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NATO-EU-United States: Why not a virtuous "ménage à trois"?

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"There are many things that we would throw away if we were not afraid that others might pick them up."
--Oscar Wilde, 19th century Irish dramatist.

"You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometimes
You might find
You get what you need."
—The Rolling Stones

Europeans can be forgiven for occasionally asking if Americans *really* support the EU's European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Since NATO's creation in 1949, Washington has alternated between encouraging and hectoring its European (and Canadian) allies to assume a larger share of the responsibilities and burdens of collective defense and—beginning with NATO's involvement in Bosnia in 1995--crisis response. At the same time, Republican and Democratic Administrations alike have looked to NATO as the *anchor* of U.S. engagement in European security affairs and the primary multilateral venue for shaping allies' defense policies and capabilities.

Hence, when President Chirac and Prime Minister Blair agreed at St. Malo, in December 1998, that the EU "*must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises*," Washington's initial response, captured in the famous "three noes" dictum of then Secretary of State Albright--no *decoupling* of Europe from the United States, no EU *duplication* of NATO structures or resources, no EU *discrimination* against NATO allies (such as Turkey)--was distinctly chilly. Fresh memories of intra-European as well as transatlantic wrangling over the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, combined with growing worries about the situation in Kosovo, no doubt played a role here. Would the EU be capable, some Americans

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worried, of "*taking care of fires in its own backyard*" (to use the analogy of Alain Richard, France's Defense Minister at the time)? Or would the EU, to be blunt, produce rhetoric and committees but no results?

More broadly, some U.S. officials wondered if key consultations and decisions on security matters might migrate over time from NATO, where America's unique political and military strengths ensure it has a preponderant role in shaping Alliance policies and operations, to the EU, where there is no U.S. seat at the table.

In sum, perhaps Wilde's insight reflected the U.S. dilemma: while trying to convince Europeans to do more and spend more for their own defense, the United States sometimes appeared to refuse taking "*oui*" for an answer, as it might reduce America's influence.

Fortunately, time and experience has improved U.S. as well as European understanding of the strengths and limitations (real and potential) of NATO, the EU, and bilateral or "coalition of the willing" arrangements and operations. Given the complex and demanding global security environment in the post-9/11 world, is it perhaps time to think more grandly, but also more pragmatically, of a virtuous "ménage à trois" among the EU, NATO, and the United States?

Understandably, the analogy might seem improbable at first, as the three protagonists are so obviously unique and dissimilar: a superpower; a political-military alliance of sovereign states (including that very superpower); and a complex "union" that includes both supranational and intra-governmental (and sovereignty-conscious) institutions. But the three also are part of a Euro-Atlantic community of broadly shared, albeit not identical, values and interests that faces a number of common challenges.

Evolving American approach

The first glimmerings of the "*ménage à trois*" concept appeared from what many Europeans might consider an unlikely source: the Pentagon. Defense officials, it seems, were not so enamored of the cold shower offered by Secretary Albright. If the EU could mobilize European efforts to improve military capabilities that also would be available to the Alliance, those officials reasoned, why not give it a chance? Hence, then Secretary of Defense Cohen corrected the Clinton Administration's aim in his remarks to the informal meeting of NATO defense ministers in October 2000:

> *First, we must develop a clearer and, to be blunt, a more positive vision of the future NATO-EU relationship. For my part, I am convinced that a close, coherent, cooperative, and transparent relationship will prove to be in the best interest of Allies and EU members, both current and future, and further our overarching vision for the entire Euro-Atlantic community in all its political, economic, social, and security dimensions.*

Second, we must ensure that the Alliance and the EU have the necessary military capabilities to perform their respective missions. This means that both organizations must: take a hard look at what they really need in terms of military capabilities, based upon an objective assessment of current and likely future threats; identify those areas where their capabilities fall short; agree together on how to rectify those shortfalls; and find the resources for the task.

Despite the change of Administrations in January 2001 and the inevitable review of past policies by the incoming team of President Bush, there was no fundamental reversal of the long-term vision proffered by Secretary Cohen. And in the aftermath of 9/11, ESDP certainly did not rank near the top of the Bush Administration's priorities. Still, U.S. efforts to develop a solid NATO-EU working relationship did not come to a standstill. For example, the "Berlin Plus" arrangements--these establish a formal framework for NATO-EU consultation and cooperation in areas such as operational planning, defense planning, command arrangements, and EU access to NATO common assets and capabilities—were agreed in early 2003.

"Strategic partnership": back to first principles

Although NATO and the EU formally declared their "strategic partnership" in December 2002, their steps toward this goal have been rather tentative so far. This should be disappointing to all member states of both organizations, given the arguments in favor of a close and cooperation relationship. These can be summarized as follows:

Strategy: 19 of the 25 EU member states are NATO allies, and four are active members of the Partnership for Peace and, hence, closely tied to NATO in terms of defense planning, operations, and political-military cooperation. Logically, these 23 member states should not be schizophrenic, adopting different views of their national security interests depending upon whether they are looking through a NATO or EU lens. Indeed, at the strategic level, one detects largely convergent views on security threats to the Euro-Atlantic community. The EU's Security Strategy (ESS) of December 2003 lists five key threats: terrorism; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; regional conflict; state failure; and organized crime. Except for crime, NATO—for example, in its April 1999 Strategic Concept and more recent declarations--sees essentially the same threats. The ESS emphasizes non-military tools to prevent and diffuse crises, but hardly strikes a pacifist stance. And to be fair, NATO pronouncements recognize that states must use all their tools, not just the military, to meet 21st century threats.

Capabilities: Each of the 23 EU allies and partners has one set of military forces and, equally important, one defense budget. These must serve national missions as well as those that might become obligated under NATO, EU, UN or "coalition of the willing" leadership. Given the current and projected state of most European defense budgets and the constant and growing demand for European forces to serve in crisis management or peacekeeping operations, there is no room for wasteful and unnecessary duplication. And when it comes to doctrine, training, and equipment interoperability, European military commanders understand that inconsistent practices could increase the inherent risk of military operations.

Operations: Moreover, European forces are increasingly involved in a common set of operations. Berlin Plus was used for the transition from a NATO-led to EU-led security presence in Macedonia in early 2003. A few months later, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan transitioned from an *ad hoc* coalition under UN mandate to a NATO-led force in Kabul. In late 2003, ISAF began to expand its operations beyond Kabul toward the north and west. In spring 2006, it will increase its forces from approximately 8,000 to 12,000 to assume challenging new responsibilities in the south (alongside nearly 18,000 U.S. soldiers in Operation Enduring Freedom in eastern Afghanistan.) Meanwhile, in late 2004, NATO terminated its 9-year peacekeeping force in Bosnia and, again using Berlin Plus, transferred its security role to a nearly 7,000-strong EU force, ALTHEA. (Many of the European personnel simply switched shoulder patches.) NATO, meanwhile, remained in Bosnia with a modest Sarajevo headquarters to facilitate cooperation with ALTHEA and assist Bosnian authorities with defense reform. As military operations are not always so predictable, other scenarios need to be considered. It could happen one day that an operation begun as an "autonomous" EU operation might later need assistance from NATO.

A work in progress

So where does the NATO-EU couple stand today?

First, the good news. Overall, the public rhetoric is correct. Declarations emanating from NATO and EU headquarters and from member governments speak of "cooperation, not competition." The Alliance's top political body, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), meets periodically with its closest functional counterpart, the EU's Political Security Committee (PSC). While their formal agenda has been largely limited to Bosnia—and this for complicated reasons involving Turkey, Cyprus, Malta and varying interpretations of Berlin Plus—an informal dialogue has taken place in two meetings "at 32" (that is, foreign ministers from each of the NATO and EU member states) during the last half of 2005. Meanwhile, NATO's Military Committee meets periodically with its EU counterpart; indeed, several of the European military representatives are dual-hatted. And after more than a year of negotiations, the organizations agreed in late 2005 to set up small liaison cells in each other's military staffs. The best news of all is that NATO-EU cooperation in Bosnia, despite some rough patches at the start, is said to be going well.

But there is less than good news, too. There are still numerous dysfunctional aspects of the relationship at various levels. By most accounts, substantive cooperation between NATO and the EU on capabilities development remains marginal. And when it comes to consultations and cooperation on operations outside Bosnia, the specter of a beauty contest between the two lingers just under the surface.

Take the example of Darfur in May 2005. UN Secretary General Annan and African Union (AU) Chairperson Konaré had requested NATO and the EU to act quickly to support AU forces engaged in monitoring a shaky cease-fire. Yet some in the EU hesitated. As Le Figaro reported at the time, unnamed European officials were heard to

complain that "*l'UE, étant sur les lieux (à Darfour) depuis six mois de façon discrète, n'a pas envie de voir l'OTAN, nouveau venu dans la région, lui voler la vedette.*"[2] Fortunately, a compromise was found and both organizations found ways to help the AU. NATO arranged airlift to Darfur for over 4000 AU peacekeepers and provided staff assistance to the AU's mission headquarters in Ethiopia. The EU provided additional staff assistance, financial and logistical support, plus modest airlift help.

The future of the AU effort in Darfur is uncertain, with growing expectations that a UN-managed force will be created to handle the situation. According to White House officials, President Bush suggested to President Chirac in late February that "NATO should be more actively involved in a robust international response to this crisis." Still, it seems plausible that the EU and NATO might face other situations where cooperation in support of a third party or organization in Africa would make sense; treating Africa as a virtual *chasse gardée* of either the EU or NATO certainly would not.

Another example occurred in late January 2006. According to several reports, France blocked an informal NAC-PSC on the subject of terrorism. This time, reported Le Figaro, an anonymous French diplomat railed that *"nous ne voulons pas que l'OTAN mette son nez partout et impose son ordre du jour à l'UE."*[3]

Well, perhaps the concept of a "*ménage à trois*" is not for tomorrow after all....

Obstacles and hope

Why should this be so difficult? Several reasons might be cited here.

NATO and the EU are proud organizations but profoundly different in their structures, procedures, and ambitions. At NATO, no one mentions any aspiration to realize "an ever closer union." Political-military affairs clearly are the focus of attention, and member states become particularly "sovereignty-conscious" when deciding whether to send their young men and women into harm's way.

Europeans need no reminder that the EU covers a vast range of activities—economic, monetary, social, legal and political—as well as a constellation of institutions—the Commission, Council, European Parliament, and European Court of Justice—that have no NATO equivalent. Within the vast EU machine, ESDP is not necessarily the highest priority of a number of member states, many of whom are leery, to say the least, of attributing any collective defense role to the Union. Nor does ESDP occupy an important space in the EU budget.

Another factor is that NATO and the EU are both passing through difficult transformations. Their respective enlargements have brought new potential, but also new complications, in terms of strategic coherence, decision making, and resources.

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[2] "Having been on the scene (in Darfur), albeit discreetly, for six months, the EU did not want to see NATO, a newcomer in the region, steal the show."
[3] "We do not want NATO to stick its nose in everything and impose its agenda on the EU."

NATO allies have for the most part intellectually accepted that the core Alliance mission of assuring collective defense no longer is played out through territorial defense inside Europe. Hence, while remaining engaged in the Balkans, especially Kosovo, NATO has undertaken a new range of missions since 9/11—in the United States, Mediterranean, Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur, and elsewhere. The cost of these missions is high and growing, but not always equitably shared. This is true for the risks, as well. At the same time, despite repeated pledges by heads of state and government, the development of European capabilities is proceeding quite slowly and unevenly. In addition, NATO's exact role as a "primary forum" for transatlantic cooperation (as Chancellor Merkel recently advocated) has yet to be worked out, although the United States over the past year has sought to broaden strategic consultations at NATO and move away from the so-called "toolbox" approach that so dismayed even its closest allies. These are among the issues that NATO will need to confront squarely at its Riga summit later this year.

For their part, Europeans need little reminder of the difficulties facing the Union. True, the impasse over the Treaty on a European Constitution does not spell the end of ESDP, whose essential objectives, structures, and procedures were established by the existing Treaty on the European Union and subsequent agreements, such as Berlin Plus and the establishment of the European Defense Agency. Nevertheless, a combination of factors—one could cite the slow development of capabilities; the engagement of European forces in NATO-led and other operations (for example, France's costly commitment in the Cote d'Ivoire); and a certain preoccupation with domestic economic, social, and political problems across Europe—seems to be causing a certain number of EU members to shy away from ambitious new military missions, especially those involving combat risks. That said, the EU still occupies an interesting space for very useful missions, under ESDP auspices, in numerous other instances, including civilian monitors in Aceh, or at the Egyptian-Gaza crossing point at Rafah, or in police and military training in Africa, or in civilian capacity-building in Georgia and Iraq.

In any **"***ménage à trois,***"** relations between the United States and EU will be extremely important, and here the news is generally encouraging. Beginning in late 2004, the Bush Administration made clear its desire to broaden and deepen that relationship. This is why, after meeting his fellow allies at NATO headquarters in February 2005, Mr. Bush traveled downtown and became the first American President to meet with the European Council, Presidency, and President of the Commission at the very seat of the Union. Until then, most U.S.-EU summits had been rather bland events, dominated by haggling over commercial issues and not discussions on pressing strategic issues. But this time, President Bush came with a larger agenda: to engage the EU as a closer and more effective partner in the struggle against international terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and to stabilize failed and failing states and promote democratic values worldwide.

Why this change? Perhaps it was because the United States, NATO, and EU--despite the transatlantic and intra-European differences over going to war in Iraq--have been developing greater common experiences in improving global stability and security.

In addition to their aforementioned cooperation in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia, the United States, NATO, and EU worked together to support presidential and parliamentary elections in Afghanistan in 2004-5. The three have played mutually supportive roles to advance democratic processes in Ukraine. All are engaged, albeit with differing emphasis, in encouraging reform and regional cooperation within the Caucasus and Broader Middle East. And in the effort to contain nuclear proliferation, specifically involving Iran, closer U.S. cooperation with the "EU three" became possible once the Administration became convinced of French, British, and German determination to resist Tehran's effort to acquire nuclear weapons capabilities.

It is premature, of course, to uncork the champagne. The Iranian dossier is far from closed, and other contentious issues—such as U.S. handling of detainees and potential EU action (now deferred) that would affect military sales to China—might yet spell serious trouble for U.S.-EU relations.

Way forward

To advance this particular "*ménage à trois*," a few additional steps will be necessary. European leaders continue to look for deeds as well as words affirming American support for a more integrated EU with an increasingly responsible role in global security. In recent years, even unabashedly "Atlanticist" Europeans have wondered aloud if Washington hopes to keep EU ambitions in check by systematically playing certain allies and partners against others. None of them wants to be manipulated or forced to "choose" between NATO and the EU. If the United States has a complaint with a particular EU policy, it should challenge it with convincing arguments--without appearing to belittle the EU as an institution. The newest EU members have as much *amour propre* as Europe's "founding Six."

Last year, Under Secretary of State Burns accepted EU High Representative Solana's suggestion to upgrade the "U.S.-EU Senior Level Group," a forum for high-level policy dialogue on a range of political and strategic issues. This is a step in the right direction. At the same time, the U.S. government probably needs to reexamine how it is internally organized—within Washington departments and agencies, its European embassies, and its NATO and EU missions—to deal with a broad array of intersecting transatlantic defense and homeland security issues that can no longer be easily compartmentalized.

The United States, too, has legitimate concerns. Will Europeans actually build the interoperable military and civilian crisis management capabilities needed to meet 21st century threats? Equally important, will they act forcefully, either within NATO, or in "coalitions of the willing" alongside the United States, or under an EU flag should diplomacy and economic inducements fail, as they no doubt will in some cases? By-and-large, the Europeans have shown determination in the Balkans and Afghanistan, but those challenges are far from resolved. And the shadow of Iraq, where European ranks on the ground have been uneven and thinning of late, still looms large. If the logic of close and complementary cooperation among NATO, the EU, and the United States is accepted in words, will this be accepted in practice?

The "French connection"

Answers to these questions will depend, in part, on the future relationship between Paris and Washington. Here, a certain paradox reigns. On one hand, they manage close, sometimes exemplary cooperation in areas ranging from intelligence and police cooperation in counter-terrorism, to combatting Taliban and Al Qaeda remnants in eastern Afghanistan, to helping the Lebanese people regain sovereign control over their own affairs. According to Washington Post editorialist David Ignatius, M. Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, a close advisor to President Chirac, has become a regular visitor in the office of Mr. Stephen Hadley, national security advisor to President Bush, where Lebanon, Syria and Iran figure prominently on their agenda. Yet, the two capitals also seem to be frequently butting heads over the direction of NATO and its relationship with the EU. (NDLR: "Bush's New Ally: France?" par David Ignatius, Washington Post, February 1, 2006.)

Simply put, many Americans--and, one might add, many of France's European allies, as well--see France as systematically working to restrict practical cooperation between NATO and the EU. It might not be politically correct these days for French officialdom to promote the EU as a *contrepoids* to the United States—a notion explicitly rejected by Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Blair, among other EU leaders. Still, for many American specialists on European affairs, the current French term-of-art, *multipolarité,* seems virtually indistinguishable from *contrepoids* in its meaning and implications.

Secretary of State Rice reportedly remarked recently to a French diplomat that "*French-American relations are better in practice than in theory."* Still, perhaps it would be useful to declare a truce in theoretical discussions and focus on pragmatic cooperation within the NATO-EU-U.S. relationship.

Here, perhaps, the approach of our military officers could set a good example.

Beginning with the visit to Washington, last September, of the Chief of the French Joint Staff (EMA), General Bentegeat, a number of high-ranking French officers have made the trek across the Atlantic in recent months. In a single week in late January, an admiral and three generals—including General Thorette, head of the French ground forces, on his first visit to the United States since 2002—met informally with American experts, including this author. Two themes were raised repeatedly during these discussions:

Interoperability: The French and American militaries are cooperating today, and will cooperate in the future, including with other allies and partners, in diverse missions and theaters within and outside Europe. To do so, they must be able to communicate, exchange information, offer mutual support and—where necessary—fight side by side. To achieve and maintain interoperability, cooperation is required at various levels, including doctrine, planning, technology, equipment, and training. Interoperability does not imply abandonment of sovereignty; it will always be up to political authorities to

decide if military forces will be committed in a specific instance. But interoperability is an *essential pre-existing condition* to cooperate effectively if a political decision is made to do so.

Civil-military cooperation: In nearly all crisis management and peacekeeping missions today and tomorrow, our militaries are not--and will not be--alone in the operational theater. They must, in nearly every case, work closely with an array of civilian agencies and actors—be they international, governmental, or non-governmental organizations—to prevent conflict or stabilize the situation and begin reconstruction in the post-conflict phase. This is true for operations conducted under NATO or EU or "coalition of the willing" auspices, even if the precise tools used might vary from case-to-case.

In many respects, U.S. and French military officers seem to be drawing closer together on these points. As evidence, one can point to several key Pentagon strategy documents and directives over the past year pointing to the need to cooperate closely with allies and partners across a range of military operations, including stabilization and reconstruction. According to a Department of Defense directive issued in November 2005, "*stability operations are a core U.S. military mission that the Department...shall be prepared to conduct and support. They shall be given priority comparable to combat operations.*"

If the principles of interoperability and civil-military cooperation were better accepted by all as applicable to the NATO-EU-United States relationship, this could go a long way toward lowering the obstacles to practical cooperation between and among the three. Yes, some tensions likely are inevitable, as different political calculations will come into play in any specific case. But with better tools in place to cooperate, the chances of an effective response will increase if and when the political will exists to do so.

The result will not be a perfect "*ménage à trois*", but that's where the Rolling Stones come in.....

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