

1. Which are the main complementarities and possible synergies between NATO and the EU?

Any discussion of EU/NATO cooperation must begin by identifying the competitive advantages of both institutions.

There are several ways to organize the competitive advantages/division of labour discussion:

(i) Firstly, there is the division between the operational and the more conceptual aspects of defense.

NATO has an edge when it comes to operational matters, because of its superb command, control and communications infrastructure, and because there is a clear chain of command (militarily and politically).

The EU may have an edge on the more conceptual side, because it can bridge the military-operational, civilian, political, and industrial elements of security and defense.

The EU aspires to strengthen its operational capabilities, including in the areas of command and control. But NATO does not want to give up the political, capability development or industrial aspects of defense either, even as it recognizes that its edge is on the operational front.

(ii) Secondly, there is the deterrence and defense vs. crisis management/expeditionary division.

NATO has a clear advantage when it comes to the former, and CSDP is specifically geared for the latter.

But NATO does not want to let go of the out-of-area expertise it has developed over the past decades. Similarly, the EU does not want to give up on defense; indeed, it currently sees this as a policy area that can legitimize deeper integration.

(iii) Thirdly, there is a high vs. low-end capacities division, both in general and more specifically when it comes to expeditionary matters.

NATO has an edge in high-end capacities (thanks in large part to its C2 infrastructure and the presence of the US), and the EU is particularly strong in the low-end of the spectrum, not least thanks to its capabilities in civilian crisis management and its mastering of the civilian-military interface.

But here again, the EU does not want to give up the high-end of the spectrum, nor does NATO want to be excluded from the low-end.

(iv) Finally, we have the East vs. South divide.

Many in Brussels argue that NATO is doing the heavy lifting in the East, which supposedly opens up the Southern neighbourhood for a larger CSDP role.

But here again, CSDP is also playing a role in tackling threats coming from the East (especially when it comes to disinformation, cybersecurity, and Security Sector Reform in Ukraine and elsewhere). And NATO also has its own framework for the South.

In conclusion, each institution has its own competitive advantages, which in theory point to what might be seen as a natural division of labour.

The fact that neither organization wants to be boxed into any specific functional or geographical corner is understandable, both

for political and bureaucratic reasons. And this inevitably underscores the importance of greater coordination between NATO and the EU in the future.

In part, at least, this could be achieved by ensuring that the EU's PESCO projects are fully in keeping with the goals of the NATO/EU Joint Declaration (2016), avoiding unnecessary duplication.

2. Is 'strategic autonomy' compatible with joint EU/NATO action?

The answer to this question largely depends on how we define 'strategic autonomy', a notoriously fuzzy, often contested concept, and how we think it will develop in the future. There are at least three possible meanings: autonomy as responsibility, as hedging, or as emancipation (Daniel Fiott)

(i) Autonomy as responsibility:

The freedom *to* conduct missions and operations autonomously, rather than the freedom *from* dependence on the US.

The aim is that the EU should be militarily capable of undertaking autonomous missions and operations in its neighbourhood and beyond, as required.

This is fully compatible with the traditional NATO/EU division of labour: NATO is responsible for deterrence, the EU for crisis management, external borders, hybrid threats, cyber security, counterterrorism and protection of the global commons (maritime and space).

But this is clearly insufficient for some member states, who argue that without defense-industrial autonomy, the EU will remain intolerably dependent on the US.

(ii) Autonomy as hedging:

This can be seen as a reaction against the uncertainties surrounding the future of the transatlantic relationship generated by the Trump administration and its blatant hostility to the EU project.

It is about the freedom to act autonomously in missions and operations, with greater freedom from US political authority and industrial-defense interests.

It emphasizes the importance of Europe's defense-industrial competitiveness and autonomy: there are currently 34 PESCO projects designed to enhance the EU's critical defense capabilities, including the Eurodrone MALE RPAS, Tiger Helicopter Mk III and the Integrated Unmanned Ground system. The underlying assumption is that the EU cannot have operational and political autonomy without industrial autonomy.

(iii) Autonomy as emancipation:

Some argue that the two options outlined above do not afford the EU the level of autonomy required for it to deal with the security challenges it faces; furthermore, only emancipation would allow the EU to achieve its full potential as a global actor. From this perspective, the logical endpoint of the autonomy process should be for Europe to be able to manage its own collective defense.

Full emancipation would require a very significant increase in defense spending by EU member states in order to develop high-end capabilities, including a nuclear deterrent. This is

inconceivable in today's EU, since most member states are unwilling to voluntarily sacrifice the protection they currently enjoy under the US nuclear umbrella.

It is often overlooked that emancipation would imply that the EU would also have to avoid becoming dependent on other powers, such as China.

In theory at least, the acquisition of a serious military and defensive capacity by the EU could strengthen, rather than weaken, the transatlantic relationship. But it would of course raise serious questions about the future/role of NATO; after all, Europe would not need two significant security entities in the same space.

A post-Brexit caveat:

Brexit will deprive the EU of 20-25% of its defense spending, and 40% of its R&D spending on defense. Proposals such as the European Intervention Initiative apparently seek European (and not just EU) operational autonomy, providing the UK with a possible role beyond Brexit. But initiatives such as the European Defense Fund are designed to achieve greater EU defense-industrial autonomy only. This contradiction may undermine the very notion of EU autonomy.

Conclusion

The most viable version of strategic autonomy currently available to the EU lies somewhere in between responsibility and hedging. This is fully compatible with (and in fact requires) closer EU/NATO cooperation.

The EU's current level of ambition will allow it to act as a significant crisis management actor, but there is no internal consensus as to whether it should move far beyond this.

Strategic autonomy should not be seen as a binary concept, but as a spectrum along which Europeans can move as their capabilities grow. Nor should it be measured primarily by how much Europeans can do without the US; it would be a strategic error to define European autonomy solely in relation to US behaviour or interests.

Furthermore, separation from the US should not be the EU's major goal; even if/when we are better capable of looking after ourselves, we will still want to act alongside the US out of mutual interest in protecting the Euro-Atlantic community. The EU and the US will continue to share with one another more than either shares with any other major actor.

3. What needs to be done to preserve/strengthen the North American pillar of European security?

The demonization of the Trump administration is futile and potentially counter-productive. Many of the tensions that currently undermine the transatlantic relationship pre-date Trump, and some will probably out-live his (likely two-term) presidency.

This is because they reflect longer-term trends, such as the end of the Cold War, the unravelling of the liberal international order, and the return of great power competition. (Incidentally, it is important that the transatlantic conversation does not lose sight of what promises to be the key organizing framework in international relations in decades to come, namely the growing rivalry between the US and China; unfortunately, NATO is not the best forum for this).

US ‘disengagement’ from Europe is often exaggerated: the US military presence in Europe has been enhanced both through NATO and the European Deterrence Initiative (both the Obama and Trump administrations increased funding for the EDI, for US military exercised and training in Europe, which rose from \$3.4 billion in 2017 to \$6.5 billion in 2019). The US is perfectly capable of pivoting to Asia while remaining strongly engaged in Europe.

Looking ahead, a change of mindset is needed on both sides of the Atlantic. The EU must take defense more seriously (something it is already beginning to do) and discuss the consequences of its plans for greater strategic autonomy both with the US and NATO. We also need to move beyond the one-dimensional 2% goal for NATO defense spending as the standard benchmark for measuring progress.

The US also has to accept that it cannot have it both ways. Washington has already served notice that European dependency on US military power is no longer US policy. But it is politically unrealistic for the US to suppose that Europe will become increasingly able to look after its own security while at the same becoming more -not less- dependent on US defense equipment and R&D. Greater European military capability, including defense-industrial capability, should help sustain transatlantic trust, not undermine it.

However, we need to acknowledge that the balance between autonomy and interdependence in European and US defense industries will remain a source of conflict in years to come.

Charles Powell

Director, Elcano Royal Institute (Madrid, Spain)