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**THREATS PERCEPTIONS AND THE TRANSATLANTIC
STRATEGIC DEBATE: DETERRENCE, NON-
PROLIFERATION AND MISSILE DEFENSE**

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THREATS PERCEPTIONS AND THE TRANSATLANTIC STRATEGIC DEBATE:
DETERRENCE, NON-PROLIFERATION AND MISSILE DEFENSE

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This paper describes the diversity of approaches and provides some thoughts on how to maintain a transatlantic consensus on issues of deterrence, non-proliferation and missile defense.

The continuing Alliance strategic debate

Even though Alliance countries have been able to agree on a common defense policy since the early 1950s, strategic divergences have never ceased. In the post-September 11 environment, there is still a common outlook on threat perceptions. But NATO cohesion in the field of military policy will continue to be an elusive goal.

There is still a common strategic outlook within the Atlantic Alliance. NATO members remains bound by the Strategic Concept adopted at the 1999 Washington Summit, and by the Comprehensive Political Guidance issued at the 2006 Riga Summit. The publication of the European Union's Common Security Strategy in December 2003 reconciled the transatlantic community on threat assessments and policy objectives. In the late 1990s, NATO stood firm and united in its reply to Serbian aggression in Kosovo.

After September 11, NATO invoked implemented Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the first time ever, and embarked in joint operations to patrol the American skies and the Mediterranean sea. Many Alliance members agreed immediately to participate in the *Enduring Freedom* operation, including at sea.¹ NATO later took over the International Stabilization force in Afghanistan.

The twin threats of terrorism and proliferation are recognized as the two most immediate and serious ones for NATO countries. All polls show that international terrorism is considered as the number one security threat by US and European public opinions alike.² And all Alliance members consider Iran's nuclear program as an issue of critical importance.

This is good news. It was not a given that nearly 20 years after the end of the Cold war, an enlarged NATO would still share a common strategic outlook.

However, there remain differences. For instance, China is considered as a threat by many Americans (48%), without any equivalent in Europe.³ And the weakening of democracy in Russia is a source of concern in the United States (75%) much more than it is in Europe (57%).⁴ Also, as was the case in the past, an agreement on threat

¹ The allied coalition CTF-150 (Combined Task Force 150), which patrols around the Horn of Africa, is the German navy's biggest operation since the end of the Second World War.

² See for instance *Transatlantic Trends 2007*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States of the United States, September 2007; TNS Emnid poll for the Berterlsmann Stiftung, 22 october 2007; Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 28 March 2008.

³ Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 28 March 2008.

⁴ *Transatlantic Trends 2007*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 2007.

perception does not automatically translate into an agreement on how to deal with the threat. The level and conditions of commitment to the operations in Afghanistan (the plague of “caveats”), or the options to deal with the Iranian nuclear crisis, continue to be the object of heated transatlantic debates. 77% of Europeans oppose committing more troops for combat actions to deal with international threats. One of the most significant transatlantic divergences is about the conduct of combat operations against the Taliban: 68% of Americans agree against only 30% of Europeans.⁵ Another divergence is about a harsher attitude towards Iran, including by maintaining the option of using military force: 47% of Americans agree, but only 18% of Europeans do.⁶

The sources of such divergences continue to lie primarily in strategic cultures. Geography and history, differences in relative power (including the ability to spend on defense budgets), and in respective conceptions of international law, world order or the use of military force, are structural factors that have traditionally weighed on internal NATO debates. They will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. In addition, the shock of September 11, which did not have any equivalent in Europe despite the Istanbul, Madrid and London bombings, magnified some of these divergences. The invocation of Article 5 in October 2001 was the tree that hid the forest of different strategic perspectives.

It would be wrong to characterize intra-Alliance debates as primarily US-European ones – especially since the two enlargements of 1999 and 2004. It is true that in many instances, the fault line in strategic assessments and threats perceptions lies across the Atlantic Ocean. Such is the case, for example, regarding the question whether a military option should be considered to deal with Iran, the relevance of a missile defense site in Europe, worries about Russia’s political evolution, or the perception of China as a threat (as well as the issue of lifting the arms embargo). But other issues may oppose the three NATO permanent UN Security Council members (the United States, the United Kingdom and France), which are also nuclear powers in the sense of the NPT, to the rest of the Alliance; their willingness to intervene militarily around the world and their strong stance on nuclear deterrence is not always shared by others. Still other issues have opposed a loose group that includes France, Germany, Belgium and a few others to the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, etc., such as the notion of preventive war against Iraq. And citizens of countries which have been recently struck by major acts of terrorism tend to rank this threat as being higher than others.⁷

There are also sometimes national exceptions. Britons tends to consider Russia as a “foe”, while public opinions from most major NATO countries disagree.⁸ Bulgarians are almost alone in NATO to believe that China’s growing military power is a source of concern (only 42% of them say so).⁹

Finally, opinions on some of the key threats may vary significantly across the Alliance. Turks are among those in the world who worry the most from nuclear proliferation (57%, against, for instance, 21% of the French).¹⁰ Poles overwhelmingly (70%) consider that a nuclear Iran would be a threat to Europe, but only 54% of Europeans on

⁵ *Idem.*

⁶ *Idem.*

⁷ Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 28 March 2008.

⁸ Harris Poll n° 19, 20 February 2008. Britain is also the European country where the highest number of respondents (31%) consider that it is a potential military threat (Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 28 March 2008).

⁹ 47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey, The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 27 June 2007.

¹⁰ *Idem.*

average say so (less than 45% in Slovakia, France and the Netherlands).¹¹ Spain stands alone in its 81% support for committing troops to reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, while the European average is 64% (less than 50% in Slovakia and Bulgaria).¹²

Nuclear non-proliferation

In the realm of nuclear proliferation, a key issue is whether the Alliance will be able to maintain a consensus on how to deal with Iran.

Iran is unanimously perceived as the most threatening country by public opinions in NATO.¹³ Within the Alliance, the percentage of those opposed to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons varies between 83% (Bulgaria) and 97% (Germany).¹⁴ A nuclear-armed Iran would be considered a serious threat by a strong majority of public opinions across NATO: from 65% in Bulgaria to 87% in Italy.¹⁵

But when it comes to reasons to oppose Iran's nuclear drive, the United States attaches greater importance than the Europeans to the nature of the political regime – whereas the Europeans prefer to emphasize the importance and “neutrality” of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The transatlantic consensus on the options to deal with Iran is fragile. As stated above, there is a 19-point difference between Americans and Europeans on the need for a harsher attitude toward Iran, including maintaining the military option. This transatlantic divergence is confirmed by other polls. According to an October 2007 survey, “diplomacy only” (without sanctions) is favored by only 36% of Americans against, for instance, more than 50% of Spaniards, Italians and Germans; and the military option receives the support of 21% in the United States against, 7-8% in Germany, Italy, France and Spain.¹⁶ Similar results emerged in a later survey : in the United States, 35% prefer diplomacy only (and 60% tougher measures such as sanctions or military strikes), compared with to 54% in France and Spain, 56% in Italy, 57% in the United Kingdom and 61% in Germany.¹⁷

If the next US president maintains a firm stance, several European countries may eventually come to doubt the wisdom of applying more pressure on Tehran. Support for tougher action has significantly decreased around the world between 2006 and 2008.¹⁸

Calls for the reopening of negotiations without preconditions will be more frequently heard. The positions taken by Paris, London and Berlin may be increasingly isolated.

The United States should make it clearer that it seeks a change in regime *behavior* (as opposed to regime *change*) in order to assuage European fears to be dragged on a slippery slope towards war. And Washington should also reaffirm its commitment to the NPT as the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. A consensus on continuing sanctions and a firm stance towards Iran will be difficult to maintain absent these conditions.

¹¹ *Transatlantic Trends 2007*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 2007.

¹² *Idem*.

¹³ Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 28 March 2008.

¹⁴ 47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey, The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 27 June 2007.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 9 November 2007.

¹⁷ Globescan poll for the BBC World Service, February 2008.

¹⁸ *Idem*.

Missile defense

Since the United States officially announced its intention to have a third Ground-based Missile Defense (GMD) site in Europe, missile defense has become – for the second time in a decade – an issue of contention.¹⁹ There is a clear divide across the Atlantic: most Europeans oppose it (in particular 71% of Germans), while 49% of Americans favor it.²⁰

But is it really because of a divergence in threat perceptions and how to deal with missile proliferation? NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer pointed out that “*There is absolutely a shared threat perception between the allies. Allies all agree that there is a threat from ballistic missiles*”.²¹ The 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration stated that “*ballistic missile proliferation poses an increasing threat to Allies’ forces, territory and populations*”.²²

The Russia factor is probably critical here. Had there not been a forceful reaction by Moscow opposing missile defense, would some Western governments still be inclined to express the same concerns about a “new arms race”? Russia tends to be considered more as a “friend” than as a “foe”.²³ And there is some support in Alliance public opinion for cooperation with Moscow on this issue.²⁴

Can a consensus be achieved on the missile defense issue? Alleviating “Russian concerns” at all costs is not necessarily a healthy way forward. There is absolutely no evidence that the current plans threaten in any way the credibility of the Russian nuclear deterrent. Only the ability by Moscow to deliver a *very limited ballistic missile strike* (a handful of missiles) through the use of *some particular bases* may be affected by the planned defense site.²⁵ Moscow claims that it may be a first step, to be followed by larger deployments. But why would we seek to alleviate Russian concerns about possible future evolutions of a site that has yet to be installed? Why would the security of NATO territory be subjected to a Russian co-decision, as the suggestion to use jointly operate a radar based in Azerbaijan would imply? And why would there be any connection between the fate of the INF treaty, from which Moscow threatens to withdraw, and the European missile defense site? The reality, as Russian leaders admit privately when pressed hard, is that Russia cannot stand the idea that Poland becomes firmly entrenched in the Western family. (One could also add that, if strategic missile defense was so bad from a Russian point of view, the Kremlin should immediately announce that it will dismantle the nuclear-tipped missiles that continue to protect the Moscow region.)

The protection of European territory by missile defense is an important common transatlantic interest. The third site was initially conceived to protect the US continental

¹⁹ The GMD site will comprise up to 10 two-stage GBI (Ground-Based Interceptors). Steven A. Hildreth & Carl Ek, *Long-Range Ballistic Missile Defense in Europe*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, 9 January 2008, p. 4.

²⁰ Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 28 March 2008.

²¹ Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, Press Conference, 19 April 2007.

²² *Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008.*

²³ Majorities in the United States, France, Italy, Germany and Spain consider that Russia is a « friend ». Harris Poll n° 19, 20 February 2008.

²⁴ Harris Interactive Survey for France 24 and the International Herald Tribune, 28 March 2008.

²⁵ According to the US Missile Defense Agency, the GBI are too slow to intercept Russian ICBMs.

territory against a possible future Iranian ICBM.²⁶ But when European allies suggested in 2007 to put it at the service of NATO as a whole, Washington agreed almost immediately. This should not be a surprise. There are three reasons why it is in the US interest that European territories be protected too: (1) The need to avoid indirect blackmail on the United States through a threat on its European allies; (2) The need for protection of US military bases in Europe; (3) The need to ensure that European troops will be able to participate in future operations in the Middle East without being subjected to blackmail.

Missile defense plans should be constantly reviewed in a way that ensures that they match the evaluation of the threat – but not Russia's mood. Where possible, intelligence assessments about the Iranian ballistic program should be shared with Moscow. A joint NATO-Russia radar would be a significant confidence-building measure.²⁷ If needed, a commitment could be made towards Moscow to avoid expanding missile defense installations in Europe in a way that would threaten the overall credibility of the Russian nuclear deterrent.

Failing to achieve such a consensus would open the way for Russia to divide the Alliance on this issue through political pressure or even blackmail.

Nuclear deterrence

In the realm of nuclear deterrence, several patterns can be discerned.

There is no major disagreement on nuclear doctrine between the United States, the United Kingdom and France. All three capitals insist that nuclear weapons are for deterrence only and will be needed in the foreseeable future to deter major threats against their security – primarily nuclear, but also non-nuclear, such as biological or chemical threats.

London now insists on the importance of moving towards a nuclear-weapon-free world. France and the United States are much more prudent in their rhetoric on nuclear disarmament. However, the decision in principle to replace the Trident submarines with a newer generation SSBNs commits the United Kingdom to another three or four decades of nuclear weapon status.

At the same time, many non-nuclear NATO members are weary of the absence of progress towards nuclear disarmament. Germany, the Netherlands or Canada, are among the Alliance members most vocal about the need to go forward in that direction.

An interesting conjunction of events is appearing on the horizon. The next NPT Review Conference will take place in 2010. Many Western nations will want progress on nuclear disarmament to ensure the continuation of the treaty's validity and legitimacy. Immediately afterwards (2011-2013), construction of the European missile defense site is due to be finished, and other NATO missile defense programs should come to

²⁶ As is well-known, the GMD site will not be able to protect the southernmost part of NATO territory. NATO defense ministers have agreed in June 2007 to study the protection of this region through other means.

²⁷ The Russian radar located in Azerbaijan can be used for early warning, but not for tracking (because of its location).

fruition. At about the same time, many NATO nuclear-capable bomber aircraft, which carry US B-61 gravity bombs, will have to be replaced.²⁸

So far, most European “host” nations (those who have a nuclear role) have balked at the idea of paying the additional costs needed to give a nuclear capability to the *Eurofighter* or the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). Given that Europe should then be protected by missile defense, might it not be the time to consider a termination of the ability for the five European countries to carry nuclear weapons? The United States would retain a small number of nuclear weapons in some of these countries – perhaps only the United Kingdom and Turkey – for use exclusively by US air forces. This could form the basis of a new nuclear consensus within the Alliance.

Despite transatlantic and intra-European variations, there is a broad agreement among Alliance members on threat evaluation. For sure, issues of nuclear proliferation, missile defense and nuclear deterrence will continue to remain topics of heated transatlantic debate, and there are inherent limits to what can be achieved in terms of a common strategic outlook on critical strategic issues. But a minimum consensus on such issues is not out of reach.

²⁸ According to open sources, the US continues to station a number of B-61 gravity bombs in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom, for use by US and European aircraft (except for the UK, where they are reserved for US use).