The Future of Euro-Atlantic Institutions

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Reinventing the Past

Anyone gazing into the future should have his or her feet firmly planted in the past. In this connection, it may be useful to start by taking some distance from, or at least re-evaluating, what we think of (in the West) as the traditional or typical 'Atlantic' relationship and the institutions that serve it. In 1945, for instance, it was by no means fated that the pattern would develop exactly as it did for the second part of the twentieth century, with two-strategically symmetrical (if qualitatively different) sets of collective institutions – the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (Warsaw Pact), the European Union's precursors and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (or COMECON) – facing each other with their embattled front lines in the centre of Germany. During the early post-war years, the Moscow-driven Communist movement only gradually brought the East European nations under its sway; the Berlin Wall only came up in 1961; Britain under Sir Winston Churchill was the first to put forward the idea of an integrated European political and economic community (under the name of the 'Council of Europe'), but, as we know, ended up being left outside the most integrated European circle for nearly 30 years. A proposal would have gone through to establish a European Defence Community with a fully integrated European army and without the Americans, if the French National Assembly had not got cold feet – strangely foreshadowing the 2005 referendum results on the European Constitution – in 1953. It was these changes to the original plan that made it inevitable that the US should join the Europeans in history's strongest-ever fully guaranteed alliance to hold the Russians back from the Western half of Europe, while the European Community (later European Union, EU) was created and was

to develop for nearly 40 years as a purely non-military enterprise under NATO's umbrella.

What is happening at the present juncture can, in a sort of historical shorthand, be described as a gradual unravelling and blurring of those neat and clear solutions. Changes are happening in the size of institutions, their roles, their ambitions – it already seems strange to recall that NATO had no formal rights or activities outside the European area throughout the Cold War – and, of course, in their political and psychological attitudes. It will be a mistake, however, to hastily diagnose this process as a kind of 'revenge' of history, presaging a return to the starting point of 1945 (or even 1939). Some changes can surely be categorised as irreversible, such as the twentieth-century defeat both of fascism and communism in Europe; the overwhelming move away by Europeans (including even the non-allied states, in their own fashion) from a purely national and competitive concept of defence; and the fact that the Europeans will never again become *territorial* conquerors and possessors in the rest of the world. What the Euro-Atlantic community is moving towards is something truly new and none the easier to imagine or cope with for that.

In order to formulate some of the important and as yet unresolvable questions about that future, an answer has to be provided to *what* has changed so far, and *why.* Here, it will be suggested that two major overlapping and cumulative shifts of environment and agenda have shaped the internal evolution and external relationships of the two major Euro-Atlantic institutions, NATO and the EU, over the last 15 years.

The Immediate Post-Cold War Period

The drivers of the first great wave of change from 1989-90 onwards are clear. They include the complete collapse of the Eastern 'mirror-image' collective institutions, followed by the incomplete success[2] of the Russian Federation's attempts to reconstruct a strategic and economic community, at least in the former territory of the Soviet Union (minus the Baltic states). As a result of this and the subsequent break-up of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, new states multiplied all across the region. There was a wholesale strategic 'opening' of the European security system, both in terms of the collapse of geographical divisions and the shift in security concepts: peace was to be sought not by sitting tight behind dividing lines, but by going forth together for active security operations and mutual assistance in reform.

Increasing the demand for the former was, of course, the more negative factor of the unleashing of civil conflicts in South-Eastern Europe and both external and internal wars in the former Soviet space.

By the mid-1990s, it was clear what the principal architectural solutions would be. NATO and the EU would not only have to expand Eastwards, eventually to the whole Central European region and prospectively the Balkans, but they would also have to work for a peaceful and (if possible) constructive *modus vivendi,* with an essentially 'non-integratable' Russia. NATO, which succeeded throughout the Cold War by never having to fight, had to be rapidly 'operationalised' for *ad hoc* conflict management tasks – which were at first limited to Europe, but unlike classic collective defence, did not conceptually have to be. Experience in the Balkans and elsewhere proved that even the most positive uses of the military tool could not bring full solutions to conflicts (or, indeed, prevent them). The new emphasis on multi-functional intervention brought the EU's potential role as a civilian security actor to the fore and posed new challenges of inter-institutional coordination. By the end of the decade, European shame and frustration at the experiences of the air war over Kosovo were to push the EU one historic step further into establishing its own military crisis management arm, the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

After September 11, 2001

Without exaggerating their direct impact on Europe as such, the cataclysmic terrorist attacks in the US on 9/11 accelerated some of the above trends and gave others a new twist. They probably made inevitable the 'big bang' enlargement of both NATO and the EU,[3] but at the same time provided a face-saving way for Moscow to take them calmly (because President Putin could claim a higher community of interest with the West against terrorism). By moving East, however, the Western institutions endowed themselves with a new set of 'neighbourhood' problems and also moved into a more direct interaction with Russia, potentially undercutting the former value of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), both as a meeting-place and as a buffer. Meanwhile, with Al-Qaida as the new enemy number one, the strategic focus moved further away from Europe and further downgraded the life-and-death importance of the European territory for US strategists. Logically enough, NATO was urged by the US to turn its attention outside its

traditional area and by 2003, it was ready to take over responsibility for the military peace-building operation (International Security Assistance Force, ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Superimposed on these institutional developments came the massive political rift caused, both within Europe and (on some aspects) between the whole of Europe and the US, by Washington's decision to invade Iraq without any international-legal sanction in March 2003. Even for the US' operational partners, this and other aspects of the US anti-terror campaign tended to highlight underlying US-European differences over issues as fundamental as the proper response to 'asymmetric' threats, the limits of military force and the authority of international law. The Europeans were forced willy-nilly to think in new ways about what the EU stood for and what it wanted as a free-standing security power. The very nature of the new non-traditional threats highlighted the security relevance of competences the EU had long taken for granted, but which NATO could never match in fields like border management, immigration and internal order, infrastructure and energy management, the use of economic tools for strategic leverage, and responses to 'human security' threats like disease, natural disasters and climate change. Pushed by individual terrorist attacks (Madrid in March 2004 and London in July 2005), the EU came step-by-step into the open with clear collective formulations both of its inward-looking security responsibilities and its global aims. In consequence, the US found itself more and more often dealing with the EU either bilaterally or in larger groupings like the G8 and the UN Security Council – and not through NATO – on matters of most topical security concern. This is not to say that Euro-Atlantic relations have moved fully and effectively from one paradigm of governance to another. On the contrary, justified anxieties remain in many quarters about the adequacy of the US-EU channel; the rather limited role into which NATO has been compressed (hence the lively debate about extending it!); and the diverging visions across the Atlantic on the role of institutionalised cooperation in general.

Latest Developments, Future Questions

Four years after 9/11, there has been time for second thoughts, lessons learned and subtle corrections. Many features of the current Euro-Atlantic scene may be explained by the sobering effect of failures: the US getting bogged down in Iraq, and NATO finding it very tough (both technically

and politically[4]) to expand its mission to the more dangerous parts of Afghanistan, while the EU has suffered a massive crisis of confidence after French and Dutch voters rejected the new Constitutional Treaty in referendums held in 2005. This set back further enlargement of both the EU and NATO, and meanwhile other players are re-asserting their ability to present serious challenge to any supposed global dominance of the Euro-Atlantic community and its agenda. Russia's tampering with gas supplies through Ukraine to Europe (reminding many EU countries uncomfortably of their strategic dependence on post-Soviet energy sources), the reactions throughout the Islamic world to a hopeless misjudged publication of cartoons in a Danish newspaper, and China's new activism and leverage on many fronts are only the most obvious examples. As a general result, the current rather subdued and civilised tone of trans-Atlantic relations may best be seen as the calm of exhaustion. Neither side has much appetite for new adventures or new quarrels, even if some 'maximalists' on both sides are still talking big, perhaps to mask their unease.

The questions this leaves open for the future of Euro-Atlanticism are legion and just a few are picked out here. First, has the security agenda moved away too hastily from the former imperative of physically defending Europe's own territory, and if that still remains necessary, who is effectively ensuring it at present and who will do so in future? Second, will the EU's present 'pause for reflection' on the Constitution crisis get prolonged into a kind of gradual attrition (under the weight of new members, economic weaknesses, or whatever) or will the Union – as so often in the past – turn out to have 'stepped back to take a bigger jump'? If it does go forward as a *sui generis* strategic power with global ambitions, who will in practice be leading it and in which direction? Can it become stronger (and potentially larger) without losing its prospects of a non-zero-sum cooperation with Russia? Is it fated to have a relationship of competition, of tense co-existence or of positive synergy and division of labour with the US (a question which, of course, depends also on who the next US President will be)? Is there room in the longer term for an active NATO in the greater European space, and/or a united and legitimate NATO in the wider world? Will the US and collective Europe have more similarities, or differences, in the way they relate strategically to the world's other growing powers – including India itself – and will these Euro-Atlantic dynamics have a net positive or negative effect on the prospects for global peace and human development? Is it correct to expect, or fear, that the EU's and NATO's new roles will gradually

squeeze out 'softer' institutions like the OSCE? And in that case, could there be a counter-trend to maintain 'variable geometries' through the coalescence of sub-regional lobbies both within the big European institutions and on their borders? Manifold as these questions are, they are still limited to asking what *could* happen; perhaps the even bigger issue that Europeans like the author need to ponder upon – and to debate with friends in other regions – is what *should.*

References/EndNotes

[1]   This short text is based on a lecture delivered by the author at the IDSA in New Delhi on February 21, 2006, which explains the lack of the normal apparatus of academic references.

[2]   Incomplete because Moscow has never been able to persuade all its neighbours into close military cooperation, and the effectiveness both of its strategic control of the region and of post-Soviet economic integration has been limited.

[3]   Both institutions opted to admit the maximum of applicants in 2004 (7 to NATO and 10 to the EU), without looking too hard at their military qualifications, in view of the value of having Europe's whole territory under one discipline in face of the new 'transnational' threats.

[4]   The reference is to the cliff-hanging in January 2006 before the Parliament at The Hague decided to approve sending a key extra contingent of Netherlands troops to ISAF.

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