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CONFERENCE ON ‘TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY COOPERATION: FACING THE NEW CHALLENGES’

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Introduction

The Rome conference was the second transatlantic conference organised by the EU Institute for Security Studies in 2003. Coming at a time characterized as “the deepest transatlantic crisis in the post World War II era”, it focused on the EU and US strategic concepts, EU-NATO cooperation, armaments cooperation, and future trends for the transatlantic link. Represented among the roughly sixty participants were diplomats, think tank representatives, academics, and defence officials. This conference report summarises the main topics of discussion within each of the four sessions.

EU and US Strategic Concepts: Facing International Realities

The conference was initiated with a discussion of the EU Security Strategy (ESS) and the US National Security Strategy (NSS). Although stemming from different origins, a number of speakers noted that there are several similarities between the documents. According to a European speaker, the most salient are:

- The striking of an optimistic note at the outset of the ESS and US NSS, registering notably the progress made with the end of the Cold War;
- The blending of different categories and levels of challenges (military and non-military, state and non-state, internal and external) in the new analysis of the threat;

- The advocacy of a proactive and anticipatory approach (e.g. in the ESS, “we should be ready to act before a crisis occurs. Conflict prevention and threat prevention cannot start too early.”).

Both documents acknowledge what was coined a “new shared agenda”: addressing transnationalised human threats (e.g. terrorism and WMD proliferation), countering the challenges posed by nature (e.g. AIDS and climactic disasters) and drawing benefits from the growing and positive interdependence between free-market economies, societies, informational and cultural systems.

In spite of these similarities, several substantial differences were noted. According to several speakers, the most significant are divergences concerning the meaning of pre-emption and the prioritisation among available tools to counter international threats. While the US strategy places primary emphasis on military strength, the EU document highlights the need for a judicious combination of resources.

Current international realities

Generally speaking, participants felt current international realities contribute to the growing transatlantic wedge between Europe and the US. The dates 11/9 (fall of Berlin Wall) and 9/11 were used to illustrate the different contexts used by both sides in the formulation of world perceptions. While November 9, 1989 was equated to an end in the strategic history of Europe, September 11th 2001 was described as a new strategic history for the United States (“it ended our capacity for isolation”).

Poll data was utilised to provide examples of significant transatlantic divergence. One of the more informative examples where the results to the question: “Do European and Americans have different social and cultural values?” In the US, 93% of the respondents answered “yes”; while 79% did so in Europe (for more findings, see the Transatlantic Trends Survey from 2003).

Events in Iraq were seen to have driven this wedge deeper. The need to find common ground on Iraq was evident in several remarks. For example, an American speaker maintained that Europeans should take the lead in formulating new UN resolutions (as long as Jerry Bremer was kept as a special representative to Iraq). NATO would be responsible for the military dimension while both the EU and the US would cover economic reconstruction. According to the speaker, this would be acceptable to the US since it would allow it to “still run things in Iraq.” On the whole, European speakers were more concerned about the implications of a failure in Iraq.

The reform of ESDP and EU-NATO Cooperation

During the second session, the heart of the debate focused on the balance between the NRF and the military dimension of ESDP (referred to as the EU rapid reaction force by all speakers). According to a European speaker, the “NRF has devastating consequences for developing European capabilities.” Specifically, the need to draw personnel from the

same limited pool of deployable forces, combined with some American officers' insistence on a NATO 'right of refusal'—so that the Alliance could effectively block the use of units both assigned to the NRF and the EU response elements—would further endanger European military capacity. Several other participants voiced concern over the option of “right of refusal.”

An American speaker argued that there was no inconsistency in having both an NRF and a EU military rapid response element. The forces would complement each other by taking on different missions. The main challenges would be the coverage of financial costs and effectively drawing force personnel for the two structures from one pool of individuals.

Some participants noted that several questions remain to be answered concerning the collaborative structure between the NRF and a military dimension of ESDP. Examples of outstanding issues include:

- The exact role of DSACEUR
- The process for transferring SFOR from NATO to the EU
- The identification of the pre-defined assets

Several participants drew attention to the growing technological gap between US and European forces. The growing gap between the two sides was identified as one of the key factors behind the US decision to initially act alone against Afghanistan.

According to an American participant, this trend has to be reversed. It was counterproductive that the EU be dependent on the US, something that eventually would emasculate the concept of indivisible transatlantic security. The European objective should not be to copy the US; rather, it should aim to catch up with the US through the gradual transformation of capabilities. An example of a potential strategy for doing so might be the acquisition of commonly owned EU assets (using the NATO AWACS model).

Participants noted a substantial difference in European versus US transformation processes. In the US, force transformation is driven to facilitate network centric warfare and effects based operations. These require alignments in doctrine, strategies and operations. On the European side, the focus is on obtaining network enabled capabilities. Under this framework, the objective is to incorporate modern C4ISR capabilities into operations, without necessarily doing alignments at the strategy and doctrinal level.

A European participant noted that to be realistic, a debate on EU-NATO cooperation had to take into account current realities in Iraq. For example, does the situation in Iraq justify the need for an NRF? What would happen if the force is overstretched and Europeans need to carry out an autonomous operation in the African continent? Is the US leadership in Iraq consistent with European visions and how would a “right of refusal” mechanism impact collaboration?

Armaments and defence industry transatlantic cooperation

According to the majority of speakers, transatlantic cooperation in the areas of armaments and defence industry is bleak and will continue that way. In the words of one speaker, “we see benefits (to collaboration) but little has happened.”

A slew of reasons were given for the sluggish levels of transatlantic collaboration. Among the more common were perceptions of increasing capabilities gaps, spending gaps, and fortress mentalities across the Atlantic. For example, concerning spending levels, it was noted that the EU spends one-third of the US amount in procurement. EU spending levels in R&D equate to one-fourth of the US figure. Nonetheless, it was observed that these reasons did not tell the whole story and could be refuted to a certain degree. For example, greater US spending on defence R&D did “not automatically mean that it is getting value for its money.”

A better explanation for the current malaise in levels of collaboration was attributed to market differences and commitment levels. The US market is generally self-sufficient and does not require transatlantic collaboration to flourish: “US defence firms easily capture more than 90 percent of all defence contracting in its home market, which in turn easily comprises more than 50 percent of all global arms procurement.” European firms, on the other hand, are much more dependent on foreign sales. For example, BaE systems and Thales do 70-75 percent of their business outside their respective countries. With respect to commitment, an American speaker noted that “the greatest barrier to cooperation would appear to be the lack of longterm commitment on the part of key players—mainly the United States—to engage in transatlantic armaments collaboration in a meaningful and determined way.” Several participants pointed to the “Buy American” provisions to illustrate the roadblocks imposed at the political level.

Models for collaboration

In spite of barriers, participants acknowledged that there was room for productive collaboration. Even for a US at the forefront of technology, there are key areas where Europeans can contribute. Examples include European niche capabilities such as low observability technology, computerised information networking, nuclear research, and microelectronics. Other niche areas mentioned were stealth naval ships, air-independent propulsion systems, artillery, and advanced manufacturing (shipbuilding).

Given the potential for benefits on both sides, several models for cooperation were posited. The most commonly referred example was the Joint Strike Fighter program. According to several participants, it provides a workable forum for sharing technologies that allows both foreign investment and ownership. A couple of participants voiced concern over the JSF model. A European speaker noted it would make Europeans the junior partner in any future relationship while another argued the JSF model was not transatlantic enough: “it is a US project with European participation.”

Participants concluded that will and determination were the keys for enhancing armaments and defence collaboration across the Atlantic. In the end, tangible progress will most likely come out of industry and not government sector.

Future trends in the transatlantic partnership

The last session covered future trends in the transatlantic partnership. A short and long-term perspective was used to gauge developments. For the short term, a European speaker observed that prospects for improved relations were limited. Both Europeans and Americans face significant domestic events in 2004. These will require substantial resources and attention. In the US, preoccupations are likely to center on developments in Iraq and the upcoming national elections. In the EU, the enlargement process, parliamentary elections, and the adoption of a constitution will likewise turn attention inward.

For the long-term view, the focus was on the EU. An American speaker predicted that the EU would engage in either “bandwagoning” or “balancing” behaviours. It all depended on how far Europeans could unite in their efforts to develop their institutions and policies. For the next coming years, it was generally agreed that ESDP would “not go backwards”. Among other long-term predictions were:

- The Union will eventually have agenda setting powers within NATO. To illustrate the point, an American speaker noted that if Europeans were to propose to NATO a mission that they thought was important, but that the US thought unimportant in its own terms, the US would have a second reason to approve the mission—to keep it out of the EU’s hands, and to avoid the prestige loss associated with a success.
- The hegemon (the US) will continue to preserve its power—something that is likely to lead to more transatlantic tension in the future.
- Even if there is a change of government in the United States, the tasks at hand will not change. The realities of Iraq and other events in the greater Middle East will continue to demand significant attention.

Conclusion

The underlying sentiment throughout the conference was that transatlantic relations are currently at a low point. The relationship was frequently characterized by the many differences that have surfaced over the past twelve months. On the positive side, the fragile state of the relationship gave participants a strong impetus to stress the need for finding transatlantic solutions to shared problems. Several participants underscored the need to return from a transatlantic relationship based on urgency to one based on common interests.