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The Widening Military Capabilities Gap between the United States and Europe: Does it Matter?

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Military and political experts on both sides of the Atlantic assert that the widening military capabilities gap between the United States and Europe creates a more challenging environment for transatlantic cooperation. From the American perspective, arguments tend to suggest that the growing gap limits interoperability, dictates contradictory strategies between the United States and Europe, generates domestic burden-sharing accusations, and ultimately obliges the United States to pursue a more unilateralist foreign and security policy.

On the other hand, from the European perspective, the capabilities gap may indeed seem to be somewhat irrelevant given today's perceived low-threat security environment. Furthermore, to many European governments, the fiscal constraints required by Europe's monetary union, coupled with a demographics trend that threatens many of Europe's social programs, must make the capabilities gap appear to be insurmountable. Even if the closure of the gap were desirable, European leaders, as a whole, could hardly seek to make comparable expenditures in defense as the United States without causing a cataclysmic change to Europe's social and political landscape. And many, either begrudgingly or not, are at least realizing that the effort required to overcome this gap is not worth the economic and political costs. The United States commits twice as much national treasure for defense as its NATO European partners and outspends them on a per capita basis of over 3:1. It is simply not

possible for Europe to readjust spending priorities to make up for this shortfall. Thus, in all likelihood Europe will remain woefully behind the United States in terms of absolute military capabilities.

Despite this challenge, European politicians and scholars view the capabilities gap as a trend whose wider growth can be limited through the implementation of policies that increase defense expenditures on certain key capabilities, and lead to better resource allocation through economies-of-scale consolidation of the defense industry, research and development, and acquisition agencies, and through mutually advantageous transatlantic defense cooperation in armaments arrangements to access American technologies. These policies are being implemented not to close the gap per se; rather, they are being implemented with varying degrees of success to militarily reinforce the European pillar of NATO while simultaneously providing the European Union (EU) with a military capability to act autonomously of NATO.

Even with the efforts in these areas, European leaders are nonetheless seemingly left with a dichotomous challenge: balancing aspirations of increased military capabilities to buttress its fledgling Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) against the fiscal strains of Europe's ever more demanding social-welfare state. This internal struggle suggests a continuation of the status quo and thus the need for a closer analysis of the significance of the capabilities gap.

The Gap Today

As it exists today, the military capability gap between the United States and European states certainly limits Europe's participation in particular types of operations and as a consequence arguably weakens its decisionmaking influence within the alliance and its emerging collective voice on the world stage.¹ Still, European allies do have a credible and substantial influence, both within the alliance and in the global arena:

- Economically, the 454 million inhabitants of the European Union have a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$11 trillion, which is roughly equal to the 293 million inhabitants of the United States.²
- Militarily, Europeans are in an alliance with the United States, undoubtedly the most militarily capable nation today, wherein each member theoretically has an equal say. Two of Europe's members possess strategic

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nuclear forces. Collectively, the Europeans are second only to the United States in military capabilities, and current military reform efforts under way in European states, along with NATO and EU initiatives, if implemented effectively, should result in increased efficiencies to further boost capabilities.

- Politically, European states possess two of the five permanent member seats on the UN Security Council and are vital and influential members in countless international forums. Indeed, Europeans are portrayed as the alleged masters of “soft power” and are thus perhaps more adept at coping with today’s asymmetrical threats than the United States.³

In this light, the increasing disparity between American and European military capabilities may not mean much, least of all to a European or, given Europe’s still significant military capabilities, to any potential military adversary. In turn, the question many Europeans might reasonably be asking is, “Does the growing military capabilities gap matter?”

Atlanticists would argue that the gap does matter. Interoperability with mutually supporting strategies to work in concert with each other is in Europe’s and the United States’ shared interests. For Europe or the United States to confront their common threats in isolation invites a more difficult and dangerous slog at best and catastrophe at worst.⁴ The United States enjoys a strong bond with Europe formed over the centuries by a “complex mixture of shared history, common origins, and an abiding belief in certain principles like democracy, freedom, and justice.”⁵ Apart from the soundness of these somewhat abstract concepts, past and present governments on both sides of the Atlantic have recognized that this partnership has served the transatlantic community well previously and undoubtedly believe it will continue to do so in the future.⁶ This conviction manifests itself through the alliance and its continued evolution. Still, one cannot ignore the conditions that exist today which cause critics to question the utility of the transatlantic partnership.

Arguably, apart from the political chasm that formed over the war in Iraq, one of the most critical factors in the debate of NATO’s value to Americans is the perceived power gap between Europe and the United States. The power gap is the genesis for the alleged divergence within the alliance. It is not so much the overall state of the transatlantic relationship that needs to be questioned, but rather the underlying assumptions concerning the widening capabilities gap that could lead one to invalidate the need for a strong transatlantic partnership. Again, over the past decade, current and past US and European administrations, being cognizant of the potential dangers and challenges of a growing capabilities gap, have sought ways to mitigate the damage of this trend—primarily through efforts to strengthen the European pillar of NATO, but also through the implementation of policies that support the EU’s European Security and Defense Policy.⁷

A quick read of the abundant editorials and literature pertaining to the efforts and policies within NATO and the EU would lead one to believe that the enterprise of militarily enabling Europe has been a total failure. These assessments reinforce the perception that Europe has become so shamefully weak and complacent that the United States is compelled to act as a lone sheriff on the international stage. This perceived state of affairs—that the United States’ armed forces are no longer interoperable with its European allies; that the United States and Europe have divergent security strategies; and that, consequently, the United States is forced to take unilateral measures in global affairs—is not only the mantra of many political leaders and analysts in the United States, but is also asserted by some European academics and officials who want to establish a more credible European military capability either as part of the deepening process within the EU or to counterpoise the United States, or a combination of the two.⁸

In his divisive analysis of American and European relations, Robert Kagan cites the “power gap” as one of the fundamental reasons that America and Europe are drifting further apart.⁹ Unfortunately, by exaggerating trends while ignoring nuances, Kagan and others paint a rather negative picture of Europeans as being weak and largely unprincipled, as witnessed by their alleged willingness to cooperate with “evil” regimes for the sake of avoiding violence at any cost. “Europe” is portrayed as an American antithesis, whose divergence with its old transatlantic ally is so pronounced, “they agree on little and understand one another less and less.”¹⁰ Their argument states that Europeans have become dependent upon the United States for security and its implied hegemonic and moral leadership. Were this indeed an accurate portrayal, then of course the capabilities gap would be utterly meaningless, as the Europeans could bask peacefully under American protection while the United States alone sets the declination of the world’s moral compass.

The United States of Europe?

One problem with this increasingly accepted portrayal of a powerless Europe is the tendency to regard “Europe” as a fully matured political entity, as though it were the United States of Europe. While the unimaginable destruction of two debilitating wars has led to a more stable cooperative environment, that hardly makes the region a homogeneous amalgamation of like-minded states. These states’ histories, cultures, and national psyches cannot be conveniently lumped into a one-size-fits-all description.¹¹ This leads to one of the most prevalent problems in debates concerning the power gap between the states of Europe and the United States. Detractors of Europe use the term Europe without further elaboration or definition, leaving it to the

audience to determine precisely what “Europe” means. This loose usage ultimately leads to misleading or false comparisons: from descriptions of national character to defense spending. It ascribes or assumes nation-like characteristics that are not truly present in a European supranational sense, such as a “European” foreign or security policy and their implied institutions such as a “European” ministry of defense or ministry of foreign affairs. There is no doubt that many European leaders share aspirations for a more unified Europe and have laid the groundwork for this evolutionary change through the European Union; yet, those European institutions that represent the genesis of potentially unified European foreign and security policies are in an embryonic state whose further development is uncertain and whose comparison with similar American institutions is deceptive.¹²

What, then, is “Europe”? The fact of the matter is that today “Europe” does not really exist other than as a geographical description. The European Union is the closest institutional phenomenon that could represent the idea of “Europe,” and the two terms are often seemingly synonymous. Assuming that this is a somewhat accurate estimation, then there are a few noteworthy observations that, while being rudimentary, are unfortunately either ignored or overlooked when describing “Europe.”¹³

The EU is, after all, made up of several sovereign states, each with its own foreign policy, defense policy, various ministries, and separate constituencies to whom their respective governments are responsible. The EU exists through a series of treaties with federal-like competencies only in those areas where all the member states agree. Thus, while the member states have agreed to subordinate certain national policies to supranational institutes in the economic community, the development and implementation of foreign and security policies remain largely the purview of each member state.¹⁴ Nowhere was this more evident than during the buildup to the war in Iraq. The crisis was often inaccurately publicized as causing a discord between the United States and “Europe.” In reality, the polarization of positions among the European states caused an enormous internal row within Europe (even leading to recriminations of an American plot to split Europe). Indeed, since many European states, at least from the French perspective, “missed a good opportunity to be quiet” and fall in line with a few of the more “mature” European governments, it was literally impossible to speak of a “European” position on Iraq. At the EU level, “Europe” was paralyzed, but that did not prevent the participation or support of many European governments in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The crisis merely proved that EU member states retain their sovereignty in those areas of vital national interest, at least for the time being relegating Europe’s CFSP to a hodgepodge of separate national priorities limited to those areas where the member states can reach consensus.

The nascent “European” foreign or defense policies that exist today do not represent a solid, well-developed plan to support a “European” supranational strategy, but rather correspond to the lowest common denominator of 25 separate national policies.¹⁵ Accordingly, as this arrangement stands today, the European Union’s CFSP does not necessarily accurately reflect the foreign and security policies or the priorities of “Europe.” Rather it represents an extension of each state’s own foreign and security policies and strategies. And, when regarding the enormous diversities in foreign and defense policies of the EU member states, along with the accompanying political and historical baggage, it is a small wonder the EU has been able to accomplish as much as it has in the security arena.¹⁶

Even the actual differences of military capabilities among the EU member states are as stark as night and day. Some European nations possess nuclear weapons, while others are steadfastly opposed to anything remotely associated with atomic power. Several European governments commit a considerable amount of capital on defense, while others barely spend enough to have even a token military force. Even among the four EU neutral states, certain members guard their “armed neutrality” with significant capabilities and healthy armaments industries, while others are comfortable with drastically less capability. The list of differences is virtually endless: from large and mostly nondeployable legacy conscript forces, to rapidly deployable all-volunteer forces; from states with global military reach through capabilities such as aircraft carriers, to states without naval or air forces. This exercise of comparisons and contrasts presents two clear certitudes: it is meaningless to assign these capabilities a neat “European” label, and it is unmistakably erroneous to characterize these forces as “weak.”

Notwithstanding this diversity of national policies and actual capabilities, the EU member states still aspire to a “deepening” of the EU. Certain treaties provided the framework for Europeans to develop a Common Foreign and Security Policy, and within that policy a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP).¹⁷ Within the confines of these policies, member states contribute military capabilities to establish a Headline Goal Force for the conduct of pre-agreed missions. Still, this can hardly be considered a grand European strategy. Simply because the EU has a Political and Security Committee, a Military Committee, and a military staff does not mean that its members have agreed to or even desire a “European Army.” These structures, institutions, and mission statements again represent nothing more than what each of the member states is willing to accomplish collectively within the context of the European Union. The laudatory progress made to date in European security and defense arrangements represents a launching point that can either remain a tool for accomplishing limited-scope operations under EU

auspices or the foundation from which more meaningful “European” strategies, policies, and capabilities can grow.

The member states of the European Union can afford such a relatively slow evolutionary implementation of security policies and its associated Headline Force capabilities because NATO remains Europe’s primary security organization. The development of a military capability autonomous of NATO is also one that all US administrations have supported as a way of sharing the security burden and increasing European capabilities. Paradoxically, some critics suggest that either the EU force represents a challenge to existing security arrangements, or the limited nature of the EU force demonstrates Europe’s military weakness.

On the surface, a force of 60,000 established to take on limited military tasks might seem unimpressive, but the restricted scope of this force should not be confused with demonstrating a weak European political will or with Europe confining itself uniquely to the use of this force.¹⁸ An EU force should instead be viewed as a tool that EU member states can employ should NATO decline to act. Yet critics of Europe’s efforts in this domain fail to see the forest for the trees as they assess the restricted nature of the force as some sort of European weakness. To be sure, there are certain critical capabilities or enablers that European states still need to develop or procure in greater quantities, either under the auspices of NATO’s Reaction Force (NRF) or the EU’s Headline Goal Force.¹⁹ However, there are sound plans and procurement programs at national levels, at bilateral and multilateral levels, at NATO, and at the EU to assist in correcting these capability shortfalls.

The EU’s narrowly focused efforts in the security arena also are often mistakenly professed as being in competition with NATO or the United States, when in fact the two organizations complement each other. One merely needs to take into account the EU’s assumption of policing and peace-keeping missions in the Balkans, its lead in the 2003 Congo crisis, and other smaller missions around the world to recognize that these institutions mutually support each other’s efforts in advancing stability and security.²⁰

In spite of these considerable achievements and continued undertakings by the EU member states, we are still today some distance from resolving Secretary Kissinger’s lament of having no one to call to speak to “Europe” about the most pressing security concerns.²¹ This condition will likely persist for some time, precisely because those issues of vital national interest are justifiably closely guarded by each sovereign European state. Whether or not this somewhat anarchical state of affairs within Europe should be viewed as positive or negative is beside the point, however. What is important is that one needs to be cautious when categorizing politics, foreign policies, defense spending, and even power as “European.” Even though the European states

are making constant progress toward integration in these areas, all of these competencies remain today largely at each state's own discretion and are not amalgamated at a supranational European level. Along these lines, one can discuss the various aspects of French, German, or Dutch defense and security policies with a high degree of authority; however, to attempt to do the same at a "European" level could prove to be somewhat reckless. Simple descriptions that do not accurately take into account the peculiarities that make up "project Europe" invite misunderstandings and grave underestimations of the United States' most important and capable allies.

Diverging or Converging Security Interests?

Another concern of the widening capabilities gap is that the power differences cause the United States and Europe to see the world differently. According to Kagan, the power gap between the United States and Europe has provided Europe and America with different outlooks on the world:

When the European great powers were strong, they believed in strength and martial glory. Now they see the world through the eyes of weaker powers. These very different points of view have naturally produced differing strategic judgments, differing assessments of threats and of the proper means of addressing them, different calculations of interest, and differing perspectives on the value and meaning of international law and international institutions.²²

Yet a straightforward comparison of the *European Security Strategy* with the US *National Security Strategy* quickly leads one to conclude that far from seeing the world and its threats differently, Europe and America perceive the world in quite similar fashion with its array of common threats. Even the respective publics agree on the essential themes. The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey of the European and American publics revealed that they share similar views about the threats they face and how to cope with them:

Contrary to talk about a growing transatlantic rift, the American and European publics agree on many fundamental issues. . . . They have common views of threats and of the distribution of power in the world. Both sides strongly support a multilateral approach to international problems and the strengthening of multilateral institutions. Majorities on both sides show a strong readiness to use military force for a broad range of purposes, and support NATO and its expansion.²³

Of course today's complicatedly vague threats almost leave one yearning for the simple days of the Cold War, when a single obvious Soviet threat left both Europe and the United States with little choice other than cooperation. But despite their ambiguous nature, today's threats of terrorism,

rogue or failed states, and weapons of mass destruction are clearly cited in both Europe's and the United States' respective strategies as the primary threats to security.

The relevance for each of these comparatively vague and asymmetrical threats in determining required strategies and military capabilities is each distinct, and hence perceived with differing criticalities between allies. While the United States tends to view these threats with a greater sense of urgency, several European states do not see the immediacy of the threats—a scenario somewhat reminiscent of times during the Cold War. Yet despite these differences, the United States and Europe have forged ahead through NATO to recognize the new threats, develop new strategies, and identify and implement new programs and capabilities required to cope with them.²⁴ From both a military and a historical viewpoint, new threats have merely replaced the old ones.

The Gap and a Division of Labor

Allegations of European capability shortfalls in defense are not new. There is a long history of American demands for the Europeans to increase their military capabilities. Continued shortfalls in capabilities accelerated after the Cold War. European nations cashed in on their “peace dividends” to the point that many Americans allege an irreparable gap was created, leaving Europe weak and incapable of fighting alongside its American allies. In this weakened state, the argument goes, European nations have sought the refuge of international laws, conventions, and organizations to influence world events.

On the surface this observation certainly seems logical: weak nations shun the use of force and embrace international laws and conventions, while those that are strong prefer to keep the full range of options available to them for the implementation of foreign and security policies. But the problem with this view is the underlying assumption that Europe is in fact weak. A number of indicators are incorporated into this assertion. But most of these indicators are in relation to or in comparison with the United States. If the United States is the standard of measurement used in determining what nations are weak or strong, then one could easily assert that every nation other than the United States is weak.²⁵

Consequently, using the United States as the yardstick to calculate a state's absolute military strength is deceptive, especially from a European perspective. To the contrary, qualitative and quantitative comparisons of military capabilities indicate that Europe is second only to the United States. The resulting capabilities gap between the two pales in significance when one considers they are allied with each other, are qualitatively compatible, and have capabilities that complement the other's shortfalls.

Comparing Defense Expenditures				
	2004 Expenditures in current US dollars (\$ billions)	Expressed as a percentage of GDP	Percent of the world total	Number of armed forces (thousands)
United States	455.91	3.9 %	41 %	1,546
NATO Europe	240.11	1.9 %	21 %	2,352
China	84.30	1.5 %	7 %	2,255
Russia	61.50	4.4 %	5 %	1,027
Japan	45.15	1.0 %	4 %	260
World Total	1,119.27	2.5 %	100 %	19,970
Source: IISS, <i>The Military Balance</i> , 2006				

Figure 1. Comparing defense expenditures, 2004.

From a quantitative perspective, the United States today commits resources to defense that dwarf the resources committed by any other nation, and its deployable forces far outnumber Europe's. Past operations have confirmed the severe challenges Europeans face and an excessive reliance on American capabilities to effectively deploy their own forces and conduct operations. The terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the ensuing Global War on Terrorism have ensured an accelerated divergence of defense budgets well into the foreseeable future, which may cause one to wonder whether it is not really a matter of the United States spending too much on defense, rather than the Europeans spending too little.²⁶

Collectively, Europeans have more men under arms, more main battle tanks, and more artillery than the United States. They are near parity in fighter aircraft and attack helicopters. While several European states possess forces that are made up of nondeployable conscripts and still lack the sought-after capabilities required for today's forces to get to the battlefield and then to conduct and sustain combat operations (capabilities including strategic lift; air-to-air refueling; precision-guided munitions [PGMs]; sustainment assets; and command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance [C4ISR] systems), quite a few European states possess precisely those capabilities or have plans to acquire them. European states have been making headway in many critical areas that should cause one to question past affirmations of European feebleness. Assumed shortfalls in military airlift capability continues to be touted as an example of Europe's inability to get to

the battlefield, yet a snapshot of lift assets suggests that the shortfall is not as significant as Europe's critics would have one believe. European states in NATO cumulatively possess 681 military airlift platforms to the United States' 819.²⁷ They are making progress in other areas as well, from unpiloted aerial vehicles (UAVs) and PGMs to the network-centric communications assets required to use them effectively and in concert with their American allies.

However, merely counting dollars spent on defense or the number of tanks, aircraft, and destroyers does not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the extent of the capability gap. Qualitative considerations are equally important in appreciating the significance or insignificance of the gap. Qualitative comparisons confirm American dominance of the many cutting-edge military and dual-use technologies, facilitated by an extremely competitive and consolidated military industrial base, a leading information technology sector, and strong government-backed research and development programs. By definition, this dominance implies a gap of some sort. But even this technology gap is perhaps not as pronounced as some imply. European armies possess, have access to, or are developing many of the same types of high-tech equipment and munitions that are employed by the United States.²⁸ The primary difference is that European states do not possess them in quantities comparable to the United States, and the scale of American programs is often much larger than their European equivalents. From a technological standpoint, Europe's defense industries are capable of producing armaments that are comparable to their American counterparts.²⁹

Another equally important factor in the gap equation is the type of capabilities required to ensure interoperability, thus enabling US and European forces to fight together. Jeffrey Bialos argues that American and European forces do not necessarily require the same types of capabilities to be interoperable, but at a minimum they must be able to communicate with each other via secure modes in order to exchange information. In this area the Europeans are not too far behind, and the cost to invest in C4ISR systems is not overburdening.³⁰

Consequently, while there is an undeniable numerical gap in capabilities that will invariably continue to grow, these disparities do not necessarily prevent interoperability between American and European forces. If these disparities in capabilities have caused anything, it is the establishment of a de facto, albeit unclear, division of labor within the alliance and between NATO and the EU, wherein the United States plays a leading role during high-intensity phases of operations and European forces become more prominent in the post-conflict phase. Regardless of concerns that such an arrangement could create resentment and mistrust, that does not change the fact that this is the essential nature of the alliance today. Heinz Gärtner suggests that in

Number of Armed Forces in 2006			
	Active	Reserves	Total
European Union	1,780,598	2,689,579	4,470,177
NATO Europe	2,350,951	3,045,804	5,396,755
Europe Total	2,469,448	3,685,679	6,155,127
United States	1,546,372	956,202	2,502,574
Source: IISS, <i>The Military Balance</i> , 2006			

Figure 2. Number of European armed forces, compared to the United States.

order to allay the possible ill feelings and further share risks and responsibilities, the division of labor should be “qualified” and not clear-cut where “Europeans do the peace and the Americans do the war.” With a qualified division of labor, European states and the United States would maintain capabilities across the security spectrum, but would tend to focus on the missions where each has a comparative advantage—be it in the collection and distribution of intelligence, the employment of precision munitions, the deployment of constabulary forces, or simple “boots on the ground.”

This capabilities-driven, qualified division of labor is already being played out in Afghanistan and the Balkans. In Afghanistan, the United States led initial combat operations to remove the Taliban and continues to have the lead role in Operation Enduring Freedom, a Coalition effort with 22 nations providing capabilities at the higher end of the warfighting continuum. Simultaneously, NATO commands a 36-nation International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that provides lower-end peacekeeping capabilities.³¹ We have seen a similar scenario played out in the Balkans, where the United States initially provided the bulk of the combat power, but not at the exclusion of European combat forces.³² The EU has now taken over NATO missions in Bosnia as the focus has shifted to those nation-building areas in which the Europeans have considerable competence. This de facto division of labor grew out of a military necessity precisely because of the capabilities gap. However, the gap has not led to a noninteroperable, ineffective alliance; rather, we have seen a logical migration of capability contributions based on relative strengths and a partnership that recognizes the comparative advantages each side has to offer.

European Use of Force

Despite the quantitative gaps with the United States, Europeans nevertheless possess a considerable military capability. Furthermore, they are undeniably willing to use it. Critics of European capabilities assert that since

Europeans are weak, they are horrified by the thought of using military force.³³ Yet European states have resorted to the use of force more in the last decade than in any time during the Cold War, and nearly always in conjunction with the United States: in Gulf Wars I and II, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Operation Desert Fox again in Iraq, Kosovo, Macedonia, Afghanistan, and the Congo. Europe's alleged abandonment of power is cited as being due to its preference for "soft" power, a preference for using forms of persuasion other than the use of force or the threat of its use.³⁴ Yet, in a speech at Harvard University, the EU's High Representative for CFSP, Javier Solana, recounted an interesting vignette that challenges the "America as Mars, Europe as Venus" premise.

Just a few weeks ago in the middle of the Indian Ocean a rather daring military operation took place. A ship was boarded from helicopters on the high seas. It was carrying missiles from North Korea to Yemen. What happened? The lawyers in another country got together and decided that the action was illegal and had to be called off. Who were the people who boarded the ship? They were Europeans, Spaniards as it happens. Who were those who insisted on the operation being ended because of international legal norms? The United States government.³⁵

This incident simply demonstrates that bold generalizations do not always reflect reality. In fact, nearly all agree that European states prefer soft power over hard. But again, as the event above shows, Europe's preference for soft power is not at the exclusion of hard power. This is also true of preconceptions about the United States being a warmongering, hegemonic power.

The argument that American military dominance makes the United States more inclined to use force than its European counterparts is valid in certain circumstances. The availability of unique military capabilities definitely provides the United States with a greater range of options.³⁶ Certainly this argument could be made for those cases where the United States acted unilaterally: Grenada, Panama, and cruise missile strikes against targets in Afghanistan and Sudan. The American capacity to conduct such operations does increase the probability that the United States will resort to force. Conversely, the probability of Europeans conducting similar operations is reduced, but perhaps not so much because they do not have the same capabilities, but because of a relative lack of political consensus. As David Calleo writes, "Europe thus still remains unable to focus effectively the military power that its states actually possess."³⁷ In other words, their hesitancy to employ force may not be because the Europeans do not have the military means to engage or even because they lack the political will to engage, but because the immature nature of Europe's CFSP and ESDP and the nature of the EU itself do not facilitate such large-scale designs.

In combined combat operations with the United States, regardless of the capabilities a state brings, the political decision to participate, by defini-

“The actual differences of military capabilities among the EU member states are as stark as night and day.”

tion, demonstrates a certain willingness on the part of European states to resort to force and assists in dispelling the notion that Europeans abstain from using force. Their relative capability deficiencies vis-à-vis the United States do not necessarily make European states less inclined to conduct operations with the United States and, as discussed above, recent history tends to support this notion.

The conflict in Kosovo confirmed American dominance and is often cited to point out the disparities in power between Europe and America. European critics take this one step further, suggesting that American willingness to spend more in order to avoid casualties led to the investments in new technologies that permitted the accurate engagement of targets from safe distances. Accordingly, this development led to a technology gap that has made the United States more willing to use force than European states. These critics purport that since European states are unwilling to suffer casualties and allegedly lack these same high-tech capabilities, they therefore would have “to pay a bigger [human] price for launching any attack at all.”³⁸ Yet, General Wesley Clark provides firsthand insight that at certain times during the Kosovo crisis, the Europeans were more willing to commit forces than the United States, despite the possibility of increased casualties.³⁹ The goal of casualty avoidance is shared by all, but as witnessed in Kosovo and elsewhere, it has not automatically relegated Europe to the sidelines.

Conclusion

There is an undeniable gap in military capabilities between the United States and Europe, and it seems that it will only grow larger. What, then, is the significance of this capabilities gap? Have the disparities in accessible military might caused the members of the alliance to perceive threats differently and their security interests to diverge? Has the gap prevented US and European forces from being interoperable? Are the differences in power so pronounced that the United States’ only choice is to go it alone? In a word, no. It would seem, despite constant and consistent historical warnings to the contrary, the gap in capabilities is somewhat insignificant in some contexts and exaggerated in others.

A comparison of the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* with the *European Security Strategy* confirms that the United States and the EU share common threats and strategies. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic recognize that the implementation of the strategies along cooperative lines and through multilateral institutions will be more successful than each entity following its own strategies in isolation or unilaterally.

The capabilities gap also implies that the United States and Europe need to continue to work together through the alliance and other cooperative avenues if they want their forces to remain interoperable to their mutual benefit. As opposed to overcoming inequities in the quantitative gap, restraining a wider fissure in the technology gap is fiscally feasible and will help to ensure interoperability. In addition, as European states have already expressed aspirations for a military capability autonomous from NATO, their leaders should follow through with defense reforms and commit resources in those areas where there are recognized shortfalls as presented in the EU, in NATO, or both. Again, the intent of investments in key capabilities is not to close the capabilities gap or to boost spending to what Americans might construe to be “acceptable levels.” Rather, investments in these capabilities are essential to further enable European forces, ensuring that NATO member states remain interoperable and providing EU member states with the capacity to conduct the full range of missions to which they’ve agreed.

Within NATO and between NATO and the EU, a de facto qualified division of labor exists. Rather than bemoan this division of labor, leaders should recognize it and modify strategies and plans accordingly. One could argue that both organizations are already unofficially on this track, as demonstrated by their flexible metamorphosis in attacking potential or existing security problems around the world, which only a few years ago would have seemed unimaginable. The Riga NATO Summit scheduled for 28-29 November 2006 offers an excellent opportunity to recognize the particular skill sets and resources of the member states, reemphasize the requirement to remain interoperable, and in those areas where there are alliance-wide shortfalls, to identify candidate capabilities for development as NATO collective assets.

The improbability of many European states committing more of their treasuries toward defense suggests that capabilities will continue to diverge. While this is certainly not a desirable condition, it is far from being the apocalyptic end of the alliance. The capabilities gap, while growing, has not led to a dysfunctional alliance. Rather, Europe’s and America’s leaders continue to acknowledge the enormous value and importance of the transatlantic partnership in advancing their shared values and facing their common threats. Despite recent strains in European-American relations, NATO continues to serve as a valuable organization that binds the allies together, providing the

vehicle for continued cooperation. In this light, the military capabilities gap between the United States and Europe, as it exists today, is not as significant as many observers state or imply.

NOTES

1. Borut Grgic, "Why the Gulf Looks to America," *The International Herald Tribune*, 30 January 2004.
2. Figures obtained from European Union, Delegation of the European Commission to the USA, <http://www.eurunion.org/profile/EUUSStats.htm>.
3. David P. Calleo, "Power, Wealth, and Wisdom: The United States and Europe after Iraq," *The National Interest*, Summer 2003, pp. 14-15; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 8-9, 30.
4. "Most important, it would be a mistake to base US foreign policy on the assumption that European support for American policy is neither possible nor necessary. Acting on the false premise that Washington does not need allies—or that it will find more reliable or more important ones elsewhere—could ultimately cost the United States the support and cooperation of those most likely to be useful to it in an increasingly dangerous world." Philip H. Gordon, "Bridging the Atlantic Divide," *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (January/February 2003).
5. A. Daniel Weygandt, "The Transatlantic Divorce—Are the US and Europe Drifting Apart?" speech at the BAWAG, Vienna, Austria, 24 September 2003.
6. In response to an inquiry about possible congressional pressure for the US military to not overextend itself with NATO, Ambassador Nuland stated, "I think the opposite is true. At least my sense is that we have very strong bipartisan support in the US for a strong NATO because NATO is a multilateral security organization that is delivering. It's delivering in Afghanistan. It's delivering in Darfur. It's delivering in Kosovo. It also, as we've talked about, is a place that can help us to strengthen the capabilities of our European allies and to increase security burdensharing and flexibility." Comments by US Ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland, during a briefing to the State Department Press Corps, Washington, D.C., 15 Jun 2006.
7. NATO's Transformation Command was created to ensure that as national forces transform their militaries to take advantage of new technologies, doctrine, and tactics, they remain interoperable with each other. Within the EU, common NATO/EU membership of most members, coupled with NATO/EU permanent arrangements and liaison missions, helps to keep both organizations informed of each other's efforts before and during crises and helps to make NATO assets available for EU military missions.
8. Former Secretary of State Powell refutes the notion that the United States is inclined to act unilaterally but rather seeks to cooperate with the world's "great powers" to cope with threats to stability and security. Colin L. Powell, "Strategy of Partnerships," *Foreign Affairs*, 83 (January/February 2004). Powell emphatically denied US unilateralism: "US strategy is widely accused of being unilateralist by design. It isn't. It is often accused of being imbalanced in favor of military methods. It isn't. It is frequently described as being obsessed with terrorism and hence biased toward preemptive war on a global scale. It most certainly is not."
9. Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
11. Even Kagan suggests "one cannot generalize about Europeans," but then proceeds to do so because, "nevertheless, the caricatures capture an essential truth: The United States and Europe are fundamentally different today." Kagan, pp. 5-6.
12. The failure of two "core" European states, France and The Netherlands, to ratify the EU Constitution in the spring of 2005 exemplifies the problematic and evolutionary nature of Europe's political integration.
13. Defining Europe as the EU is also awkward; when looking at Europe from a security and security institutions standpoint, "Europe" or "European" becomes even murkier. While NATO and EU expansion have seen overlapping memberships for many of the new entrants, Romania, Bulgaria, Norway, and Turkey are members of NATO but not of the EU. Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, and Malta are members of the EU but not of NATO. Switzerland, resting in the heart of Europe, is a member of neither organization.
14. It is this distinction that makes the European Union a unique enterprise. The first pillar of the EU, the European Community, in effect reflects a confederate-type political arrangement among the member states. Consequently, one can discuss "European" trade policies, competitiveness, anti-trust laws, and other issues that fall within the economic domain with a greater "European" bent. Meanwhile, the common foreign and security policy resembles more an international organization based on intergovernmental cooperation whose very nature does not lend to the development of concrete "European" policies. These unique intricacies of the various EU communities are too often ignored, or familiarity with one community leads one to assume similarities of other communities when in fact they are vastly different.

15. Even within this pillar, member states can opt out of participating in certain areas. For example, Denmark has opted out of the program in its entirety. Spain and Hungary opted out of participating in the Code of Conduct on Defense Procurement.

16. A good example of this concept is the simple comparison of the security and defense policies of Europe's two most militarily capable members: France and the United Kingdom. Both recognize NATO as Europe's premier security organization, yet France tends to support policies that limit NATO's influence, while the United Kingdom tends to safeguard the primacy of NATO with ferocity. Their policies lie at opposite ends of the NATO spectrum. One can easily imagine the challenges to reconcile these differences, and yet since St. Malo the two states have been the engine for a more unified and integrated Europe on the security front.

17. The CFSP was established in 1993 with the Maastricht Treaty and has been modified since by a number of other treaties. The CFSP permits the European heads of state (European Council) to define principles and general guidelines for the EU's common foreign and security policy. The CFSP permits the formulation of common strategies and overall policy guidelines for activities with individual countries and the adoption of joint actions and common positions. ESDP was initiated by the Treaty of Amsterdam to develop a common security and defense policy to provide EU member states with policies and capabilities to execute humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping tasks, and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking (Petersberg tasks) autonomously from NATO. ESDP is managed by the Political and Security Committee (PSC), the European Union Military Committee (EUMC), and the European Union Military Staff (EUMS).

18. The tendency to attribute the Petersberg tasks as being on the lower end of the force spectrum is not fully accurate either. This tendency exists because for the time being the capabilities currently allotted to the EU Headline Goal Force limit its participation to the lower-intensity missions. Nonetheless, one of the Petersberg tasks is peacemaking, which can require a significant military strike and sustainment capability well beyond what might be expected for peacekeeping or disaster relief missions. The EU aspires to be able to accomplish Kosovo-type missions by 2010.

19. The NRF is set to be fully operational capability in October 2006 with approximately 25,000 troops. The force will be able to start to deploy after five days' notice and sustain itself for operations lasting 30 days or longer if resupplied. The NRF will provide NATO with a high readiness joint and combined armed force to deploy quickly. Forces rotate on a 6-month period before being replaced by a new force. The designated units go through a 12-month train-up and are certified by SACEUR. In December 1999, the European Council agreed to establish a 50,000 to 60,000 "Headline Goal" force by 2003 capable of the full range of Petersberg tasks (humanitarian and rescue tasks, peace-keeping and peacemaking tasks). The force was designed to be self-sustaining with the necessary command, control, and intelligence capabilities, logistics, and combat support services; deploy within 60 days; and sustain operations for at least one year. A 2004 council decision took into account shortfalls with the force and committed themselves to be able to achieve the full range of missions by 2010. The Battle Group concept was recently developed to provide minimum responsive force packages to include a combined-arms, battalion-sized force package with combat support and combat service support capable of launching an operation within five days of the approval of the Crisis Management Concept by the council.

20. European Union operations include the following:

- EU Police Mission (EUPM) Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1 January 2003. As of January 2006, EUPM numbered 198 international staff members—170 seconded police officers and 28 civilians. In this mission they support the police reform process and will continue to develop and consolidate local capacity and regional cooperation in the fight against major and organized crime.

- EU Military Operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR-Althea) Bosnia-Herzegovina, 2 December 2004. EUFOR comprises some 7,000 soldiers to replace NATO's SFOR. The force operates under UN Chapter VII mandate. The force includes troops from 22 EU member states. Albania, Argentina, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Morocco, New Zealand, Norway, Romania, Switzerland, and Turkey also participate in the operation.

- EU Military Operation in Democratic Republic of Congo (Artemis) DRC, 12 June 2003 - 1 September 2003. EU Force of 1,800 aimed at contributing to the stabilization of the security conditions and the improvement of the humanitarian situation in Bunia, DRC. This was the first autonomous EU military mission outside Europe. France was the framework nation.

There are other EU missions as well in the Balkans, Africa, Caucasus, Middle East, and Asia. To date, the EU has conducted 15 operations, with a potential mission to Kosovo in the queue.

21. Even though the creation of a High Representative of CFSP is a significant step in resolving Kissinger's dilemma, the High Representative still must bow to the wishes of the various heads of state of the European Council.

22. Kagan, p. 11.

23. Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, *Worldviews 2002*, "American and European Public Opinion & Foreign Policy," <http://www.worldviews.org/detailreports/compreport/index.htm>.

24. NATO's membership expansion eastward, the conduct of out-of-area missions, the establishment of a Transformation Command, and the development of the NATO Response Force (NRF) are all examples of the

transatlantic community's political willingness to transform and to recognize and cope with a changing security environment.

25. Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security*, 28 (Summer 2003).

26. "The European Union has three major independent military powers—Britain, France, and Germany. . . . In 2002, the three European powers spent \$35, 32, and 23 billion respectively on national defense—a total of roughly \$90 billion, as opposed to roughly \$350 billion for the United States. Looked at in relation to population or GDP, the big European three spent roughly half of the US outlay. Nevertheless, the three European states together spent more than Russia, China, or Japan. What do these figures tell us? Is it that everyone else is spending too little on defense, or that the United States is spending too much?" David P. Calleo, "Power, Wealth, and Wisdom: The United States and Europe after Iraq," *The National Interest*, No. 72 (Summer 2003), pp. 11-12.

27. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance, 2006* (London: Routledge, June 2006), p. 406. Several of these aircraft participated in NATO's first NRF mission of transporting relief supplies to the victims of Hurricane Katrina in the southern United States.

28. There are, nonetheless, military technologies that the United States develops at a great cost through various R&D programs to protect US forces and subsequently closely safeguards. Often the US government is willing to provide its European allies with the capability, but is unwilling to provide them with the know-how. In other words, the United States will provide the "black box," but will not divulge the source code inside the box that makes it work. In turn, the United States is often unjustly accused of being unwilling to transfer key technologies when in fact it is willing to provide the capability. Thus European militaries have access to many of the same capabilities afforded to American forces and routinely at similar costs.

29. Two recent studies confirm Europe's relatively solid standing in the technological area. Gordon Adams et al. discovered that while none of the European states studied is likely to have a fully networked military in the foreseeable future, "all have a greater commitment to the deployment of C2 [command and control] and communications capabilities that link their national forces closer together and provide greater interoperability within the NATO alliance than is sometimes thought. The biggest constraint on European C4ISR investment is overall limitations on defense budgets, not the absence of adequate technology." Gordon Adams et al., *Bridging the Gap, European C4ISR Capabilities and Transatlantic Interoperability* (Washington: George Washington University, October 2004), p. iv. A study by the French Defense Minister's Conseil Général de l'Armement, after examining air-to-air and cruise missiles, telecommunications and optical spy satellites, nuclear attack submarines and frigates, and attack and transport helicopters, also concluded that the technological gap was either small or nonexistent. See "UK-US JSF Pact a Boon for MBDA," *Defense News*, 12 June 2006. Other examples of Europe's domestic aptitude at the high-tech end of the defense industry are EADS's A400 program, EADS's first air-to-air refueling sale to the UK, MBDA's Storm Shadow cruise missile, several PGMs, and Europe's Galileo satellite.

30. Jeffrey Bialos, "The United States, Europe, and the Interoperability Gap," *The International Spectator*, 40 (April-June 2005), pp. 58, 60. The Adams et al. study also makes clear that C4ISR systems are the linchpin for conducting modern military operations.

31. The four top contributing countries are Germany with over 2,400; Italy, over 1,100; UK, over 900; and France, over 800. See the NATO webpage "NATO in Afghanistan," <http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan>.

32. It is perhaps noteworthy that the first air-to-air engagement during the Kosovo conflict was a Dutch F-16 downing a Serb Fulcrum.

33. Since the United States possesses a formidable "hammer, all problems start to look like nails," while weak Europe faces the opposite problem: "when you don't have a hammer, you don't want anything to look like a nail." Kagan, pp. 27-28.

34. Calleo, p. 12.

35. Javier Solana, "Mars and Venus Reconciled: A New Era for Transatlantic Relations," 7 April 2003, <http://ue.eu.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/75373.pdf>.

36. There are obvious advantages to acting in concert with allies and with the blessing of international institutions. Their support not only brings sorely needed military and financial assistance in the long run, it also provides legitimacy. In a world where international rules and conventions carry increasingly more weight, the "legitimate" use of force, while not a prerequisite, nonetheless becomes a correspondingly more valuable commodity in the conduct of world affairs.

37. Calleo, pp. 14-15.

38. Kagan, p. 23.

39. Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), pp. 319, 330-34, 438. On p. 450, he writes: "The European officers saw a leaner campaign focused on Kosovo, characterized by more flexible and daring tactics. They were prepared to take greater risks with their troops and to ask for less from the supporting arms such as artillery and airpower." Clark further explains that Europeans were more concerned about *civilian* casualties and their preference was to shift efforts from the air campaign to a ground campaign to limit civilian casualties.