

# EU-NATO cooperation and the Strategic Compass

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Report

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## INTRODUCTION

The European Union's (EU) cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is set to prominently feature in the Union's Strategic Compass on security and defence. In dealing with resilience and partnerships, there will be scope under the Strategic Compass to assess how the EU and NATO can **better respond to complex crises and emergencies and the protection of Europe**. As NATO also moves towards the revision of its own Strategic Concept, and with a view to enhancing the security of Europe and the transatlantic relationship, there is an opportunity for the EU and NATO to discuss a range of strategic issues.

Any discussion of EU-NATO relations has to take place against the backdrop of a broader strategic context in which European states are being called to take on more responsibility for their security. With the rise of China and the actions of Russia, as well as emerging and disruptive technologies and climate change, there are **new security challenges on the horizon**. As a consequence, the EU increasingly understands that it may have to take on more responsibility for crisis situations in its near and wider neighbourhoods. Given the shared memberships of EU and NATO by many European countries, this is an opportune moment to discuss the future of EU-NATO relations.

To this end, this **high-level conference brought together over 140 individuals** including senior government representatives, EU and NATO officials and think tank analysts to discuss the current nature of EU-NATO relations. In particular, this conference was an opportunity to take stock of EU-NATO relations following the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, recent events in Afghanistan and the climate-induced crises experienced in Europe during the summer. Finally, this conference was timely in that it precedes the likely signing of a new EU-NATO Joint Declaration by the end of 2021.

## BUILDING AN ESSENTIAL PARTNERSHIP

There have been decades of cooperation between the EU and NATO, dating back even before the 16 December 2002 EU-NATO Declaration on European Security and Defence Policy. Nevertheless, **cooperation has certainly intensified since 2016 with the adoption of a EU-NATO Joint Declaration**. A follow up Joint Declaration in 2018 and a common set of 74 proposed actions helped to maintain the momentum for cooperation and a further Declaration is foreseen at the end of 2021. The timing of this Joint Declaration could not

be more timely given that the EU is drafting a Strategic Compass and NATO is set to revise its Strategic Concept.

Beyond political declarations, however, there is clearly a need for the EU and NATO to address the strategic landscape faced by the Euro-Atlantic region. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerabilities Europe faces when confronting major health crises. The evacuation from Afghanistan has also raised a multitude of questions, including whether Europe is ready and capable of undertaking rescue and evacuation missions. What is more, the recent experience of the 'AUKUS affair' suggests that communication between NATO allies remains to be improved. Finally, both **the EU and NATO increasingly have to address the challenge of resilience** and ensuring that partners can effectively counter hybrid threats such as disinformation and cyber-attacks.

Even though Russia's illegal seizure of Crimea brought the EU and NATO closer together, it is clear that the EU's own shift **from strategic innocence to more responsibility for security and defence** has contributed to a more mature EU-NATO partnership. Indeed, the high-level political bodies such as the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC) and the North Atlantic Council (NAC) are meeting more frequently and political dialogue has been strengthened.

At the staff-to-staff level, the Policy Planning Divisions at NATO International Staff and the European External Action Service have taken steps to organise foresight seminars to **enhance strategic awareness and anticipation**. However, staff members from both organisations can aim for a more structured approach to dialogue. This can include a listing of regular exchanges and strategic dialogue meetings on different topics aimed at ensuring more coherence and avoiding unnecessary duplication at the working level.

What is more, the EU and NATO can boast of cooperation in regions such as the Western Balkans where there are close operational relations. Both organisations have also worked more intensely on countering disinformation, especially in relation to **countering harmful narratives and supporting European governments** with capacity and support. Of course, the experience of Afghanistan highlights the distance to go before European governments in NATO and the EU are better prepared for complex crises occurring beyond their shores. Although it is too early to draw concrete lessons, there is certainly a need for closer civilian-military interaction.

The EU has also taken the bold step of opening up the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project on military mobility to Canada, Norway and the United States. Not only is this a sign of good will on the part of the EU, but it allows the EU and NATO to **intensify the respective efforts on ensuring the movement of military equipment across Europe** in a more timely fashion. Beyond this example, the progress reports on the Joint Declarations clearly show an intensification of efforts in areas such as the Parallel and Coordinated Exercises and hybrid threats at the working level.

### ADDRESSING THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

However, there are challenges standing in the way of greater EU-NATO cooperation, although some of these obstacles are not insurmountable. One of these dynamics relates to the **growing importance of EU security and defence** and the reprioritisation of US interests *vis-à-vis* Europe and the Indo-Pacific. In one important respect, the Biden Administration appears to be open to the idea that the EU should take on more responsibility for security and defence in its own neighbourhood. For some, this can be seen as an opportunity to enhance the EU's strategic autonomy, but this concept continues to have a divisive meaning among European capitals.

In this respect, a **greater European capacity and willingness** to take on more of the security burden from American partners is generally viewed positively in Washington. There appears to be momentum in this regard, especially following the 'AUKUS affair'. Paradoxically, this episode and the experience of Afghanistan may even lead to a greater US push for more European strategic responsibility. Nevertheless, with such momentum comes risks. Primarily, ambivalent European governments need to be reassured that a greater commitment to EU security and defence does not come at the expense of the US security guarantee.

Another major issue facing EU-NATO cooperation is the question of China. Indeed, **NATO is increasingly focusing on the security challenges posed by China** and this approach is largely seen against the backdrop of the US approach to security in the Indo-Pacific. For the EU, a more balanced approach to China may be desirable and this implies a more holistic approach to the region, especially given that almost 2 million EU citizens reside in the Indo-Pacific. In this respect, EU-NATO relations are bound to be increasingly caught up in wider discussions about the Indo-Pacific and China. It is for such reasons that the EU-US dialogue on security and defence is important.

### THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE EU AND NATO

A core challenge for the EU and NATO is to ensure that each body can react to complex crises in an effective manner. This implies the need for **creative thinking and new policy solutions** that may encourage the EU and NATO to work in new and deeper ways together. It also means playing to the strengths of each organisation. For example, cooperation can be much broader than security and defence and also include questions about digitalisation or climate change. In this respect, there are at least three main areas where the EU and NATO can explore further cooperation:

- 1) **Resilience:** the EU and NATO can take greater steps to pool their expertise to counter hybrid threats but this implies a need for new technological solutions and, above all else, civilian expertise. Far greater cooperation can be achieved on countering hybrid threat and the EU and NATO can explore ways to ensure cooperation between hybrid and cyber rapid response tools. Notwithstanding the traditional challenge of information exchange between the two organisations, any response to hybrid threats requires information sharing. There has been a strong commitment to resilience by NATO and the EU and the task now is to bring together a range of public and

private stakeholders to address critical infrastructure protection, foreign interference, humanitarian crises and climate change.

- 2) **Emerging and disruptive technologies:** both the EU and NATO have to make best use of recent and future innovations in defence and civil technologies. NATO has recently initiated efforts on innovation and the EU, through the European Defence Fund, is in an important position to stimulate European investments in technologies. Emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and quantum computing have a clear military relevance, but the EU and NATO have only barely begun to cooperate on the standards and regulations required to manage and harness disruption. Again, given its unique position the EU is well-placed to mobilise and generate regulation and financial resources.
- 3) **Climate change:** cooperative EU-NATO responses to climate change will increasingly be required. Both the EU and NATO have taken early steps to 'green defence' and the Union naturally has an added-value in this domain given its high-level of investments through the European Green Deal. Nevertheless, the EU and NATO have a vested interest in ensuring that they develop energy efficient technologies and equipment that does not undermine any operational performance.

The **Strategic Compass and the Strategic Concept processes represent a key opportunity to bolster EU-NATO cooperation**. For this to happen, both processes need to be transparent and encourage further dialogue. A goal should be to enhance the capacities of European governments when confronting traditional and unconventional threats. Indeed, both the EU and NATO find themselves in similar strategic situations where it is clear that a 'zero-sum game' mentality will not advance the cause of Euro-Atlantic security. Looking to the next Joint Declaration, the Strategic Compass and the Strategic Concept, there are clear opportunities for finding synergies and ensuring that the outcomes of further cooperation between the EU and NATO are greater than the simple sum of the efforts on both sides.