



# NATO Goes Realistic

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**ABSTRACT** The two pillars of the Atlantic Alliance are the United States and the European Union (EU). In 2011, France and the United Kingdom went to war in Libya entirely outside the defense structures of the EU. It was also the first time a major military operation was carried out by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that was not under the leadership of the United States. This article presents reasons why the EU was totally absent in Libya and why it does not necessarily portend “Europeanization” of the Alliance. The fundamental problem in organizing transatlantic relations is the asymmetrical relationship between the United States and Europe.

**KEYWORDS** European Union; Libyan War; NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

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The most significant event in the Libyan War was something that did not happen, a non-event reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes’s celebrated “dog that did not bark in the night.” The foreign policy and defense structures created so laboriously by the European Union were totally absent. France and the United Kingdom went to war in Libya and deliberately ignored the Brussels institutions. Why? What are the implications for the European Union, the probable evolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and transatlantic relations generally?

Flash back to November 2, 2010. The French and British governments announced an agreement to coordinate closely their defense policies and military forces. It included even the possibility of jointly financing, building, and operating a nuclear aircraft carrier. At present, all of Europe boasts of only one such formidable warship, the *Charles de Gaulle*, out of service periodically for routine maintenance. (The United States has eleven nuclear aircraft carriers, each at the core of a battle group.) Some enthusiasts pointed to the accord as the embryo of a single European armed force, which could be an instrument of a common European foreign policy.

They did not read the fine print. Spokesmen for the British government stated publicly that the Franco–British joint force would be completely independent of the Brussels institutions, which they stigmatized as “paralytic.” They indicated specifically that the accord was not to be viewed as an extension of the 1998 St. Lo agreement between France and the United Kingdom, which was left ambiguous regarding NATO to accommodate differing interpretations by the two signatory powers. The British wished to clear the air as far as they were concerned, emphasizing that the 2010 accord

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was intended as a reinforcement of NATO, not as an eventual challenge to or replacement of it. To the dismay of proponents of ever-increasing European unity, the British explicitly called for a new kind of decision making in defense matters: to invite states to cooperate through bilateral accords, which other states could then support or even join, depending on circumstances. The driving force was to be individual sovereign states, not the Eurotechnocracy in Brussels. The British defense minister, Liam Fox (who subsequently resigned for personal reasons) later added an acerbic comment. In his view, Germany has military capabilities—but its political system, notably the strength of pacifist sentiment reflected in political parties and the federal structure, renders making decisions on the use of military force difficult. Liam favors cooperation for European defense, provided it is not done under the auspices of Brussels and its bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup>

The French, in principle, view NATO warily, and seek to place limits on its role and reach whenever possible. General de Gaulle's policy has resonated within the entire political class: to assume that the United States will use its preponderant position within NATO to advance its own interests, which may not coincide with French or European interests. NATO should be kept as a useful means for calling in the United States as a reserve force when Europe cannot deal with a major challenge (like the threat from the Soviet Union) by itself. Deep in the French psyche is the model of Allied operations in 1918, with Marshal Foch as supreme commander of military forces (including American) on the Western front and Clemenceau as statesman-in-chief. In the Libyan War, the French military by itself could not have met the challenge. Was the European Union (EU) an option instead of NATO, with American forces accommodated under European command? The short answer is, absolutely not. Consider the obstacles. Germany opposed, for good reasons, any intervention in Libya—this alone ruled out an EU operation. The United Kingdom declared that a military operation had to take place outside of EU defense structures, characterized anew as “paralytic.” The United States would contribute its forces only through NATO. Prime Minister Berlusconi later revealed that he agreed personally with Chancellor Merkel in opposing intervention, but went along when assured it would be a NATO operation. Even

traditionally neutral Sweden agreed to participate on condition that it would be through NATO—and it is not even a full member of NATO (although it is a member of its Partnership for Peace). It was NATO or nothing.

Coinciding with the absence of EU defense structures in the Libyan War was the severe crisis of the euro currency. Fundamental questions have been raised about the nature of the decision-making process in the EU. These questions were discussed in 2005 when Europeans had to decide whether they wanted to adopt a Constitution that created a more perfect union, much as did the Americans in 1787–1788. The defeat of that proposal by referenda in France and the Netherlands pushed aside this debate. The European political class engineered some changes in the Treaty of Lisbon by avoiding referenda, except in Ireland, where it is required by law. A negative Irish vote created problems that delayed the implementation of the Treaty until December 2009. The deepening crisis over the euro has threatened the very existence of the EU. In principle, the transatlantic alliance has two “pillars”: North America (the United States and Canada) on the one side, and “Europe” on the other. What is the European pillar—the individual states of Europe, the EU, or something else? If it is the EU, what is happening to it?

## BACK TO BASICS

During the hard-fought French Socialist Party primaries in 2011, one contender, Martine Aubry (mayor of Lille and party secretary) commented that the EU is best understood as “*une fédération des états-nations*” (federation of nation-states)—a phrase popularized if not coined by her father Jacques Delors, a former president of the European Commission and principal architect of the euro currency. Federations can do some things very well, other things less well, and some things only with great difficulty or not at all. The EU has been highly successful in creating a free-trade area characterized by largely unencumbered movement of people, goods, and capital. It has created common standards and regulations for the economy, thus benefiting from economies of scale. In economic matters, the EU has some of the characteristics of a federal government. With a population of close to 500 million

people compared with slightly more than 300 million Americans, the EU is now on a par with the United States by most measures of per capita income and gross economic production (each accounting for almost one-quarter of the global economy). The emergence of the EU as an economic giant is one of the most important geopolitical developments of the late twentieth century.

The EU has encountered serious problems in creating a common currency, the euro, which has been adopted by 17 of the 27 member states. The United Kingdom, Denmark, and Sweden meet the requirements for membership in the Eurozone but decline to join. The other seven countries, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe, have not yet qualified for membership, and some are now having second thoughts. Critical decisions about education, social welfare, labor-management relations, and tax codes are not within the purview of central control. A single currency requires common economic governance, as Jacques Delors himself now argues, for which there is not (or not yet) a political consensus.

The domains of defense and foreign affairs give federations the greatest difficulties. The key decision makers in the EU in those areas are the leaders of the individual nation-states, despite the creation of an Office of High Representative for Foreign Affairs (now occupied by Catherine Ashton) under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty. This is not to say that the European common defense effort is insignificant. In the past decade, EU forces have made almost two dozen foreign civil and military interventions—involving some 10,000 troops and 5,000 police officers under European command, independent of NATO. They have taken place in the Balkans (Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo), in Eastern Europe (a mission in Georgia), in Africa (Congo-Kinshasa and Chad), along with participation in an international effort to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia. These efforts are useful, primarily in Africa, in helping to protect vulnerable populations in limited circumstances. They require long preparation, constant negotiation, and are suitable for police or stabilization purposes—not for waging major wars.

The fundamental problem in organizing transatlantic relations is the asymmetrical relationship between the United States and Europe. The United States has a democratic state governing a country.

The EU is not a democracy, not a state, and Europe is not a country. A vast scholarly literature documents each point in the above sentence. (1) The EU has a “democratic deficit.” Although members of the European Parliament now are elected, the campaigns are overwhelmingly about domestic politics, tend to reflect domestic party alignments in each member state, and arouse little interest within the European electorate, probably because the European Parliament itself has limited power. Members of the Commission are chosen by nations and represent their major domestic parties. The Council consists of chiefs of government and of state—and functions more as a diplomatic conclave than as an autonomous executive. The legitimacy of the EU comes mainly through the legitimacy of democratically elected member governments. (2) The key decisions, especially in foreign and security policy and even as regards fiscal and economic governance, are made by leaders of the member states, not by a separate central power. (3) Finally, and perhaps the heart of the matter, Europe is not a country—there is an insufficient sense of identity as a community to support the weight of a sovereign state.

## THE WEST AT BAY

The air is now filled with tough talk about NATO. Former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson recently declared that we can no longer be satisfied with reassuring language enshrined after lengthy consultations and painful negotiations in periodic announcements of “strategic concepts” concerning such problems as missile defense, nuclear deterrence, relations with Russia, and global partnership. “I am not one to be mesmerized by fine words about underlying bonds of common values,” he declared. “They don’t provide helicopters and precision bombs.” The question is: What works and what does not work? Several different responses have been made to the present difficulties of the transatlantic relationship. Some observers are deeply pessimistic. Their arguments: Europe no longer matters. With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, Europeans do not have the will or the means to defend themselves, as shown by their reluctance to pay for their own defense. All their talk about creating a viable Common Foreign and Security Policy, comments Richard Haass, is just that—talk. Global power is

shifting away from Europe toward Asia and other rising powers elsewhere, particularly the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and, above all, China). Inevitably the United States will turn away from Europe and NATO and toward other parts of the world. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates contributed to this atmosphere of gloom and doom in his farewell appearance at NATO headquarters in June 2011 when he warned that the U.S. Congress would not be willing to pay for the defense of people who are not willing to defend themselves. There is a real possibility, he said, of a “dim if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance.”<sup>2</sup>

Others believe that American rather than European power is in decline. Among the frequently sounded themes: The United States is no longer the dominant superpower that it was in the past. Confidence in the quality of American leadership has been weakened, perhaps fatally, by the launching of a “war of choice” in Iraq. The rise of China and the other BRIC nations inevitably will create a multipolar world in which China may well become the dominant superpower. These structural trends will lead to the lessening importance and perhaps the disappearance of NATO. Many Europeans believe or hope that an increasingly united and self-confident EU can fill the vacuum created by American decline. The EU in the past has always come out of crises stronger than before. Europeans are being urged to rise to the occasion and take steps to create true economic governance and an effective foreign and defense policy. Were this to happen, many hope the United States and the EU would then march “shoulder to shoulder” as equals within a revitalized transatlantic relationship and in NATO.

## THE WEST STILL MATTERS

News of the death of the West has been greatly exaggerated. Almost a billion people reside in the nations of the EU, the United States, Canada, and a few other closely associated countries. Together they account for about half of the entire global economy and are not likely to dip lower than 35 percent in the future. The values that underlie their political and social systems—constitutional democracy, rule of law, open societies, and mixed economies—enable them to adjust to rapid change in an orderly manner. A rising trajectory for the much talked about

BRIC nations and others (Malaysia, Indonesia, South Africa, etc.) is not inevitable. Each aspiring superpower has considerable obstacles in the path to domination, above all the existence of regional rivals who have their own pride and desire to resist new forms of imperialism. The major contender for superpower status is China; it may well be contained by neighboring powers to be reckoned with—India (soon to become more populous than China), Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and others who may prefer to join forces with the United States and Europe to preserve independence and dignity. Similar countervailing pressures may be in place, with even more force, for India, Russia, Brazil, and the others. Authoritarian trends in most rising powers also have negative long-term consequences, making it difficult to cope with abuse of power and systemic corruption.

The rise of the “rest” gives the West a powerful incentive to draw together—which could be another of the many ruses of history. On both sides of the Atlantic, more will need to be done to defend common interests and project power when necessary in the Age of Austerity now upon us. The need for cooperation is especially urgent in dealing with turmoil in the Greater Middle East and Africa. So long as the vital interests of Americans and Europeans are at stake in wide swathes of the world, they will find it expedient to coordinate policies and act together to the fullest possible extent. How to do so? Cooperation must be based on reality, not rhetoric.

## THE ALLIANCE GETS REAL

Could the EU evolve into a full-fledged federal state? In politics, never say never; in this case, however, the prospect is so dim, at least in the near future, that it can be ruled out. There is a fundamental defect in the decision-making mechanism of the EU’s foreign and defense policy. Twenty-seven (soon to be 28 with Croatia) foreign and/or defense ministers, with their diverse cultures and geopolitical interests, would take an inordinate amount of time to formulate a meaningful policy in emergencies. The world cannot wait for this long process to unfold. And, if an agreement somehow emerged, and was then presented to the American partner as a fait accompli, it is hard to see how it could be

renegotiated. The United States would have to give up its sovereignty—exactly what even the smallest European nations are loath to do.

A new decision-making model is emerging in the EU: forceful initiatives have been taken in both the Libyan and euro crises by at least two of the three major powers (France, the United Kingdom, and Germany). They then mobilized support by a coalition of the willing. France is assuming the key “hinge” role, working with the United Kingdom in foreign and defense policy and with Germany on economic governance. Leadership cannot be expected from the fragmented executive power of the EU. Legitimacy in the EU, President Sarkozy declared in his important speech at Toulon on December 1, 2011, at the height of the crisis of the euro currency, comes through democracy in each member state, not through the Brussels bureaucracy. National political leaders are the ones to put forward proposals, to try to persuade others to join them in finding solutions, and to then act even if there are dissenting voices.

Some European observers contend that the Libyan conflict signals a “tectonic” shift of the balance of power from the United States to Europe. When he announced the return of France to the integrated military command, Sarkozy called for “Europeanization” of the Alliance. In Libya, for the first time ever, NATO deployed forces for a major operation without the United States taking the lead. President Sarkozy asserted that this shows that NATO could serve as a tool to advance the French national interest. He took some pleasure in responding to the criticism by Secretary Gates of Europe’s reluctance to meet its obligations within the alliance by stating that “our American friends” can and should be doing more to support the operations in Libya. Does the Libyan model portend “Europeanization” of the Alliance?

It depends on what is meant by “Europeanization.” One authoritative interpretation has been proposed by Pierre Lellouche, a former French deputy, former Secretary of State for European Affairs, now Secretary of State for Foreign Trade. A graduate of elite schools in France, he has a law degree from Harvard, chaired the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, teaches geopolitics in Parisian universities, and is an adviser to President Sarkozy on transatlantic issues. The French goal, he affirms, is indeed Europeanization. A first step was taken when a French general

(Stéphane Abrial) received the Transformation Command, based in Norfolk, Virginia. It focuses on long-term planning for more effective integration and deployment of NATO forces. This is not enough, says Lellouche. Another step is required: to appoint a European as SACEUR (Supreme Commander Europe) with an American as deputy (thus reversing the existing order). That way Europe would be the leader, not merely a “co-pilot.” Presumably, the office of Secretary General would remain assigned to a European. If Europeanization means there will be a European SACEUR as well as secretary general, with Americans as deputies under each one, the Libya model does not point in that direction. It is inconceivable that such a move would be accepted by the United States—which currently pays 75 percent of NATO’s budget and is, by far, the largest single power within the alliance.<sup>3</sup>

The North Atlantic Treaty does not require unanimity. In a sensible adaptation to the realities of the international state system, it simply stipulates that in case of an attack against any member, each party to the treaty, individually and in concert, would take “such action as it deems necessary . . .” No party to the treaty is designated as sole leader, and no party has a veto. NATO operates on the basis of a large consensus, without compulsion. All decisions involve negotiations and compromises. Proposals by the United States and all other parties are frequently watered down or rejected in debates at the North Atlantic Council under the chairmanship of a secretary-general who is always a European. Like any other member, the United States can refuse to contribute, to military operations of which it disapproves or to attach conditions to its participation (the case in Libya).

In practice, the United States generally does play a leadership role. It is hard to see how any major military operation by NATO can succeed without participation by American forces. But the United States was ambiguous about the intervention in Libya. The Obama administration went back and forth on how much support to give to the Arab revolt that started in Tunisia, exploded in Egypt, and then spread to other countries, including, notably, Libya. No one knew or could possibly have known with any certainty whether the overthrow of authoritarian regimes would lead to constitutional democracy, the triumph of Islamic fundamentalism, or sheer

chaos. The political leaders of France and the United Kingdom were intent on assuming the “responsibility to protect” Libyan civilians from slaughter. The Obama administration was quite happy to “lead from behind,” providing military capabilities that were indispensable to the success of the operation. The EU was not and could not be a channel for successful action in dealing with this problem; NATO was the only available tool and worked reasonably well. How to improve its performance in the future is on the agenda. If the outcome in Libya ultimately does not serve the common interests of the West, the carpenters doubtless will blame their tools.

## Notes

1. For the British view of the accord of November 2, 2010, see the interview with John Stevens, former Conservative member of the European Parliament, in “European Interview no. 50,” *Fondation Robert Schuman*, November 2, 2010; and Liam Fox, interview appearing in *Politique Internationale* 131 (printemps 2011): 289–297.
2. Lord Robertson, speech at Chatham House, July 6, 2011; available online at [acus.org/natosource/text-speech-lord-robertson-transatlantic-relations-case-optimism](http://acus.org/natosource/text-speech-lord-robertson-transatlantic-relations-case-optimism); Richard N. Haass, “Why Europe No Longer Matters,” *Washington Post* (June 19, 2011); and Robert Gates, “Future of NATO,” available at [defense.gov/speeches/20](http://defense.gov/speeches/20) June 2011.
3. Pierre Lellouche, *L'Allié indocile: La France et l'OTAN, de la guerre froide à l'Afghanistan* (Paris: Editions du Moment, 2009): especially pp. 246–248.