The “moment of truth” came at the Helsinki EU summit in December 1999. There were a major step forward in ESDP institution building and the resolution, or at least so it seemed at the time, of at least one of the most critical elements of dispute with NATO—i.e., in essence with the United States: the ongoing disagreement about the concept of “NATO first” (although the term was understandably not used in the Helsinki documents).

At Helsinki, the Finnish EU presidency moved forward the work set in motion at Cologne. In a lengthy Presidency Report, it proposed for adoption a wide range of provisions for European security and defense and for “non-military crisis management of the European Union”—an area that attracted less attention at the time, but that has subsequently come to have major significance for NATO-EU relations, with a potential import greater than some of the other issues that have been in play between the two institutions.¹

The most important innovation at Helsinki, following a proposal by Prime Minister Blair and President Chirac,² was the setting of a “Headline Goal” to create, by 2003, a capacity to deploy and sustain forces able to pursue the full range of Petersberg Tasks, “including


the most demanding, in operations up to corps level (up to 15 brigades or 50,000–60,000 persons)—with provisions for support and rotation, in excess of 200,000 persons all told. The force should be “militarily self-sustaining and have all command and support services needed; it should be deployable within 60 days and be sustainable for at least a year.” To make this Headline Goal Task Force possible, the EU decided to create a wide range of command, control, intelligence, and strategic transport capabilities—notably, those areas that, under the 1996 Berlin agreement, would come principally from the United States in the event of a transfer of “NATO

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3 This “Headline Goal” was in response to a mandate given to the Finnish EU presidency at the June 1999 European Council summit in Cologne. See Cologne European Council, Presidency Conclusions, June 3–4, 1999, op. cit. There has been debate for some time about what the upper limits of the Petersberg Tasks would be. France has tended to be the most ambitious. Thus, in the words of the French ambassador to Washington:

[W]e are not just aiming at operations on the low end of the peace-keeping spectrum as I have sometimes heard. Does this mean that we would be able, in 2003, to carry out an operation such as “Allied Force” [NATO’s Kosovo campaign] entirely by ourselves? Of course not—and it would be dangerous to create such expectations. But the imbalance between U.S. and European forces which we witnessed last year [in the Kosovo conflict] would be substantially reduced—and 2003 will be an important stepping stone on the path to such a capability, which we need to keep as a longer-term goal in order to be prepared for all non-article 5 contingencies (emphasis added) (Ambassador François Bujon de l’Estang, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., October 10, 2000).

4 Helsinki European Council, Presidency Conclusions, December 10–11, 1999, op. cit., Annex 1 to Annex IV:

To develop European capabilities, Member States have set themselves the headline goal: by the year 2003, cooperating together voluntarily, they will be able to deploy rapidly and then sustain forces capable of the full range of Petersberg Tasks as set out in the Amsterdam Treaty, including the most demanding, in operations up to corps level (up to 15 brigades or 50,000–60,000 persons). These forces should be militarily self-sustaining with the necessary command, control and intelligence capabilities, logistics, other combat support services and additionally, as appropriate, air and naval elements. Member States should be able to deploy in full at this level within 60 days, and within this to provide smaller rapid response elements available and deployable at very high readiness. They must be able to sustain such a deployment for at least one year. This will require an additional pool of deployable units (and supporting elements) at lower readiness to provide replacements for the initial forces.
assets.” Furthermore, the European Council adopted measures “relevant to Union involvement in all phases and aspects of crisis management”; decided to engage EU defense ministers, when appropriate, in meetings of the EU’s General Affairs Council; and created a number of new permanent political and military bodies within the council:

- A standing Political and Security Committee in Brussels, including national representatives at senior/ambassadorial level.
- The military committee of chiefs of defense, represented by military delegates.
- The military staff to “provide military expertise and support” to what was now renamed the “Common” European Security and Defense Policy (CESDP).

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5Ibid.: Member States have also decided to develop rapidly collective capability goals in the fields of command and control, intelligence and strategic transport, areas also identified by the WEU audit. They welcome in this respect decisions already announced by certain Member States which go in that direction:

- to develop and coordinate monitoring and early warning military means;
- to open existing joint national headquarters to officers coming from other Member States;
- to reinforce the rapid reaction capabilities of existing European multinational forces;
- to prepare the establishment of a European air transport command;
- to increase the number of readily deployable troops;
- to enhance strategic sea lift capacity.

6Ibid.: The following new permanent political and military bodies will be established within the Council:

a) A standing Political and Security Committee (PSC) in Brussels will be composed of national representatives of senior/ambassadorial level. The PSC will deal with all aspects of the CFSP, including the CESDP, in accordance with the provisions of the EU Treaty and without prejudice to
Furthermore, the European Union had already decided at Cologne to create a new post of high representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, also with a second title as secretary general of the European Council—thus firmly embedding these critical issues in the EU institution based on the member states rather than in the supranational commission; and to these the Europeans added a third title for this official: secretary general of the Western European Union, as a step on the way toward the WEU’s being absorbed within the EU, as envisioned by the Amsterdam Treaty (subject to European Council decision). The appointment of Spain’s Javier Solana to all

Communities competence. In the case of a military crisis management operation, the PSC will exercise, under the authority of the Council, the political control and strategic direction of the operation. For that purpose, appropriate procedures will be adopted in order to allow effective and urgent decision taking. The PSC will also forward guidelines to the Military Committee.

b)—The Military Committee (MC) will be composed of the Chiefs of Defence, represented by their military delegates. The MC will meet at the level of the Chiefs of Defence as and when necessary. This committee will give military advice and make recommendations to the PSC, as well as provide military direction to the Military Staff. The Chairman of the MC will attend meetings of the Council when decisions with defence implications are to be taken.

c)—The Military Staff (MS) within the Council structures will provide military expertise and support to the CESDP, including the conduct of EU-led military crisis management operations. The Military Staff will perform early warning, situation assessment and strategic planning for Petersberg Tasks including identification of European national and multinational forces.

In the meantime, a series of interim bodies were to be set up by March 2000.

7See Cologne European Council, Presidency Conclusions, June 3–4, 1999, op. cit., “Paragraph II. Staffing Decisions.” This second title was conferred in part to ensure that the high representative would be embraced by the bureaucracy of the European Council and would also understand—in part because of his day-to-day duties—that his heart had to lie with the nation-state members of the EU rather than with the EU’s supranational expression, as represented by the commission. Comments of a senior EU official to the author, May 2001.

8See “Statement by the Secretary General of WEU, Mr. José Cutileiro, on the decision to appoint Dr Javier Solana as the next Secretary General of WEU,” Brussels, November 19, 1999; and WEU Ministerial Council, Luxembourg Declaration, November 23, 1999:

Ministers . . . expressed their conviction that Mr. Solana’s appointment to this position will contribute to the development of relations between WEU and the European Union foreseen in the Treaty on European Union and by the decisions of the European Council in Cologne.
three positions was significant, since he had been serving, until assuming his new duties (October 1999), as NATO’s secretary general and thus was able to bring knowledge of its principles and practices to his new work; his appointment also symbolically indicated that the EU’s new ventures in foreign policy and defense should not be read as its simply going off in a totally different direction from NATO’s.

This leap forward in EU efforts to create a functioning ESDP naturally increased the intensity of U.S. concerns about key elements of the relationship with NATO. The new elements—Political and Security Committee, Military Committee, Military Staff, and secretary general—seemed at first blush to be suspiciously similar to NATO’s institutional structure, instantly raising the question whether the EU effort would perform become a rival for NATO—if only at the bureaucratic level, in terms of time, attention, focus, and overlap, if not also for competition of resources. Could there be—down the road—the prospect of the creation of a second Europe-based “integrated military command structure?” Even though there was hardly a hint at Helsinki of such a development, it was not an unnatural inference that this new institution might develop in such a way.

Much attention was paid to the Headline Goal Task Force (which quickly gained the popular name “rapid reaction force”). But from NATO’s standpoint, the most important fact should have been its modesty: the goal of up to 60,000 people could not be seen as producing a competitor for NATO at any serious military task—even factoring in the added support elements and forces that would have to be available for rotation over a deployment period of up to a year. The European rapid reaction force could not, for instance, hope to undertake an operation of the complexity of NATO’s efforts during the Kosovo conflict, even if European countries were prepared to emphasize ground operations, with a likely significant exposure to casualties—certainly far higher than would be incurred through an

At Cologne, the EU had called for “definition of the modalities for the inclusion of those functions of the WEU which will be necessary for the EU to fulfill its new responsibilities in the area of the Petersberg tasks.” The European Council envisioned decisions by the end of 2000, so that “the WEU as an organisation would have completed its purpose” (Cologne European Council, Presidency Conclusions, June 3–4, 1999, op. cit., Annex III, paragraph 5).
airpower-only campaign. Some American observers have pointed to the phrase—and similar phrases used later—that the European rapid reaction force would be able to undertake Petersberg Tasks “including the most demanding”; but analyzing the list of those tasks still does not take one into the realm of major military operations.

Another issue was also immediately reintroduced: If the Europeans were engaged in an operation with such complex institutional arrangements, how easily and effectively could they “hand over” operations to NATO if military escalation required that the more capable and robust military organization take over, whether or not that was because some ally came under attack and thus NATO would be charged to respond under the Washington Treaty’s Article 5? In effect, would the creation of the European rapid reaction force cross the forbidden line of creating “two NATOs”—although one of them would be “outside” NATO?

But even before these issues were addressed, the United States placed its main focus on what the Helsinki European Council would do to resolve the dispute that had arisen over the differences between the Washington (NATO) and Cologne (EU) texts. The result was hard-won and owed much to pressure from London to ensure that the major Helsinki initiatives did not simply provoke further American disquiet. Thus, the Finnish Presidency Report and Presidency Conclusions were heavy on important NATO concerns: These included the commitment to develop modalities for full consultation, cooperation and transparency between the EU and NATO . . . [and for] necessary dialogue, consultation and cooperation with NATO and its non-EU members. [And the EU states agreed to define] appropriate arrangements [that would] allow . . . non-EU European NATO members and other interested States to contribute to EU military crisis management.9

This last point was clearly an effort to deal with some of the expressed concerns of countries like Turkey that wanted to know the extent to which they would be both consulted and engaged.

Despite the bows taken in the right direction, in these instances Helsinki fell short of U.S. hopes. Thus, the “dialogue, consultation and cooperation,” noted above, would be done “with full respect for the decision-making autonomy of the EU.” Similarly, the EU did decide that “the non-EU European NATO members,” after “a decision by the Council to launch an operation,” could “participate if they so wish”; and states that were willing to deploy “significant military forces” in an EU-led operation would have “the same rights and obligations as the EU participating Member States in the day-to-day conduct of such an operation.” But here, too, the EU offer was qualified. The right of participation by non-EU European NATO members would apply only “in the event of an operation requiring recourse to NATO assets and capabilities.” But, “in operations where the EU does not use NATO assets,” these countries would have to be invited “on a decision by the Council.” Also, terminating an operation would be the council’s sole decision.

However, the key, immediate U.S. concern was adequately addressed:

The European Council underlines its determination to develop an autonomous capacity to take decisions and, where NATO as a whole is not engaged, to launch and conduct EU-led military operations in response to international crises. This process will avoid unnecessary duplication and does not imply the creation of a European army [emphasis added in both instances].

Since Helsinki, much debate across the Atlantic has turned on whether all the Europeans do subscribe to the principle of “where NATO as a whole is not engaged.” For American tastes, it cannot be repeated often enough.

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11 Ibid., Annex 1 to Annex IV.
12 Ibid., paragraph II. To pin down the point, the key qualifier “where NATO as a whole is not engaged” was repeated twice more in the document.
13 Some French commentators have sought to modify this phrase by arguing that “where” does not refer to a circumstance—i.e., a choice by NATO—but rather to a place: only “where,” in terms of geography, NATO has not already become engaged.
While the logic is not clear, the political import is. Comments made by an EU official in Brussels to the author, May 2001. Obviously, this effort to twist the English language has not had many adherents.