

The War on Terror and transatlantic relations

Reflections and projections

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In the decade since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the War on Terror has produced both unifying and divisive pressures on transatlantic relations. The unifying pressures were most evident immediately following the 9/11 attacks, but they have been sustained in the form of global cooperation in a wide range of counter-terror operations involving North American and European forces, officials, and organizations.

The divisive pressures were evident within weeks of 9/11, and intensified over time. On balance, the elements of the War on Terror and the operations conducted under its banner have arguably had a net negative impact on the transatlantic relationship. The experience has demonstrated that all allies are vulnerable to attacks by determined domestic or foreign individuals or groups who chose to attack soft targets to create fear and disrupt normal ways of life. But it has also highlighted very different attitudes toward vulnerability, the meaning of 'war,' the use of force, religion's role in international relations, and shared responsibilities for joint responses to terrorist threats, all of which tend to complicate transatlantic solidarity. Both the cooperation and the complications will be part of future transatlantic dealings with the challenges posed by international terrorism.

"Nous sommes tous Américains"

President George W. Bush declared a War on Terror on September 20, 2001 following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in New York, the Pentagon, and other intended targets in Washington. Bush, addressing a joint session of the U.S. Congress, declared: "Our War on Terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated." The language initially used by Bush was subsequently expanded to the more grandiose "Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)"

At the time that Bush gave birth to the War on Terror, the transatlantic relationship had been solidified by reactions to the horrendous attacks that took almost 3,000 lives - mostly Americans, but including nationals from every region of the world. As a sign of this solidarity, British Prime Minister Tony Blair had come to Washington to coordinate responses to the attack and was in the audience in the U.S. Capitol for the President's speech. On September 12, all NATO governments had agreed that the attacks warranted invocation of NATO's Article 5 collective defence provision, proclaiming that they would be regarded as attacks on all allies who would therefore respond with assistance to the United States. Starting with *Le Monde's* September 12 proclamation "Nous sommes tous Américains," European public opinion demonstrated the solidarity.

However, the veneer of European empathy for the United States and support for a strong response temporarily hid different perspectives on the nature of the required reaction. The most obvious divisions grew out of pre-existing European perceptions of Bush and his administration as unilateralist and prone to rash and militarist approaches to international problems. Most Europeans had not fully trusted George W. Bush from the first days of his administration earlier that year. The questioning intensified with a number of actions taken by the administration in its early months, including departure from the SALT II strategic arms accord with Russia, refusal to participate in the International Criminal Court, and rejection of the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions.

NATO's reaction to the terrorist attacks was quick and unequivocal, and was initially applauded by the Bush administration. Two months after the attacks, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, R. Nicholas Burns, argued that NATO had responded strongly to the terrorist challenge, and that the response demonstrated NATO's continuing relevance: "With the battle against terrorism now engaged, it is difficult to imagine a future without the alliance at the core of efforts to defend our civilization."¹

However, in spite of Burns' brave words, the Bush administration in the first weeks sought help from the allies mainly through bilateral channels, not through NATO. Some Pentagon officials privately dismissed NATO's formal invocation of the alliance's mutual defence provision and complained that the alliance was not relevant to the new challenges posed by the counter-terror campaign. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously asserted that "In this war, the mission will define the coalition - not the other way around."²

War mentality

The terrorist attacks on the United States and the nature of the American response had a major impact on U.S.-European relations, leaving fundamentally different impressions on Americans and Europeans. The 'war mentality' adopted by the Bush administration seemed to warrant all necessary steps to defend the country, irrespective of the views of other countries or the accepted norms of international law. Europeans, for the most part, although shocked and sympathetic, did not see the attacks as changing global realities in any profound way. They remained convinced that international cooperation and law were vitally important foundations for international stability and, indeed, for a struggle against international terrorism.

While the initial phases of the War on Terror left scars on relations among governments in the transatlantic alliance, the subsequent Iraq phase produced divisions not only between the United States and many allied governments but also among European governments and between American and European public perceptions of what was required for alliance solidarity. Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, if not before, some key officials in the Bush administration began to act on the assumption that Saddam Hussein was a part of the terrorist problem that should, and could, be eliminated. By early 2002, it seemed clear that the United States was intent on bringing about a regime change in Iraq in addition to removing the Al Qaeda threat from its Afghan base.

While the United States was laying the groundwork for an attack against Iraq, several European allies were not prepared to come to the same conclusions reached already by Bush administration officials. Europeans generally agreed that Hussein was a problem and that his regime was in clear violation of international law. Further, they shared some of the U.S. frustration that international sanctions had done much to hurt the Iraqi people but little to undermine Saddam's rule. However, few Europeans believed that Saddam Hussein was a major supporter of international terrorism who was in possession of threatening weapons of mass destruction, as the U.S. administration claimed.

Most Europeans and many European governments perceived the Bush administration as determined to go to war against Iraq while caring little what other countries thought, irrespective of how unilateral action might affect the future of international cooperation, and with little regard for the impact on international law.

Preventive war

For its part, the Bush administration further fanned the flames of European concern when, in September 2002, the White House released a policy statement on the *National Security Strategy of the United States*. The paper focused on "those terrorist organizations of global reach and any terrorist or state sponsor of terrorism which attempt to gain or use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or their precursors." With regard to such threats, the document claimed it was promulgating a strategy of pre-emption, consistent with accepted international law, saying "as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed." It then added,

"...while the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists."³

However, many Europeans (and others) interpreted the document as making the case for preventive war - asserting the right to attack a presumptive enemy before it had developed the ability to attack the United States. In the view of many Europeans, this amounted to a unilateral assertion of rights beyond the accepted norms of international law which could be misused by the United States or copied by other countries with destabilizing results.

Some European governments, led by Tony Blair's Britain, supported and participated in the attack on Iraq. Others stood on the side lines and criticized, most notably France and Germany. As for public opinion, an in-depth analysis of European public opinion following the Iraq war came to the conclusion that opposition to the war was at least partly rooted in the perception that the United States was acting unilaterally, and without reference to international opinion. According to this analysis,

"it makes a significant difference whether a potential military action involved a unilateral U.S. move or one supported by NATO or the U.N. In Europe support increases from 36% for the U.S. acting alone to 48% for an action under a U.N. mandate."⁴

As the United States struggled to move Iraq from a war in progress toward self-rule and democratic elections, the allies softened their reaction to the requests for assistance from the United States but stopped far short of providing the kind of help the United States wanted. The allies were careful, however, to avoid giving President Bush any 'victory' that he could use to good effect in his re-election campaign. This reluctance was reinforced by the fact that Bush administration claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties to terrorist groups, used to justify the war, were not supported by the evidence, validating European reticence about participating in the conflict.

By 2004, U.S. prestige in Europe had dropped to an all-time low. The image of U.S. intelligence capabilities, brought low by American claims that Saddam Hussein had an active weapons of mass destruction program and was a major supporter of international terrorism, had suffered as well. The Euro-Atlantic debates over Iraq had left obvious scars on transatlantic relations as well as on intra-European ties.

These troubled times had led many in Europe to look for alternatives to the existing structure of transatlantic relations, focusing primarily on intensifying European integration to turn the European Union into a counter-balance to American power and influence. They fed support for the European Constitution agreed by EU governments in 2003. Such attitudes toward U.S. behaviour also led to the 'rump' meeting of France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg in April 2003 that produced agreement on establishing a separate EU military planning cell independent of NATO, which U.S. Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns subsequently called "the most significant threat to NATO's future."

EU as 'balancer'

U.S. unilateralism was not an entirely new phenomenon, but the Bush administration had carried it to new levels, convincing many Europeans that American unilateralism and hegemonic behaviour were becoming the norm in the relationship. The suggestion by some that the Bush administration behaviour was an anomaly in American history was undermined when Bush was re-elected for a second term. The campaign was won in part on the argument that the United States was in the middle of the GWOT, and that the middle of a war was not the time to change Commanders in Chief.

Once the November 2004 elections had awarded George W. Bush another four-year term, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had stood behind the Bush administration on Iraq in spite of strong opposition to the war at home as well as around Europe, flew to Washington to try to get U.S.-European relations back on track. During Blair's White House talks, President Bush responded to his British friend's efforts by acknowledging that "the world is better off, America is better off, Europe is better off when we work together."⁵

The European allies responded to the Bush victory by compromising on Iraqi debt, agreeing to forgive much of that debt, in spite of Iraq's potential future oil income. But French President Jacques Chirac continued to call for a multi-polar world, and President Bush said he would use the 'capital' he earned in the elections in support of his policy preferences. These positions left

questions about how quickly U.S.-European relations would recover from the Iraq and 9/11 traumas.

The failure of the European Union Constitution to win approval in 2005 referenda in France and the Netherlands did not signify popular rejection of the 'balancer' argument, but were based far more on the desire to preserve national identities and cultures and on concerns about economic consequences than on any grand strategic arguments. But this failure did squelch talk about the EU as a 'balancer,' and led to serious introspection among EU governments. How could one imagine the EU counterbalancing the United States if even the most 'Gaullist' of European countries, whose government had promoted the concept of making the EU an international pole of power, could not win popular approval for a document that would establish the platform for such a role?

Even before the defeat of the EU Constitution, there were serious questions about the EU balancer concept. In a new balance of power system, the EU would have been required to align itself with Russia and China from time to time in response to disagreements with the United States. One presumes this also could mean that the United States would be free to align with other countries, let's say India and Japan, or even Russia or China, against the European Union. It doesn't take much imagination to envision how unstable international relations could become in such an environment. Moreover, how comfortable would Europeans feel about aligning themselves with autocratic or even authoritarian states against the American democracy?

One answer, of course, is that the EU could engage in "soft balancing," as Robert Pape suggested at the time, by adopting measures that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but use international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements to delay, frustrate, and undermine U.S. policies that run contrary to perceived European interests.⁶ This, however, is not much different from the current state of transatlantic relations.

The debate in Europe over the U.S. invasion of Iraq reflected the fact that there were very different attitudes and assumptions among EU member states concerning the relationship with the United States. While some European states opposed the U.S. action based on their judgment that the case for war had not been made, others lined up in support. The divisions among allies and even within allied governments were based not just on the merits of the case for war but also on differing images of Europe's future and the role of the United States in it. When the model of the EU as a balancer came into question, the idea of a uniting Europe with the framework of continued transatlantic cooperation had some new life.

In addition, the change of leaders in two key countries - France and Germany - substantially improved the dynamics of their bilateral and alliance relations with the United States. When Christian Democrat Angela Merkel assumed the chancellorship in Germany in 2005 she consciously sought to repair some of the damage to Germany's relations with the United States, and to make NATO "a high priority for German foreign policy."

Similarly, when Nicolas Sarkozy won the French presidency in 2007 he brought with him a fundamentally changed attitude toward NATO and relations with the United States. Sarkozy's decision to return France to NATO's integrated military command and to develop the European Union's Security and Defence Policy in NATO-friendly directions was welcomed by the Bush administration.

Many European governments remained supportive of U.S. policy even though they all faced public opinion that opposed the war in Iraq and thought little of U.S. leadership in general. George Bush's "fence mending" trip to Europe in February 2005 helped establish a better atmosphere for the U.S.-European dialogue, and even made some progress toward coordination of U.S. and European approaches to international terrorism, Iran and other issues. Good will was evident on both sides. But many underlying suspicions and unresolved issues remained.

Until the 2008 U.S. elections, American policy toward Europe took more traditional forms, with burden-sharing complaints focused on allied efforts in Afghanistan, some of which reflected unwillingness on the part of some to put their forces at the same level of risk as those of other allies. Even though it was clear that NATO needed to negotiate a new strategic concept, the allies preferred to wait until a successor to George W. Bush had been elected. Their acceptance of a key role for NATO in far-off Afghanistan did not mean they wanted to settle on a new alliance concept with the Bush administration. This none-too-subtle preference reflected the continuing European mistrust of the Bush administration and its attitudes toward transatlantic relations. When Robert Gates was selected to replace Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense late in 2006, one of the main sources of suspicion was removed, but the mistrust was not entirely mitigated.

Obama

When Barack Obama succeeded George W. Bush as President of the United States in 2009, European governments and publics breathed a loud sigh of relief. Obama was the kind of leader they thought would be more understanding of and even committed to many European values and perceptions that had been rejected by the previous administration. The initial honeymoon period in U.S.-European relations included a different U.S. rhetorical approach to the struggle against terrorism. Obama made it clear he was redefining the War on Terror, narrowing its focus to a war against Al Qaeda and to prevent the Taliban from re-establishing a sanctuary for terrorists in Afghanistan. Over time, the administration moved away from describing U.S. counterterrorist policy as a 'global war,' which many Europeans had always found inappropriate and counterproductive. The President also promised to wind down American involvement in Iraq, and to move toward 'Afghanification' of the conflict in Afghanistan. He promised to shut down the U.S. detention facility for suspected terrorists on the military base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and rejected the use of torture in dealing with terrorist suspects.

In time, it has become clear that changing the overall character of the U.S. approach to terrorism is more complicated than producing declaratory policy. American counterterrorism policy no longer features Iraq at its centre as the U.S. withdraws the last of its combat troops

there. The Obama administration hunted down and killed Osama bin Laden, and has conducted a fairly successful campaign along the Afghan/Pakistan border to eliminate other Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. The administration mounted a surge of military forces into Afghanistan intended to turn the tide in the struggle against the Taliban. However, there remain doubts about the future ability of the Afghan regime, led by the corrupt and politically ineffectual government of President Hamid Karzai, to assume responsibility for security throughout the country, allowing U.S. and NATO forces to reduce and then eliminate their combat role. The leading 2009 symbol of the changed U.S. policy - closing Guantanamo's detention facility - has not been accomplished, not for lack of will but for the difficulty of finding an acceptable way of dealing with the prisoners still held there.

On the positive side of the ledger, the transatlantic allies have developed a wide array of cooperative approaches and venues for dealing with the threat of international terrorism. The allies agree that they should work together to deal with terrorist challenges and have placed no formal limitations on their cooperation toward that end. The new NATO strategic concept, agreed at a summit meeting in Lisbon in November 2010, declared that "terrorism poses a direct threat to the security of the citizens of NATO countries, and to international stability and prosperity more broadly" and that the allies would

"enhance the capacity to detect and defend against international terrorism, including through enhanced analysis of the threat, more consultations with our partners, and the development of appropriate military capabilities, including to help train local forces to fight terrorism themselves."

On the other hand, future transatlantic cooperation against terrorist threats will remain troubled by the many historical factors, domestic political circumstances and military capabilities - or lack thereof - that have complicated cooperation from the beginning. Many Americans still believe that the United States is at war against terrorists, while the concept of a 'war on terrorism' still does not resonate in Europe. There is more inclination in Europe to try to mitigate the political, social and economic conditions that give rise to terrorism than there is in the United States, leading to different assessments of what is required to deal with the terrorism challenges. There is also the constant challenge of combating terrorism while not appearing to be warring with the entire Muslim world.

The death of Osama bin Laden has already become the reason, or perhaps the excuse, for pulling more quickly out of Afghanistan, the main theatre of the war against terrorism. From this angle, this huge success in the 'war' could be a major factor in undoing its further prosecution. However, differences over the future conduct of a War on Terror do not just fall on either side of a dividing line in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. American public opinion no longer offers majority support for the war effort in Afghanistan, becoming much more like European opinion. The economic crisis in the United States and internationally will further reduce the will on both sides of the ocean to spend limited resources on a war that is perceived as either having been won - by virtue of the elimination of Osama bin Laden - or as unwinnable, and therefore not worth additional cost in lives and fortune.

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