JACQUES DELORS INSTITUT
‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖ B E R L I N ‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖

The right time for ever closer EU-NATO cooperation is now

Jekaterina Grigorjeva
Research fellow at Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin

Dr. Nicole Koenig
Research fellow at Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin

cc Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum source flickr.com

For the first time since the beginning of institutionalized relations in 2001, the EU and NATO have issued their first [Joint Declaration](#) on security cooperation. The Declaration issued during the Warsaw Summit on 8-9 July 2016 aims at giving a "new impetus" and "new substance" to the EU-NATO strategic partnership. There are many reasons why EU and NATO should cooperate more closely. However, there are at least three reasons why this strategic partnership should be upgraded now.

1 A political window of opportunity

The EU's new [Global Strategy](#) and the NATO Summit in Warsaw have set the tone for the renewal of the EU-NATO strategic partnership. Published a few weeks ahead of the Summit, the EU's second strategic document after the 2003 European Security Strategy underlines the need for a deepened partnership with NATO through "coordinated defence capability development, parallel and synchronized exercises, and mutually reinforcing actions". The emphasis on complementarity and synergy indicates that the 'beauty contest' that has, at times, characterized EU-NATO relations has been overcome.

In addition, 2016 could represent an opportunity to overcome the political blockade that has prevented formal EU-NATO cooperation in the past. A key underlying reason was the fraught relationship between non-NATO EU member Cyprus and non-EU NATO member Turkey. Turkey blocked the sharing of NATO security information with the EU while Cyprus restricted formal EU-NATO dialogue to the operations conducted under the 'Berlin Plus' arrangements. After four decades of division, there is some hope for a political settlement of the Cypriot conflict. It seems that the peace talks have already allowed for closer cooperation. As NATO Secretary General [Stoltenberg](#) stated at the Warsaw Summit, the EU and NATO have concluded more formal arrangements in the first half of 2016 than in the previous 13 years.

2 Complex threats call for a smart division of labour

The EU and NATO have 22 members in common. Clearly, the two organizations have been faced with similar threats for some time. However, the number of shared security challenges has expanded and the membrane between external and internal threats has grown thinner. Neither NATO nor the EU has the toolkit to address these increasingly complex threats alone. The Declaration thus puts strong emphasis on their joint ability to counter hybrid threats, deal with migration, and expand coordination on cyber security and defence.

In the past, the US had often called on the EU to take care of its own 'backyard'. In recent years, security developments in this 'backyard' have acquired a global dimension. The resolution of the Ukrainian conflict is a question of the reestablishment of the post-Cold War security order, equally relevant to EU and non-EU NATO members. Managing relations with Russia represents a key strategic challenge for both – NATO and the EU. Similarly, the conflagration in Syria and Iraq is a global security concern. The number and frequency of terrorist attacks claimed by the self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and Syria illustrate its global dimension.

NATO remains the world's strongest military alliance and Europe's key actor in terms of collective defence and deterrence. The EU is the world's most important civilian power and is continuously expanding its toolbox as illustrated by the broadening comprehensive approach

outlined in its new Global Strategy. There should not be a strict hard-soft division of labour between the two organisations. However, the complex threats and challenges call for a close strategic dialogue and new forms of cooperation, to which both organisations contribute with their strongest assets. A good example is NATO's [deployment of a maritime force in the Aegean Sea](#) since February 2016 to support Turkey, Greece and the EU's border agency Frontex in the refugee crisis with reconnaissance, monitoring and surveillance.

A smart division of labour could also fill the somewhat lofty formula of 'bolstering resilience' that both the Joint Declaration and the EU's Global Strategy define as a core objective with substance. While NATO will invest in military resilience through the decision to send four additional battalions to Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland (1000 troops each), the EU will have to raise its game in the field of 'soft power' to foster state and societal resilience. It could, for instance, promote inclusive policies in the Baltic States targeted at Russian minorities, which are particularly vulnerable to the sophisticated methods of hybrid warfare.

3 The need for a 'security response' to Brexit

There are fears that a Brexit will destabilize the whole European security architecture. With the UK, the militarily most capable member state is leaving the EU table. Despite the occasional veto and its Atlanticist vocation, the UK has been an important driver behind the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy and a proactive player on a range of foreign policy dossiers including EU sanctions against Russia and Syria. The EU-27 will have to redefine its image as a global security actor post-Brexit as well as its relationship with the UK within and outside NATO. A strengthened strategic partnership between the EU and NATO could be instrumental in both regards.

In light of the common challenges and threats, it is in the interest of the EU, NATO and the UK to preserve a strong-knit European security network. As a committed NATO member and a country with a long European history, the UK could adopt the role of mediator between the EU and NATO using the close ties developed over the years to both organizations. The Warsaw Summit Communiqué clearly states that the "fullest involvement" of non-EU Allies is essential for the EU-NATO strategic partnership. In the medium-term the EU could, for instance, invite non-EU NATO members such as the UK to informal Defence Minister meetings to discuss strategy and issues of common concern.

Meanwhile, the EU-27 should use the fading British veto to strengthen the European pillar within NATO. The EU's Global Strategy calls for greater EU-NATO cooperation, but it also underlines the EU's continued ambition for strategic autonomy. This ambition should be maintained for two reasons. First, the EU is surrounded by a multiplicity of crises and NATO or the US will not be willing or able to intervene everywhere. The conflicts in Mali and the Central African Republic were illustrative in this regard. Second, the withdrawal of the UK and the US election, regardless of its outcome, are likely to intensify calls for greater transatlantic burden-sharing directed at the EU-27.

While a Brexit will widen the military capabilities gap between the EU and NATO, it could help narrowing the capability-expectations gap in terms of EU defence cooperation. It could represent the necessary trigger for implementation of the Lisbon Treaty's provisions on defence. The EU-27 could engage in closer defence cooperation through permanent structured cooperation, the creation of a European semester on defence and the establishment of a civil-military EU Headquarters complementary to NATO. In response to the British referendum, the French Foreign Minister Ayrault and the German Foreign Minister Steinmeier took a first step in this direction through a Joint Declaration in which they "recommit to a shared vision of Europe as a security union" which should encompass all aspects of security dealt with at the European level.

Conclusion

In a more connected, contested and complex world, maintaining, strengthening and unifying the two key pillars of transatlantic security has to be a strategic priority. The Joint EU-NATO Communiqué came at the right time, but it is only the starting point. It will now be up to the NATO Secretary General and the EU High Representative to table concrete initiatives for the operational aspects undermining a smart division of labour. However, the workability of such arrangements will crucially depend on the member states. The willingness to settle a decade-long conflict and to overcome national sovereignty reflexes in defence within the EU is a precondition for an effective and balanced EU-NATO partnership.