time, President Trump was confronted with an impeachment inquiry at home.² In addition, ahead of the Summit, President Macron sharply criticized NATO's functionality by claiming that the Alliance was experiencing 'brain-death'.³ According to him, the USA is becoming increasingly unreliable as a guarantor of European security, as is NATO's

Article 5 commitment. Being a historically distant NATO member, France announced its commitment to enhance European strategic autonomy, while pushing for a fundamental debate on the future of the Transatlantic Alliance.

During the two-day Summit, the Allies discussed the following topics:

China was put on the agenda, as Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stressed the need for NATO to fully recognize the country's growing influence in Europe, Africa and the Arctic. Therefore, the London Declaration spoke of both "opportunities and challenges" in relation to China.⁴ For the first time, the People's Republic was characterized as a potential strategic threat to the West. In particular, the USA is pressing for Chinese tech giant Huawei to be excluded from the expansion of the telecommunications infrastructure on the old continent. In this regard, NATO's main task would be to assess possible risks and find ways to maintain communications should (in line with American concerns) cyber-attacks take place. The Alliance also reaffirmed the need to adjust its political orientation in the Far East and to continue to monitor China's military rise. However, due to the diverging interests of NATO members towards Beijing, an effective and coherent China policy could prove to be difficult and Europe may eventually see itself confronted with a risky balancing act between the USA and China.

Although NATO would undoubtedly be weaker without Turkey, the country also poses a major source of insecurity: The gas dispute between **Turkey**, Cyprus, and Greece could potentially escalate, leading to a deadlock situation which will have a negative impact on EU-NATO relations. The purchase of the Russian Triumph **air defence system** S-400 and Turkey's military actions in northern Syria were also heavily

criticized by the Alliance. Furthermore, President Erdoğan repeatedly threatened to reject defence plans for Poland and the Baltics, if NATO did not classify the Kurdish YPG militia as a terrorist organization. More recently, the opening of Turkey's borders to the EU brought a new influx of migrants to Greece, leading to renewed tensions between the two neighbors. Thus, the NATO-Turkey relationship has reached a new low, a situation that especially **Russia** could benefit from. The majority of NATO countries agreed that Russia continues to pose an existential threat to transatlantic security, which is why Secretary General Stoltenberg pleaded for unity towards Moscow once again.

The **climate factor** is also playing an increasingly important role in security policy debates, as it could lead to renewed migration flows, as well as novel security threats in various areas. In this regard, Norway's prime minister, Erna Solberg, referred among others to the lack of water facilitating the rise of extremist movements in areas such as Mali and Burkina Faso, and stressed that NATO should submit itself to an intensive discussion on the security implications of climate change.

The debate on financial **burden-sharing** within NATO remains one of the most controversial items on the transatlantic agenda and is almost as old as the Alliance itself. Numerous US presidents used to criticize the low contributions of the European members of the Alliance long before President Trump took office, and as a result of Brexit, 80 percent of the Alliance's defence expenditures will now come from non-EU countries.⁵ Therefore, the need for increased defence spending was an important topic of discussion at the London Summit.

Despite the initial differences, the London Declaration acknowledged the unprece-

dented progress of EU-NATO cooperation and reaffirmed both the strong transatlantic bond between Europe and North America, as well as the commitment to Article 5 on collective defence.

NATO and the response to the Covid-19 virus outbreak

No country was spared from the spread of the Covid-19 virus to Europe and North America and various NATO members, such as the USA, UK, Italy, and Spain, were most heavily affected in terms of infection and death rates. Secretary General Stoltenberg addressed the dire situation and the severe economic consequences of Covid-19, while stressing the important role of NATO during the pandemic outbreak.⁶ Furthermore, Stoltenberg called on NATO member states to adhere to their commitments to military spending despite the economic shock caused by Covid-19. A main argument for maintaining the membership fees is the increasingly important role of the military in containing pandemics. However, the commitment to spend \$400 billion more by the mid-20s will likely be tested in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis.⁷

The Alliance, like other international organizations, had to take preventive measures to minimise the risk of further infection. During the Covid-19 crisis, NATO initiated an active exchange between the Allies and boosted coordination with the European partners. The Alliance had its own medical personnel at disposal and was strictly monitoring the potential Covid-19 impact on NATO forces in international operations. Despite the pandemic, the work of the organization remained uninterrupted. Although initially some military exercises, such as 'Defender Europe 2020', had to be postponed, the continuation of NATO operations abroad was further assured. One important step was the utilisation of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) to provide support for allies and partners during the pandemic. Spain was one of the most affected countries, and Madrid received support from EADRCC, specifically from the Czech Republic, Turkey, Germany, Luxembourg and Lithuania.⁸ The Alliance co-

ordinated the transport of supplies across the member states using two additional programs – the Strategic Airlift Capability and Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS).⁹

Obviously, existing EU and NATO structures and mechanisms were applied to coordinate logistical, transport, and medical help to the member states. Both the EU and NATO recognized the need for cooperation and coordination, in order to create synergies through complementary capabilities and launch a pool of adequate resources based on the best practices and experiences in each of the organizations. One of their main tasks was the transportation of patients to countries with free hospital capacities, as well as medical personnel and supplies. Repatriation flights for citizens of the EU and NATO members were also conducted. In this context, the pandemic revealed existing gaps in their coordinated responses but also highlighted "both the need for and the potential of NATO-EU cooperation."¹⁰

Implications for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy

Current developments confirm that NATO remains the most important collective defence organization for European security. In its annual report on the implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)¹¹, the European Parliament stressed the importance of the Transatlantic Alliance, while expressing concerns about the USA's withdrawal from the multilateral world order. The report advocates for strengthening the EU's capacity to act autonomously in the field of security and defence, underlining that a strategic autonomy of the Union would not pose a threat to NATO; if anything, it could rather contribute to further strengthening the Alliance. This notion was also reaffirmed in the recent report on the implementation of the EU's Global Strategy (EUGS) '*The European Union's Global Strategy: Three Years On, Looking Forward*'.¹² Brussels emphasises that a strong EU-NATO partnership is evidence of an increasingly interconnected transatlantic security area, and the importance of far-reaching cooperation on

defence-related issues is underlined time and again.

Before the London Summit, Stoltenberg announced that in 2019, defence spending across European Allies and Canada increased in real terms by 4.6%, making this the fifth consecutive year of growth.¹³ He also revealed that by the end of 2020, those Allies will have invested \$130 billion more since 2016, and while in 2017 only five Allies reached the two-percent-target, meanwhile the number increased to nine countries: the USA, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, the UK and the Baltics. However, as a consequence of the current Covid-19 crisis, European defence budgets are in danger of being (once more) severely cut – a repetition of what had happened after the financial crisis in 2008. Nowadays, armed forces in most European countries are still in the process of recovering from the damage done in those years, and considering that the range of security challenges currently facing Europe is broader and more complex than ten years ago, it would be ill-advised to slow down this repair and modernisation cycle by a new round of defence budget cuts.

It is also necessary for Europe to continue its efforts towards a more balanced burden-sharing within NATO. A new formula for sharing these costs was agreed with the USA and Germany covering 16% of NATO's budget respectively starting in 2021.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Trump administration considerably increased the US outlays for military operations in Europe within the framework of the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI). In fact, the USA tripled the EDI spending to boost European defence and even increased the presence of US troops in Europe.¹⁵ Moreover, the long-standing debate on increased defence spending is missing the heart of the problem: even though the EU's 'Big Two', France and Germany, have ambitious goals for European defence, they follow traditionally different paths – Paris relies on depth and hard power, Berlin on breadth and soft power. Europe needs a common strategic culture in order to safeguard its interests and values in a coherent way and be a credible NATO partner. The EU

member states should therefore focus on making defence spending more effective, by avoiding duplications and cooperating more closely in the field of defence as a collective security actor.

In this regard, Brussels should also aim to add more credibility to the goal of enhancing its strategic autonomy. Concrete measures and action plans for the better pooling of capacities and capabilities should continuously be adopted, in order to launch a stronger European presence not just in the political and economic, but also in the military and technological field (a 'Europe first' narrative). Initiatives like the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)¹⁶ and the European Defence Fund (EDF)¹⁷ surely have the potential to become game changers and provide a meaningful framework for European defence procurement, but only if member states show willingness to go beyond the political and industrial hurdles to jointly deliver the capabilities they need.

Future Outlook

The EU will continue to face an increasingly complex and unpredictable security environment, which includes a weakened multilateral order, enhanced hybrid and terrorist threats, growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a more self-confident China, as well as a more assertive Turkey and Russia. The Union must therefore adapt to this new global political reality and find ways to better protect what has been politically built in Europe over the decades, without relying solely on American help and protection.

This year is already proving to be crucial for both the EU and NATO because of the Covid-19 crisis, which – apart from its disruptive socio-economic and political consequences – is expected to have a negative impact on all countries' defence budgets and planned expenditures, leaving Europe in a more vulnerable position. In the United States, the upcoming presidential elections will reveal whether the 'Trump effect' is just a temporary phenomenon or represents a deeper transformative trend in US politics.

The Transatlantic Alliance evokes a reminiscence of past times, and yet it has proven to be an adaptive institutional relict from the Cold War, even though many have declared it to be obsolete over the last three decades, including Trump recently. In fact, NATO has not only proven its ability to adapt to a changing environment by constantly developing new tools and instruments to interact with it, but also demonstrates comparative advantages in dealing with a potential new rival such as China, based on its past experience with the Soviet Union. The organization already disposes of rich know-how on the broad spectrum of non-kinetic warfare, from cyber-attacks to Russia's all-out information war, and is thus best equipped to face an assertive China in the future. It is also clear that none of the transatlantic members, aside from the USA, could tackle a potentially deepening systemic coordination between Moscow and Beijing in the field of security and defence on their own.

A fundamental common feature of the EU and NATO is their willingness to integrate new members. Following the accession of Montenegro to NATO (2017), the Republic of North Macedonia joined the Alliance in March this year¹⁸; the Alliance is now comprising of thirty states. At the Brussels Summit in 2018, Allies welcomed the historic Prespa agreement between Athens and Skopje and invited the government to begin accession talks.¹⁹ The inclusion of North Macedonia is seen as an important step towards stabilising the entire Balkan region and EU accession negotiations would be the next realistic step. They were originally scheduled to start in the summer of 2019, but integration efforts suffered a setback when France refused to open accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania.²⁰ This, in turn, showed how quickly security and stability in the Western Balkans could be decisively jeopardized and how other actors, such as China, Russia and Turkey, would fill the vacuum instead.

With regard to future EU-NATO cooperation, the following potential trends should be carefully followed and assessed:

- ★ The Covid-19 crisis could trigger a crisis of confidence and solidarity in Europe, which might result in a growing fragmentation within the EU institutions or between EU member states along the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of the main external actors on the old continent;
- ★ Potential cuts in the defence spending of many EU member states might become obstructive for future investments in this field and would also make it difficult to achieve the planned increase in NATO defence spending until 2024;
- ★ A trend towards the "bilateralisation" of international relations, as well as the risk of a continuous erosion of the role of the EU and NATO in international multilateral forums, might have a negative impact on the cohesion of Transatlantic policies and strategies;
- ★ As a result of the withdrawal from the EU, the UK might start playing France and Germany off against each other by pursuing bilateral negotiations and agreements with each of the two countries. This might produce new tensions between Berlin and Paris and make it more difficult to deepen the Franco-German cooperation in the field of security and defence policy.
- ★ A united front of several European NATO members (Poland, the Baltic countries, Romania, etc.) is emerging as a result of an increasingly benevolent position of France and Germany towards Russia, which might shift the focus on strengthening the bilateral relations with the USA (and NATO) and thus slow down the EU's attempts at deepening integration in the field of security and defence policy.
- ★ A trend towards a systemic coordination and cooperation between China and Russia (the Dragonbear) in the field of security might lead to the intensification of coordination and cooperation between the EU and NATO. The EU and its members have

shown some worrisome levels of naivety towards China as recent mistakes indicated²¹, despite the definition of Beijing as an economic partner and a strategic competitor by the European Commission.²² Meanwhile, NATO has already started “thinking about some basic principles and guidelines for dealing with China.”²³

Conclusion

The transatlantic relationship is currently facing complex and extensive challenges as the USA and Europe are in disagreement with each other due to their diverging approaches towards Iran and climate change, the tariffs on steel and aluminium introduced by the USA, as well as the future approach towards China and multilateral institutions. Europe continues to face shrinking geostrategic importance and the fact that the era of the ‘American world policeman’ seems to be coming to an end is the real game changer. Countries such as Russia, Turkey and China are now filling the emerging geopolitical gaps in the direct European neighbourhood, particularly in the MENA region and Eastern Europe. Therefore, a degree of self-criticism within the European institutions and capitals is appropriate: the serious consequences that a possible withdrawal of the USA from international treaties and foreign policy engagements could entail were deliberately ignored on the old continent for a long time.

However, the current security threats are too complex for a single nation or organization to cope with. Neither NATO nor the EU members have the necessary instruments at their disposal to protect their populations effectively and sustainably on their own, with the exception of the United States. And yet, even the most powerful military in the world could not prevent a pandemic such as Covid-19 from entering its borders and seriously affecting the American people.

As indicated at the NATO Summit in London, a process of reflection should be initiated in the sense of a profound political debate on the future of the transatlan-

tic partnership. Currently, NATO continues to present a divided picture. The debate that has been going on for years about the unequal distribution of defence spending among the Allies cannot be cited as the sole reason for this. The transatlantic cohesion and NATO’s ability to adapt to new challenges and changing environments are often undermined by actions of the members, particularly as some of them are reluctant to coordinate, preferring individual approaches. Within NATO itself, there has been no rupture – despite the critical statements and threats of US President Trump, the USA has even increased its contributions to NATO, a fact that testifies to an increasingly interconnected transatlantic security architecture. All of this clearly indicates that the European NATO members have not lost their importance for the US.

Thus, the importance of continuing to work closely together on all defence-related issues and effectively addressing the complex security challenges facing both sides of the Atlantic cannot be overstated. Overall, based on current developments, it can be concluded that NATO is largely viewed in a positive light and continues to be the most important instrument of European security. Despite this fact, European defence integration will be further promoted, above all, through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). Although the USA perceives an autonomous European defence as a threat to NATO, there are strong arguments supporting the assessment that an enhanced EU defence would be to the Alliance’s advantage. Thus, it is expected that the institutional consolidation of a strong European pillar within NATO will continue to be a priority for the EU in the coming years.

In conclusion, Europe should avoid contributing to the growing systemic rivalry between the USA and China, by pursuing a unique European way of navigating through the new Global System’s bipolarity with emerging regional hotspots and an increasing polarization between the two power centres. One possible way is the institutional cooperation between the EU and

NATO, another way is building long-lasting strategic relationships with NATO allies and partners in all parts of the world.

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