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New Tasks for EU-NATO Cooperation

An Inclusive EU Defence Policy Requires Close Collaboration with NATO

Niklas Helwig

In recent years, difficult relations with Russia and the instability of the Southern Mediterranean have presented the EU and NATO with new challenges. They both put a stronger emphasis on countering hybrid threats, territorial defence and counter-terrorism. In the course of this development, the EU and NATO have deepened their cooperation at staff level, while failing to harmonize their basic political and strategic objectives. EU Member States do not yet share a common understanding of the role of the EU and NATO in European defence. The EU could align the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), incorporated in the Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), more closely with the objectives of NATO. This would be in line with the German idea of an inclusive EU defence policy.

Currently 22 states are members of both NATO and the EU. Despite overlaps in content and geography, formal cooperation between the two organizations, as outlined in the Berlin Plus Agreement of 2003, was hampered by tensions between Turkey and Cyprus. It was only the crisis over Ukraine that prompted the NATO leadership to work more closely with the EU on an informal basis. By the end of 2016, the EU and NATO agreed on a list of proposals for deepening cooperation, which was expanded again in December 2017.

Widespread scepticism in Washington that EU defence cooperation could discriminate non-EU members of NATO, or that the EU could distance itself from the US, has long since evaporated. Instead, under US President Donald Trump, political

differences weigh heavy on the relationship, as evidenced by his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. A fundamental debate on EU-NATO cooperation has also been avoided due to the different strategic orientations of EU Member States. While NATO's collective defence is key for Baltic and Central European countries, Western Europe is increasingly looking at the EU's goal of achieving "strategic autonomy" in crisis management. Beyond technical exchanges between EU and NATO staff, there is, therefore, a need to agree on common goals.

Limited cooperation framework

If EU-NATO cooperation were judged solely in terms of the number of proposals, one

might say it had made considerable progress. At their meeting in December 2017, NATO Foreign Ministers added another 32 to the previous 42 recommendations for cooperation. Divided into seven subject areas, cooperation ranges from cyber security, to capacity development in third countries as well as parallel exercises. However, the cooperation framework is narrow: almost without exception, proposals are limited to more intensive communication between the staff of both organizations. For example, the ministers are encouraging EU and NATO staff to cooperate more closely on threat assessment in the European neighbourhood and to hold joint workshops on hybrid and terrorist threats. The two organizations have not created new formal cooperation structures, but merely recommended their staff develop common analyses, concepts and standards.

Nevertheless, NATO ministers already regard the limited degree of cooperation as a success, since formal cooperation continues to stagnate. Based on three flagship initiatives, the progress of their cooperation is assessed below.

Hybrid threats

Combating hybrid threats is a new task for both organizations. A hybrid attack is defined as state or non-state actors pursuing a mix of diplomatic, commercial and economic strategies to destabilize other countries or influence their policies. Although hybrid warfare is not a new phenomenon, the 'West' has so far been unable to counteract such activities by Russia or the 'Islamic State' (see [SWP Comments 22/2015](#)).

On the initiative of Finland, 12 EU and NATO members have joined the new European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. The centre opened in Helsinki in autumn 2017 outside of the official EU and NATO structures. Its informal nature means it is able to circumvent the difficult process of involving all EU and NATO members. Experts delegated from participating states pool the analyses of hybrid threats

and make them accessible for practical use. Their findings will, in turn, benefit EU and NATO defence activities.

Despite the centre's informal structure, the two organizations have been able to make progress on countering hybrid threats. However, the centre's remit does not extend beyond threat analysis. There is no prospect of deepening cooperation towards a joint hybrid command that can also develop and implement defence measures. For such an upgrade, the willingness among Member States and their services to share sensitive information is lacking. A possible operational orientation would also make it clear that Russia is the main source of concern for hybrid attacks. This impression is still officially avoided out of consideration for militarily non-aligned states.

Countering terrorism

In order to refute President Trump's criticism of NATO, it adopted new measures in the fight against terrorism at the summit in Brussels in May 2017. In the latest round of proposals, EU and NATO representatives are to "explore ways" for the two organizations to share information about terrorist threats.

An exchange of such information would be a positive step. States are reluctant to share findings from their intelligence services within the multilateral framework of the NATO alliance, even if they contain information about terrorist threats. Instead, they prefer bilateral agreements. However, it is doubtful whether the new EU-NATO cooperation will also include exchanging sensitive information.

Furthermore, the current cooperation hides the fact that the fight against terrorism is politically a highly controversial area. The EU-NATO cooperation has so far failed to provide any answers to questions about the rule of law or the choice of methods employed in anti-terror operations. Under President Trump, the US is already pursuing a hard line in the fight against terrorism which might eventually

rock the transatlantic relationship. The US Administration's increasingly right-wing conservative policy in the Middle East might even give a boost to extremist forces (see [SWP-Aktuell 8/2017](#)). A sustainable joint anti-terrorism strategy that implements not only solely operational counter-measures, but also combats the causes, is not in sight.

Military mobility

On the face of it, military mobility in the EU is a purely technical issue. In order to guarantee a credible deterrent on the EU's eastern border, NATO planners are placing demands on military and logistical infrastructure in the EU that were thought to be forgotten. The relocation of troops and equipment among EU countries has led to logistical, legal and regulatory obstacles in recent years. Different regulations and legal standards are slowing down military movements across the EU's internal borders. Furthermore, after the end of the Cold War, bridges, roads and rail networks were not built to withstand military loads and are, therefore, unsuitable for relocating heavy equipment. An action plan announced by the European Commission for March 2018 and a PESCO project led by the Netherlands are supposed to help governments overcome these obstacles. The EU budget already supports the expansion of civilian transport networks with a budget of 22.4 billion euros up to 2020.

Efforts to intensify dialogue between EU and NATO military planners and to increase military mobility are, therefore, also political issues. The associated costs and pressure to reform might lead to resistance from Member States. Surveys among the German population already reveal widespread scepticism about the purpose of the military reassurance measures on the EU's eastern border. The scepticism might be intensified by a debate about expensive construction projects. Instead, the EU should highlight the infrastructure projects' synergies with civilian benefits. In order to do so, Member

States would have to expand their so far limited EU-NATO cooperation and involve regional decision-makers at an early stage.

NATO and PESCO

Since the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was only adopted in December 2017, it has not yet been an issue at NATO meetings. It is a cooperation framework in which 25 EU Member States launch joint projects to develop and operationalize military capabilities.

The EU emphasizes that PESCO does not compete with NATO. The aim of the projects is to develop national military capabilities that can be deployed under either EU, NATO or UN flags. The EU and NATO want to coordinate their defence planning processes in order to achieve this goal. However, it is debatable whether the desired coherence can be achieved solely by adjusting procedures.

For example, the discussions about setting up PESCO have revealed diverging strategic objectives among EU Member States. Countries such as France and Italy want the EU to be able to react independently to future crises in the southern neighbourhood. In contrast, Poland and the Baltic countries are acutely aware of the possible threat from the East and support NATO's objective of establishing a credible deterrent on the EU's eastern border. The successful implementation of PESCO is endangered by these different preferences.

The 17 PESCO projects, which were adopted in mid-December, have a strong emphasis on developing capabilities for crisis management. Among the more ambitious projects is the contribution from Germany to establish an integrated network of logistical hubs, which will simplify the planning and implementation of out of area operations from 2024. The Franco-German crisis response initiative (EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core, CROC) will have the greatest operational focus. This is a closely coordinated catalogue of capabilities designed to shorten the planning time

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of a military EU operations.

Apart from the Dutch military mobility project and a Lithuanian-led cyber rapid response team, the PESCO projects do not contribute to NATO's level of ambition in the area of collective defence and deterrence. However, a 360-degree orientation of PESCO to the security interests of all the 25 participating countries would increase commitment by the Central European states and, therefore, also correspond to the German goal of an inclusive EU defence cooperation.

NATO's Framework Nations Concept (FNC) might provide the link for an inclusive approach. Similar to PESCO, the framework also allows participating states to more closely coordinate their armed forces development. Germany leads an FNC group that aims to develop joint capabilities and establish multinational forces (see [SWP Comments 35/2017](#)). 19 partner countries, including non-NATO countries such as Finland and Sweden, dock on to the Bundeswehr as an 'anchor army' and thus can preserve otherwise costly capabilities. Ideally, capabilities developed within PESCO could be integrated into the German FNC project and, in turn, be used in EU operations.

Taking account of NATO goals

Germany has so far supported the incremental implementation of the proposal catalogue on EU-NATO cooperation. However, the common challenges can only be effectively met through political convergence between the two organizations. On important issues – from the fight against terrorism to the strategic orientation of EU defence policy – the positions within the EU and NATO continue to diverge.

Germany has both a military and political interest in closely linking the EU with NATO. It should, therefore, put forward proposals that move current staff dialogue on technical issues up to a political level. Informal foreign ministers' meetings, such as the EU's Gymnich format, could also take place with the participation of all EU and

NATO ministers.

Germany can also play a key role in connecting PESCO with the FNC. The Federal Ministry of Defence chairs the main committees of the German FNC and, therefore, already plays a steering role in European NATO capability planning. Consequently, Germany cannot avoid acting as an initiator in PESCO and seeking synergies between the two cooperation formats. In future, Germany could introduce PESCO projects that are more closely aligned with NATO's strategic goals. NATO is interested in projects that improve interconnectivity, digitization and joint training of troops. In this way, Berlin could promote EU cohesion and more closely involve those EU partners that lean more towards NATO.