

Conference on the Future of Europe

Beyond the Third Declaration: scenarios for EU-NATO cooperation

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Executive Summary

- > The release of the Third EU-NATO Joint Declaration is a decisive step towards a more united transatlantic community.
- > While it entails a *widening and deepening* process, it also implies a strong *political value*. Nevertheless, barriers to reinforced EU-NATO cooperation persist, and the degree of interaction is likely to vary in the medium to long term.
- > Three possible scenarios suggest themselves – continuity, stagnation, expansion. The EU should be prepared to react to each of them and attempt to widen and deepen the interplay with NATO.
- > The uncertainty of future developments requires the Union to articulate an efficient, flexible and future-proof strategy with a vital partner like NATO. In its interactions with NATO, it must strive for a strategic partnership, set realistic goals and seek achievable objectives.

“[T]here is simply no security and defence issue where less cooperation is the answer ... This is why we are working with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on a new EU-NATO Joint Declaration to be presented before the end of the year” (Von der Leyen 2021). With this adamant statement, the President of the European Commission announced that the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) started to draft a Joint Declaration in September 2021.

The release of the Third EU-NATO Declaration, expected in early 2022, is a decisive step towards a more united transatlantic community able to meet today’s security challenges by concurrently envisaging a widening and

deepening of their cooperation. Along with this, it inherently entails a political rapprochement that potentially strengthens both organisations. Yet, the EU-NATO partnership remains fragile and evolves in an uncertain environment. It is affected by highly volatile endogenous and exogenous factors – global security concerns and power games inside NATO and the EU – and it is therefore likely that the degree of interaction will continue to strongly vary.

Against this backdrop, and as a contribution to the reflection on the future of the EU in the domain of foreign, security and defence policies, this policy brief examines to what extent and how the EU should engage with NATO in the medium term. It proceeds by first illustrating the Third Joint Declaration as a case in point to grasp the current EU-NATO cooperation status, its main facets and limitations. Drawing on those, it then elaborates three possible scenarios – continuity, stagnation, expansion – and discusses the EU’s level of engagement in relation to each of these possible future trajectories. It argues that while EU-NATO relations are likely to be characterised by continuity, the Union must do all it can to avert the breakdown of cooperative dynamics with the Alliance and pursue an output-oriented strategy, that is, not seek cooperation just for the sake of it, but strive for achievable objectives with NATO regardless of the status of EU-NATO relations.

What’s next for EU-NATO relations?

If the 2016 EU Global Strategy was marked by the awareness of an increased international instability, the upcoming EU strategic reflection process, the Strategic Compass, is likely to emphasise how little the security narrative has changed since then (EEAS 2021). On the one hand, the overriding return of power politics is emblematically observable in Russia’s aggressive stance and China’s assertiveness. On the other hand, the emergence of an even more hostile security context

featuring numerous multi-layered threats – the weaponization of soft power in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, disruptive technologies, information manipulation, climate change, hybrid threats, cybersecurity – has required both the EU and NATO to refine their respective strategies as well as commit to a reinvigorated partnership (NATO 2021). It is against the backdrop of this complex global context that the EU and NATO have been elaborating the Third Declaration.

Apart from such external factors, the Third Declaration is also influenced by endogenous dynamics, above all the erratic transatlantic partnership. The hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan coupled with the AUKUS affair – a partnership amongst Australia, the UK and the US in the Indo-Pacific that sidelined Europeans, most notably France – questioned not only the cohesion among the allies, but also Washington’s ability to liaise with Europeans through NATO. To address these internal dynamics, renewed attention towards transatlantic cohesiveness and preserving the Alliance’s role have contributed to the need to send a strong political message. The US administration has made it clear that the “transatlantic Alliance is back, and we are not looking backwards, but we are looking forward together” (Biden 2021). Backed by US support, the Third Joint Declaration can gain a unique political value, as it may be able to demonstrate that transatlantic bonds are alive, and that the US administration endorses the EU’s strategic autonomy.

While talks are ongoing, from the Union’s perspective, the forthcoming Joint Declaration is expected to “enhance our cooperation on emerging and disruptive technologies, climate and defence, resilience, countering hybrid threats such as foreign information manipulation, securing cyberspace and outer space and enhancing maritime security”, ultimately aiming at fostering EU-NATO situational awareness and political dialogue. Hence, it covers a large number of the Strategic Compass priorities (EEAS 2021). Meanwhile, at NATO, the NATO 2030 and the NATO Strategic Concept reflections focus on similar security clusters and equally call for enhanced resilience, the need to ensure the technological edge of defence, support the rules-based international order and adapt to climate change (NATO 2021). Therefore, a common perception of contemporary security threats and a reinvigorated transatlantic partnership coupled with organisational entrepreneurship have provided impetus for a new convergence.

The Third Declaration: a mutually reinforcing process ...

The Third Joint Declaration can be framed through three lenses: *widening*, *deepening*, *political value*.

First, the renewed EU-NATO momentum would lead to *widening* their relations. ‘Soft defence’ elements such as emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT), climate, resilience and potentially outer space are novel, having the potential to expand the inter-organisational interplay into hitherto uncharted territory. Under this new impulse, competing dynamics between the EU and NATO are avoided. Instead, the Declaration brings the two partners closer together, preventing duplicative outcomes and creating synergies. In the wake of wide-ranging global concerns, both partners have realised to what extent cooperating on those crucial matters becomes critical. Second, the Third Declaration is likely to insist on *deepening* EU-NATO relations in crucial areas. Admittedly, countering hybrid threats, cybersecurity and maritime issues, as well as political dialogue already underpinned the previous Declarations. Both the EU and NATO have been seeking new levels of ambition, coordinated planning and complementarity in the past. They now pledge to further reinforce this through more frequent high-level meetings, stronger staff-to-staff interactions by boosting strategic communication, intensifying shared situational awareness and joint exercises (NATO 2021).

Third, the momentum is inherently and politically interlinked with both EU and NATO strategic reflection processes. The conjunction between these reflections and the Third Joint Declaration’s release is everything but accidental. In 2016, the First EU-NATO Joint Declaration coincided in a timely fashion with the release of the EU Global Strategy and the introduction of the EU strategic autonomy rhetoric. Already at the time, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg openly pre-empted any potential national opposition able to counter the EU project (NATO 2016). Shortly thereafter, the First EU-NATO Joint Declaration became public: it seemed like an endorsement of the EU’s strategic autonomy ambitions by NATO and reiterated that NATO remains the cornerstone of the European security architecture, practically setting boundaries and cementing the role of the Alliance.

Both NATO and the EU exploited the Joint Declarations as a political tool to achieve internal cohesiveness, nip any inter-organisational tensions in the bud and mutually reinforce each other. This pattern is likely to be replicated at present. The NATO Secretary-General once again welcomed the EU’s efforts on defence, as long as they do not produce duplication (Brzozowski 2021). In so doing, he countered internal divisions on strategic autonomy. Moreover, the Third Declaration arguably follows the logic of the Strategic Compass and Strategic Concept chapters, eschews possible antagonism in newly disputed areas, streamlines the two reflection processes as well as empowers the EU and NATO internally.

... hindered by multiple barriers

Nevertheless, the Third Declaration's ambitions must stand the test of reality, and systemic impediments as well as the political framework cannot be neglected.

First, doubts can be raised about the feasibility of *widening* cooperation in such novel clusters. Indeed, EU-NATO relations are under-conceptualised and lack a common strategic vision. In 'soft defence' areas, norms and rules still remain internally ill-defined and the EU and NATO struggle to spell out common definitions, levels of ambition, standards and timeframes (Interview 1). Moreover, the internal reflection processes are not finalised yet. NATO is currently at a turning point, and there is no guarantee about the direction in which it will further develop (Tardy 2021). Depending on which path the Alliance will take, its willingness to cooperate on these matters varies. Furthermore, cooperation in 'soft defence' domains is more prone to be imbalanced. Thanks to the expertise, regulatory toolbox, personnel and financial resources it disposes of, the EU is likely to play a predominant role. EU-NATO staff-to-staff cooperation has increasingly addressed EDT, resilience and climate change, but this has only meant taking the first steps (EU & NATO 2021). Despite NATO's in-depth know-how in specific niches – resilience, innovation and cybersecurity – the role of the EU defence programmes (European Defence Fund, European Defence Technology and Industrial Base) will remain prominent. Lastly, all these areas are politically sensitive, thus generating tensions among the members. A case in point is the "NATO Climate Change and Security Action Plan", where a few allies have blocked any NATO initiatives for a considerable time (Interview 2). This trend raises questions about the prospects of elaborating coherent and consistent cooperation in the long term.

Second, also regarding *deepening* systemic barriers persist. The EU-NATO partnership's official success story hides sub-optimal cooperation (NATO 2020). Relations are laced with structural constraints, such as the impossibility of sharing sensitive information. Two concrete examples to grasp such factors hindering cooperation are the maritime domain and cybersecurity. Regarding the former, presently the EU and NATO are both operating in the Mediterranean Sea but do not engage in any kind of cooperation (Interview 3) due to inter-state tensions and structural barriers. Even information-sharing is not envisaged, making the interplay unstable and diachronic (Giuglietti 2022). Cyber cooperation is equally anything but straightforward. The absence of classified information-sharing channels coupled with a national reticence to exchange sensitive information limits the spectrum of possible interaction (Lété 2019). These issues currently persist (European Parliament 2021).

Third, the *political framework* is worth highlighting. On the one hand, the US fluctuating stances on the EU's defence initiatives – Washington is in favour as long as they do not threaten US defence leadership (Fiott 2019) –, its pivot to the Indo-Pacific at the expense of the engagement in Europe and some European countries' interpretations of the future of European defence jeopardise transatlantic unity. Over the last few years, not only the Trump administration, but also the French national narrative (Elysée 2017) led to political cleavages among NATO allies. Healing the wounds has taken a while, and the 2022 French presidential elections may further polarise the public debate on the EU's strategic autonomy, potentially triggering hazardous spirals of hesitancy. In a similar vein, the 2022 US-midterm elections will represent a testing ground for the allies and the role of the US, especially if 'Trumpian' views will regain ground. Within NATO, the post-Stoltenberg era raises questions about the further development of EU-NATO cooperation depending on three closely intertwined factors: NATO's future role in general, the consensus among the allies on NATO's specific goals and, linked to this, the priorities of the new Secretary-General as of September 2022.

Future engagement: three possible scenarios

Turning towards the future from a European perspective, to what extent and how should the EU engage with NATO? The uncertainty of future developments in certain areas of the world – Indo-Pacific, Eastern neighbourhood, Middle East –, as well as the role of critical players – the US and Turkey – require the Union to concretely articulate an efficient, flexible and future-proof strategy with NATO through both multilateral and bilateral channels. If the Third Declaration stipulates a new momentum, the above-mentioned barriers indicate that the future of EU-NATO cooperative dynamics remains open. Therefore, considering the Third Declaration as a baseline, the EU should prepare to develop relations with NATO along the lines of three possible scenarios – continuity, stagnation, expansion.

Three main variables determine those scenarios and help understand which scenario is most likely to materialize: first, the degree of common EU-NATO perception of security threats; second, the degree of transatlantic unity; and third, the quality of the relationship between the heads of organisations. These three variables are inherently interlinked and mutually influencing. Hence, the perception of the security threats is determined by the ability of EU/NATO heads to craft compatible strategies and whether the transatlantic community can synthesise joint priorities. In turn, transatlantic unity is influenced by the efforts of EU and NATO leaders to perform as brokers and mobilise synergies. Furthermore, the nature of the relationship between the heads of organisations will be

determined by the prerogatives of the next NATO Secretary-General and the compatibility of the two entities' security agendas.

If the EU seeks cooperation with NATO, as stipulated in its Strategic Compass, its engagement with the Alliance must differ in function of the specific scenario. The ideal objective would be to pursue a favourable trade-off between the level of engagement and the expected output, that is, refrain from seeking cooperation only for the sake of cooperation and adopt a strategic posture with achievable, operational goals related to widening and depending, in function of a specific scenario.

Continuity

The first scenario foresees the persistence of the trend registered until the Third Declaration. Although a common perception of the security threats endures, the EU and NATO are not in the position to synthesise a joint strategic view. In this sense, transatlantic unity neither deteriorates nor increases: the 2022 electoral campaigns do not subvert the current status quo. Moreover, the new NATO Secretary-General upholds the previous engagements at the organisational level, yet he/she does not open a new window of opportunity for reinforced cooperation.

In this scenario, EU-NATO cooperation features mainly as a political rather than operational process, designed to pursue internal agendas and not to step on each other's feet. Systemic issues persist, and a full *deepening* remains unrealistic. To make the best of this scenario, the Union should commit itself to cooperate just for seeking internal political objectives – strategic autonomy – as long as the trade-off is suitable. Cooperation mainly entails avoiding possible overlaps and coping with emerging security challenges through parallel, yet politically compatible, agendas. High-level political dialogue and the *widening* process remain the major tools, and the EU further engages in the staff-to-staff dialogue. However, a clear division of labour does not emerge, leading to wasting resources and pursuing a short-term vision only.

Stagnation

The second scenario deals with inertia due to a dramatic decline of the cooperative momentum. The emergence of different perceptions vis-à-vis the security threats leads to dissimilar agendas practically not leaving any room for furthering cooperation. Liaising with the other organisation eventually becomes less appealing to both the EU and NATO. The mutual alienation comes with instability within the transatlantic community due to the US disengagement in Europe and the growth of an independent European defence narrative. This also rekindles frictions between EU and non-EU allies – the US, the UK, Turkey and Canada. Here, the takeover of the new

NATO Secretary-General marks a turning point, and relations with the EU are perceived as less relevant. This results in a discontinuity in the EU-NATO partnership, practically reducing high-level interactions to the minimum. Accordingly, the implementation of joint initiatives is characterised by a perpetual deadlock, and there is the risk of frustrating earlier achievements.

In this scenario, the Union's interest to engage with NATO dramatically drops. *Widening* and *deepening* processes cannot be expected, and the impasse prevents any further initiatives. Politically speaking, the significance of EU-NATO relations fades. Nonetheless, the EU would be well-advised to uphold political consultation to prevent returning to a 'frozen conflict' with NATO. Talks between heads of organisations and staff-to-staff relations remain essential to preserve communication channels with NATO and not squander past accomplishments.

Expansion

Finally, in the last scenario, EU-NATO cooperation experiences an unparalleled progression. Both organisations further converge in their perception of key contemporary security threats, which leads to mapping out and articulating better common priorities and a division of labour. Moreover, the transatlantic community is able to find a balance between the US and European stances and promote unity among the members, thus enabling non-EU allies to be fully involved. Moreover, the new Secretary-General discloses a stronger tendency to foster relations with the EU, adopting an even stronger pro-European stance than Stoltenberg.

Based on these conditions, cooperation can be stepped up, and the Union undertakes a coherent cooperative interplay with NATO, simultaneously seeking the structured political dialogue as well as the *widening* and *deepening* of the relations. In this scenario, the Union should intensify inter-organisational consultations with NATO. It should push for developing joint hubs and working groups in sensitive defence clusters to outline common rules, standards, and approaches. The Union also outlines a division of labour that remains however bottom-up, flexible and output-oriented.

Regarding the *deepening*, overcoming systemic issues could be possible if the Union concurrently tackles those at the inter-organisational and national levels. Therefore, not only does the EU strengthen relations with the Alliance, but it also further engages with member states and fosters bilateral bonds with non-EU allies. Indeed, to fully accomplish a deepening of EU-NATO cooperation, the EU must generate win-win solutions able to meet members' needs. In doing so, the US is a crucial partner with which it must set joint objectives, promoting the Union's agenda within the Alliance, and countering any

opposition. To that end, the EU should extensively liaise with the US, draft an EU-US defence transatlantic agenda for a common strategic vision, norms and division of roles. By progressively bringing Washington on the Union's side, it may be possible to ease intergovernmental negotiations within NATO and the EU in the medium term.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if cooperative dynamics with NATO prove to be beneficial for the EU, the level of engagement and the tools to pursue cooperation must vary according to different scenarios. The above-mentioned scenarios are more or less likely to happen depending on endogenous and exogenous factors. The 'continuity' scenario is the most plausible, due to the institutionalisation pattern EU and NATO have so far been experiencing alongside the persistence of the current barriers. Accordingly, the significance of EU-NATO relations will primarily remain political, leaving limited space for any concrete operational improvements. Nonetheless, 'stagnation' may occur when concurrent negative windows of opportunity appear – a new NATO leadership, the majority of the allies less prone to cooperate with the EU, dissimilar security agendas. Conversely, it seems that 'expansion' is only possible in case of major shocks – e.g. the worsening of the global power competition – that sharply require closing ranks and beneficially investing in a deeper EU-NATO partnership. However, this last scenario seems to be the least plausible because of the multiplicity of preconditions – a traumatic event and a singular political awareness – it demands.

Overall, it is in the EU's interest to seek constructive, cooperative dynamics with NATO. Politically speaking, cooperation remains a key tool to streamline the internal strategic reflection process and increase the EU's

actorness in the defence domain. In view of the release of the Strategic Compass, the Alliance still remains a strong political partner, and the Union should seek strategic autonomy in coordination with NATO. Nevertheless, the *widening* and *deepening* remain challenging. Any efforts can be inhibited by intergovernmental barriers, Washington's mistrust of the EU defence project, and NATO's reticence.

Regardless of which scenario will materialise, an output-oriented approach should guide the EU decision-makers – if nothing else, then at least to prevent the reappearance of antagonism regarding the EU defence project. In this sense, the Union should strive for a more strategic partnership by setting realistic goals and seeking achievable, operational objectives instead of fruitless commitments. If barriers persist, the Union must refrain from galvanising the *deepening* process, and rather encourage a greater political dialogue on the basis of which to further EU-NATO relations in the medium term. In that regard, the EU should attempt to seize any windows of opportunity to *widen* the interplay with NATO, if possible, *deepening* it, with the purpose of being prepared to face any future adversities. Conversely, if cooperation drops, the main output is the *political value*. EU-NATO relations serve as a tool to safeguard the EU defence project and secure the political equilibrium reached with NATO on this matter. In this constellation, the relations with NATO serve primarily internal security objectives and ensure that the Union can develop independent tools to be better prepared vis-à-vis new security challenges. High-level relations and staff-to-staff interactions remain pivotal. However, the Union should complement them by bolstering bilateral relations with crucial allies, primarily the US.

Further Reading

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