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Defense alliance and economic links. Is there any Bridge to a new Era for Transatlantic Relations?

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Abstract

More than 15 years after the rift in Transatlantic Relations after the invasion of Iraq, the Alliance seems to be death wound for a new crisis. This time, the nature and etiology of the crisis differs from the previous ones. So does its diagnosis and treatment.

The two pillars of this relation are the defensive alliance and the economic link. Both are currently under paralysis; the economic link, as a consequence of the suspension / unilateral end of negotiations by the US (the European part had also concerns about the content and consequences of the TTIP).

This paper will focus on the defensive Alliance.

Our methodology will start from theory of defensive alliances: their reasons, their requirement and their subjects. How the parties in an Alliance should look like in order for them to be interested in a defensive Alliance. The paper will highlight the common understanding of threats, the shared way to face them or the way to share the burden and mutual benefits as conditions for alliances; as well as the impact of leadership, legitimacy and public controversy, the influence of different strategic cultures (and world macro-visions) among its members, the economic gap and the alternatives to overcome it, the security dilemmas or the role of images.

The paper will give an answer to the question about the structural character of the current transatlantic crisis, the role of national interests and the impact of Brexit and its “privileged relationship” as an additional source of controversy, as well as to find out if the current conceptual rift can be fixed.

Summary and Keywords

Alliances theories, transatlantic relationship, balance of power, national foreign policies

Introduction

The transatlantic relationship has traditionally been approached from an economic and commercial perspective (Hamilton, 2014), security and defense through NATO (Fernandez and Smith 2009, Volker, 2011) or in political terms (Pollack, JCMS 2005). The rupture has even been transferred to the legal sphere (Fahey, ELJ 2013, Bradford, 2013). The combination in these moments of rupturist processes in the EU (Brexit, populisms, separatisms), and in the United States (break with multilateral commitments, international organizations, etc.), infringes a polytrauma to the relationship that must be analyzed in its various elements and determine if it is surmountable, with what kind of measures and if its maintenance is desirable or as a result of the cold war, it lacks specific meaning today, regardless of the policies supported on both sides.

1. Reasons for creating a Defense Alliance

The most frequent reasons and requirements for the creation of a Defense Alliance are providing security to the own country and citizens and deter any current or potential foe. Some scholars consider that the creation of a defensive alliance is a way to keep or restore the balance of power. By subscribing an alliance engagement, a State conveys partners and adversaries on their intentions and predictable behavior. The existence of a defensive alliance requires certain conditions that can be summarize as follows:

- existence of a security threat, shared perception of it
- shared approaches on how to cope with the threats
- shared values, in clear connection with the previous condition. This is relevant in the case of democratic countries as their approach to defense alliances are particular, if compared with the rest of the countries
- shared interests
- sometimes, it is determinant to have a clear leadership
- existence of an hostile environment that pushes weaker States to join alliances with others, similar or stronger to deter the threats (Leeds & Morgan, 2010)

We can follow the dominant explanation for why States sign alliance treaties that is, to convey credible information about their future intentions to partners and adversaries (Leeds 2015). Transatlantic alliance has

followed this pattern from its creation, at least until the end of the Cold War. Transatlantic allies were sending a clear message to the Soviet Union about their engagement of collective security defense (art.5 Washington Treaty). Since then, it is suffering from the evil of ambiguity concerning adversaries, goals and challenges, as well as the ways to cope with them.

Following Leeds and Morgan (2010), two schools of thinking explained the reasons for countries to create/join alliances: the balance of power and domestic politics and preferences.

Alliances and arms, for the first theory, allowed States to be responsible of their security in case of aggression. They will keep peace through deterrence, or ensure the continued existence of the major actors in the international system. Theoretically also, some scholars considered permanent alliances as destabilizing factor and a contribution to war; the opposite for flexible alliances. Even if there were attempts to link war and polarity in international system, there was no empirical evidence on that as power preponderance was associated with peace in the XIXth Century, but power preponderance was not associated with peace in the XXth Century.

One thing is relevant for our analysis. NATO was created as a defensive alliance in a bipolar period and led by one of the superpowers. In front of it was a different defensive alliance, the Warsaw Pact among the countries around the Soviet Union and security dependent on it.

Currently, the system presents a diffuse polarity, and the US is not ready / willing to led anymore except for its own interests and following just its rules and strategic approach. Ended the bipolar confrontation, the European allies don't perceive anymore a security threat, as least in the way the Soviet Union was. There are no territorial disputes on the European territory¹, the one that can be encouraged by alliances and arms race. This implies less need for alliances. Moreover, the cyber-threat –the only clearly visible- are not suitable to be fought by NATO and the procurement of more weapons. and are not ready to follow any kind of military adventures just for satisfying the US desire or interest, and the US is not more interested in investing as security umbrella for European countries as its security concerns are not anymore in Europe.

¹ Exception of the entities generally not- recognized as Crimea as part of Russia, the Northers Cyprus or the territorial enclave of Nagorno Karabakh.

However, even with conditions supporting the formation of the alliance change, the empirical analysis shows that other factors can mitigate opportunist abrogation (Leeds and Savun 2007, 1129).

For the second theory (national goals or Policy preferences), States pursue the same goal, power or security. The goals are determined, at least partially, by domestic factors (Organski, 1958). These have significant implications for alliance politics. As a consequence, alliances will be not flexible if economy and sentiments are intricately meshed with those of other nations. Although arms, alliances or territorial acquisition can serve to increase power, the primary source of international power is domestic development.

The States form alliances based on similarity in policy preferences, as the use of force/war is based on expectations to win and then change the other States policies (Buono de Mesquita, 1981).

NATO has always been an asymmetric alliance. In these cases, small States rarely provide military support, but other advantages, like the use of the territory and resources, trade preference... generating the "security-autonomy trade-off" (Palmer and Morgan, 2006). Major Powers often use alliances as tools of management or means to control the policies of other States (Schroeder 1976). Among the reasons for keeping alliances, however, are the democratic character of their members and their different power status (Leeds, Savun, 2007). When there is an undeniable leadership, allies usually accept the strategic options and interests of this one. The maintenance of alliances are also bigger if the benefits for their members are not only military or aggregation capabilities (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985, Morrow, 1991, Gibler 2000, Long and Leeds 2006). The same happens with alliances with a high level of military institutionalization, as NATO is, even if empirical evidence not always is supporting this statement (Leeds and Savun 2007,1129).

At these moments, transatlantic alliance becomes a strategic tool for more economic development. The US, led by a businessman with more economic than defensive ambitions aiming at improving the wealth of American citizens (America first), is only interested in making savings with NATO (reasonable) but mainly in avoiding any kind of European procurement benefiting an eventual growing European defense industry. Security concerns are only present in the public statements. So, clearly

one can perceive the divergences in policy preferences. NATO will serve the US preferences by a bigger percentage of European burden sharing or by their contribution to its military operations abroad; at the same time, it will serve the allies will to count on a US defensive umbrella, just in case, not too expensive. (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003).

But now, the access to the American umbrella seems, at least, uncertain (if the Europeans don't pay for it). The development of the consequent European defense industry threatens to end the purchase of weapons systems to the US. Therefore, how to be allies competing for the same markets? The respective military capabilities will be more powerful but the allies will become competitors. Developing capabilities will end with the uncritical follow-up of the strategic decisions of the USA. Only if the EU doesn't not arm itself, it will need the Alliance.

2. Reasons for maintaining the Transatlantic Relationship. The NATO future

Apart from the current need of military capabilities, other reasons to keep allied would be the cost of ending NATO, if they would be greater than continue within the Alliance. Only the existence or perspective of a new alignment would boost the ending of the TR (Leeds, Savun, 2007).

As recently showed, the existence of an Alliance can modify the challenger's demands a disposition to settlement by the target (Fang, Johnson, Leeds 2014). The defense umbrella, even if uncertain, continues to be the most powerful reason to keep the transatlantic alliance.

Alliances are only powerful if they are credible. If allies and adversaries doubt that the States would fight together in the event of war, alliances lose their power as a tool of bargaining (Leeds and Morgan, 2010). Violation of alliances commitments is most likely when conditions have changed since the time of alliance formation.

This doubt clearly exists in the TR, where the conditions changed from the self-defense in case of aggression to out-or area crisis management operations. This led European allies to improve its military capabilities and search for autonomy. However, there is no agreement among the European allies on the effort to do in order to cope with the security concerns. NATO accepted countries very demanding but without

military capabilities. Members with those capabilities are not so demanding and less interested to pay for the first, in exchange of nothing.

The main cost of ending with NATO will be the vulnerability of European countries: a poor scenario also for the US as Europe works as its advanced defense platform. The advantage of having Turkey as NATO member is not anymore a trustful alternative to European countries. Even with more investments, more defense expenditure, etc, the perspectives for a European defense, or at least, for a EU defense are not good. Heterogeneity among member States and different national strategic cultures are so big, that the differences are sometimes bigger than with the US. Apart from the EU not being a State and so lacking an executive authority, by the time being it is impossible to the EU to have a military doctrine. Among EU countries there are more Atlantist or more Europeanist, there are allied or neutral, with a conscription army or with a professional one, concentrated on deployments or on territorial defense, on military capabilities or on civilian ones, defense providers and defense consumers, introverts and extroverts, concerned about Eastern threats or Southern threats, more institutional or more national sovereignty as basis for a European defense... Definition of strategic objectives is not easy an usually leads to a minimum common denominator. There is no leadership, even if some countries want to lead, and there continues to be a lack of mutual trust that obstacle the pooling and sharing.

In some way, the US leadership of NATO served as a glue of the wills of the European allies, for decades. The US continues to be the ally able to change the outcome of a war between an ally and a challenger; able but no willing to.

3. Consequences of Brexit on the Transatlantic Relation

The most important consequence of Brexit (if it finally happens) will be a weaker Europe's security; it means, an EU security weaker than it is currently, but also a weaker UK security, once detached from the EU. Three years after the 2016 referendum, there is not already a clear idea of the modalities for exit. Permanence or not in the internal market or in the customs union is not just a trade concern for good, services and capital. It will have consequences on defense.

Apparently, as an intergovernmental policy, Brexit would not affect the participation of the UK in security and defense issues. This statement is valuable for NATO where the UK continues to be one of the most important members as a nuclear power, one of the countries with more military capabilities, close interoperability with the US, and great expeditionary capability and the will to use it. However important it was for the European defense, the concept of "defense" includes also the economic-industrial part of it, the investments for military R+D+I and other aspects of foreign policy as development cooperation, diplomatic network, soft power, etc. This will be negatively affected by Brexit and the EU 27 will lose the added value represented by the UK. But more insecure EU implies also a more insecure UK. Even if the country is proud of its relationship with the US, exiting the EU will reduce the UK strategic sex-appeal for the US.

Brexit will deprive the UK the participation in the EU decision-making process, where traditionally it played the veto role (permanent autonomous OHQ, EDF, EDA...). As non-member, the access to financial resources for research and for the defense industry (H2020 and EDF) will be restrained, as well as procurement defense market, except with the condition of a third country. Airbus decision to leave the UK is a proof of the negative consequences of Brexit.

Apparently, Brexit will make wider the transatlantic gap. The UK is the biggest defense spender and a firm supporter of NATO through their obstacles to develop an autonomous European Defense. However, in part as a consequence of the decision to leave the EU, in part as the US disengagement, today the relationship between NATO and EU are better than never before. More than 40 initiatives are developed together, even if they are not the top-ten superstar initiatives for an ultimate military capabilities development.

As eventual domestic consequences of Brexit, tensions can arise in North Ireland in form of disorder or terrorism, and in Scotland leading to an independence referendum. Apart from the instability it would represent, it would imply for the UK to remove its strategic nuclear forces from Scotland and its redeployment to England.

The negative economic impact of Brexit would reduce UK possibilities for modernization and new military capabilities acquisition.

In a symbiotic relationship, a less secure EU is also a less secure UK and vice-versa. Any attempt to revamp the transatlantic relation and NATO will be more difficult for both, the UK and the EU. In any case, the UK's membership of NATO continues to be a link with the rest of the European NATO members in terms of defense.

4. Conclusions

Until recently, the Atlantic Alliance was worth for European and Canadian allies in order to fulfill their security/defense concerns. But also it was for the US, as a way to legitimize the use of force, especially through the coalitions of the willing, with no legal support in a SC resolution.

In both sides, the game of perceptions and misperceptions plays differently. There is a shared interest based on shared values, but no perception of the need of each other. One side is disengaging; the other is breaking into pieces (Brexit). Moreover, within the European side there is no single approach and different strategic cultures and economic interest are involved. Under those circumstances, finding a bridge seems complicated to us.

The US is not interested anymore on this link, concentrating just on its enormous advanced military capabilities, even if they seemed unsuitable in front of asymmetric conflicts (Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan). The rest of allies concentrate in the way to pool and share capabilities, increase their defense expending and being more efficient.

Nevertheless, this will be not enough for European countries. The best defense strategy is not having foes and avoiding an attack. For doing that, the tool is diplomacy. Free to develop certain strategic autonomy, thanks to the US disengagement, European countries should find their own alignments (better than alliances, Snyder 1997) acting as a balancing power among the biggest ones: US, China and Russia. It would imply, for the time being, a network of multilevel, multi-sector alliances, with different powers, being open to cooperate but also to setting up limits and caveats for this cooperation.

Few bridges, if any, are available to keep alive the transatlantic alliance. Be confident on the inertia of years of it worked it is not an

strong foundation for an alliance if it wants to be credible in front of eventual competitors.

Moreover, bridges would be also needed among EU countries whose different strategic cultures make some of them quite apart from the rest in the threat perception (East v. South) and on the ways to cope with it (civilians v. military, force deployers v. neutrals or reticent to send troops abroad, mainly to scenarios where the risk is high). The traditional motto: stand together, but be ready to fight alone, applies.

An exercise of civil engineering that perhaps is too much for a Continent self-absorbed.

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