

“Explaining a Fraught Relationship:
The United States, NATO,
and the European Union”

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NOTE: In a twist on the standard seminar presentation, prior to presenting the substance of this paper on November 5th I plan to engage those in attendance in a genuine policy discussion/debate that is going on inside the Administration: whether the US should weaken its long-standing NATO commitments to allow for deeper bilateral cooperation with the EU, including joint military action. The paper at this stage is merely a highly preliminary sketch—more like a think piece—not anything approximating a thoroughly developed and highly polished seminar paper. On the contrary, it is motivated by a current policy debate and represents an attempt to use the issues of this debate as a means by which to frame an outcome in need of a theory-based explanation. The paper seeks to provide a background as well as lay out some of the causal contours that might explain an outcome that at present is the motivation for a policy debate that seeks to transform this outcome into a different more preferred outcome.

The triangular relations between the US, EU, and NATO are fraught. Formal US commitments to NATO are preventing constructive cooperation between the US and EU that appears to be in their mutual interest. While this scenario has begun to change on the ground, and the old hard lines of alliance commitments are beginning to soften in practice, the much vaunted and long-standing Atlantic Alliance is certifiably unstable and may not be able to withstand the centrifugal pressures currently arrayed against it. What explains this paradox? This paper seeks to identify the causes of a fairly surprising set of circumstances, an outcome so thoroughly undesired by policymakers they are at present seeking means of transforming it.

The NATO alliance has been significantly hampered by difficulties experienced in the Afghan theater, as relations between the US and European allies that grew severely strained under the Bush Administration have hardly dissipated with the transition to the current administration. The unwillingness of European allies—who together comprise the core Member States of the EU—to make sufficient troop contributions to ISAF has rankled American leadership past and present. Eight years in the running, the War in

Afghanistan continues to suffer from troop shortages in the field and perceived imbalances among the major contributing countries.

Indeed, relations among NATO allies are not improving as the Obama Administration finds itself between Scylla and Charybdis in Afghanistan: without additional troop commitments from European allies, the US must choose between the incapacity of current forces to clear and hold outlying areas and the political pitfalls of larger body counts and fiscal deficits. Though NATO is on the record as an alliance in agreement to deploy a larger ISAF force by early 2010, only the UK is sending additional forces to the region. Germany, Netherlands, and Spain are in fact considering scaling back their current troop allotments, and the UK figure involves fewer than 500 additional pairs of boots on the ground.

A marquee exhibit of NATO's current state of instability is the alliance's Comprehensive Approach. Stemming from the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO has formally committed itself to a widened array of foreign policy tools for stabilizing and reconstructing conflict affected states—ranging from the hard tools of kinetic warfare across the spectrum to the soft tools of long term development and everything in-between. The term “comprehensive” connotes a horizontal concept that goes from soup to nuts, applying the complete foreign policy toolbox in an attempt to transform war zones into fully functioning states.

De facto, however, the commitment to this rubric has been sorely lacking, giving ammunition to critics who appear on solid ground in accusing the Alliance of playing politics by making it appear as if the 28 Member States all stand in unison on something important (what could be more substantive than a new commitment to resolving the

problems of so-called failed states). Indeed, it seems the Comprehensive Approach has been used to paper over the alliance fissures that cracked wide open in Afghanistan, the primary piece of evidence for which involves the CA's Action Plan. The so-called Action Plan has been thoroughly un-acted on, as it comprises the epitome of a paper tiger: no additional NATO capabilities have been developed to match the rhetoric used widely by NATO leaders.

An additional example of NATO's problems involve the EU, most of whose members can also be found in NATO. EU Member States have begun to strike out on their own, i.e. without the U.S. Despite being seriously inhibited by the constraint of limited resources, the EU has resisted American opposition and proceeded to set up an independent military headquarters in Brussels distinct from NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE)—not to mention an independent intelligence coordinating entity. Moreover, the EU now possesses its own rapid reaction force capability. Despite numerous failures to follow through on rhetorical pronouncements by politicians, under High Representative Javier Solana the EU created its Battlegroups capability that became operational in early 2007: approximately 1500 troops can in theory deploy within 15 days and remain in theater for 30 up to 120 days. Some thirteen different configurations of Member State forces and equipment comprise the Battlegroups, which rotate with at least two ready to deploy at all times.¹

Thus, what emerges is a stark contrast between two organizations with effectively the same members but distinctly different goals, a paradox involving the same

¹ No Battlegroup has been deployed to date. Hence this fancy new machine has yet to get out of the garage, the likelihood of which is lowered by the need for 27 fingers simultaneously to press the garage door opener—not to mention the caution induced by the understanding that if it were to crash on its test drive, it would likely never get out of the garage again.

governments pushing their organizations in different directions. At times this paradox can seem highly mystifying, for a cadre of high ranking officers of the EU Military Staff appear to go back and forth between the EUMS and NATO's SHAPE with remarkable ease considering how widely divergent the aims of both organizations are. All of this appears to flip standard cooperation theory insights on their collective head, for cooperation is putatively easy when threats are considerable and more difficult when only minor issues comprise concerns. With two major simultaneous wars involving Alliance members and an unvanquished foe of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, one would expect fairly seamless cooperation across NATO; in fact, the opposite has proved to be the case, thereby necessitating an explanation.

Explanations can be grouped into at least three broad theoretical categories: realism, liberalism, and constructivism:

Realist: Severity/nature of threat and/or unequal distributions of power among allies and enemies account for NATO's current instability. The asymmetric nature of the allied al-Qaeda enemy threat has caught NATO unequipped for the "hi tech" foe encountered on today's battlefields.

Liberal: Institutions emerge when states perceive mutual interests from deepened cooperation; asset specificities and reduced transaction costs among other forms of institution inducing efficiency maintain cooperation most institutional set up. This explanation seems to be precluded by the very nature of the delineated outcome.

Constructivist: Ideational factors and the social construction of actor identities can bode well or ill for cooperation among them; instead of material facts and notions of efficiency, disparately imagined communities may cast aspersions on cooperation.

European members of NATO may desire their own distinct security organization in the EU for no other reason than notions of European identity, honor, and pride.

Other: One strain of alliance theory, collective action based, postulates that a unit or group will cooperate if it includes a member with a preponderance of capability. With the US overstretched and experiencing waning hegemony, it is less able to punish free riders.

[I will be working in the various pertinent literature on alliances, unipolarity, soft balancing, collective action, etc.]