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REPRINT



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The United States and the evolution of ESDP

F. Stephen Larrabee

The US attitude toward the European Security and Defence Policy has been marked by considerable ambivalence. The United States has had difficulty deciding whether ESDP is NATO's companion or competitor.¹ In principle, the United States wants – and needs – a strong European partner to help manage the new security threats, most of which emanate from beyond Europe's borders. However, Washington has not wanted to see ESDP evolve in a way that would undermine NATO and has reacted strongly to any attempt by the EU to develop an autonomous capability not closely linked to NATO.

These concerns were reflected in the US reaction to the Franco-British summit at St. Malo in December 1998. While the Clinton administration generally supported the development of a strong and cohesive European partner, many American officials worried that the summit represented an attempt to develop an autonomous European military capability outside of NATO.

These concerns were temporarily defused at the EU summit in Helsinki a year later. At the summit, the EU announced that it would only act when 'NATO as a whole is not involved. This statement seemed to indicate that NATO would be given priority in any crisis and that the EU would only act if NATO decided it did not want to get involved. It thus diminished – but did not entirely eliminate – the US fear that ESDP might develop as a rival to NATO.

US concerns resurfaced with great intensity over the proposal by France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg at the so-called 'chocolate mini-summit' in April 2003 that the EU should set up a separate operational planning cell at Tervuren. The proposal set off alarm bells in Washington, as it seemed to signal a move away from the Berlin Plus formula, whereby the EU could draw on NATO assets to manage a crisis if NATO did not want to become involved. In the eyes of many US officials, it appeared to be the first step

1. See Robert E. Hunter, *The European Security and Defense Policy: NATO's Companion – or Competitor?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2002).

down the slippery slope towards the creation of a European military capability outside of NATO – and thus a threat to NATO's primacy as the key forum for transatlantic security cooperation.

The strong US reaction to the proposal to establish a planning cell at Tervuren also reflected a broader concern that some members of the EU, especially France, were seeking to establish the EU as a 'counterweight' to NATO. These fears were reinforced by President Chirac's emphasis on 'multipolarity' – a codeword for balancing or containing US power – and by Franco-German opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. In the eyes of some US officials, France appeared to have moved from being a cantankerous ally to an outright opponent of US policy.

The winds of change

However, in the last several years, US attitudes towards ESDP have begun to shift in a more positive direction. The difficulties with which the United States has been confronted in Iraq have made it clear that Washington cannot manage the current security challenges on its own and that it needs allies. The US military intervention in Iraq has also underscored that simply toppling a repugnant regime is not enough. The United States also needs to be able to carry out stabilisation and reconstruction measures after the major combat phase has been concluded. This requires civilian skills and capabilities. After years of denigrating ESDP, US officials have begun to recognise that the EU, with its emphasis on civilian capabilities, has something to offer even if it cannot contribute much to dealing with conflicts at the high-end of the conflict spectrum.

This has important implications for the future. In the coming decade, many, if not most, of the conflicts the United States and/or NATO are likely to confront will be insurgencies and unconventional conflicts at the low end of the conflict spectrum.² These operations require different capabilities than the combat phase – police, election monitoring, civil affairs units etc. NATO is not well equipped to handle these tasks, whereas the EU is.

The United States has also begun to recognise that the threat to NATO posed by ESDP is nowhere near as strong as many US critics tended to think. While ESDP enjoys strong support among European public opinion, there are a number of important obstacles to the emergence of an ESDP that could pose a serious challenge to NATO's primacy. The first and most important is British policy. In the last few years, it has become increasingly

2. For a detailed discussion, see F. Stephen Larrabee, John Gordon IV and Peter A. Wilson, 'The Right Stuff. Defense Planning Challenges for a New Century,' *The National Interest*, no. 77, Fall 2004, pp. 50-58.

clear that a strong ESDP cannot be built without Britain and that London is not willing to sacrifice its special relationship with Washington on the altar of ESDP.

Indeed, Britain today is a bigger obstacle to the advancement of ESDP than the United States. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is much less of a Europhile than his predecessor Tony Blair. Moreover, his political position is very weak. Faced with strong opposition at home and within his own party, the last thing he wants is a new push for European defence. Thus initial French hopes for a new St. Malo – a Franco-British summit to re-launch ESDP – are not likely to be realised in the near future.

This is even more true if the Conservatives come to power in the next election, which given Brown's domestic problems and declining public support, looks increasingly likely. The Conservative party has moved in an increasingly Eurosceptical direction lately and its leadership has little enthusiasm for ESDP. And without strong British support, reinvigorating ESDP will be difficult,

Nor can France expect strong support from Germany for an ambitious new effort to re-launch ESDP. Franco-German cooperation has lost the warmth and centrality it enjoyed under Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. On the surface an attempt is made to give the relationship an air of amity but behind the smiles the relationship is marred by suspicion and a scarcely concealed rivalry for leadership of Europe. This rivalry is reinforced by different political styles. Sarkozy's hyperactivity and tendency to launch initiatives without prior coordination with his EU partners, especially Berlin, has irritated Chancellor Angela Merkel, who favours a more methodical and consultative style of diplomacy. In addition, Paris and Berlin are at odds over a number of substantive issues, including nuclear power, energy and climate change and the role of the European Central Bank.

In the defence area, Germany continues to punch well below its weight. Defence spending remains at only about 1.27% of GDP, considerably below that of France and Britain. This limits Germany's ability to play a leadership role both within NATO and on matters related to European defence. In addition, there is growing concern in the Bundestag about committing German troops to peace operations abroad, as highlighted by Berlin's unwillingness to participate in the French-led mission in Chad. Hence Germany cannot be counted on to pick up the slack created by Blair's departure and Brown's more reserved approach to European defence.

At the same time, the addition of ten new members from Eastern Europe has shifted the political balance within the EU and strengthened the influence of the 'Atlanticists'

within the organisation. While the new East European members support ESDP, they do not want to see a strengthening of ESDP lead to a weakening of NATO. The same is true of the Atlanticist West European members of NATO – Portugal, Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy. Taken together, the ‘Atlanticists’ can be counted on to block any effort to orient ESDP in an anti-American direction.

The shift in the US attitude toward ESDP has been part of a broader shift in US thinking about the EU more generally. For much of the 1990s, the United States either ignored the EU or tended to regard it as a potential rival to NATO. The latter fears were particularly prevalent in the early Bush years. Abandoning the principled support the Clinton administration had given the EU, the Bush administration adopted a much more sceptical approach to European integration, fearing that a stronger EU would be a less compliant partner and undermine NATO.

In its first term, the Bush administration was wary of efforts designed to strengthen European cohesion, especially in the security and defence field. However, the administration began to adopt a much more positive approach toward the EU in its second term. During his trip to Europe in February 2005, President Bush not only paid a visit to NATO headquarters, but also visited the EU – the first visit ever by an American president. In his speech in Brussels, Bush explicitly stressed that the United States supported a strong, cohesive Europe.³

Bush’s speech reflected an important shift away from the administration’s early ambivalence toward European integration. This shift was prompted by the changed strategic realities of the post-Cold War world, especially since 9/11 – the greater need for allies in order to address new security challenges, the EU’s effort to develop a stronger security and defence dimension, and NATO’s own limitations in meeting some of the new challenges. These developments contributed to a growing recognition that a stronger, more cohesive European partner is in the US interest – a position that has been embraced even more strongly by the Obama administration.

This does not mean the United States and EU leaders will always see eye to eye regarding the future evolution of ESDP and NATO. While the United States is likely to be more relaxed about the development of ESDP in the coming decade, Washington will continue to regard NATO as the primary forum for the discussion of European security issues. In addition, several issues are likely to remain contentious and subject to dispute.

3. For the text of Bush’s speech, see: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050221.html>.

Operational planning

Operational planning has been and remains one of the chief US concerns. Some EU members, particularly France, argue that the EU needs its own capacity to conduct operational planning for contingencies where the United States does not want to get involved. The United States has traditionally opposed such an arrangement, fearing that it would complicate planning and result in unnecessary duplication. This was one of the prime reasons Washington reacted so strongly to the proposal to set up an EU planning cell at Tervuren.

However, the row over Tervuren arose in the context of growing US-French differences over Iraq and a perception in Washington that President Chirac was trying to establish ESDP as a rival or counterweight to NATO. Today, however, the context for the development of ESDP is quite different. US-French relations are much more cordial. Unlike Chirac, President Sarkozy sees NATO and ESDP as complementary, not rivals. France's return to the military wing of NATO, moreover, should reduce the sense of suspicion and mistrust on both sides and make the establishment of an EU planning capacity less contentious and easier to manage.

The United States needs a strong and militarily capable European partner that can help address new threats and challenges. If the EU is going to play an effective role in helping to manage crises, it needs to be able to act independently of NATO in some limited instances, especially during crises such as those in Chad or the Democratic Republic of Congo, in which the United States does not want to get involved. However, these instances are likely to be relatively limited in number and scope. If a serious crisis were to arise that threatened Western interests, the United States would almost certainly get involved, though it might not take the lead.

Crisis management

The United States has traditionally regarded NATO as the organisation of choice for crisis management and has, in effect, demanded an informal 'right of first refusal.' France and a number of other EU members have opposed this claim on the grounds that it implicitly subordinates the EU to NATO – a status they firmly reject.

The Helsinki summit in December 1999 seemed to resolve this dispute by establishing the principle that the EU would get involved in managing crises 'when NATO as a whole was not involved...' This was widely interpreted as meaning that the EU would only take the lead in managing a crisis when NATO did not want to get involved.

However, France and several other EU members never felt comfortable with this interpretation because it constricted the EU's freedom of action and implied that the EU was subordinate to NATO. France pushed hard for the EU to get involved in the Congo crisis in June 2003 – the first EU deployment outside of Europe – and provided the bulk of troops for the operation (Operation *Artemis*). The Congo operation was conducted without recourse to NATO assets and without consultation with NATO. While it is unlikely that the United States would have wanted to involve NATO in the crisis, the lack of consultation annoyed some US and NATO officials and set a bad precedent.

Since then, efforts have been made to ensure greater consultation and complementarity. However, this cooperation leaves much to be desired – as the crisis in Darfur (West Sudan) demonstrated. The crisis initially led to an unseemly 'beauty contest' between the two organisations. The United States saw the crisis as an opportunity for NATO to demonstrate its continued relevance and more global orientation, while France argued that the EU, not NATO, should take the lead in managing the crisis. In the end, two airlifts were conducted – one by NATO and one by the EU.

The differences over Darfur underscore the limitations of relying on ad hoc arrangements. If future problems are to be avoided, mechanisms agreed upon in advance, including joint planning and force generation, will need to be set up. Without such arrangements, NATO and the EU may find it difficult to agree on how to cooperate – as was initially the case in Darfur.

At the same time, there is a need to rethink the modalities of NATO-EU cooperation. In the past, the dialogue between NATO and the EU focused largely on how NATO could help the EU conduct military operations. However, as James Dobbins has pointed out, of the two organisations it is NATO that needs EU assistance to successfully execute many of the tasks that it is called upon to perform today, not the reverse.⁴ As he notes, it is quite possible to envisage an EU-led operation being completed without the involvement of NATO. However, it is nearly impossible to imagine a nation-building operation being completed by NATO without the involvement of the EU.

The EU has a number of civilian capabilities that NATO lacks and which are needed in the stabilisation and reconstruction phases of peace operations. It makes little political or financial sense to try to duplicate these capabilities within NATO. Rather, in some cases NATO should have the ability to draw on EU assets. Thus, in the future closer cooperation and coordination between NATO and the EU will be increasingly important for effective crisis management.

4. See James Dobbins, 'Friends Again?' in Marcin Zaborowski (ed.), *Friends Again: EU-US Relations After the Crisis* (Paris: European Institute for Security Studies, 2006), p. 26.

France's return to the Alliance's military command should make this cooperation easier, reducing the sense of competition and rivalry between NATO and the EU that has hindered cooperation in crisis management in the past. However, currently the main obstacle blocking closer NATO-EU cooperation is Turkey. Ankara has prevented closer NATO cooperation – in an attempt to bring pressure on the EU to make concessions on Cyprus and its EU membership bid – a tactic which has antagonised both EU and NATO officials.

Given the importance of closer EU-NATO cooperation for enhancing crisis management, greater effort needs to be made to overcome Turkish objections. However, this issue cannot be resolved at the bureaucratic level; it will require high-level political intervention, especially from the American President. In addition, it will require European leaders to show greater flexibility in addressing Turkey's concerns and to put greater institutional pressure on the Greek Cypriots to make progress in resolving the Cyprus issue.

A European caucus

US officials also worry that a stronger ESDP could lead to the formation of a 'European caucus' within NATO – that is, that non-EU members of NATO could be faced with a unified front on the part of EU members in discussions within NATO. Such a caucus has been strongly opposed by successive US administrations because it could significantly complicate Alliance decision-making. European allies who are members of the EU might be unwilling to compromise on hard-won positions within the EU. In addition, a European caucus could slow the process of Alliance decision-making if the Alliance had to wait until the EU had first come to a position before it could act.

The formation of a European caucus could have a particularly disruptive impact on relations with the United States. It might provoke a strong backlash in the Congress and result in reduced support for both NATO and the EU. EU enlargement, however, is likely to diminish the prospect of such a caucus emerging. The pro-Atlanticist countries in the EU, especially Britain, Spain, and the new invitees from Central and Eastern Europe are not likely to agree to any position on defence or security matters that would be openly opposed by the United States.

Collective defence

Collective defence has been a core mission of NATO since its founding. However, some EU politicians and analysts have suggested that the EU should provide a security guarantee to its members. There are several problems, however, with this idea.

First, the EU currently does not have the military capacity to provide for the collective defence of its members. Some European members argue that there is no danger in making such a commitment because there is no imminent danger of attack. However, it is extremely dangerous to make military commitments that cannot be carried out even if the probability that they will have to be implemented is low.

Second, such a commitment overlaps with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (NATO), without adding any significant capability for European defence. Moreover, some Americans fear that such a commitment risks opening up the problem of 'backdoor commitments' – that is, if an EU member who is not a member of NATO were the victim of an attack, the United States could be dragged into the conflict 'through the backdoor.' These concerns have been particularly strong within the US Congress.

European defence integration

Europe has nearly 1.7 million men under arms. However, only about 10 percent of these are deployable. While efforts have been made to address this problem in the last several years, important deficiencies remain, particularly in the areas of strategic transport, strategic intelligence and command and control.

Given the current economic and political climate in Europe, there is little chance that defence spending in Europe will rise in the near future. Raising taxes or cutting social expenditures in order to increase defence outlays would not find support among European publics. The only way to find the necessary resources for defence improvements, many Europeans argue, is for the European members not to organise their defence nationally but to strive to create a more efficient European defence.⁵

European defence integration will help Europe rationalise its defence procurement policies and overcome its inefficient defence spending. Greater capabilities cannot be created only through NATO; they must also come through greater defence cooperation within the EU. Thus if the United States really wants increased European defence capabilities, it will need to accept a greater degree of European defence integration. This may be the only way to free up the investment funds needed for transformation.

At the same time, it will be important to ensure that European force development priorities are closely harmonised with those of NATO and the United States. This will require close coordination between the force development process under the EU's European Ca-

5. See Rob de Wijk, 'European Military Reform for Global Partnership,' *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1, Winter 2004, pp. 197-210.

pabilities Action Plan (ECAP) and efforts within NATO undertaken by Allied Command Transformation (ACT) as well as the US Joint Forces Command (JFC).

NATO's geographic scope

One of the most contentious issues is likely to be NATO's geographic role and scope. The United States favours a broad security role for NATO. However, many Europeans oppose such a role. They believe that the EU, not NATO should play a global role and that NATO's geographic role should be essentially limited to Europe. Many Europeans reacted sceptically, for instance, to US efforts to build 'global partnerships' with countries such as Australia, Japan and South Korea, fearing that this would dilute NATO's European focus and overstretch the Alliance's capabilities.


In principle, the EU is not limited geographically; its mandate allows it to act anywhere in the world. However, the EU's ambitions continue to exceed its capabilities. The 1999 Helsinki goal – the creation of a 60,000 man intervention force – has still yet to be met in practice. The EU is currently conducting twelve ESDP missions, two of which are military. However, the key question, as Daniel Keohane has noted, is not the number of missions but their size, intensity and robustness.⁶ The 'battle groups' are designed to provide a capability to intervene far from Europe's shores, but only in small and limited crises such as the Congo. And even in such instances there has been a clearly visible reluctance on the part of some EU members such as Germany to contribute forces to such peace operations.

Building a more robust intervention capability will not be easy, especially given the impact of the global economic crisis. The crisis is likely to heighten the tension between domestic demands to preserve the main provisions of the welfare state built up in Europe after World War II and pressures for greater defence spending. Given the lack of an overriding unified threat, most European states will be reluctant to increase defence budgets.

The way ahead

ESDP has made considerable progress in the last decade and enjoys strong public support. As ESDP proceeds, the United States and Europe need to ensure that it strengthens, rather than weakens, transatlantic relations. Several steps are necessary to ensure that this occurs.

6. Daniel Keohane, '10 Years After St. Malo,' *Issues* no. 27 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, October 2008), p.6.



First, the United States should accept that Europe needs to have some autonomous operational planning capacity outside of NATO. Given US preoccupation with Iraq and the war on terrorism, the European concern that the United States will not want to be involved in some contingencies is justified. Thus for those few instances when the United States does not want NATO to be involved in managing a crisis, the Europeans need the capacity to act on their own. The key task is to ensure that ESDP develops in an open and transparent manner and in a way which strengthens the capacity of the United States and Europe to effectively address future security challenges.

Second, US and European defence transformation processes and priorities need to be closely harmonised. The United States and Europe need to develop common threat perceptions and common, or at least compatible, military doctrines. The new EU security strategy paper is a step in the right direction. It represents the beginnings of what Paul Cornish and Geoffrey Edwards have called a 'European strategic culture'.⁷ Moreover, many of the threats identified in the paper are very similar to the ones identified in the US National Security Strategy published in September 2002.

Third, NATO and the EU need to develop mechanisms that will allow for a rapid coordinated response in times of crisis. This should involve developing mechanisms for planning and force generation as well as enhanced political consultation. Unless such advanced planning is undertaken, NATO and the EU are likely to find it difficult to cooperate in the future and many of the problems that occurred during the Darfur operation are likely to be repeated.

Fourth, the United States needs to recognise that the EU is becoming an increasingly important political and security actor. In the future, European defence policies and decisions will be increasingly made within a European framework. This will require the United States to develop a stronger security relationship with the EU.

7. See Paul Cornish and Geoffrey Edwards, 'Beyond the EU/NATO Dichotomy: the Beginnings of a European Strategic Culture', *International Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2001, pp. 587-603. For a more sceptical view, see Sten Rynning, 'The European Union: Towards a Strategic Culture?' *Security Dialogue*, vol. 34, no.4, 2003, pp. 479-96.