

European Defence Post-Brexit and 'EU-NATO Cooperation': What Level of Ambition?

Written by Jolyon Howorth

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JOLYON HOWORTH, JAN 11 2017

Donald Trump has called NATO obsolete. His view is by no means marginal in the US. Major International Relations scholars such as Barry Posen, Andrew Bacevich, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer have recently called for the US progressively to withdraw from NATO and to hand it over, lock stock and barrel, to the Europeans. How likely is such a scenario and what are the alternatives?

When the EU's CSDP was first launched at Saint Malo in December 1998, the key concept was 'autonomous action'. The EU, it was asserted, would develop its own strategic vision. The European framework would allow the member states to generate serious military capacity, whereas in NATO they would simply free-ride. And CSDP would allow European forces to tackle regional security challenges the US did not wish to engage with. Alas, CSDP did none of those things. Almost two decades later, the June 2016 European Global Strategy asserts that the EU's foreign and security policy goal is (still) 'strategic autonomy'. Yet the reality, as we have seen in Libya and Ukraine, and as it is lived by member states with a Russian border, is that Europe seems more dependent on NATO and the US than at any point since the mid-1980s.

Since the December 2013 EU summit on defence, there have been innumerable new calls for the Union to develop a credible and robust capacity to handle regional crises. Since Brexit, these calls have reached a crescendo, with the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council all weighing in. I call this 'CSDP-Redux'. At the same time, all these voices insist that cooperation between the EU and NATO is vital to this process. How can the aspiration for autonomy coexist with intensified cooperation?

In December 2016, the EU and NATO, following up on the Joint Declaration issued at the NATO summit in Warsaw (June 2016), released a laundry list of areas in which the two entities are actively cooperating. These include hybrid threats, cyber warfare, maritime security, military capabilities, R & T and others. One might be forgiven for believing that this is simply common sense—hardly the stuff of grandiloquent declarations. So the real question is: what is to be the relationship between these two entities over the coming decades? Why does Europe need two seemingly comparable defence entities if strategic autonomy offers the EU the ability to cope with its regional security issues on its own? If the EU actually achieves strategic autonomy, what is NATO for? Conversely, if the EU does not achieve strategic autonomy, what is CSDP for?

The answer depends on the level of ambition of CSDP. Federica Mogherini aims at the highest possible level of ambition. Some experts (see, for instance, papers by Sven Biscop and Luis Simon) argue that such a level is indispensable if the EU is to achieve its strategic objectives. Others remain sceptical of the EU's ability to attain such a level. Given this diversity of opinion, four possible scenarios present themselves.

The first scenario, which cannot entirely be ruled out, would be one associated with the gradual unraveling of European integration. This scenario has been rendered less improbable with the vote on Brexit. In this case, the EU member states would return to the 1950s and become totally dependent on NATO. Such a prospect might please some in the UK but would be the worst of all possible worlds for other Europeans and for the USA.

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A second possibility would be a status quo scenario, in which CSDP would continue along its current track, with modest improvements in EU capacity-generation. This would constitute an admission of failure to meet even the minimal expectations written into the EGS; and it would not meet any of the expectations articulated by a range of voices in the USA.

A third scenario would be one in which significant progress were made via CSDP-redux. Some of the instruments being prioritised—the OHQ, the activation of battle-groups, the implementation of permanent structured cooperation—could produce a far more effective CSDP, capable of making a difference particularly in the Southern neighbourhood. This would not really amount to 'strategic autonomy' in that it would still leave the EU existentially dependent on NATO and the US, while at the same time expending a great deal of money duplicating capabilities largely provided to NATO by the US. It might satisfy those who believe the EU should do more, but who are unconvinced that it should do much more. Theresa May's Britain would find these last two scenarios unpalatable.

The final scenario assumes that the EU is serious about becoming a 'strategically autonomous' actor. If it wishes genuinely to stabilise its neighbourhood, it has no alternative but to develop its capacity to the very fullest extent. This means ending its dependency on the US. The EU should take up the American challenge and progressively assume leadership in meeting its own regional challenges. The US, via NATO, can continue to back-stop EU security policy with critical enablers such as intelligence, logistics, heavy lift, command and control—but only as a temporary measure while Europe acquires the experience and the confidence to meet future challenges on its own. Such a development would be massively in the best interests of both the EU and the US. The best way of reaching that stage is to merge CSDP into NATO, progressively to take over command of the major agencies in NATO, to change the very essence of NATO into something more consistent with *European* values, and to allow the US to focus on the areas of the world that are of the most strategic importance to Washington. At that point, the Europeanised-NATO incorporating CSDP-redux can sign a bilateral, co-equal and different type of alliance with the United States. In this scenario, the UK could play a vital part. That is the ultimate logic of the EGS. Anything else would be a simple half-measure that would ultimately satisfy nobody.

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