

Transatlantic Troubles

Are they America's loss?

Andrew A. Michta

TRANSATLANTICISM, CONCEIVED as a special security bond between the United States and Europe—framed by the NATO alliance, driven by shared threat perceptions and buttressed by common Western values—is in flux.

The United States is losing influence in Europe, and the growing resistance to its continued leadership on a range of security issues is not limited to politicians. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, while 78 percent of Germans in 2000 had positive views of America, after the attack on Iraq in 2003 the number fell to 45 percent, to stand in 2006 at only 37 percent. For the French, the numbers went down from 62 percent positive in 2000 to 39 percent in 2006; even in the UK, the attitude toward America fell from 83 percent positive in 2000 to 56 percent in 2006.¹ The emerging anti-Americanism of the “European street” is a reality not only in Germany, France and Belgium, but also among the most pro-American new members of NATO like

Poland. In a Center for Social Opinion Research (CBOS) poll released in Warsaw in November 2004, 58 percent of the respondents saw U.S. policy as contributing to instability and conflict in the world, while only 21 percent saw American policy as contributing to peace and stability.²

Europe’s policy elites do not reject the use of military power out of hand. Contrary to the argument advanced in the 1990s, the fracturing of the transatlantic relationship is caused not by the incompatible strategic cultures of the allegedly Hobbesian Americans and pacifist Europeans, but rather by divergent interests and differences on security policy. Those differences are not existential, but they are nonetheless important; we are driven apart not by what we are, but by what we do.

To some extent, the weakening of the transatlantic bond has been inevitable because the end of the Cold War reduced Europe’s reliance on the United States for security, notwithstanding the celebrated “unipolar moment” of unchallenged American supremacy in the 1990s. The Balkan wars further obscured the transformation of Euro-Atlantic security relations. Europe’s deficit of military capabilities had made U.S. power essential

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¹“Favorable Opinions of the U.S.,” *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, June 26, 2006.

²“Polacy o roli Stanow Zjednoczonych w swiecie”, Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS), BS/178/2004, Warsaw, November 2004.

to ending the Balkan conflicts, thereby solidifying the view in Washington that not much had changed when it came to security relations. The lessons drawn portrayed Europe as indolent and lacking political will to deal with crises even in its own back yard. The corollary assumption in Washington was that the Europeans would continue to look to the United States to make decisions, and would ultimately follow the lead of the world's "indispensable nation."

That particular Balkan misperception was corrected in 2003 during the crisis over Iraq, when France, with the support of Germany, actively opposed the United States in the United Nations and in NATO, bringing about what the U.S. ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns would term a near-death experience for the alliance. Still, even as the United States was launching the military campaign in Iraq, some in Washington expected that the Europeans would assist with the Iraq stabilization force after the major combat operations phase was over. More than three years later that belief is finally being laid to rest. Today, while Europe remains weak on security, it is no longer a given that the continent will accept the U.S. lead if it sees its interest elsewhere.

NATO in Decline

ALTHOUGH NATO remains the institutional framework for Euro-Atlantic security relations, its efficacy is in question. The two post-Cold War cycles of enlargement have brought stability to Central and southeastern Europe, but they left the issues of the overall alliance mission and capabilities unresolved. Though from the vantage point of Washington NATO retains a significant residual security value, bilateralism has increasingly defined U.S. security relations with Europe. This transformation in the U.S. approach has been to some extent unavoidable, as today the European allies

cannot reach agreement on issues that the United States believes are crucial and then come up with the necessary military capabilities to take the required action. At the same time, we are still a long way from the point where the European Union as a whole could become America's new partner on security matters, speaking with one voice on policy and ready to assume responsibility for stability in and outside of Europe. But the shift toward bilateralism in Euro-Atlantic security relations goes beyond the shortage of political will or deployable EU military capabilities. An important factor driving the process is the progressive hollowing-out of NATO, both as a result of diverging interests and policies, especially those U.S. policy decisions taken in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003, and as the consequence of how NATO enlarged after the Cold War.

The United States' failure to use NATO as the framework for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, after the alliance had invoked Article 5 in the wake of 9/11, missed an historic opportunity to revitalize the alliance. The operation, if executed by NATO, could have focused the alliance on a key new mission and exposed the allies to a shared risk on the battleground against the Taliban, as well as against the larger common international threat from Al-Qaeda. NATO further lost ground when Allies failed to agree on it playing a greater role in stabilizing Iraq. Today NATO is faced with the possibility of an even more devastating blow: the risk of a strategic failure of its mission in Afghanistan. By the NATO commander's own admission in Afghanistan in early September 2006, the alliance had six months to turn the tide of the Taliban insurgency—a difficult task as Germany and the Netherlands debated the rules under which their troops should operate.³ Recognizing the

³"NATO Gives Itself a Deadline to Get on Top of the Taliban", *The Financial Times of London*, September 2, 2006.

urgency of the situation, on September 28 the North Atlantic Council authorized the expansion of NATO-ISAF operations to all of Afghanistan.

In retrospect, NATO's enlargement has proved a mixed blessing for the transatlantic relationship. The alliance enlarged in 1999 and 2004, adding ten new members, but the politics of the process overshadowed the issue of the military capabilities of the new allies and the requirements for military modernization. Although it will be declared operational in October 2006, the NATO Response Force continues to suffer from lack of agreement about how the force should be used and serious shortfalls in future rotations.

In addition, NATO allies continue to disagree about what NATO's mission should be. The United States' vision of a global "expeditionary alliance" able to deliver security where needed is not shared across Europe, and the Europeans themselves are also divided on the issue. A number of key European states, France and Germany in particular, have rejected the "toolbox" approach, focusing more on the political dimension of cooperative security based on a community of values. The new NATO members, on the other hand, see the alliance to be predominantly about Article 5 security guarantees. They have endorsed the U.S. position, if not on principle then as the necessary *quid pro quo*, in exchange for U.S. support. After all, Poland's decision to send troops to Iraq as part of the U.S.-led coalition was not so much about Middle Eastern terrorism as about Russia and Warsaw's effort to secure American backing in Central Europe.

The striking increase in bilateralism in transatlantic relations is therefore the consequence of U.S. and European policies, which are a reflection of NATO's identity crisis. While NATO's survival as an international organization is not in question, its significance as a key instrument of

security is. Five years into the post-9/11 era, France, Germany and several other European allies have basic disagreements with the United States about the fight against Islamist terrorism, Middle East policy—including Iraq and the Arab-Israeli question—and other security issues. Likewise, U.S. views on NATO transformation are met with limited enthusiasm, while Washington's pressure for expanded NATO-EU cooperation is not shared by key players and at times blocked. NATO's military transformation goals set at the Prague Summit in 2002, remain works in progress. Simply put, transatlantic relations are in question because there is a deadlock at the heart of the alliance: The U.S. security agenda is being met with continued skepticism in Europe.

A New Relationship

DESPITE THE repeated assertions about the need to build a strong U.S.-EU relationship, when it comes to security issues U.S. policy toward Europe puts a far greater premium on dealing with individual European capitals than on working within NATO or dealing with the EU. These bilateral relationships vary in terms of their intensity, from close partnerships at one end of the spectrum to cool but cooperative arrangements on the other. At one extreme there are an "old European" and a newcomer: The United Kingdom and Poland which—albeit for different reasons—see close ties to the United States as vital to their national security. At the other extreme, France and Belgium would like to see reduced U.S. influence and the renewed deepening of the European project. Somewhere in the middle, Germany's position has fluctuated, with Chancellor Gerhard Schröder coming closer to the French position and staking a strong anti-U.S. position on Iraq, while Chancellor Angela Merkel moved closer to the center and became a greater pro-

ponent of NATO. Meanwhile, the overall American military presence in Europe will likely continue to decline, and some of the deployments will shift southeast to Romania and Bulgaria to support U.S. policy in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. It is not inconceivable that in five years no more than 20,000 U.S. troops will remain in Germany.

Differences over the Middle East and the Mediterranean region will continue to strain Euro-Atlantic relations until a compromise on the Middle East has been reached, especially on the Arab-Israeli issue. The Iraq War remains another key obstacle to better transatlantic relations, as well as to greater European unity on security and foreign policy. Differing views on the Iraq War and the overall U.S. War on Terror strategy continue to polarize Europe. Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to throw his country's support fully behind the U.S. policy in Iraq has put new distance between the United Kingdom and France. Likewise, the cooling of German-American relations in the wake of Iraq has seen a concomitant deterioration of German-Polish relations, an important regional variable in Central Europe. Because Germany opted to stay out of the invasion of Iraq, while Poland stepped into the breach in an attempt to position itself as the favored American ally in the region, the decade of carefully calibrated work to foster German-Polish reconciliation has been dealt a serious blow. The differences have not been limited to the "new Europeans." Denmark assisted the United States in Iraq, and Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen has continued to support the U.S. policy. A similar position was taken by Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Spain's José María Aznar; although both have been defeated since, at the time the policies of Italy and Spain belied any claim of European solidarity.

Indeed, the cohesive idea of "Western Europe" that had provided the paradigm for security and political integration dur-

ing the Cold War has been superseded by a much more amorphous notion of Europe where regional and developmental discrepancies became ever-more pronounced. In security terms, there is no "one Europe"; there are multiple regions, each with different threats. The farther one travels east and south, the less secure these regions appear. In the Balkans, American power was critical to concluding the series of wars in the 1990s; in the Baltic littoral it remains the essential variable for the security of the newly-independent Baltic states and for Poland.

The propensity for bilateralism and regionalism on security issues need not threaten European stability or U.S.-EU relations. A range of regional security optics in Europe can be accommodated within the existing institutional structures, assuming greater American involvement where needed, for instance when dealing with Mediterranean security. Likewise, the new transatlantic relationship does not preclude EU-wide efforts to develop military crisis management forces and to foster a larger common security policy. For example, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have worked to strengthen their bilateral ties with the United States, and they have also pledged forces for a battalion-sized EU rapid deployment "battle group", together with Germany and Slovakia; the Netherlands, while committed to transatlanticism, has volunteered to contribute to a battle group with Germany and with Finland.

The current trend toward bilateralism in U.S.-European relations opens the possibility of working on various agenda issues in informal contact groups that include the United States and a number of European partners. A recent example of such issue-oriented cooperation was the work of the United States with several European governments within the larger context of the so-called "Lebanon Core Group" international conference, held in Rome in late July, 2006, to end the Leba-

nese war. The meeting did not call for an immediate cease-fire, but it reached agreement on an international peacekeeping force in Lebanon and on convening a donors conference. Subsequently, France took the lead heading the deployment of multinational peacekeepers under a UN mandate, with Italy, France and Spain providing the bulk of the force. Unlike the "coalition of the willing" formula in Iraq, where the U.S. agenda was opposed by key European allies, in the case of Lebanon the shared goal of ending the fighting pushed the process forward, irrespective of differences between France and the United States on the ceasefire's timing and conditions. The durability of the agreement aside, Lebanon has shown that, despite recent acrimony, the United States and Europe can compromise and work effectively when their interests converge. Seeking such common ground on concrete security policy problems will be key to future transatlantic cooperation.

Though Europe still needs good relations with the United States and the United States needs to be engaged in Europe, neither needs the other for survival.

In other words, as transatlantic relations are no longer driven by the overarching imperative of a shared existential threat posed by the Soviet Union, issue-oriented cooperation that takes into account regional interests and variables offers a path to a new Euro-Atlantic bargain. Such issue-oriented cooperation will be more effective than expanding the existing bureaucratic structures of NATO or suggesting a new strategic concept for the alliance.

America needs continued influence and leverage with individual European nations in order to pursue its worldwide security agenda, especially in the Middle East, but it doesn't need the same close and comprehensive relationship with Europe to do so. This ongoing change need not be feared or resisted; rather, it should be accepted as the foundation of an emerging new transatlantic relationship. Grounded in realism, the issue-oriented approach will help tone down debates over ideology and set aside recriminations over Iraq, focusing instead on areas where cooperation between the United States and Europe is important. □

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