The EU and NATO: A Partnership with a Glass Ceiling

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Abstract

The EUGS aims at deepening the strategic partnership between the EU and NATO. Security challenges and increasingly hybrid threats emanating from Europe's neighbourhood underlined the need for a mutually reinforcing and complementary EU–NATO cooperation. The EUGS triggered more systematic cooperation based on seven joint priority areas. The organizations found new and creative ways to circumvent long-standing political blockades. However, these blockades still put a glass ceiling over implementation while transatlantic tensions curtail the strategic nature of this partnership. While the bureaucratic framework underpinning EU–NATO cooperation has been strengthened, breaking through the glass ceiling and forging a more strategic bond goes beyond EUGS implementation and depends on high politics.

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While making a general pledge for stronger security partnerships,[1] the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) puts particular emphasis on deepening cooperation with NATO. This focus seems logical considering that 22 EU member states, each with a "single set of forces", are also NATO members. The call for closer EU–NATO cooperation had grown louder since 2014. In light of Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine, including cyberwarfare, the lines between civilian and military threats and responses became harder to draw. In the EU's southern neighbourhood, the link between fragile states, terrorism and migratory flows blurred the boundaries between internal and external challenges. These developments led to the strategic recognition that the EU and NATO indeed *have* to be mutually reinforcing and complementary to be effective.

The publication of the EUGS in June 2016 provided a push for a more systematic attempt at deepening EU–NATO cooperation. Its implementation in the field of security and defence also raised new questions about the interface with NATO. This paper reviews implementation and assesses progress since mid-2016.

1. Guiding principles and implementation actions

The EUGS outlined guiding principles for deepening EU–NATO cooperation. It underlined that "NATO remains the primary framework for most Member States" when it comes to collective defence.[2] However, this primacy "shall not prejudice the security and defence policy of those Members which are not in NATO".[3] Cooperation should therefore be deepened "in complementarity, synergy, and full respect for the institutional framework, inclusiveness and decision-making autonomy of the two".[4]

These principles were reiterated in subsequent joint documents, which specified concrete areas of implementation. On 8 July 2016, two weeks after the publication of the EUGS, the Presidents of the European Council and Commission as well as the NATO Secretary-General signed a Joint Declaration calling for a more substantial partnership and speedy implementation.[5] In December 2016 and 2017, the EU and NATO agreed a total of 74 implementation actions in seven strategic priority areas: [6]

1. Countering hybrid threats
2. Operational cooperation including maritime issues
3. Cyber security
4. Capacity building

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[1] Dijkstra, Hilke, „Implementing the integrated approach: Investing in other international organisations", *EU Global Strategy Watch* (July 2018), https://www.feps-europe.eu/component/attachments/attachments.html?task=attachment&id=103.
[2] Council of the European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels (June 2016), https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Council of the European Union, *EU-NATO Joint Declaration*, Brussels, 8 July 2016, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21481/nato-eu-declaration-8-july-en-final.pdf.
[6] Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Implementation of the Joint Declaration* (15283/16), Brussels, 6 December 2016, http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15283-2016-INIT/en/pdf; Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the Implementation of the Joint Declaration* (14802/17), Brussels, 5 December 2017, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31947/st14802en17.pdf.

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5. Defence capabilities
6. Defence industry and research
7. Exercises

A second Joint Declaration was signed ahead of the 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels.[7] It stressed the need to focus on implementation and called for swift and demonstrable progress based on the 74 actions.

2. Milestones and informal cooperation

EU–NATO cooperation has long been blocked by the conflict between Turkey on the one hand, and Greece and Cyprus on the other. The relaunch of this partnership since 2016 has been in line with a previous trend, namely to circumvent political blockades at the highest political level through informal cooperation. This becomes apparent when reviewing the 74 implementation actions. Most of them refer to closer staff-to-staff contacts, information exchange, or the organization of joint seminars and training. In addition, informal meetings between the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the Political and Security Committee (PSC) are used to going beyond the narrow scope of formal political dialogue. Informal paths have yielded some implementation milestones.

One such milestone was the establishment of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki in 2017. The Centre is shielded from the political blockade that impairs EU–NATO cooperation as it is neither an EU nor a NATO body, rather an international body established by and open to EU and NATO members and staff. It currently includes 11 EU and NATO members,[8] three non-NATO EU members (Austria, Sweden and Finland) and three non-EU Allies (the US, Canada and Norway). Turkey and Cyprus are not among the participants. The Centre encourages strategic-level dialogue and fosters a common understanding of hybrid threats through regular workshops, seminars and training. Importantly, it developed a hybrid threat scenario for discussion during the informal NAC–PSC meeting on 28 September 2018.[9] It thus supported the first informal scenario-based reflection on a coordinated response to hybrid threats.

A second milestone, illustrating synergies between the EU and NATO, was cooperation on military mobility. In autumn 2017, then US NATO General Ben Hodges called for a "military Schengen zone" to lower logistical and regulatory barriers to moving heavy military equipment or hazardous substances across Europe's borders in case of crisis.[10] The proposal was taken up by the Dutch, who are now leading a project on military mobility in the framework of Permanent Structured Cooperation

[7] Council of the European Union, *Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation*, Brussels, 10 July 2018, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36096/nato_eu_final_eng.pdf.
[8] At the time of writing, these included the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK.
[9] The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, „Hybrid CoE Supports Informal NAC-PSC Discussion", 28 September 2018, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/news/hybrid-coe-supports-informal-nac-psc-discussion/.
[10] Hodges, Ben in: Herzenshorn, David M., "Call for 'military Schengen' to get troops moving", *Politico*, September 2017. https://www.politico.eu/article/call-for-military-border-schengen-to-get-troops-moving-nato-eu-defense-ministers/

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(PESCO).[11] Together with the High Representative, the Commission published an Action Plan for Military Mobility and proposed spending €6.5 billion from the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework to support implementation.[12] In this area, which is key for credible deterrence in the East, NATO has to cooperate with the EU as a regulator. To ensure that the changes to European infrastructure truly meet the military needs, NATO shared its generic parameters for transport infrastructure with the EU. Upgrading the EU's infrastructure should also benefit civilian transport.

3. Glass ceilings and stumbling blocks

While the EUGS provided a push for more inter-organizational EU–NATO cooperation, it did not contribute to solving old and newer political tensions. The fact that both EU–NATO Declarations were signed by the respective heads of organizations, rather than their member states, is indicative of a certain disconnect between bureaucracy and politics. In interviews, some senior NATO officials dismissed the 74 actions as "largely bureaucratic stuff" and complained that there was too much process and not enough substantive joint action.[13] The political blockades, they argued, continue to place a glass ceiling over implementation.

Indeed, EU–NATO cooperation is still characterized by parallel, and at best coordinated, rather than joint action. Formal NAC–PSC meetings are restricted to the discussion of the Berlin Plus operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[14] Instead of organizing *joint* exercises, they refine the practice of parallel and coordinated exercises. Attempts to develop a *joint* playbook on hybrid threats were blocked, in part due to the EU's reluctance of associating its broad civilian toolbox too exclusively with NATO.[15] Proposals of a *joint* implementation roadmap for military mobility tabled in mid-2018 stood little chance of receiving a green light.

These glass ceilings limit the degree to which NATO and the EU can reap the benefits of their complementarity. The inability to share classified information would severely limit cooperation in times of crisis. In the event of a hybrid attack, information exchange would be restricted and there would be no formally agreed procedure for effectively managing interfaces. This is not trivial at a moment when NATO is defining its role regarding hybrid threats below the level of Article 5.

There is little hope that the glass ceilings hanging over the EU–NATO partnership will vanish any time soon. In spring we saw renewed Greek–Turkish tensions on the disputed islets in the Aegean Sea. In addition, Turkey blocked Greek Cypriots from exploring gas in water surrounding the island.

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[11] Ibid.
[12] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on the Action Plan on Military Mobility*, Brussels, 28 March 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/transport/files/2018-military_mobility_action_plan.pdf
[13] Interviews conducted by the author in Brussels in May and June 2018.
[14] See agenda of the NAC-PSC meeting in July 2018: http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/CM-3794-2018-INIT/en/pdf
[15] Pawlak, Patryk, "Countering hybrid threats: EU-NATO cooperation", *European Parliamentary Research Service*, March 2017.
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599315/EPRS_BRI(2017)599315_EN.pdf

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Meanwhile, transatlantic tensions place limitations on the *strategic* nature of this partnership. The 2018 Brussels NATO Summit was dominated by a strong call by the US President for more burden-sharing, culminating in a US threat to withdraw from the Alliance.[16]

The one-year EUGS progress report stated that the Strategy's "push for a European Union of security and defence (…) anticipated the debate on military burden-sharing across the Atlantic".[17] However, the key litmus test is whether this push will actually contribute to more European readiness and defence spending. If not, the US could perceive the EU's steps towards a European Security and Defence Union (i.e. PESCO, the European Defence Fund and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence) as an unnecessary distraction, and thus duplication. In fact, the implementation of the EUGS's measures in the field of security and defence and its overarching aim of achieving European strategic autonomy have already caused transatlantic tensions.[18]

More broadly, the EU and the US are at odds about trade as well as major foreign and security policy issues (e.g. the US embassy in Jerusalem, the Iran nuclear deal, US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia). These tensions hamper meaningful transatlantic dialogue on strategic security priorities.

Conclusion

The EUGS triggered a more systematic and structured process of inter-organizational cooperation. The organizations found new ways of circumventing old blockades. Below the political level, NATO and EU staff increasingly coordinate their parallel activities. However, political tensions put a glass ceiling over implementation and the potential benefits that joint exercises, actions or roadmaps could yield. Their respective strategies and playbooks remain separate and limits to information-sharing would impede coordination in times of crisis. Overall, the bureaucratic strings of inter-organizational cooperation have been reinforced, but a truly strategic partnership would require more transatlantic convergence and overcoming long-standing political blockades. Ironically, the very implementation of the EUGS in the field of security and defence has the potential to become yet another (minor) chapter of transatlantic dissension.

[16] Herzenshorn, David M. and Bayer, Lili, "Trump's whiplash NATO Summit". *Politico*, 13 July 2018. https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-threatens-to-pull-out-of-nato/

[17] European External Action Service, *From Shared Vision to Common Action: Implementing the EU Global Strategy Year 1*, Brussels, March 2017, https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/full_brochure_year_1.pdf.

[18] See for example: Erlanger, Steven, „U.S. revives concerns about European defence plans, rattling NATO Allies", *New York Times*, 18 February 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/nato-europe-us-.html; Brands, Hal, "What Trump gets right in his spat with Macron", *Bloomberg,* 14 November 2018. https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-11-14/trump-s-spat-with-macron-contains-one-truth-about-europe

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