Chapter 7

There is No “Europe”:
Disagreements Within NATO Are Not Solely Transatlantic and Pertain to the Fundamentals of European Security

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Analyses of transatlantic relations, and security relations in particular, often focus on differences between the United States and its European allies. This clearly is an important factor. Given Europe’s dependence on US security guarantees, the United States’ continued willingness to engage in the continent’s security is the condition sine qua non for NATO’s survival. US dissatisfaction with European engagement and defense spending has consequently been a key item on intra-Alliance agendas since 1949. US concerns about NATO and its European allies’ engagement were indeed voiced openly long before Donald Trump. Debates about burden sharing also trickle down to domestic politics in member states and thus contribute to shaping the general climate within the Alliance, as for instance the 2 percent objective that has featured in several German electoral campaigns.

It is, however, equally important not to overlook structural differences among European Allies. When the Reflection Group appointed by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg published its report on “NATO 2030” in late 2020, it was no coincidence that Alliance cohesion was among the key points. Indeed, disagreements among Allies have increased in recent years—to the point of famously prompting French president Emmanuel Macron to declare NATO “brain dead” because it is no longer able to adopt common views on key strategic matters. This notably pertains to the role Turkey has been playing in recent years and intra-Alliance rivalries. Other examples include Allies’ difficulties to develop a common stance on Libya and different views on NATO’s potential role in the Arctic. The latter example is linked to what is certainly the single most important aspect for Euro-Atlantic security in the 21st century: the Alliance and its members’ relationship
with Russia. Yet, regarding Russia in particular, ideas on the way ahead vary widely across NATO capitals. What is ultimately at stake are diverging approaches to European and Euro-Atlantic security at large, based on different interpretations of the future direction of the global security environment. The three most relevant issues most likely to trouble NATO in the coming decade may thus be summarized as, first, disagreements among member states on concrete policy issues, most prominently illustrated by Turkey’s current foreign policies and its consequences for Alliance cohesion. Second, Allies continue and will continue to hold divergent threat perceptions and consequently place different emphases on security challenges and defense priorities. Third, there is no consensus among European Allies on whether US security guarantees can be considered a viable option in the years and decades to come.

Against this backdrop, this chapter aims at showing that ‘Europe’ is by no means a monolithic bloc or actor in its own right, but rather a group of states sometimes pursuing different and even incompatible perspectives. In particular, on the Western side of the Atlantic, references to ‘Europe’ as an actor in transatlantic security relations are a frequent phenomenon. Any analysis or future policy based on the assumption that Europeans are unified in security will, however, be erroneous and impracticable. As the ongoing debate on European strategic autonomy has notably revealed, the primary reason is that Europeans lack a joint vision on how to ensure their continent’s security in the future. As this chapter argues, insights gained from this debate pertain to the very fundamentals of European security, beyond petty debates on semantics. Allies’ increased difficulties to come to shared views in fact stem from very different takes on the foundational features of European security and divergent readings of structural evolutions in the international system. However, the problem is not only that diverging visions confront each other. Rather, some European governments simply do not have such a vision, cling to the status quo, and sometimes even refuse to think about the possibility that things may have to evolve. These differences come on top of other divergences on issues such as democracy and the rule of law, including within the European Union, involving Hungary and Poland.
Turkey as the Current Problematic Ally

Under current circumstances, the most prominent cases of disputes among NATO members include Turkey, in an overall context of the country’s government no longer interested in being an integral part of the ‘West’. Tensions occur both at the bilateral level between Turkey and individual members of the Alliance—notably with Turkey’s ‘traditional’ antagonist Greece, but also the United States and France—and at the multilateral level, with Ankara blocking strategic cooperation between the NATO and the European Union or NATO and partner countries such as Armenia, Jordan, or Israel. Greece and Turkey have a longstanding conflict over Cyprus, as well as disputes over natural resources in contested waters. The United States notably ejected Turkey from the F-35 program after Turkey purchased the S-400 air defense system from Russia. Franco-Turkish tensions, finally, are multi-dimensional in nature and range from personal attacks between presidents Erdoğan and Macron, religious and cultural issues, to geo-strategic rivalry. The two countries even came close to a military clash in the Eastern Mediterranean in the summer of 2020. France’s frigate Courbet, part of NATO’s maritime security Operation Sea Guardian, was illuminated by Turkish targeting radar when approaching a cargo ship suspected of breaching the arms embargo in Libya, escorted by the Turkish navy. As France did not obtain the desired support among other NATO allies in the incident’s aftermath, it temporarily withdrew from Operation Sea Guardian. Paris’ positioning on Libya, where it unofficially sided with General Haftar, is widely considered to be the cause for this absence of support from other NATO members.

Beyond NATO, these issues also matter in the EU context where Germany and other EU member states blocked the adoption of sanctions against Turkey. Western Europeans are thus not on the same page when it comes to dealing with Turkey, which is hardly surprising given their very different relations with Ankara. Moreover, the fact that the European Union—and Germany as the main actor behind the so-called EU-Turkey refugee deal in particular—has made itself dependent on Turkey to control flows of migration to Europe limits its room for maneuver.
Beyond bilateral conflicts, security dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean are increasingly a cause for concern. These include, *inter alia*, conflicting territorial claims and conflicts over natural resources or countries’ positioning in the Syrian and Libyan wars—with, in all cases, Turkey as a key actor. Likewise, Turkey’s actions in the September 2020 flare-up of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been analyzed as the country’s “pursuing the goal of undermining the current status quo in the region.” Ankara’s military offensives in Syria against Kurdish-led forces, fighting against ISIS as US allies, also revealed deep rifts among NATO countries and further complicated the situation in the Middle East. All these incidents point toward the structural estrangement between the West, NATO, and Turkey rather than merely differences over policies that can be solved by compromise. They are therefore likely to have long-term implications for the Alliance’s cohesion and ability to act, including in shaping a closer relationship between NATO and the European Union as one of the key undertakings of Euro-Atlantic security (see Ewers-Peters’ chapter in this volume).

**Disagreements Are Not Limited to Individual Countries’ Foreign Policies**

It would, however, be erroneous to solely limit the analysis of disagreements among NATO members to the actions of Turkey as the current ‘problematic ally.’ Even Western European Allies sometimes hold positions that are incompatible with each other. Key disagreements pertain to threat perception and hence defense priorities as well as to the likelihood of continued US security guarantees. These disagreements run deep—sometimes so deep that they are not always visible at the surface level of every-day policy issues. Yet, they clearly shape positions, as a closer look at the ongoing European defense debate reveals. In past years, many important aspects of this debate revolved around the notion of European strategic autonomy.

Long known and used in a French national context, the 2016 European Union Global Strategy lifted “strategic autonomy” to the European level. The document “nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union,” but does not provide a concise definition of the notion’s content or implication. The ensuing and
at times heated debate among Europeans was not particularly enlightening at the conceptual level and is today considered in need of being “detoxified.” Yet, the debate has offered many meta-level insights into the various national approaches to European security and defense.

Two variables are key in this context: threat perception and assessments of the likely future of US security guarantees for Europe. Threat perception is an absolute classic in European defense debates: the question of against what or whom Europe needs to be defended. Diverging threat perceptions translate into different and even incompatible views on what policies the Alliance should adopt regarding certain key issues, notably in its relationship with Russia as the single most important issue for Euro-Atlantic security in the 21st century. Moreover, given that threat perception requires translation into defense planning, this is also a debate about allocating capabilities and defining priorities in light of scarce resources. Most important in the context of threat perception is how Europeans should deal with Russia, notably in a wider vision of Euro-Atlantic security. The second variable pertains to the United States and its engagement in European security. Here, the key question is that of the mid- and long-term reliability of US security guarantees and the conclusions Europeans need to draw for their own security cooperation, which, in turn, has ramifications for NATO.

In both the EU and NATO contexts, as well as at national levels, Europeans have in recent years acknowledged on numerous occasions that their security environment is deteriorating. The conclusions drawn from this observation, as well as how to explain its causes, however, vary widely across the continent.

Threat Perception as the Independent Variable

The principal factor explaining divergences among European nations is threat perception. Enumerations of threats and risks in various national strategy documents certainly look very similar at first glance, just as Europeans regularly manage to agree on listings of threats and challenges in joint documents such as the 2016 European Union Global Strategy or NATO Summit Declarations. However, divergences pertain to the prioritization and urgency of these threats. In light of scarce resources, in particular in smaller European countries, it seems almost
self-evident that a genuine 360-degree approach taking into account all threats that would be backed up by actual defense planning and allocated resources is hardly feasible. The usual enumerations are therefore primarily a rhetorical compromise and mere juxtapositions of threats that say little about actual prioritization. In reality, European states hold very different views on what priorities should be and what both national and multinational defense planning and procurement should focus on.

While this categorization obviously lacks sophistication, European states can roughly be divided into two ideal-typical camps. The first one is composed of those countries that consider Russia the main threat to the continent’s security. This first group primarily consists of the northern and eastern European countries, i.e., the so-called Eastern flank. Germany also belongs to this group, at least on paper (as illustrated, for example, by the 2018 Conception of the Bundeswehr which switched the official focus back to territorial defense\textsuperscript{17}), although concerns about Russia are much less pronounced there than, for example, in the Baltic states or in Poland. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands are part of it, too. The second camp looks primarily to the south and sees the greatest challenges in (Islamist) terrorism, \textit{inter alia} resulting in high levels of political instability in regions such as West Africa. The most prominent representative of this camp is undoubtedly France, but Italy and Spain also share many of the French views\textsuperscript{18}.

These two main categories of threats—Russia and terrorism—are the most relevant dividing line in Europe’s defense debate. Transnational threats such as climate change or the risk of pandemics are also part of contemporary discourses but are less controversial. The key explanation for this is the fact that primarily the former two require translation into capability requirements in defense planning (such as the NATO Defense Planning Process, NDPP) and thus the allocation of (considerable) means and prioritizations in acquisition decisions. In comparison, the actual military and defense planning implications of, for example, climate change are negligible. Russia and terrorism as main threats, in turn, clearly shape defense planning, military policies, and procurement decisions. They also shape attitudes and expectations
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vis-à-vis NATO and the EU’s defense activities within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP).

Europeans themselves are increasingly aware of these divergences in threat perception and the problems they cause. It is for this reason that the European Union’s latest strategy process, the Strategic Compass (launched under the German EU presidency during the second half of 2020 and due to be completed under the French presidency during the first half of 2022)\(^\text{19}\) started with a first phase on threat assessment. The result is an unpublished report based on input from EU member states’ intelligence agencies (and not governments, in order to ‘depoliticize’ the document) that details the threats and challenges the EU will likely face in the five to ten years to come. Yet, because threat perceptions are at the heart of defense policies and are not suitable for compromise, it seems unlikely that the Strategic Compass—or any other strategy process or document—will truly overcome intra-European divides that are structural in nature.

What is more, Europeans not only disagree in terms of East versus South. They also perceive threats in varying intensity—and thus sometimes fail to raise awareness among Allies for their concerns. Herein lies another difference between the two categories of threat perception identified above that gives rise to additional tensions: the terrorist threat is mostly met with disinterest and neglect by those who do not consider it their key preoccupation. France thus deplores a lack of active military and political support and even acknowledgement by its European allies for its actions against it, including by its key partner Germany. The European debate on terrorism, particularly over the Sahel region, is therefore mostly a matter of Paris trying to convince other Europeans that they must take the threat seriously and act accordingly. Dissatisfied with NATO’s renewed focus on territorial defense, France’s recent initiatives outside of existing institutional frameworks, notably its European Intervention Initiative, are largely linked to this factor. Concerning Russia as the other main threat on the European agenda, however, neglect is much less of a feature in the debates. Rather, European countries disagree on the likelihood of an actual armed conflict with Russia and hold at times very different positions on the best approach to adopt vis-à-vis Moscow.
How to Best Deal with Russia?

One concrete implication of threat perception as the independent variable, and certainly the most divisive, means that agreement on how to best deal with Russia is difficult to reach among Europeans. Relations between NATO, its members and Russia, and the question of how the US-Russian security dilemma can be managed are the most important matters for European security in the foreseeable future. Ultimately, the issue at stake is the European security order. Yet, Europeans’ differences do not solely relate to the extent and, above all, intensity to which Russia is considered a threat. They also pertain to how to best handle that threat as well as if and how NATO should dialogue with Russia or in what geographic areas, such as the Arctic, NATO should play a role. The Alliance has been united in condemning the annexation of Crimea and taken measures intended to reassure its member states on the Eastern flank.

In Europe, this is not only a matter of relevance in a NATO context, given that twenty-one NATO members are also part of the European Union. EU member states are also bound by the so-called Mogherini principles adopted in 2016 and reaffirmed in 2020, which in essence make normal relations with Russia contingent on the implementation of the Minsk agreement. EU member states also managed to agree on sanctions in 2014 and to renew them every six months since (adding more sanctions as the relationship with Moscow deteriorated further). This nevertheless hides at times deep divergences among Europeans on the matter of how much dialogue should exist. How deep these divergences are became apparent in internal European reactions to EU High Representative Josep Borrell’s visit to Moscow in February 2021, who, after having been treated in a very uncourteous manner in Moscow, had to defend himself in front of the European Parliament. As again became clear, particularly harsh stances toward Russia are not a matter of parliamentarians’ positioning on the political spectrum, but much more related to countries of origin—in particular the Baltic states and Poland, i.e., the Eastern flank countries.

Disagreement thus runs deep between those who view the current state of affairs with Moscow as a consequence of insufficient dialogue and those who even refuse arms control initiatives—which, it could
be argued, are in Europe’s interest—on the basis of not wanting to reward Russia with ‘business as usual.’ Consequently, absent a consensus, actively improving relations between NATO (or, for that matter, the European Union) and Russia is not currently on the official multilateral agenda. At the Alliance level, this produces a stronger emphasis on deterrence. For example, the Reflection Group’s NATO 2030 report states that “NATO should remain open to discussing peaceful co-existence and to reacting positively to constructive changes in Russia’s posture and attitude.”22 In other words, the authors of the report consider the ball to be in Russia’s court.

The Eastern flank countries insist on ‘no business as usual’ as the guiding principle of NATO-Russia relations after the annexation of Crimea. Yet, calls for resumed and better dialogue with Russia do exist. As early as 2016, for example, then German State Secretary at the Foreign Office Markus Ederer explained that “No one expects NATO to return to business as usual. But at the same time, we have every interest in managing a highly delicate relationship with a neighboring nuclear power in a way that minimizes the risk of unwanted escalation and enhances predictability to the greatest extent possible.”23 More recently, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in line with his native Norway’s general approach to Russia, argued that:

Dialogue is important. Especially when times are difficult as they are now, then it is important to sit down and discuss also difficult issues. (…) Even without any improvement in the relationship between NATO allies and Russia, I believe that at least we have to manage a difficult relationship - on transparency, risk reduction and also addressing arms control.24

This echoes the calls by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken25 as well as Joe Biden’s meeting with Vladimir Putin in Geneva on June 16, 2021, and the Strategic Stability Talks launched in its aftermath.

If ‘no business as usual’ is one end of the European spectrum, it is again France that is at the other end. Europe of course includes openly Russophile governments such as Viktor Orbán’s in Hungary. France, however, is at the same time critical of Russia’s foreign policy and actively seeking to return to a dialogue with Moscow on matters such as strategic stability. This is why France’s approach—and other European
governments’ reactions to them—deserves particular attention in trying to understand the current state of the European security debate.

In August 2018, Emmanuel Macron called for a “review of the European defense and security architecture“ in his annual speech to French ambassadors—not necessarily at the French diplomatic apparatus’ satisfaction given that, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the wording’s closeness to the so-called Medvedev initiative and the problems related to that were immediately understood.26 The following year, and only days before the G7 Summit in Biarritz, Macron invited Vladimir Putin to a working visit at the French presidential summer residence in Brégançon. He shortly thereafter reiterated the necessity to improve relations with Russia in his 2019 speech to the French ambassadors.27 France’s purely bilateral ‘strategic dialogue’ with Russia was subsequently launched. It *inter alia* includes meetings in a 2+2 format, i.e., between the respective foreign and defense ministers. Macron named one of France’s most senior diplomats, Pierre Vimont, to be ‘Special Envoy for the security and trust architecture with Russia’ (*architecture de sécurité et de confiance avec la Russie*).

French ambitions in this context are bold. Among the key motivations cited by Macron is that, against the backdrop of the emerging multipolar international system, Russia must be offered strategic partnerships other than with China—simply out of European interest.28 That said, France firmly stands on the grounds of the 2015 Mogherini principles and frequently underlines that Russia must respect international law.29 It would therefore be mistaken to interpret Paris’ reaching out to Moscow as some kind of ‘pro-Russian’ or even ‘pro-Putin’ stance. France’s strategic dialogue ambitions are nevertheless criticized, for instance in Poland—*inter alia*, but not only, because there is zero appetite for such a dialogue with Moscow.30 In a European context, France’s gestures also contribute to fears of Paris’ unilateralism and its alleged goals of decoupling. Although the latter is not on France’s agenda, the fact that the Franco-Russian dialogue initiative was not well explained or even coordinated with European partners clearly did cause suspicions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Franco-Russian strategic dialogue has so far yielded few tangible outcomes, and where it is headed remains unclear. Even French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly admitted in July 2020 that results were largely missing.31
The 2+2 meeting planned for September 2020 was cancelled in the wake of the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and has not been rescheduled. The initiative thus also illustrates the very limited possibilities for a European country to single-handedly work toward strategic stability on the continent.

Needless to say, diverging views on future relations with Russia are an almost insurmountable obstacle in developing a joint vision on the future European and transatlantic security order. They also have considerable ramifications in another field of relevance. Closely related to the question of relations with Russia, European NATO members’ attitudes toward arms control indeed also cover a wide range of positions. Notably with respect to conventional arms control, positions range from complete opposition on the grounds of ‘no business as usual’ to again French attempts at engaging a ‘strategic dialogue’ with Russia.32 Divergent European views then also extend into areas such as missile defense. From a wider European security perspective, more obstacles to effectively establishing arms control regimes with Russia may be about to emerge. NATO member Poland as well as NATO partner country Finland acquired precision-guided cruise missiles, while non-aligned Sweden recently decided to join them.33 These are the exact non-nuclear weapons Russia has repeatedly declared that it wants included in any kind of future arms control agreement. Although the major arms control deals are bilateral between the United States and Russia, the geographic proximity of the above European countries means these weapons are part of the stability equation, potentially complicating the prospects for agreements—likely at the detriment of European security.

Many of these aspects will also matter in adopting a new Strategic Concept for NATO. In the run-up to the 2010 document, Germany had numerous objections to the nuclear character of the Alliance and ended up in an open dispute with France.34 The issue was eventually sorted out and Berlin agreed, stating that as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. With elections in Germany taking place in September 2021, it seems likely that the nuclear-critical Green party may be part of the country’s governing coalition. What this would mean for nuclear deterrence in the Alliance obviously remains to be seen, both at the level of nuclear deterrence and when it comes to nuclear sharing and nuclear weapons stationed in Germa-
ny. The Green party’s election platform states that it ultimately wants all nuclear weapons to be withdrawn from German territory, just as the Green party faction in the German Bundestag wants Germany to join the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty. Needless to say, in light of the Alliance’s increased focus on deterrence since 2014, differences over nuclear deterrence have an even greater divisive potential in 2021 than they had in 2010.

Confidence in Continued US Security Guarantees

As discussed above, at least part of the suspicions against France’s strategic dialogue with Russia, and more broadly European strategic autonomy, arise from fears that Paris may have ambitions to ‘decouple’ European security from that of the United States. In reality, as noted above, ‘decoupling’ is not on European capitals’ agenda, and thus also not on Paris’. Yet, another aspect over which Europeans disagree is their analyses of long-term prospects for US security guarantees. The debate is consequently about whether Europe needs to start thinking about a ‘Plan B’ or whether Joe Biden’s election as US president means that risks of the United States withdrawing from or reducing its engagement for Europe are off the table.

In this context, threat perception again matters tremendously. The greater the fear of Russia, the greater the fear of decoupling. Depending on the kinds of threats European capitals consider most pressing, their focus is either on expeditionary operations (terrorism) or collective territorial defense (Russia). This leads not only to considerable differences in defense planning and posture as discussed above, but also to different degrees of dependence on the United States. Unsurprisingly, therefore, how vociferously European countries place themselves in the Atlanticist camp correlates strongly with the intensity with which they perceive a Russian threat.

This is not to say that France, which even in this context represents the other end of the European spectrum, does not need the United States. The two countries in fact cooperate closely at the bilateral level. For Paris, US-French cooperation is most valuable and crucial in the Sahel region in the fight against terrorism, where the United States notably provides crucial reconnaissance and surveillance to France’s
counter-terrorism operation Barkhane.\textsuperscript{36} From a French perspective, this is the most important vector of transatlantic defense cooperation, as again became apparent after the 2020 US elections, when French minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly expressed her hopes of continued US engagement in that region.\textsuperscript{37} Yet, as seen from Paris, the nation’s survival is hardly dependent on the United States, as opposed to perceptions in Central and Eastern European countries where the US is ultimately considered the guarantor of the nations’ existence. Those states that perceive a threat from Russia are at the same time the most convinced Atlanticists who, in view of their situation, rely on the closest possible cooperation with the United States—and are correspondingly skeptical about stronger cooperation in the EU. On the one hand, they are afraid of prompting less US engagement. On the other hand, they want to avoid having to invest scarce resources in the CSDP, which is by definition not about territorial defense.

One key question for the continent’s security is: how likely is continued US engagement? Given that US engagement will still be decided in Washington rather than in Paris, Berlin, or Warsaw, how likely is it that US administrations want to maintain US security guarantees for Europe? And how likely is it—provided they have the political will—that they will be able to do so in light of political and budgetary constraints? On this issue, views and assessments again vary across Europe. Once more, France may be considered the outlier. It is fair to argue that the French analysis on future US engagement is the most pessimistic for European security, based on two observations. First, it is often stressed in France that ‘Trumpism’ is not gone with Donald Trump and that US domestic politics will likely remain volatile.\textsuperscript{38} Second, as most recently reiterated in its 2021 Strategic Update, France expects the United States to refocus its security policies toward Asia and away from Europe, notably in light of China’s emergence as a strategic rival.\textsuperscript{39} The French take is thus both relatively traditional—after all, de Gaulle decided to acquire nuclear weapons because he deemed US security guarantees unreliable—and based on systemic factors. In most other countries, transatlantic security relations tend to be viewed in a much more ‘personalized’ manner, i.e., with much greater emphasis on the occupant of the White House without explicitly accounting for systemic factors. From such a vantage point, the years of the Trump adminis-
tration are considered an anomaly. With Joe Biden’s election, and for instance his speech at the 2021 virtual edition of the Munich Security Conference in which he declared that “America is back,” transatlantic security relations are seen as returning to normal. Joe Biden’s accession to the US presidency has therefore already changed one key aspect of Europe’s defense debate: the question of whether or not Europe—and the EU in particular—should aspire for more strategic autonomy. With the Biden administration, the French argument that Europe needs to step up its joint defense efforts to compensate for diminished US engagement clearly seems weakened in the eyes of many.

Yet, a considerable portion of the debate on European strategic autonomy is a false debate anyway, at least in its transatlantic dimension. Supporters of strategic autonomy primarily argue that the EU must gain more ‘autonomy to’ to become more capable of acting, and opponents warn against efforts toward ‘autonomy from,’ i.e., decoupling European security from that of the United States. Consequently, and quite paradoxically, the two strands also differ in the assumed reference point for European strategic autonomy. Proponents are concerned with more capacity for action for the EU within the framework of the CSDP defined in Article 42 of the Lisbon Treaty. This means military operations outside of EU member states’ territory, covering the spectrum of the so-called Petersberg Tasks. Thus, decoupling from the United States was never among the proponents’ goals, nor was a role for the EU in collective defense. Opponents, however, primarily assume efforts toward precisely this decoupling and therefore go far beyond the CSDP in their argumentation. French officials, including President Macron, have repeatedly explained that European strategic autonomy and NATO are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, Macron has also said:

But our commitment within NATO neither prevents nor hinders European strategic autonomy, as I have said and will say again here, quite the contrary, but in order to be respected within NATO, to be credible within NATO, we need a strong, more united, bolder Europe, a Europe that stands by the choices we have made for a little more than three years. We will have to continue in the coming months with the United States of America, reengaged in multilateralism, I hope, reengaged in several places of conflict, we
will have to convince them of our choices, of their relevance in the long term, and I am deeply committed to this.\textsuperscript{41}

In sum, France does not seek to promote decoupling Europe’s security from that of the US. Rather, France’s reasoning is based on the idea that decoupling, at least in degrees, will inevitably be initiated by Washington and that Europe must act accordingly.

Much of the European defense debate is often theological in nature, and rarely based on solid empirical grounds. The fundamental question remains unanswered and unaddressed: is the status quo of European security still an option in the medium to long term? And if it is not, in what way—and in this context, also in what institutional framework(s)—should European security be organized? What would be the United States’ role in European security? More than five years into the debate on European strategic autonomy, after the end of the Trump presidency and more than seven years after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, European governments still do not have answers to these questions. It is not only the visions in the various European capitals that differ. Many European governments have not developed any vision at all and are stubbornly clinging to options that may simply not be available in the future. The European debate may thus be summarized as follows: one camp argues that, in light of likely less US engagement, Europe needs to start thinking about a plan B before it is too late. The other camp responds that it wants the United States to guarantee Europe’s security. A more fruitful debate would be based on clearer ideas on the future of US security engagement in Europe, which in particular would require the United States to take a stance.

**Concluding Remarks: Focusing on China is Not the Panacea**

In light of the above, the NATO 2030 Reflection Group’s call for alliance unity seems well warranted. Turkey’s estrangement with the West is clearly not the only problem NATO is facing. Disagreements, sometimes profound disagreements, also persist among the Alliance’s European members. That there is no such thing as a unified Europe should be a key takeaway for US policy makers. Differences among Europeans mostly pertain to future policies and approaches to European and transatlantic security. Debates oppose those who wish to preserve
the status quo and those who argue that this option is simply not available, mostly due to change at the international level as well as in US domestic politics.

Against this backdrop, NATO members should also be careful not to overemphasize China as a topic for the Alliance. It may indeed be tempting to focus on the faraway “strategic competitor” as an easy way out of debating different views on transatlantic security affairs. This applies, first, to the hardcore Atlanticists among European allies because they think that this will guarantee that they are viewed favorably by the United States. But it may also, secondly, apply to the Alliance as a whole. Because the China focus is more abstract, it is easier to agree upon than on closer-to-home issues such as dealing with Russia. The Indo-Pacific may be the latest buzzword and great power competition with China may be en vogue in Washington, but it must also be kept in mind that Europeans have had past difficulties agreeing on China. More importantly, there are still too many unresolved security issues in the Euro-Atlantic area for too much attention being shifted to the far East. As argued above, Russia is indeed the single most important factor. The fundamental differences outlined in this chapter will not go away, and they will shape intra-Alliance debates in the foreseeable future. Notably divergent threat perceptions cannot be solved by compromise, given the very nature of the matter. Russia’s undermining the European security order will remain on the agenda, and consequently territorial defense and deterrence. Likewise, instability and the terrorist threat from the South will not disappear, and hence the necessity for stabilization operations and the like. Against this backdrop, perhaps the most important task for NATO and EU members consists of finally deciding on the division of labor between the two organizations.

Notes


22. NATO Reflection Group, “NATO 2030: United for a New Era.”


25. N.A., “Engage Russia but remain ‘clear-eyed’ while doing so, Blinken tells NATO.”


28. Ibid.


38. As just one example, see Maya Kandel, “Le trumpisme a un avenir indépendant de Trump,” Le Monde, October 16, 2020 (www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/10/16/maya-kandel-le-trumpisme-a-un-avenir-independant-de-trump_6056289_3210.html).

