

In Search of a Role: New European Efforts to Counter Nuclear Proliferation

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October 2003 may well be remembered as an important milestone in the history of European diplomatic activity in general and in the efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation in particular. That month the foreign ministers of France, Britain, and Germany reached an agreement with Iran to submit the Iranian nuclear project to closer international inspection. This initiative was approved by other European countries and by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran would subsequently proceed to violate some of the agreements it had undertaken, but from the European point of view of critical importance is that European involvement led to this breakthrough in the Iranian crisis.

This diplomatic effort raises questions regarding Europe's role in the international community's confronta-

tion with the issue of proliferation. Has a change actually taken place in Europe's stance regarding proliferation? If so, how can this change be explained? Does Europe possess the determination required to halt the continuation of proliferation? Does it have suitable tools to cope with proliferation? Are the Europeans capable of speaking with one voice on the subject? Will the European policy regarding nuclear proliferation present a challenge to the US, and will it constitute a step in the transformation of Europe into a global power?

In order to answer these questions, this essay will examine the shift that has occurred in the European position regarding proliferation within a broader political context. The principal argument is that the change in European policy cannot be explained merely as a response to information that came to light over the last year or as a response to the war in Iraq. Rather, two extended matrices are also at work: internal European affairs and trans-Atlantic relations. Within Europe the subject of proliferation forms a focal point around which various European players are attempting to define their place in the European Union. The issue of proliferation also

advances Europe's self-definition as it struggles between two options on the international scene: readiness to cooperate with the United States versus the ambition to achieve an independent European role.

The Changed European Position on Proliferation

The standard previous European stance was for limited involvement only in direct efforts to halt nuclear proliferation. The EU concentrated primarily on strengthening the multilateral organizations for weapons control through support for extending the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and making it permanent; promoting the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); and promoting the Code of Conduct (CoC) regarding ballistic missiles. However, the formulation of a European strategy paper on proliferation and the direct involvement in the Iranian nuclear policy crisis are evidence that Europe is inching closer to the proactive American position that aims at obstructing nuclear proliferation by taking coercive steps – diplomatic but also military, if necessary. Inherent in the American stance is a differential approach, which mandates assigning

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varying responses to the challenges that arise, according to their particular contexts.

The European strategy paper on the proliferation of non-conventional weapons, approved in December 2003 following the decisions of the Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003, outlines the shift in the European position.¹ The very existence of the document, which for the first time defines a European position on the issue, is itself impressive, but most striking are its contents. Overall, the document outlines the threat proliferation presents to Europe and the means of coping with it. To a great extent the document recognizes that the steps taken thus far did not produce the desired results and that additional, more forceful measures must be taken. The resemblance of the document's title to an American paper on the same subject, the recognition of the gravity of the proliferation threat, and the adoption of the principle expressed by the Bush administration according to which different approaches should be pursued in different situations² all indicate that Europe is moving closer to an American position.

As its name implies, the document attaches great importance to the proliferation of non-conventional weapons and identifies it as endangering the security of European countries, citizens, and global interests. This is in contrast to earlier periods in which the Europeans tended to assign less importance and urgency to the subject. The document calls for action to prevent proliferation before it actually takes place, but urges preemptive po-

litical and economic steps over military measures. It is argued that proliferation does not occur in a political vacuum but in places where there is regional instability and conflicts. Consequently, political solutions must be found for security problems in such regions, with the assumption that the more secure countries feel, the greater are the chances that they will abandon programs for the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The document also describes the variety of tools available to the EU "to prevent, deter, halt and, where possible, eliminate proliferation programmes of concern, while dealing with their underlying causes."³ All these tools are based on a multilateral approach and include "multilateral treaties and verification mechanisms; national and internationally export controls; cooperative threat reduction programmes; political and economic levers (including trade and development policies); interdiction of illegal procurement activities; and, as a last resort, coercive measures in accordance with the UN charter."⁴ This reference to the option of force represents a substantive evolution in the European position regarding proliferation. Even if it has not yet been put to the test, the very readiness to recognize that diplomatic efforts may fail and may need to be followed by force options marks a substantial change.

In accordance with the EU decision of November 17, 2003, it was also decided to incorporate a clause regarding proliferation prevention in future agreements with third party countries. In existing agreements this

would be done upon renewal or re-evaluation. Where warranted, the EU can initiate a change in an agreement with a country in order to incorporate a suitable clause on proliferation.⁵ In the event of violation of the clause, intensive negotiations will be conducted in order to solve the problem, with suspension of the agreement forming the ultimate sanction. Initial evidence of the application of this clause may be found in the EU's announcement to Syria in February 2004 that the Association Agreement on trade would include a clause on the prevention of proliferation, violation of which would be regarded as a substantive violation of the agreement.⁶

The change towards Iranian nuclear policy is another indication of the altered European approach to proliferation. The European position changed from holding a "critical dialogue" to direct involvement in pressuring Iran, with the summer of 2003 constituting the turning point. Hitherto the EU had been opposed to the American voice. It rejected the inclusion of Iran in the axis of evil, and in June 2002 began conducting negotiations for a trade agreement between the EU and Iran as a protest against US policy, despite US pressure not to do so. The argument reasoned that Iran's inclusion in the axis of evil weakens the moderate elements in Iran and plays into the hands of the extremists. This argument matched the traditional European position regarding the value of maintaining a critical dialogue with the Iranians, which in American eyes was tantamount to inaction.

The term "critical dialogue" is still in use, but its meaning changed once Europe sharpened its tone towards Iran. On June 21, 2003, the European foreign ministers for the first time created clear linkage between the Iranian nuclear policy and trade relations with Europe. Since the EU is Iran's principal trading partner, this decision was of major importance to Iran.⁷ In the decision it was announced that when the EU examines the agreements for economic and commercial cooperation, it will do so against the backdrop of Iran's behavior in the nuclear field. The initiative of France, Britain, and Germany also indicated European willingness to take an active stand. Although the pressure applied on Iran in October 2003 came from the three countries only, it received overall European backing. Consequently this pressure is additional evidence of a changed European position and a readiness to participate in an effort to block the Iranian nuclear project.

What meaning should be attached to this change in the European position regarding proliferation? On the face of it, it would seem sufficient to focus on the war in Iraq and the exposure of information about the Iranian nuclear program in order to argue that Europe recognized its mistake and bettered its ways. The US placed the issue of proliferation at the top of the international agenda, focusing on Iraq, Iran, and to a lesser extent Libya, so that Europe was obliged to address the issue. However, a changed European position in response to the events was by no means

a foregone conclusion. Indeed, had Europe not altered its approach in the least, it would not have been surprising. A possible response could have been continued relegation of the issue to a low place on the agenda, similar to Europe's approach to international terrorism, at least until the terrorist attack in Spain in March 2004. Barring that, there were two other options: adoption of the American position, or formulation of an independent one. In

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other words, the fact that the US ascribed importance to the subject does not explain Europe's position. In order to do so it is necessary to consider how the issue of proliferation fits in with other, broader processes that Europe is undergoing, mainly the protracted process of formulating a common foreign and security policy and of defining its role in the international scene. Thus, it would be shortsighted to relate to the issue of proliferation on a stand-alone perspective. Instead, it is better understood as a theme that, while of critical importance in its own right, doubles as a reflection of additional and broader strategic relations.

Consequently, it is necessary to examine how intra-European and European-American relations influence the European position regarding proliferation.

Intra-European Relations and Proliferation

The issue of WMD proliferation and the means of coping with it serve as a political tool in the hands of the various European players within the EU. The EU organizations, the Big Three (Britain, France, and Germany), and the smaller countries are all trying to advance their respective interests by adopting and promoting a position on the issue.

The EU has taken steps to make the issue of WMD proliferation a focus around which it can formulate a common foreign and security policy. This was made clear in the Iranian context and also in the formulation of the strategy paper. Whereas with Iraq the EU failed to speak in one voice, in the case of Iran Europeans agreed that a threat exists and that it must be contained. This could best be achieved through diplomatic and commercial leverage, areas in which Europe enjoys a distinct advantage over the US. The strategy paper for coping with nuclear proliferation should thus be viewed as one of the first steps by the EU in the direction of coordinated policy. Furthermore, the fact that the EU is adopting a differential approach, i.e. different responses to the various threats, suggests a transition from an idealistic approach of strict multilateralism and universalism to a more pragmatic one. In other words,

the process resembles that undergone by the Bush administration between 2002 and 2003, when the administration shifted its emphasis from a single, uniform policy towards the axis of evil to a policy of different strategies for different threats.

Parallel to the activities of the EU, France, Germany, and Britain have taken steps to strengthen their status as leaders in Europe. It appears that France and Germany reached the conclusion that they are not interested in trying to advance in issues of defense and foreign affairs without Britain. For its part, Britain acts in two directions in order to maintain its position. On the one hand it continues to cooperate with the US, as was made clear in December 2003 by the Libyan case. The UK and the US had secretly negotiated with Libya for nine months and reached an agreement with it to dismantle all of its WMD programs. These negotiations were kept secret from Britain's European partners. On the other hand, Britain works closely with France and Germany, cooperation that naturally extends to other major issues of defense and foreign affairs. The agreement reached between the three in December 2003 for advancing the initiative for a joint defense policy should be viewed in this light, as should the European strategy on non-conventional weapons and certainly the initiative to tackle the Iranian issue.

In this context the political tension between the EU policy and the joint policy of the three states is most prominent. The latter acted in a coordinated manner, not in the name of

the EU, but as three powers attempting to retain their status in the Union. The WMD proliferation issue revealed the tension existing between the inter-governmental framework – that of three heads of state and foreign ministers – and the supra-governmental one – that of the Commission. It is no accident that Xavier Solana, the High Representative for common foreign and security policies in the EU, was not invited to participate in the visit of the three foreign ministers to Tehran in October 2003.

The European approach to the issue of proliferation also reveals a leadership crisis that hovers above the common policy. Similar to the US' increasing difficulty in achieving European recognition of its claim to leadership, the Big Three have encountered difficulties in leading the Union, since in both cases this depends on the willingness of the other countries to follow them, a willingness that is not always forthcoming. The aspirations of Italy and Spain as well as Poland to play a major role in leading the EU have caused Europe to sound like a cacophony, and the situation is likely to worsen following the expansion of the Union in May 2004 with the addition of ten new member states. For example, Franco Frattini, the Italian foreign minister, whose presidency of the troika was about to end, attempted to play a greater role in formulating the policy of the EU when he argued in early December 2003 that Iran should be rewarded for its consent to sign the Additional Protocol, even though it

had not actually done so at that time. Frattini's proposal encountered strong opposition from Germany, France, and Britain. Poland is also trying to formulate an independent position by establishing close relations with the US. This was acknowledged by the American administration, which chose to announce the new presidential Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) during President Bush's visit to Krakow.⁸

Despite these differences it is clear that dealing with the issue of proliferation has advanced Europe in its deliberations as to whether Europe should look inwards and promote *Festung Europa*, a kind of Garden of Eden divorced from the troubles of the world, or face up to security problems before they approach its borders. The European preference is clear – it aspires to play a major international role. The significance of this aspiration as it relates to proliferation thus invites evaluation of the relations between Europe and the US, since apart from internal European pressures the trans-Atlantic relations represent an important factor in the formulation of European policy.

Europe, the US, and WMD Proliferation

Europe is formulating its stand regarding WMD proliferation in the shadow of the ongoing tension between the aspiration towards independent foreign and defense policy, and the desire and need for trans-Atlantic cooperation, which means accepting American leadership. The trans-Atlantic confrontation sur-

rounding the war in Iraq strengthened the tendency – mainly in the media – to interpret every European step regarding proliferation as a rebellious act against the US. However, an attempt to explain European behavior solely as a continuation of the quarrel over the Iraq crisis is misleading, since the major dispute in the period preceding the war centered on the question of whether a threat existed and not of how to combat it. Even if the crisis about Iraq is regarded as a catalyst for changing European policy, it should be kept in mind that the tension between an independent posture and cooperation with the US existed before the war and still continues. Although the Europeans have come closer to the American position, it cannot be expected that they will speak in one voice with the Americans, since the aspiration to an independent European policy still exists. Consequently the European policy on proliferation is being formulated against the background of internal processes, but also in juxtaposition to the US. Hence a two-pronged position: on the one hand we can see that Europe, both before and after the war in Iraq, has permitted the US to lead the campaign against proliferation. On the other hand Europe has also taken steps to strengthen its independent status.

Two striking examples indicate that the willingness to permit the US to lead existed both before and after the Iraqi crisis: the first is the European position regarding North Korea, and the second is the participation of European countries in President Bush's Proliferation Security Initiative

(PSI). Regarding North Korea, the EU associated itself with the international position, led by the US, which was formulated before the Iraqi crisis. The EU avoided any independent policy, and merely participated in the condemnation voiced by the Korean energy organization (KEDO). According to the declaration of the organization, whose members include the US, South Korea, Japan, and the EU, North Korea presents a threat to in-

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ternational security. The organization condemned North Korea for grave violation of the international obligations it took upon itself, called for cancellation of the nuclear program, and announced the freezing of shipments of heavy fuel.⁹ The independent steps taken by the EU against North Korea focused on humanitarian and economic development aid only.¹⁰ This is consistent with the European approach of the 1990s, since every time the EU encountered the need to deal with specific cases and not with the principle of proliferation, it joined the US. Thus the EU supported the approach to nuclear weapons in Russia

as well as the agreement with the Ukraine, which agreed to give up the nuclear capabilities that it had inherited from the USSR. Again, when the Indians and the Pakistanis held nuclear tests in 1998, the EU barely voiced an independent position.

Evidence that Europe permits the US to lead activities against proliferation even after Iraq is the participation of European countries in President Bush's PSI of May 2003 for sea and air inspection for proliferation. It would have been expected that Europe would strongly oppose this initiative: first, in order to oppose the American leadership, and second (and perhaps even more important), this initiative is not backed up by international law and is not being implemented under UN inspection, but was in fact intended to bypass it. Despite this, the Americans have benefited from European cooperation. The outstanding example is the cooperation between the US, Germany, and Italy, which led to the seizure of components of gas centrifuges, designed for uranium enrichment, being shipped to Libya in September 2003. The official European support for President Bush's program regarding inspection of fissile material, announced in February 2004, can also indicate European willingness to accept American leadership.

These examples notwithstanding, Europe is obligated to define its independent position, in order to ensure its place as a player on the international stage in general and regarding nuclear proliferation in particular. If we return for a moment to the Euro-

pean strategy document, wordings exist that emphasize the European difference and independence. For example, in contrast to the American approach, the document resonates of the importance of multilateralism and universalism when combating proliferation, which had been the longstanding European posture. The document also contains references that reduce the status of the US regarding confrontation with proliferation and accentuate that of Europe. When there appears in the document a phrase such as "our commitment to cooperate with the US and other partners who share our objectives," Europe clearly sees itself as acting as the mainstay in the confrontation with proliferation.

This is the best context in which to understand the agreement of the three European foreign ministers (of France, Germany, and Britain) with Iran, on October 20, 2003, ten days before the expiration of the IAEA ultimatum viewed cooperation with the agency. The initiative can seemingly be viewed as another European attempt to undermine the US position, a kind of continuation of European policy regarding Iraq (this time, with Britain on the European side). Indeed, the US was not mentioned at all in the joint declaration of the European foreign ministers and the Iranian foreign minister, and the three promised Iran that they would not agree to debate the subject in the Security Council, despite a clear American demand to do so. The tone of the reports in the American press following the European formulation of its position on

Iran, from September 2003 onwards, reflects the view that Europe was defying the US.¹¹ However, such a view of the European behavior regarding Iran once again expresses a projection of the Iraqi crisis on the debate about Iran.

Although the media treated the disagreement between the parties as the gravest trans-Atlantic rift on Iran, its magnitude should not be exaggerated, since Europe played a construc-

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tive role in the crisis with Iran. The Europeans, and not only the Americans, took care to avoid repeating the confrontations that characterized the debate over Iraq. The Americans and the Europeans achieved a compromise on the IAEA resolution on Iran in November 2003, even if this took a week longer than planned. The resolution included the method of coping with Iran – a mechanism for response in the event of a future violation, as demanded by the Americans, and a multilateral framework, as demanded by the Europeans. The results of the IAEA Board of Governors discussions in March 2004 further weakened the

claim that there was a rift. During that meeting the US expressed readiness to soften its position regarding Iran and move closer to the European approach. The Americans and the Europeans rapidly reached agreement regarding the wording of the decision about Iran. The decision included appreciation of the Iranian cooperation with IAEA, and condemnation of the concealment of important information.¹² Furthermore, during this round, the tension created about Iran was between the US and Europe on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other.

A Greater European Role

Even without a crisis, one of the major challenges facing Europe is to persuade the US that Europe is in fact an important player on the international stage. A dismissive approach, however, is common in the US, expressed by the hawks in the Bush administration. According to this approach, Europe is incapable of playing a major role because of its internal dissensions. Europe is also seen as a spoiled player unwilling to roll up its sleeves and get its hands dirty.

Regarding proliferation, Europe is regarded as lacking the political stamina to act against rogue states, even when evident that these states had abused the European overtures for rapprochement. The reports of the Iranian violations that came to light after October 2003 – the continuation of the Iranian attempts to construct gas centrifuges for uranium enrichment, as well as the exposure of a more advanced centrifuge model (P2)

– strengthened these claims, and embarrassed the three European countries. However, these violations can also serve as an opportunity for Europe to express its determination to block future nuclear proliferation. This is Europe's chance to deepen its commitment to the subject, by defining a clear policy – by taking steps leading to action if the agreements are violated. This also means that there is a greater chance of enhancing the coordination with the US, such that will permit more effective international action, as well as permitting Europe to find its place on the international scene, without the US regarding it as an unnecessary addition.

In conclusion, the change that took place in the European position regarding nuclear proliferation includes three intertwining strands: Europe's policy towards proliferation; inter-European relations and proliferation; and trans-Atlantic relations as reflected by proliferation. These three issues are interrelated and express long term processes. The same applies to the challenges facing Europe on its way to acting as a major player on the issue of proliferation. The dramatic events that have taken place regarding proliferation coincide with the inter-European processes at a time when Europe is attempting to define its role.

Consequently, proliferation has become a major issue in the European

dialogue since it forms a framework of action for these processes. In addition, it is representative of other policy issues on the public agenda. Europe aspires to play an international role, but its capability of acting as a single, independent body is still limited. Europe does not intend to break with the US, but neither does it wish to follow the US without being capable of arriving at an independent policy. It may therefore be expected that Europe will involve itself selectively in international affairs, and will thus advance three aims: formulating a common European policy; conditioning the US to regard it as an international player; and as in the case of proliferation, allowing the US to lead without a sweeping European challenge.

Notes

- 1 Council of the European Union, *Fight against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: EU Strategy against Proliferation of WMD*, December 10, 2003.
- 2 The White House, *National Strategy to Combat WMD*, December 2002. On the US differential strategy, see Emily B. Landau and Ram Erez, "The Nuclear Dimension of 'Axis of Evil': Different Strategies for Different Threats," *Strategic Assessment*, 6, no. 1 (2003): 8-14.
- 3 *Fight against Proliferation*, p. 7.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 5 Council of the EU, *EU Policy as regards the Non-Proliferation Element in the EU's Relationships with Third Countries*, November 17, 2003.
- 6 Judy Dempsey, "Demands on WMD Threaten Syria-EU Trade Deal," *Financial Times*, February 12, 2004.
- 7 In 2001 trade with EU countries formed a third of Iran's trade; EU countries' imports from Iran, mainly oil, totaled 6.7 billion euros (about one percent of total European imports), and their exports to Iran totaled 6.6 billion euros (37.2% of Iranian imports), http://europa.eu.int/comm/trade/issues/bilateral/countries/iran/index_en.htm.
- 8 This was an American protest against the "Old Europe," and a prize for Europeans who follow American directions.
- 9 Statement by KEDO Executive Board, November 14, 2002. http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/asia/news/kedo_141102.htm
- 10 European Commission - External Relations, *The EC-Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – Country Strategy Paper 2001-2004*, 2001. http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/north_korea/csp/01_04_en.pdf
- 11 Paul Taylor and Louis Charbonneau, "EU Big Three Offered Iran Carrot for Nuclear," Reuters, September 19, 2003.
- 12 Craig S. Smith, "US Softens Its Rebuke on Iran Nuclear Issue, Appeasing Allies," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2004.