

Transatlantic Stress

Power and vision asymmetries complicate US-EU relations



HELGA HAFTENDORN is professor emeritus of political science and international relations at the Free University Berlin.

Helga Haftendorn | **Although transatlantic relations have improved since 2003, significant differences over how to address international conflicts remain. A common transatlantic strategy for global challenges is nowhere in sight—even in the event of a Democratic US administration come 2009.**¹

When Europeans and Americans cope with international crises, do they react as partners committed to the same values and traditions or do they behave like adversaries who follow specific interests and compete for influence? Europe and America embrace different concepts of world order that are based on diverging values, belief systems, and experiences—and thus they employ different strategies and instruments to shape international affairs. Yet, ultimately both have to search for common solutions and adjust their strategies accordingly, a process complicated by asymmetries in power.

The European vision of an ideal world derives from the writings of

John Locke and his concept of a social contract governing relations among men. It follows that the Europeans seek an international political contract. Their behavior is guided by international law and their preferred instruments are international institutions, multilateral negotiations, economic stimuli, and worldwide trade. They wish to see freedom and democracy put into practice, but they know that these need fertile soil to grow. They thus prioritize stabilizing a country or region. Most Europeans rely on soft power and are very reluctant to use military force, except as a last resort. They also tend to condition its use on a multilateral mandate,

1) This article draws on the paper, “How well can Europe and the United States Cooperate on Non-European Issues?,” to be published later this year by Geir Lundestad and the Norwegian Nobel Institute.

preferably from the United Nations, and a broad international consensus legitimizing military action.

In contrast, Americans want to build a world according to their own image: a unipolar system with few constraints on Washington's ability to act. With a Hobbesian interpretation of the world as an anarchic system, America follows its basic strategic interests by relying on a variety of means: rewards and incentives, restraint and containment, different kinds of sanctions, and a gamut of military measures. The Bush administration believes that containment is more effective than engagement and drawn-out negotiations. To bring about regime change, Washington does not exclude overthrowing a ruler as it did in Iraq.

Is Henry Kissinger's dictum still true—that the United States has global interests while Europeans follow regional ends? In fact, both follow their own national interests, whether they are global or regional. But because of the asymmetries in military and political strength, America and Europe have different capabilities for power projection and policy enforcement. The United States engages in a broader spectrum of regions and countries than do the Europeans. While the Bush administration wants to establish a military footprint worldwide, Europeans feel that their interests are best served by a peaceful world order. Only gradually have they realized that in a globalized world “the real challenges for Europe's future prosperity and stability...lie beyond its borders.”²

In the last couple of years, the European Union has been engaged in a number of strategic dialogues worldwide. It has assumed international responsibilities with its participation in the EUFOR missions in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the EU-3 activities vis-à-vis Iran.

Differences in power between Europe and America are more relevant than diverging concepts of world order.

Patterns of Interaction

An inventory of cooperation between Europe and America reveals that many of their approaches to international issues are identical; others complement each other while some are mutually exclusive. This analysis indicates that differences in the power relations between Europe and America are more relevant than diverging concepts of world order. In most cases, the United States, because of its dominant power, prevails over competing views. The Europeans lack critical capabilities and succeed only when America runs out of options. In coping with global issues, they follow five basic interaction patterns:

1. Open conflict

Americans and Europeans have divergent core interests and values. Both sides also find themselves in a situation in which domestic concerns are more pressing than international considerations. The most divisive issue is the use of military force.

The 2003 Iraq campaign saw an open skirmish between the United States and Britain, on one side, and

2) Nicole Gnesotto and Giovanni Grevi (eds.), *The New Global Puzzle: What World for the EU in 2025?* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2006), p. 206.

France and Germany, on the other. The latter, for different reasons, wanted to distance themselves from the conflict and to contain America. Their opposition to the war produced a deep split across the Atlantic, as well as in the European Union. The rift was mended when Germany and France realized that their stand hurt other vital interests, such as alliance cohe-

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sion. They further understood that an Iraq in chaos was not in their interest. Initial European *schadenfreude* at America's problems gave way to helplessness and deep concern about how the region can be stabilized in the long run. Though the Europeans continue to decline any military involvement, they have supported Iraqi reconstruction with financial and training assistance.

2. American dominance

In this paradigm the United States perceives its central strategic and other major interests at risk and feels it has to ward off perceived dangers. The more it takes recourse to unilateral actions, the less it appreciates foreign counsel and involvement.

The 2002 US intervention in Afghanistan fit this pattern. NATO had activated Article V, its famous assistance clause, but the Bush administration told the allies: "We will call you if we need you." Instead of requesting NATO assistance, Washington formed a coalition of the willing that included Russia and other states. Together with the forces of the Northern Alliance, it evicted the Taliban from Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. The tran-

sition from a unilateral to a multilateral encounter took place when the United States realized that the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan would greatly profit from its allies' assistance.

A comparable case is the Arab-Israeli conflict. With the "road map" developed by the Quartet (US, EU, Russia, UN), the transatlantic partners could rely on common guidelines. But a closer look indicates that engagement depended mostly on the United States. Initially the Bush administration had put the issue on the back burner. Recently, though, it has tried to reach some kind of success before leaving office, using shuttle diplomacy and a multilateral conference on the Middle East.

3. Burden- and Risk-sharing

In these cases, Europeans and Americans share common interests but follow different priorities. Here, the United States pays the piper and calls the tune while the Europeans dance to it. Cooperation is under Washington's lead, though for the mission to be effective, both need to recognize one another's concerns.

The second phase of the Afghan mission saw a more equal distribution of responsibilities. A European and later NATO-led mission, ISAF, took charge of stabilization, establishing provincial reconstruction teams, while special forces fought remaining Taliban. Risk-sharing suited Europeans because they worried that ISAF's stabilizing role could be compromised by Operation Enduring Freedom's (OEF) predominantly military actions, which resulted in heavy civilian casualties. In December 2005 a third phase began.

Despite some European concerns, NATO established a common roof for ISAF and OEF and extended deployments to southern and eastern provinces. Disputes erupted over the most adequate strategy to cope with the resurgent Taliban.

The European-American burden- and risk-sharing lasted only as long as a clear separation of tasks was possible. This was no longer the case when NATO units were deployed across the country where they battled the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The deterioration of the overall situation led to controversies among the partners. The United States emphasized the importance of a military victory while the Europeans preferred to rebuild the country. Washington heralded the establishment of a truly democratic state while the Europeans were content with a stable political situation in which Afghanistan was no longer a threat to its neighbors. The Europeans also argued that an isolated political arrangement for the country did not assure long-term stability; they instead advocated a regional solution that also involved Afghanistan's neighbors: Iran, India, Pakistan, the Central Asian states, and Russia.

4. Reliable Cooperation

This paradigm is based on shared interests and mutual trust. It requires that Washington interacts with the European Union on an equal level and accepts it as a full partner while the latter desists from trying to balance the United States.

The best example is transatlantic relations toward Iran 2005–2007. After initially following different

strategies—the European Union preferred “carrots” and the United States “the stick”—Washington ran out of options and agreed to a joint strategy with the EU-3. They got Russia and China on board for joint UN resolutions and enacted sanctions on Iran. When Iran refused to yield, neither the EU-3 nor the United States had credible options left. In Washington, some argued that only a military attack against Iran's nuclear installations would stop it from developing a military nuclear option. The Europeans, however, wanted to prevent a military strike by all means. They instead, proposed to tighten economic sanctions.

5. Benign Neglect

Here, neither the United States nor the Europeans care much about the issue and largely ignore the actions of the other.

Sub-Saharan Africa is a case in point. The European Union has tolerated US involvement in Africa—

though not without some misgivings—as long as Washington does

not intrude into one of the former colonial powers' preserves, such as Ivory Coast where French forces are deployed. The United States approved of European Union efforts to stabilize DRC since it had no intention to send its own troops there though they would have liked to have a voice under a NATO Berlin-Plus arrangement.

In their dealings with China the Europeans could for quite a while disregard US concerns. But this became an issue when EU politicians

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wanted to end the 1989 arms embargo. Washington was concerned that sensitive technologies could fall into Chinese hands, altering the regional balance of power and endangering the security of Taiwan. It vehemently opposed EU policy.

Cooperation and Partnership

Reliable cooperation presupposes accountability on the part of both partners. In transatlantic relations, partnership depends on the ability of the Europeans to act jointly and to have the necessary capabilities. Otherwise

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the United States expects substantial gains from cooperating with its partners. For overcoming transatlantic differences, the Europeans prefer to use multilateral institutions that offer organizational procedures and give them an equal voice vis-à-vis Washington. In exchange for increasing their influences the Europeans accept restrictions on their autonomy.

Although the United States has been the architect of many international institutions and alliances, it now uses them according to its own preferences. When the Bush administration came to office, it pulled out of a number of international agreements. Above all, Washington wanted to protect its political options from the constraints of supranational decision-making. It practices a kind of unilateral multilateralism but continues to use the language of partnership. This has been difficult for the Europeans to accept although they acknowledge that until they can muster the necessary strength they have few alterna-

tives. Washington's inclination to act unilaterally and the European Union's ambitious rhetoric have weakened mutual trust.

Successful cooperation presupposes suitable forums in which policy coordination can take place. Although the UN Charter could be seen as a global treatise of peace, its binding powers are weak, and most other international organizations are limited to the region or issue they have been designed for. During the East-West conflict, the Atlantic alliance was the core forum for transatlantic coordination. Today it has not yet fully adapted to its new role as international crisis manager. To do this, it needs globally deployable forces and flexible coalition arrangements. Afghanistan is regarded as a test case for NATO's effectiveness. If the mission fails, what will happen to the alliance? Reactions will differ across the Atlantic: America's original skepticism about the adequateness of NATO for fighting terrorism will be confirmed; NATO will then wither away. The Europeans, for their part, will want to save NATO as a forum for transatlantic policy coordination. But what will be the use of an alliance in which the US has lost interest?

Can the European Union and its Security and Defense Policy assume some of the tasks that NATO has discharged in the past? Though the European Union has strengthened its capabilities for joint political and military action it still lacks political determination and suitable military capacity for acting effectively on a global level. Washington does not consider the European Union a partner of equal standing. Though after the November 2008

elections in Washington a Democratic administration might be more inclined to work with allies and use multilateral strategies, for structural reasons the asymmetry will only change significantly if the European Union becomes a reliable, unitary actor in global affairs.

This still leaves us without a forum. The European-American summit meetings have so far been restricted to a non-binding exchange of views. Other institutions, however, are better placed for mediation, such as the G-8 on Afghanistan, the quartet on the Arab-Israeli dispute, or the P-5 + 1 (i.e. the five permanent Security Council members and Germany) consulting on the Iranian nuclear threat. The flexible structures of a “multilateralism à la carte” are thus the future.

Structural factors will make transatlantic cooperation even more difficult. The future world will be both more connected and more segmented. The United States will most likely lose its supremacy. It will compete for power and influence with China and India, possibly also with Europe. With Pax Americana gone, no commanding force or overarching structure will shape the global agenda and mediate competition and conflict. Given the structural asymmetries between Europe and America, it is unlikely they will unite to cope together with new challenges. Rather, each will seek to adapt according to its own needs. America will try to retain as much of its power as it can, and Europe needs to muster its resolve to overcome nationalist habits and become a dynamic actor on the global stage.