

## **NATO and the binary US-EU Relationship**

### **Contribution to: Victory in Europe and the road ahead**

Throughout the Cold War the internal structure of NATO and the distribution of military power was the perennial focus of political controversy among key partners – the US, France, the United Kingdom and Germany. In this vein deterrence as a balancing process between NATO and the USSR served above all to use the antagonist for maintaining internal political coherence both in domestic and in alliance terms, of course, success of deterrence was a precondition for both stability and controllable change.

The political nature of the Atlantic Alliance rested with those continuous internal efforts to rebalance the internal structure – be it to ensure US dominance or to facilitate a more autonomous Europe, be it through German efforts to serve as balancer between US and French aspirations or British efforts to avoid being torn between a special link to the US and the vital interests in not being excluded from European developments.

This political nature of the Alliance became obvious the night before the signing ceremony of the Washington Treaty in April 1949 when Truman and Acheson on the one side and several European foreign ministers, above all Schuman and Bevan on the other, quarrelled over Germany's future role in the community of Western nations. The US clearly opted for a Germany belonging to a future alliance. This came true with the eventual German access to NATO in 1955. The political discourse in NATO ever since was over how close Germany's direct links with the US should be: The French vision since 1954 was to weaken direct links between the US and Germany, to become the principal Continental partner for the US and to make the UK an adjunct to Europe and an asset in view of its influence on the US.

This continuing process got complicated by the fact that either side – and in the West in competitive manner – sought to influence political change on the other side in its favor. The outcome in 1989/90 ended the “consequences of the Second World War”, as Soviet leaders termed it. The outcome did in fact turn out very similar to the last Western plan for overcoming the division in 1959 – the Herter Plan. The management of the arms competition between the USSR and NATO left the former without additional political leverage – the beginning of the end. The

unification of Germany ended the quarrel over Germany's position within the Western political fabric: Again the competing Western nations were left without additional leverage. Mitterrand's and Thatcher's last minute efforts to stem the tide indicate the depth of this change.

This ended NATO's role as the primary political framework for the evolution of US-European relations. The first Gulf War did remind Western nations that military means still have a role to play. But ever since major political decisions were taken in other bodies. While NATO played a significant role in bringing Central East European nations and indeed nations that have separated from the former USSR closer into the Western orbit, the formation of Western Europe gathered ever more momentum. The stages are well known. What tends to get forgotten is that the virtual exclusion of the military dimension from West European integration until well into the 1990s and the acceptance of US military dominance as a political boundary condition was a precondition for this formative development. Until the early 1990s the Alliance was a framework for political change. However, the dynamics of change resulted from increasing integration within Western Europe and the vacua left by the Soviet devolution.

The combination of increasing European assertiveness, a diffused, albeit discomfiting strategic environment for the EU and the evolution of US global strategy – which considered Europe as important, but not endangered and thus not in the forefront of US security interests – resulted in a posture that was defined by the EU's wide range of instruments and influences on crises which did not in the first place call for military responses. But coordination with the US and indeed a capacity to act required that the EU would have also military and non-military capabilities at its disposal for engaging in active crisis management. The EU's Strategic Concept described the scope and purpose of these efforts. Many security measures, some military efforts (ECAP) and a coordinated positioning of European industry in the field of defence and security bolster this.

Obviously there are still long ways to go, and a failure to ratify the EU constitution could cause a major setback, although this is not a given. But this pertains to the strength of the EU. There is no way for the Alliance to ever become the primary political framework again for either United States nor Europe: For the US NATO is but one instrument of choice that has long ceased to be a basis for US force planning, let alone political orientation. For Europe it is a framework for maintaining access to US capabilities – military means, training, coordination structured and some influence on US decision-making.

Both the United State and Europe may mess this up, but it is in their well-understood interest to keep NATO effective and politically alive as an instrument of choice for extreme circumstances. Even in the military realm, above all force transformation, the more intense cooperation with the US extends to selected allies inside and outside NATO. For the EU, on the other side, security is a

national responsibility that tends to get increasingly coordinated through the EU with EU level capabilities as a natural outcome.

Military contingencies could arise out of security situations, but not from invasions. The context of military contingencies that could call for NATO involvement thus is first shaped through EU processes, in major cases in coordination with the US, if possible. To that extent the EU has become the primary political framework for security policies of EU member-states. A binary US-EU security relationship will thus increasingly become a dominant feature in both US and EU security policies.

Within this context NATO will remain an indispensable instrument for the employment of military force, even where this will not be a NATO operation. The interoperability, training, commonality of military culture and above all the capabilities will remain important for both the EU and, as the second Bush Administration has rediscovered, also for the US.

This will require continuous commitments, investments and joint efforts on either side. But the EU needs to be guided by the insight that strengthening its security posture should be driven by EU requirements, not by increasing the distance towards the US. The United States, on the other hand, need to understand that Europe can no longer be managed through some multinational US-led organisation, but that it is in the interest of the US to accept the EU as a major strategic and political partner that is driven by internal dynamics and own global interests, but that is likely to share values, interests and, if needed, efforts in case the global environment becomes more instable and more competitive. Without NATO this will be a much more demanding task.