

Commentary

Transatlantic relations: adjustment to change

What is the state of the transatlantic relationship?

Marten van Heuven

This assessment consists of two parts. First are some comments on the current interests, threats, structures and procedures of the transatlantic partners. The second part addresses fundamental changes afoot that potentially may alter the basic relationship.

'A bundle of aspirations'

Definitional minefield

The transatlantic relationship is a definitional minefield. In its broadest dimension, it encompasses all countries that define themselves as European and, on the other side of the Atlantic, Canada and the United States. It also includes Turkey. The relationship also embraces innumerable elements of the private sector. NATO has members, who are allies, but it also has partners. The EU has members and aspirant or candidate members. Some non-members of these organizations — Sweden and Finland are not in NATO; Norway and Switzerland are not in the EU — are nevertheless regarded as part of the transatlantic community, another term that challenges definition.

The European Union has been created by treaty to achieve the lofty goal of European unity, but the current narrative from Brussels also uses the more down-to-earth term European project. The Euro is a common currency adopted by many, though not all, members of the EU. There are too many aspects to the relationship to capture them in a single judgment. For present purposes the transatlantic relationship may be described as a bundle of aspirations, arrangements, commitments and agreements that encompass governmental entities and non-governmental organizations, on both sides of the Atlantic, whose common goals are democracy, security, well-being, and respect for individual liberties.

Threat perception and transatlantic security

Europe presents a kaleidoscopic tableau. It consists of countries with deep-rooted individual cultures, habits and history. These distinctions continue to be the driver of state behavior and individual citizen preferences. There are common factors, to be sure. As Hugh Seton-Watson has pointed out, "The growth of an increasingly homogeneous European culture, and also a belief among thinking men and women that they belong to a single, even if diverse, European cultural community, are facts of history and facts of this present time."¹ But despite the gloss of the EU, the essence of Europe is more diversity rather than commonality.

Threat perception depends on the identity of the perceiver. Russian conduct in annexing Crimea, and by supporting dissidents in eastern Ukraine, has provided a litmus test for allied cohesion. Russian conduct is seen differently in Kiev, Berlin, and Washington. Coordinating a policy has been the stuff of diplomacy. So far, the transatlantic community has stuck to a

coordinated response. The nuclear agreement with Iran would not have been possible without effective cooperation of American and European partners. Syrian policy is another matter, and suggests that without a workable strategy and but tentative Washington leadership, there is no coherent allied response. The terrorist attacks in Paris have revealed the strength of historic and present transatlantic bonds. But the search for a strategy — and a workable approach — to take down ISIS could also reveal sharp transatlantic divisions.

NATO has been the lynchpin for safeguarding the security of members of the Alliance. The United States continues to be its acknowledged leader. It spearheaded the handling of crises in Berlin, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and now Ukraine. But the Alliance has recently suffered from perceived American inattention. Washington has long chafed at the unwillingness of Alliance members to keep their defense efforts up to agreed levels. Meanwhile, the Obama administration has taken to the notion of leading from behind. In response to the deployment of Russian air power in Syria, Washington is seeking to shape a new strategy, amidst domestic criticism that the American response so far has been inadequate. For now, the issue of nuclear weapons in Europe is on the back burner. So is the issue of further NATO enlargement. Such support as Ukraine enjoys stops short of promising membership in the Alliance.

From competition to cooperation

Europe has structured itself around the EU. The goal is an ever closer union. But this does not reflect reality. Public reserve about the growing role of “Brussels” was already evident in 2005, when the Dutch and French electorates voted down a European constitution. Today’s polls show growing disenchantment with the EU, which is viewed as being at the same time autocratic and unresponsive to public concerns. The EU machinery works reasonably well within its own parameters, though key issues habitually seem to require all-night sessions. Transatlantic relations also function reasonably well², but not at the top political level. The current size of the EU at 28 has led to EU-US summit meetings where each leader took his/her turn at the microphone. At bilateral meetings the EU is represented by three office holders. From the point of view of the American president, this is an unworkable format. If there is to be “more Europe”, as Chancellor Merkel suggests, Europe has to come up with arrangements that enable rather than impede transatlantic dialogue at the top. If Britain opts out, there will be less Europe, not more.

The transatlantic relationship has surmounted several hurdles. In the nineteen nineties European leaders flirted with the notion of the EU as a political “counterweight” to the United States. Washington reacted sharply to perceived moves to put in place a EU military effort alongside NATO. These lines of thinking are now off the table. The present emphasis is on cooperation between NATO and the EU. Washington was also quick to see the EU as a potential global economic competitor. But ever since the Clinton administration Washington has supported cooperative economic and business relations and successive administration have expressed whole-hearted support for the EU. Nevertheless, some American economists remain skeptical about the Euro and feel that the Greek financial crisis proves them right.

The EU has as yet not demonstrated its capacities in the field of foreign policy. When Yugoslavia broke up, EU Council President Jacques Poos’ “hour of Europe” never came. The

experiment with a High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy has yet to show its full value. Despite the complex arrangements that govern the operations of the EU, the diversity among member states leads to soaring rhetoric but mostly minimalist actions. The pattern of the transatlantic relationships also reveals the latent preference in many European capitals for dealing with Washington on a bilateral basis. Significant foreign policy roles of European countries now commonly occur in smaller formats, such as the Five Plus-One, and the Minsk group. The fundamental fact is that it is Berlin, not Brussels, that sets the course for the EU.

Germany is slowly getting accustomed to this new role. It has deftly managed the transition from silent partner in the *de facto* French-German directorate of Europe to sole leadership of the European community. It steered the Greek financial crisis toward a hopefully workable outcome. Chancellor Merkel's government has kept the issue of spying from affecting the overall relationship with the United States. But her handling of the migrant issue has triggered criticism, even from within her coalition. It is unclear what is ahead when she eventually steps down or is voted out of office. This uncertainty is unsettling the German political mood.³

Fundamental changes

Two Europes?

The transatlantic relationship will be affected by two trends that are likely to set in motion fundamental changes. The first trend is the flow of migrants into Europe. Unsettled conditions in Syria, Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa will continue to generate a flow of migrants. The prospect is for many more persons fleeing unlivable conditions in search of safety and a better life. The number of migrants will continue to outpace the capacity of European countries to cope.

There have been many reported instances of volunteer efforts throughout the EU to assist refugees. But there is also a backlash, driven by the concern that immigration of people not sharing European values will tear apart the European social and cultural fabric. Some European leaders have even warned that the Christian character of Europe could be eclipsed by Muslims not sharing European cultural values. Right-wing parties have climbed aboard this issue, roiling domestic politics, and adding a sense of instability, even fear. Former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer notes that Europeans no longer live in a kind of sanctuary.⁴ He argues that the only way out of the crisis is to proceed together and in a spirit of European solidarity. With declining popular support for what is now being referred to as the "European project" this goal may be elusive.

The immigration issue has also triggered commentary about Two Europes, one welcoming, one forbidding. This debate goes to the heart of the core values of the West, and brings into play the relation between humanitarian values and national interests.⁵

Turkey occupies a key position. The migration issue presents a paradox. The EU has hemmed and hawed about admitting Turkey as a full member. The obstacle was popular unwillingness in key countries such as France. Had the EU seen its way clear earlier to admit Turkey, the EU would have experienced a more gradual and less traumatic transition to

large numbers of Muslim faith and values as part of the EU fabric. Now the transition is likely to be more abrupt and wrenching. The irony is that there are indications of a possible deal in which Ankara would agree to take in more refugees and the EU would pick up the pace on Turkey's EU membership.

America's global role

The second trend is the evolution of American views as to their country's global role. The canonical view in the US has been that America is an exceptional country and has played a global leadership role during the last century. The interests and values which it championed — democracy, human rights, rule of law, free trade and open markets — were thought to be validated by Frank Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis as the direction toward which global societies would move. This has not happened. Western values now compete with different value systems in China, Russia, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. America will play a prominent role in world events, but as one of many actors. Moreover, popular opinion in the United States, while supportive of a global role for their country and favoring a strong defense, is increasingly focused on the need to tend to domestic problems.

The President of the Atlantic Council of the United States, Fred Kempe, points to the strengths that the US has to shape the future — a strong economy, demographic dynamism, and flawed rivals — but also notes that America's domain is shrinking. The question is open whether the United States will step up to the plate.⁶ The likelihood is it will.⁷

These are but tentative observations concerning the current and future state of the transatlantic relationship. Transatlantic relations will endure. They will be shaped by many actors and conditions, in Europe and North America. Leadership will matter, to reach specific and achievable goals, building on the dense web of relations built up over decades. It will demand the best efforts of the large assembly of individuals on both sides of the Atlantic committed to a safer and better world.

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1. Hugh Seton-Watson, 'What is Europe, Where is Europe? From Mystique to Politique', *Encounter*, July-August 1985, pp.9-17.
2. Constanze Steltzenmueller, 'Why Europe needs America, a little', Brookings Institution, www.brookings.edu.
3. Jackson Janes, President of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, observes that "Germany is a nervous country right now", www.aicgs.org/by-author/jackson-janes/.
4. Joschka Fischer, 'Europe's reality check', Project Syndicate, 30 September 2015, www.project-syndicate.org.
5. Diana Pinto, 'A Clash of Western Civilizations', Project Syndicate, 13 October 2015, www.project-syndicate.org.
6. *Inflexion Points*, Atlantic Council, 24 October 2015.
7. Walter Russell Mead concludes that "...while some Americans seek to turn their backs on the difficult tasks of global engagement, on the whole, the commitment to the principles of liberal world order building that have framed American foreign policy since the Truman administration continues to shape our thinking today." Testimony delivered to

the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services on October 22, 2015. *The American Interest*, www.the-american-interest.com.