

Opinion

Fighting with allies

Reflections on transatlantic relations after Afghanistan

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As the United States and its NATO partners reduce their military roles in Afghanistan, economic conditions throughout the alliance are forcing governments to reduce discretionary spending. For most of them, this has entailed further cuts in military budgets, and therefore in forces available for use by NATO. The United States, as part of the “pivot” or “rebalancing” toward Asia, has been shrinking its military presence in Europe, which some Americans believe is a long-overdue adjustment to post-Cold War conditions on the Old Continent. Militarily, NATO is already being “reduced” to new and historically low levels of capabilities. Staying prepared and committed to fight together, however, helps to bolster other, more peaceful tools of international policy.

Working side-by-side

I must admit that I was never convinced of the wisdom of the Obama administration’s “pivot” toward Asia. The United States has been militarily engaged in Asia since World War II, fighting two subsequent wars there (Korea and Vietnam). Militarily, the pivot policy has so far produced very little in the way of enhanced U.S. military capability or political influence in Asia. Its main effect has been to raise questions about the real purpose of U.S. policies toward both Asian countries and our European allies. While it is often good to raise questions for discussion, it is not so good if you have not decided what answers you would like to see emerge. It is not clear to this observer that the Obama administration has settled on such answers.

On the other hand, the administration is to be complimented for its decision to make a strengthened commitment to NATO’s Response Force. During the George W. Bush administration, Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld saw the force as a way to push the Europeans to take on greater responsibility for NATO’s missions. As a result, the U.S. contribution to the force’s capabilities was kept minimal. Now, the Obama administration has decided to rotate the U.S. Army’s 1st Cavalry Division’s 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT) to Europe to enhance the U.S. role in the Response Force. To offset the withdrawal of substantial numbers of U.S. troops from Europe, the Combat Team will be the first in a chain of U.S. units that will rotate to Europe for exercises and training with the European allies to help keep interoperability alive in the alliance.

NATO interoperability would also be enhanced if there were more opportunities for European troops to participate in exercises in North America. This is an idea that has been around since before the end of the Cold War, appearing in some of my own studies of burden sharing prepared for the U.S. Congress. The idea still makes sense for both the United States and its allies. European troops exercising in the United States and Canada would make the point that

they are working together with the North Americans not to defend Europe but to create the possibilities for working side-by-side in a wide variety of contingencies where governments decided that the use of military force had become necessary.

Diverging values?

This and other suggestions to improve NATO cooperation will seem like rearranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic if the alliance loses political support in its member states. With U.S. secrets leaker Edward Snowden enjoying “temporary asylum” in Russia, the issue of how to deal with Putin’s authoritarian government now has taken on a new sense of urgency. The Syrian crisis has stimulated a variety of responses from NATO allies, and it remains to be seen whether alliance solidarity will be achieved as this story continues. And questions about how to deal with Iran’s nuclear program remain unanswered.

Observers on both sides of the Atlantic over the years have periodically questioned whether the rhetorically-shared values, such as those articulated in the North Atlantic Treaty, conflict with behaviours of allied governments. At a time when there is a diminishing shared military mission (Afghanistan) and still no apparent “threat” beyond that posed by instability in the Middle East and by a resurgent Al Qaeda, the temptations to abandon NATO solidarity are stronger than ever. And now the “diverging values” element has been given some new life.

Revelations about the pervasive nature of some U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) intelligence collecting programs have raised questions about the extent to which allies “spy” on each other and on their own people. The practical aspects of protecting security using modern technologies have raised fundamental questions about the values and rights violated by excessive snooping by government agencies, such as the NSA. And continuing gun violence in the United States is seen by some Europeans as illustrating fundamental differences between American and European societal norms.

There are those on both sides of the Atlantic who see the current transatlantic crossroads as an opportunity to dispense with the paternalistic U.S. role in the alliance, leaving European countries finally to take responsibility for their own security. Advocates of “more Europe” in defence are joined by Americans who argue that only by removing the U.S. “crutch” from the alliance will the Europeans learn to stand on their own, relieving the United States of both responsibilities and financial burdens.

Earlier this year, an American commentator, Sarwar Kashmiri, and a British academic, Jolyon Howorth, argued (in the *US News and World Report*, June 18, 2013) that “It is time for Europeans to stop believing that the transatlantic defence and security equation cannot work without U.S. leadership and time for the U.S. to accept that it does not have to lead everywhere in the world...” At the same time, an American NATO expert, Sean Kay, put forward some detailed suggestions for how the United States could back away from its presence and leadership in Europe, leaving NATO largely in the hands of the Europeans. Writing in *Foreign Policy* (“Time to Pull our Troops from Europe,” June 18, 2013), Kay concludes “It is time for the

United States to make clear to its European friends that it is their moment to assume lead responsibility for their security — and that the United States will help them”.

Be prepared to fight together

While I come to different conclusions on these issues than my three analyst-friends, their arguments probably resonate with many observers on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, most Americans, while “supporting” NATO, believe that it is a waste of taxpayer dollars to “defend” the rich Europeans. This, of course, is nothing new, and reflects long-held American sentiments about “burden sharing.” In Europe, there is no taste for new military operations in the wake of the fraught commitment in Afghanistan and a view that membership in a U.S.-led NATO could mean continuing requests to send money and troops in support of missions largely defined by governments in Washington.

Given these sentiments, the allies in the coming years will have to come to some politically-defensible answers to two main questions: do they still benefit from continued military cooperation, even if it is at a lower level of threat and activity; and do they still share values and interests that provide a strong political foundation for the military cooperation?

From the point of view of this Atlanticist, the United States should continue to refine its presence in Europe while maintaining a forward air, land and sea presence sufficient to support contingencies in Europe or in the Middle East region. It should also tailor the force to ensure that it will support joint training with our allies as well as demonstrate that the United States wants to continue an effective military partnership with the NATO allies and partners. This would not be a presence shaped to “defend” Europe from an attack that is not coming, but rather would seek to maintain the capability for the United States and the Europeans to combine forces under a NATO command when political decisions are made to act militarily on behalf of allied interests.

It concerns me that the political signal my three colleagues want to send might not have any of the positive results that they seek and could well have many unwanted consequences. Their approach might not produce the kind of unified European reaction that would be required for Europe to take over the U.S. leadership role of the alliance. Recent history (Libya, for example) fully illustrates that getting political consensus on the use of force is no easier among European governments than it is across the Atlantic. Moreover, the political signal that the United States is, for all intents and purposes, abandoning the alliance, would likely call many other aspects of transatlantic cooperation into question.

In sum, I see no advantage to U.S. interests in sending the signal to our European allies that we no longer see the transatlantic military relationship as valuable, particularly at a time when reductions in U.S. capabilities make effective alliance relationships even more important. The allies will never spend/build as much as we would like, but without a continued strong cooperative relationship what they do spend may well be spent in ways that are less productive for our interests.

Perhaps it is the time to have a wide-ranging debate about these issues, but my caution would be to think through all the consequences of radical departures from current policy. We should keep in mind that the United States and its European allies may not always agree on how to deal with specific question of values or interests, but the level of mutual values and interests across the Atlantic remains far higher than with any other set of relationships maintained by either the United States or the European allies. Finally, it is good to remember the Churchillian caution that “there is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting without them.” In today’s context, being prepared to fight together is a commitment that strengthens the allied ability to intervene diplomatically to try to avoid conflict and to work together to help shape post-conflict environments.

Following a career as a U.S. Government intelligence and foreign policy analyst, Stanley R. Sloan teaches courses on transatlantic relations and American power at Vermont’s Middlebury College. His most recent book is *Permanent Alliance? NATO and the Transatlantic Bargain from Truman to Obama*. He is a member of the International Advisory Board of *Atlantisch Perspectief*.

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