



France's Rapprochement with NATO: Paving the Way for an EU Caucus?

Number 40, September 2008

In this article, Jan Gaspers highlights France's rapprochement with NATO as providing a potentially significant impetus to debates about the creation of an EU caucus within NATO and argues that considerable external and internal obstacles to the creation of such a caucus still persist. For the foreseeable future, these obstacles render a greater coordination among EU member states within NATO rather unlikely, having significant implications for the EU's future as a decisive security and defence actor in international affairs.

Introduction

In recent years, international organisations have become primary venues for studying the ever-growing impact of the European integration process on the domain of foreign and security policy. In correspondence with the provisions stipulated in Article 19 of the revised Treaty of Maastricht¹, European Union (EU) member states have increasingly coordinated their actions and adopted common positions with regard to a broad variety of foreign and security policy issues in such diverse international *fora* as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)², the social and economic organisations of the United Nations (UN) family in Geneva³, the UN General Assembly⁴ and – albeit in a much more limited fashion – the UN Security Council.⁵ As a result, the diplomatic representatives of third states, like the United States (US) or Russia, often no longer perceive and deal with EU member states as individual actors within these international organisations, but rather as the constituting parts of a wider “EU caucus.”⁶

In light of the rapid evolution of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) over the last decade, several scholars and policy-analysts have suggested that it would only be a matter of time until an EU caucus would also emerge within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Burwell et al., for example, argue that “the reality of a more unified EU security policy has already contributed to an occasional *de facto* caucus within NATO, and with time this is likely to become more frequent and to affect a broader range of issues.”⁷ Another expert claims that in view of an ever-growing number of situations in which EU NATO members “delay a decision in NATO until a common EU position on the issue has been reached at the EU”, a “*de facto*

¹ Article 19 of the Treaty on European Union stipulates that “Member States shall coordinate their action in international organisations and at international conferences. They shall uphold the common positions in such forums.” An almost similar provision can also be found in Article 34 of the Lisbon Treaty, which states that “Member States shall coordinate their action in international organisations and at international conferences. They shall uphold the Union's positions in such forums. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy shall organise this coordination.”

² P. Luif & M. Radeva, EU Co-ordination in International Organizations: The Case of the United Nations General Assembly and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. *Working Papers 03/2007* (Bratislava: Comenius University Institute of European Studies and International Relations, 2007).

³ P. Taylor, The EU in Geneva: Coordinating Policy in the Economic and Social Arrangements of the United Nations System, in *The European Union at the United Nations: Intersecting Multilateralisms*, eds K.V. Laatikainen & K.E. Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

⁴ P. Luif, EU cohesion in the UN General Assembly, *Occasional Papers No. 49* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2003); E. Johansson-Nogués, The Fifteen and the Accession States in the UN General Assembly: What Future for European Foreign Policy in the Coming Together of the 'Old' and the 'New' Europe? *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 9/1 (2004); M. Farrell, EU Representation and Coordination within the United Nations, in K.V. Laatikainen & K.E. Smith *op.cit.*; P. Luif & M. Radeva, *op. cit.*; J. Wouters, The United Nations & the European Union: Partners in Multilateralism, *EU Diplomacy Papers 4/2007* (Bruges: College of Europe, 2007).

⁵ P. Luif, *op. cit.*; C. Hill, The European Powers in the Security Council: Differing Interests, Different Arenas, in K.V. Laatikainen & K.E. Smith *op. cit.*

⁶ P. Luif & M. Radeva, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁷ G.F. Burwell *et al.*, Transatlantic Transformation: Building a NATO-EU Security Architecture, *Policy Paper March 2006* (Washington: The Atlantic Council of the United States, 2006), p. 20.

EU caucus" within NATO is already existent.⁸ However, so far, EU member states have only very rarely coordinated their policies and pursued common European positions at NATO's headquarters in Brussels. Several attempts throughout the first half of this decade to establish coordination mechanism among EU NATO members have failed. During his second term in office from 2002 to 2005, the then Foreign Minister of Germany, Joschka Fischer, for example, made repeated attempts both through the German Delegation to NATO and through consultations with colleagues from other EU member states, to promote the creation of a "European phalanx within NATO." However, Fischer's plan for an EU caucus never materialised, as it met with strong opposition from the US and Turkey as well as the considerable scepticism of the UK and several other more Atlanticist EU members. Subsequent attempts of Germany's NATO Delegation to promote the establishment of a more informal consultative mechanism among EU member states equally failed in the face of continued opposition from the US.⁹ These failures have raised serious questions about the prospects for the emergence of a greater unity among EU member states within NATO.

France's NATO Rapprochement as a New Impetus for an EU Caucus?

Since his entry into office in May 2007, the current French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, has proposed a multitude of foreign policy projects, ranging from the establishment of a 'Union of the Mediterranean', through nuclear power deals with the Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi to military agreements with the United Arab Emirates.¹⁰ Much to the surprise to political opponents and supporters alike, Sarkozy has also announced that he would return France to NATO's integrated command structure.¹¹ While Sarkozy's announcement is not the first of its kind since Charles de Gaulle's decision in 1966 to disintegrate from NATO's military command and therefore needs to be regarded with some scepticism in terms of its sustainability, it clearly provides some crucial impetus to debates about a greater coordination of EU member states' policies towards NATO.

Sarkozy has closely linked France's NATO rapprochement to the idea of "Europeanising the Atlantic Alliance", which in essence denotes the aim to increase the EU's political and military influence in transatlantic security cooperation.¹² The Élysée has identified the need to establish a greater unity among the EU member states within NATO. In the context of the debates about the accession of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, for example, Sarkozy did not tire of arguing that EU member states should adopt a common position in order to strengthen the influence of the EU on this issue and NATO affairs more generally.¹³

If Sarkozy is serious about his plans to strengthen Europe's voice within NATO, the launch of earnest intra-European talks on the possibility of creating a formal, or at least informal, EU caucus within NATO is not only likely, but a necessity. However, while France's full reintegration in transatlantic security cooperation and Sarkozy's associated plan to Europeanise NATO might raise expectations that EU member states will create an EU coordination mechanism within NATO in the foreseeable future, several significant external and internal obstacles persist, which render such a development unlikely.

⁸ L.S. Lebl, Working with the European Union. *Orbis*, 50/1 (2005), p. 120.

⁹ Interviews: German Permanent Delegation to NATO 12 June 2008, German Foreign Ministry 13 June 2008.

¹⁰ A.M. Le Gloannec, Sarkozy's Foreign Policy: Substance or Style? *The International Spectator*, 43/1 (2008), pp. 15-21; J.I. Torreblanca, Sarkozy's foreign policy: where do European interests and values stand? *FRIDE Comment February 2008* (Madrid: Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, 2008); J. Vaisse, A Gaullist By Any Other Name. *Survival*, 50/3(2008), pp. 5-10.

¹¹ A.M. Le Gloannec, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19; Vaisse, *op. cit.*, p. 6; Valasek, *op. cit.*.

¹² For a more detailed discussion of Sarkozy's plans for NATO and the French White Paper, see Daniel Fiott's article 'The French White Paper on Defence and National Security: Peacebuilding, NATO, Nuclear Weapons and Space' in this issue of the *European Security Review*.

¹³ Presenting the French White Paper on Defence and National Security on 17 June 2008, Sarkozy remarked on the latest NATO enlargement round that "As we saw in Bucharest, when France and Germany agree on a position, NATO becomes more European." N. Sarkozy, *Discours de M. le Président de la République sur la Défense et la Sécurité Nationale: Porte de Versailles – mardi 17 juin 2008*.

Persisting External Obstacles

To date, the key external obstacle to the creation of an EU coordination mechanism within NATO has been staunch US opposition. As early as December 2000 at a meeting of NATO defence ministers, the US Secretary of Defence, William S. Cohen, had declared that under no circumstances would Washington be prepared to accept the creation of an EU caucus within NATO. While the bluntness of Cohen's statement made massive waves on both sides of the Atlantic¹⁴, it hardly came as a surprise. In fact, ever since the emergence of the European security and defence identity in the mid-1990s, US policy-makers of all colours have been concerned about the prospect of having to cope with what they fear would be a slowly moving and inflexible EU caucus, which would on the one hand further complicate reaching consensus within NATO and thus taking rapid and decisive decisions in times of crisis and on the other hand pose a potential counter-balance to the prevailing US dominance within NATO.¹⁵ Although Cohen's message has not been publicly echoed by any other high-ranking US government official over the last eight years, US opposition to an EU caucus within NATO has by no means declined and it should also not be expected to fade after the 2008 Presidential elections.¹⁶ Rather, the creation of an EU caucus within NATO will most likely result in a US withdrawal from NATO¹⁷ and thus ultimately in a loss of the organisation's very *raison d'être*.

A further persisting external obstacle to the creation of an EU caucus within NATO has also been posed in the past by the three non-EU European NATO members. Iceland, Norway and particularly Turkey, fear that the creation of an EU caucus within NATO would transform it into a forum that is primarily concerned with the coordination of *EU-US* security cooperation and which therefore fails to accommodate the foreign and security policy preferences of the non-EU European NATO members.¹⁸ While these concerns of non-EU European NATO members are arguably not of the same fundamental importance as those of the US, EU member states should nevertheless take them seriously.

Indeed, due to the fact that all NATO decisions are taken by unanimity, the non-EU European NATO members enjoy considerable leverage vis-à-vis the EU member states within NATO. This has been best illustrated by the way in which Turkey, for various reasons,¹⁹ has hampered joint EU efforts to establish closer EU-NATO cooperation in the past. Thus, between 2000 and 2002, Ankara repeatedly used its veto power in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) to block the adoption of the Berlin Plus Agreement and only gave in after strong US and British diplomatic pressure and various concessions made by the EU.²⁰ Even after the adoption of Berlin Plus, Ankara has continued to impede EU-NATO cooperation by threatening to veto EU access to NATO military assets.²¹ Moreover, by preventing the occurrence of any substantial debates in meetings between NAC and the EU's permanent Political and Security Committee, Turkey has made EU-NATO cooperation rather difficult.²²

¹⁴ A. Nicoll, US urges EU to keep link with Nato Military Capability, *Financial Times* (December 6, 2000).

¹⁵ R.E. Hunter, *The European Security and Defense Policy: NATO's Companion – or Competitor?* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2002), pp. 77-78; K. Archik, & P. Gallis, NATO and the European Union. *CRS Report for Congress RL32342* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2005), p. 21

¹⁶ D.S. Yost, NATO and International Organizations, *Forum Paper 3* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2007) pp. 106-107.

¹⁷ As one French diplomat remarked to the author, "When you try to create a European caucus within NATO, the US would react very harshly and probably leave NATO. Therefore, nobody has the idea to establish an EU caucus within NATO any longer." Interview: French Permanent Delegation to NATO 4 June 2008.

¹⁸ S. Tofte, Non-EU NATO Members and the Issue of Discrimination, in *Defending Europe: The EU, NATO and the Quest for European Autonomy*, eds J. Howorth & J.T.S. Keeler (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 136; P. Rieker, Norway and the ESDP: Explaining Norwegian Participation in the EU's Security Policy, *European Security*, 15/3 (2006), p. 292; Valasek, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ The main reason is the long-standing dispute with EU member Greece over the divided island of Cyprus, Aegean airspace and territorial waters as well as the EU member part of Cyprus, which makes Turkey undermine attempts to strengthen cooperation between the EU and NATO. N. Tocci, & M. Houben, Accommodating Turkey in ESDP, *CEPS Policy Brief No. 5*, (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2001); S. Tofte, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-140; J. Howorth, *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 167.

²⁰ J. Howorth, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-170.

²¹ S. Croft, Guaranteeing Europe's security? Enlarging NATO again. *International Affairs*, 78/1, pp. 108-109; Yost, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.

²² Valasek, *op. cit.*, p. 5; Interviews: French Permanent Delegation to NATO 4 June 2008, German Permanent Delegation to NATO 12 June 2008.

Persisting Internal Obstacles

In addition to the opposition of the US and the non-EU European NATO members, the persistence of fundamental differences among EU member states' foreign and security policy preferences constitutes a major internal obstacle to the creation of an EU caucus within NATO. Even two decades after the end of the Cold War, EU member states remain fundamentally divided over the question of NATO's future functions and purpose - as clearly shown by the competing conceptions of the politically and militarily most influential EU member states, namely France, the UK and Germany. Thus, the Élysée is eager to preserve NATO's traditional character as a collective defence organisation whose scope of action remains firmly limited to Europe.²³ In contrast, policy-makers in London would like to continue on the path of transforming NATO into a global security actor, which fosters close partnerships with democracies outside Europe, such as Australia and Japan, and extends the expeditionary military capabilities necessary for the projection of force in conflict theatres around the world.²⁴ Rather distinct from French and British conceptions, the political discourse surrounding the making of German policy towards NATO suggests the existence of a strong endeavour in Berlin to raise NATO's profile as a political security organisation, rather than a predominately military one.²⁵ This point has been made particularly clear by a German diplomat who mentioned that "We thought that we had already managed to transform NATO into a collective political security organisation. However, we always come back down to earth when we listen to the statements made by the new NATO members. For them, NATO remains a purely military tool in the fight against Russia."²⁶

Another persistent policy disagreement among EU NATO members relates to the role that the EU as an increasingly visible security and defence actor should assert vis-à-vis the US within NATO.²⁷ While no EU member state - not even France²⁸ - any longer seriously challenges the current *status quo* of a prominent US role in the European security architecture, little has changed in recent years regarding the scepticism of the more Atlanticist EU member states towards balancing US dominance in transatlantic security cooperation. Accordingly, the idea of establishing an EU coordination mechanism within NATO as a means to give the EU greater political weight has met with considerable opposition from the UK and several Central European EU members.²⁹ They are concerned that such a step would put the continued existence of NATO and thus the Article V security guarantee at risk³⁰ - a scenario that the EU NATO members from Central Europe want to avoid at any cost.³¹

Although the arrival of Merkel and Sarkozy on the European political scene has made the emergence of a more unitary approach among the bigger EU members more likely, the foreign policy positions of all 27 EU member states towards coping with Russia still diverge significantly and it will take considerable time before reaching greater intra-EU harmony.³² In the context of NATO, the diverging European views on how to cope with Russia have constituted another major obstacle to greater EU coordination. Thus, while several of the older EU member states, such as France and Germany, have promoted a rather integrative and thus conciliatory approach of NATO towards Moscow, the Central European EU members uphold conceptions of the purpose and functions of NATO, which put the latter and Russia on an antagonistic footing.

²³ A.M. Le Gloannec, *op. cit.*, p. 19; Interview French Permanent Delegation to NATO 4 June 2008.

²⁴ R. Niblett, Choosing between America and Europe: a new context for British foreign policy, *International Affairs* 83/4 (2007), p. 637; Interviews: British Foreign and Commonwealth Office 27 June 2008 and 4 July 2008.

²⁵ A. Hyde-Price, *Germany & European order: Enlarging NATO and the EU* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) pp. 160-163.

²⁶ Interview: German Permanent Delegation to NATO 12 June 2008.

²⁷ J. Howorth, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-160.

²⁸ J. Howorth, *op. cit.*, p. 160; Interview at the French Permanent Delegation to NATO on 4 June 2008.

²⁹ Recalling an invitation of the German Delegation to an EU gathering within NATO, a French diplomat stated in an interview with the author, "When Germany once tried to organise a breakfast with EU Member states, the new EU Member states and the UK were very reluctant. They said that they could not accept any sort of EU caucus within NATO. They even said that should an EU caucus be established within NATO, they would push for a NATO caucus within the EU." Interview French Permanent Delegation to NATO 4 June 2008.

³⁰ Interviews: French Permanent Delegation to NATO 4 June 2008, German Permanent Delegation to NATO 12 June 2008.

³¹ A. Missiroli, EU Enlargement and CFSP/ESDP. *European Integration*, 25/1 (2003), p. 3; Toft, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

³² K. Barysch, Russia, realism and EU unity, *Policy Brief July 2007* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2007).

The lack of consensus on the future role and functions of NATO, the balancing of US dominance in transatlantic security cooperation and NATO's relations with Russia are the most prominent issue areas that have made the formulation of common European positions within NATO difficult and other challenges, such as the deployment of troops in Afghanistan, can be easily identified. The fact that in contrast to other international organisations, like the OSCE and the UN, neither the European Commission nor the Secretariat of the Council of the EU assert any major role in terms of facilitating the emergence of a common European position towards NATO further undermines the possibility of the emergence of greater European unity within NATO. Indeed, EU NATO members prefer to keep their memberships within NATO and the EU as far as possible separated from each other and the Commission as well as the Secretariat of the Council have accepted that all NATO affairs, which go beyond matters of direct EU-NATO cooperation, are exclusively addressed by the individual EU member states.³³

The Current State of Play and Future Prospects

In light of the persisting external and internal obstacles, debates over an EU caucus within NATO are unlikely to translate into any tangible results. Instead of coordinating and formulating common positions, EU member states are likely to adhere to the current practice of forming flexible coalitions within NATO, which first and foremost correspond to national foreign and security policy concerns and preferences rather than a common European strategic interest. This point was made particularly clear by a senior official from the German Delegation to NATO: "To be honest, blocks usually emerge in response to specific issue areas. In debates about Afghanistan, for example, we usually meet and coordinate in groups, which correspond to the four existing sectors in Afghanistan. Our EU membership plays no role with regard to the way we perceive policy debates here at NATO and how we respond to them."³⁴ Debates about Georgia's and Ukraine's accession to NATO earlier this year³⁵ and recent attempts to find an appropriate transatlantic response to the military conflict between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia³⁶ further underline the continued differences in EU member states' policies towards a variety of issues debated within NATO. Ultimately, it is to a large extent this heterogeneity of policies, which prevents EU NATO representatives in Brussels and the officials in charge of NATO affairs in the foreign ministries of EU member states to formulate and pursue common European positions towards NATO.

The lack of coordination among EU member states vis-à-vis NATO policy-making is by no means limited to the ambassadorial level at NATO's headquarters in Brussels. On the ministerial level, EU NATO members also remain highly reluctant to exchange points of view, not to speak of coordinating their NATO policies.³⁷ French Foreign Ministry officials who are dealing with NATO affairs hardly ever discuss their portfolios with their counterparts from Berlin or London or any other EU capital, for that matter. Indeed, consultations among officials of EU member states on NATO issues usually only take place in the margins of meetings of the North Atlantic Council or at other high-level NATO summits³⁸ and this *status quo* should not be expected to change any time soon.

While the formation of a formal EU caucus within NATO remains a distant possibility for the time being, at least informal EU consultation meetings within NATO might occur more regularly in the future. In fact, as a result of France's much more constructive engagement with NATO in recent months and its agenda to Europeanise NATO, an increase in the number of informal consultations among NATO representatives from

³³ Interviews: British Foreign and Commonwealth Office 27 June 2008 and 4 July 2008, European Commission 11 June; French Permanent Delegation to NATO 4 June 2008, German Foreign Ministry 12 June 2008, German Permanent Delegation to NATO 13 June 2008.

³⁴ Interview: German Permanent Delegation to NATO 12 June 2008.

³⁵ See K.-H. Kamp, *After the Summit: Long-Term Consequences for NATO. Research Paper No. 37*, (Rome: NATO Defence College, 2008).

³⁶ For an analysis of the military conflict, see S. Fischer (2008), *Worst Case: Escalation of the Unresolved Conflicts in Georgia, ISS Analysis* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2008). For an excellent summary of the diverging opinions of EU member states during debates about a NATO response to the conflict, see N. Busse, *Derselbe Graben wie in der Irak-Krise [The same cleavage as during the Iraq crisis]*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (August 14, 2008).

³⁷ Interviews: British Foreign and Commonwealth Office 4 July 2008, German Foreign Ministry 12 June 2008.

³⁸ Interviews: British Foreign and Commonwealth Office 4 July 2008, German Foreign Ministry 12 June 2008.

EU member states has already been observed.³⁹ However, these informal consultations have not yet made any noteworthy contribution to fostering common EU positions on issues debated within NATO.⁴⁰ Accordingly, an increase of informal consultations should not *per se* be regarded as creating a greater unity of EU member states within NATO.

Conclusion

In contrast to the coordination of EU member states' policies within other international organisations, like the OSCE or the UN, coordination within NATO has so far remained absent. While the French NATO rapprochement might give new impetus to debates about the formation of an EU caucus within NATO, it should not be expected that such a caucus will emerge anytime soon. For those who are eager to maintain the *status quo* and who would therefore like to see a continued superiority of national foreign and security policy interests within NATO, this current state of play is clearly rather comforting. Particularly for the US, but also for the non-EU European NATO members and the more Atlanticist EU NATO members, the continued disunity of the EU within NATO is reason for quietude rather than concern.

However, for those who are convinced that in the 21st century EU member states must establish a common strategic culture and pool their military and civilian capabilities in order to secure Europe's continued influence not only in NATO, but more widely in world affairs, the continued lack of impact of ESDP integration on the formulation of national NATO policies should give some pause to think.

By Jan Gaspers

For a detailed account of the continued lack of impact of the European security and defence integration process on the formulation of EU member states' policies towards NATO, see J. Gaspers, *The Europeanisation of National Foreign Policy towards NATO?: The Case of NATO Enlargement, Dissertation submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2008).

The author is currently a research assistant at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) in Geneva. The views expressed in this article are the author's only and do not represent those of UNIDIR.



international security information service, europe

Rue Archimède 50, 1000 Brussels Tel: +32 (0)2 230 7446 Fax: +32 (0)2 230 6113
E-mail: info@isis-europe.org Internet: www.isis-europe.org

³⁹ Interview: French Permanent Delegation to NATO on 4 June 2008.

⁴⁰ Interviews: French Permanent Delegation to NATO 4 June 2008; German Permanent Delegation to NATO 12 June 2008.