Bridging the Atlantic Divide

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FROM SOLIDARITY TO RECRIMINATION

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Americans and Europeans surprised each other in positive ways. George W. Bush, who had faced vast protests during his first visit to Europe earlier that summer and who was widely regarded there as an ill-informed cowboy, confounded Europeans' expectations with his patient, careful, and proportionate action in Afghanistan. In turn, Europeans also broke with stereotypes, strongly supporting military action not only against al Qaeda's network but also against its Taliban hosts. European leaders pronounced their "unlimited solidarity" with the United States, and in a matter of hours NATO allies invoked the Article V mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty. In a twist that few could have predicted before September 11, within a month of the terrorist attacks the United States was conducting a major war halfway around the world, and the biggest problem for its European allies was that they wanted to send more troops than Washington was prepared to accept.

Since then, however, relations between the transatlantic allies have sharply deteriorated. Europeans now regularly accuse the United States of a simplistic approach to foreign policy that reduces everything to the military aspects of the war on terrorism. Americans respond with resentment over Europe's unwillingness to support U.S. efforts to deal with hostile states such as Iraq. In the Middle East, the recent cycle of violence between Israelis and Palestinians has prompted Europeans to accuse Washington of unconditional support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Americans to accuse Europeans of going soft on terrorism, or even of antisemitism. Deep disagreements about U.S. unwillingness to accept binding constraints on its sovereignty within multilateral institutions -- as evidenced by U.S. rejection of the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the global ban on land mines, verification measures for the Biological Weapons Convention, and other multilateral initiatives -- have also been highly corrosive.

U.S.-European differences on matters of policy and global strategy or governance are certainly nothing new. What is striking today, however, is that some serious observers are starting to conclude that the fundamental cultural and structural basis for a transatlantic alliance is eroding. Author Francis Fukuyama, who 13 years ago was declaring the triumph of common Euro-American values and institutions to be the "end of history," now speaks of the "deep differences" within the Euro-Atlantic community and asserts that the current U.S.-European rift is "not just a transitory problem." Jeffrey Gedmin, director of the Aspen Institute Berlin -- once a bastion of Atlanticism -- talks about Europe's "pathology" regarding the use of force and argues that U.S. and European views of security are now so different that "the old Alliance holds little promise of figuring prominently in U.S. global strategic thinking." Columnist Charles Krauthammer has not been alone in asserting that NATO -- once the centerpiece of the transatlantic alliance -- is "dead."

No one, however, has done more to advance the notion that Americans and Europeans are growing apart than analyst Robert Kagan, who began a summer 2002

article in Policy Review with a bold thesis: "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world." In the long and perceptive analysis that followed, Kagan argued that the disparity in power between the United States and Europe has grown so great that when it comes to "setting national priorities, determining threats, defining challenges, and fashioning and implementing foreign and defense policies the United States and Europe have parted ways." Kagan's suggestion that "the day could come ... when Americans will no more heed the pronouncements of the EU than they do the pronouncements of asean [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] or the Andean Pact" certainly grabbed the Europeans' attention. The article had hardly been printed when it began to be circulated on e-mail lists and cited in dozens or even hundreds of newspaper articles around the world. It was reprinted or excerpted in Le Monde, Die Zeit, the International Herald Tribune, and Commentaire and was even distributed to European Union officials by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana. It should perhaps come as no suprise that the article struck a chord, especially in a Europe already led by Bush administration policies to believe that the United States no longer saw Europe as a valued ally.

The "Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus" thesis accurately identifies some real differences and problems in transatlantic relations. Structural and cultural gaps that have existed for a long time have been widened by the terrorist attacks on the United States and the crisis in the Middle East; if these differences are mishandled the result could be a transatlantic divide deeper than any seen in more than 50 years. Yet structure is not destiny, and it would be as wrong to exaggerate the gaps between Americans and Europeans as it would be to ignore them. For all the differences over policy in the "war on terrorism," American and European values and interests in the world remain highly similar. The allies' differing attitudes toward power have not prevented them from using force together in the past, most recently in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and need not do so in the future, possibly soon in Iraq. Nor should we conclude that the advent of the most socially conservative and internationally unilateralist administration in Washington in more than 20 years -- after the most closely contested election in history -- represents some fundamental shift in "American" culture or values. Most important, it would be a mistake to base U.S. foreign policy on the assumption that European support for American policy is neither possible nor necessary. Acting on the false premise that Washington does not need allies -- or that it will find more reliable or more important ones elsewhere -- could ultimately cost the United States the support and cooperation of those most likely to be useful to it in an increasingly dangerous world.

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES?

There are many reasons why American and European attitudes toward power, sovereignty, and security differ, and why those differences seem particularly acute today. The "power gap" identified by Kagan is certainly a factor. It is only natural to expect that a country with the technological, military, and diplomatic resources of the United States is inclined to try to "fix" problems -- whether Balkan crises, missile threats, or rogue states -- whereas countries with fewer such resources at their disposal try to "manage" them. The United States' vast military power, technological prowess, and history of unparalleled accomplishment have imbued Americans with a sense of "can-do" optimism about the world that contrasts starkly with the relative pessimism, known in Europe as "realism," that comes from the more complex and ambivalent historical experiences of Europe's much older nation-states. U.S. power, combined with a lower tolerance for vulnerability that stems from the geographical blessing of

friendly neighbors, also leads Americans to be far more ready than Europeans to take risks and spend money to deal with threats such as missile proliferation and Iraq.

It should be noted, however, that Europe's relative lack of military power compared to that of the United States is as much the product as it is the cause of the two sides' different strategic cultures. With a collective population of 377 million and a GDP of some $8.5 trillion, the member states of the European Union certainly have the potential to develop formidable military power but have chosen not to, at least for now. This is partly a result, as Kagan also points out, of Europe's experience with war during the first half of the twentieth century versus peace and integration during the second half. Those contrasting experiences have left most Europeans convinced that dialogue and development are more effective paths to security than is military strength -- a conviction that Europeans understandably but sometimes naively seek to project on other parts of the world.

Europe's relative lack of interest in developing military power is also one of the perverse consequences of the American protectorate established by the United States through NATO during the Cold War. With the partial exception of the British and the French, whose past experiences and permanent seats on the un Security Council have cultivated in them more enduring military ambitions, U.S. leadership of NATO largely absolved the Europeans of having to think much about international security beyond Europe's borders. Global military strategy was something to be handled primarily by the United States, leaving Europeans to focus on the difficult task of building their unprecedented zone of internal peace and prosperity. The result is a paradoxical division of labor: whereas Americans are in the habit of worrying about Iraq, North Korean missiles, or a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, Europeans are generally more worried about food safety and global warming.

Finally, history, geography, and the power differential have left the two sides of the Atlantic with very different attitudes toward sovereignty -- clearly the source of all our recent disputes over "multilateral" issues such as arms control agreements, the United Nations, and the International Criminal Court. A powerful United States with enormous freedom of action throughout the world feels little pressing interest in new mechanisms that might curb that freedom. Europeans, on the other hand, have spent 50 years gradually, and for some painfully and incompletely, getting used to the idea of living in an "international community" and accepting constraints on their sovereignty. It is not surprising that smaller and weaker countries on a crowded continent are more interested in and find it easier to live with binding international laws and agreements than is the world's sole superpower, which spans a vast continent.

Thus there is no doubt that the United States and Europe have different attitudes toward power, military force, and sovereignty, or even that the divide is growing. The question, however, is whether these differences are now so fundamental that the United States can or should dismiss its alliance with Europe as irrelevant, concluding either that it does not need allies or that it might find better ones elsewhere. And the answer is no.

MORE LIKE THAN NOT

For all the talk of a transatlantic rift in the post-September 11 world, the fact is that basic American and European values and interests have not diverged -- and the European democracies are certainly closer allies of the United States than the inhabitants of any other region are or are likely to become anytime

soon. Although their tactics sometimes differ, Americans and Europeans broadly share the same democratic, liberal aspirations for their societies and for the rest of the world. They have common interests in an open international trading and communications system, ready access to world energy supplies, halting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, preventing humanitarian tragedies, and containing a small group of dangerous states that do not respect human rights and are hostile to these common Western values and interests.

Certainly, the Texan George W. Bush and the deeply conservative cabinet members who surround him, including Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Attorney General John Ashcroft, have little in common with most of their European counterparts. To use Kagan's terms, the Bush team represents a particularly "American" perspective; on issues such as religion, abortion, gun control, missile defense, the use of force, multilateralism, and the environment, they are about as far from "European" positions as Americans get. It thus stands to reason that their ascent to power was read as a step toward an increasingly "American" America, and that their subsequent policies -- given a further boost by the challenge of global terrorism -- have crystallized the apparent differences across the Atlantic.

It is less clear, however, that Bush's election really represented a fundamental shift in American values, or that these values have grown more "American" over time as Europe's have become more "European." After all, Bush's opponent in the last election, Al Gore, won some 540,000 more votes than Bush did, and Gore did so on a platform that was much closer on most issues to the European norm. The 2000 and 2002 congressional elections were also divided right down the middle between Democrats and Republicans, suggesting very little change in America's political and ideological balance, notwithstanding the dramatic change in the national leaders' approach. The point here is not to suggest that the Bush approach to domestic and world affairs is not widely supported in the United States or that most Democrats are not more "American" in their outlook than most Europeans. It is, rather, to underline that the alleged U.S.-European divide today would look very different had Gore polled a few more votes in Florida two years ago or had the Supreme Court taken a different view of the Florida recount. There would still be real differences over the Middle East, the environment, and Iraq, as there were during the Clinton years, but it is hard to believe they would be anywhere nearly as brutal as they are today.

Indeed, a broader look at American and European perspectives and values, at least at the public level, suggests far more convergence than divergence. In September 2002, for example, the most comprehensive poll of U.S. and European foreign policy attitudes ever taken showed "more similarities than differences in how the American and European publics view the larger world," according to the poll's sponsor, Craig Kennedy, president of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Americans and Europeans identified very similar issues (including international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and global warming) as their primary foreign policy concerns, demonstrated comparable perceptions of friends and allies, and expressed a strong affinity for each other. Americans expressed discomfort with unilateralism, with 61 percent in favor of a multilateral approach to foreign policy problems and 65 percent saying that the United States should invade Iraq only with un approval and the support of its allies. Even on the issue of the use of force, Europeans were at least in principle as ready as were Americans to use force to uphold international law (80 percent to 76 percent), to help a population struck by famine (88 percent to 81 percent), to liberate hostages (78 percent to 77 percent), or to destroy a terrorist camp (75 percent to 92 percent).

Other polls on various issues have also suggested much more similar public attitudes in Europe and America than the bitter public disputes between European leaders and the Bush administration would suggest. Seventy-five percent of Americans, for example, consider global warming to be a "serious problem," and a clear majority believe that the United States should join the EU in ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. Seventy-one percent of Americans support ratification of the treaty creating the International Criminal Court, and a majority disagrees with the Bush approach to the issue. Eighty-one percent support U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Even on genetically modified organisms, said to be an example of the vastly diverging transatlantic attitudes toward science and technology, a plurality of Americans, like Europeans, believe that gmos will "make food more poisonous" and 86 percent think the government should require labeling, which happens to be the EU's policy. U.S.-European differences on these and other important issues exist, but the data on public attitudes hardly seem a sign of two societies "living in different worlds."

The EU's harshest American critics suggest that whatever their sentiments in theory, Europeans are not likely to be useful allies when it really matters -- that is, when military force must be threatened or used. It is certainly true that attitudes toward force differ, and that for all the reasons already mentioned, Europeans are generally far more inclined to try diplomatic approaches to conflict. But the record of the 1990s and the early 2000s does not match the caricature of a Europe that is so hopelessly pacifist and appeasing that warlike Americans simply have no choice but to seek other alliances or act alone. In the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, Europeans were hardly keen to go to war (not unlike 47 U.S. senators and some prominent American generals), but they ultimately backed the operation at the United Nations, provided tens of thousands of troops, and contributed billions of dollars to the American-led effort to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In the Balkans, it took the United States years to overcome its own reluctance to act militarily, and in both Bosnia and Kosovo there were times when both France and the United Kingdom were more ready than the United States to threaten or use force or to risk deploying forces on the ground. Europe and the United States eventually joined together effectively to undertake NATO's first actual military missions, in which European military forces flew hundreds of sorties, provided critical bases and logistical support, and played key combat and then peacekeeping roles. The lesson of these episodes is not that Europe is unwilling to use force or has nothing to contribute, but that when the United States shows leadership it is able to bring allies along -- even to the fight.

More recently, when the United States took military action in Afghanistan to retaliate against al Qaeda terrorists as well as to overthrow their host Taliban regime, European support and desire to participate was solid. In October 2001 as the fighting was going on, a poll showed that majorities in 11 out of 15 EU states "agreed with the U.S. military action," and in the largest states the majority was substantial (France 73 percent, Germany 65 percent, and the United Kingdom 68 percent). Majorities of European populations even agreed that their own country should take part in the fighting -- the leftist-dominated German parliament approved the sending of 3,900 combat troops -- and some European leaders chafed not at the fact that the United States was using force but that their offers to contribute forces of their own were rebuffed by a Pentagon that preferred to undertake the operation alone. Nonetheless, by early 2002, European forces were involved in bombing, reconnaissance, cave-clearing, and special forces operations. European countries (first the United Kingdom, then Turkey) took on the lead role in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployed to keep the peace; this year the ISAF command is likely to pass to

Germany and the Netherlands, supported by NATO military planners. By summer 2002, there were as many European troops in Afghanistan as there were American.

Even on an issue as divisive as Iraq, it would be wrong to assume either that European and American attitudes have irrevocably diverged or that Europeans have nothing to offer in the effort to contain or depose Saddam Hussein. In Germany, of course, Chancellor Gerhard Schršder exploited deep public skepticism about preventive war by campaigning in September 2002 against an invasion of Iraq. Schršder's unilateral decision unfortunately reversed a more than decade-long trend in Germany toward support for the responsible use of force -- from nonparticipation in the Gulf War to combat roles in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Elsewhere, however, European support for a potential military operation is within reach provided the United States carefully prepares the ground. The British government has already signaled its strong support, and Prime Minister Tony Blair is far more "American" on the issue than many Americans are. In France, long seen as hostile to American interests in Iraq, President Jacques Chirac has suggested that his country would support the use of force if sanctioned by the un, and Paris remains open to participating in an eventual war. Governments in Italy, Spain, and a number of central European countries have also made clear that under the right circumstances they would back the United States should a conflict in Iraq take place. If Washington goes the extra mile to ensure legitimacy and international support for the use of force in Iraq, it may find that the massive task of rebuilding that country after an invasion would make a fine joint project that would do much to put the transatlantic alliance back on track.

MAKE UP OR BREAK UP

Americans and Europeans may not live in different worlds, but there is hardly grounds for complacency. September 11, Bush's election, the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, and the Iraq debate all exacerbate the structural and cultural differences that have always been manageable in the past. What is important, however, is not to allow the prospect of a transatlantic divorce to turn into a self-fulfilling prophesy; wrongly assuming that Europeans and Americans are determined to go their separate ways would be the best way to ensure that very outcome. Unfortunately, this is precisely what many in the Bush administration -- and some of its European critics -- seem to be doing.

The Bush administration came to office determined to overcome what it perceived to be its predecessor's penchant for compromise in the name of getting along with others. The new president, his team made clear, was going to lead based on a precise definition of American interests; European allies could and would grumble about American unilateralism, but in the end they would appreciate the new decisiveness from Washington, and the result would be better for all. Backing up this approach seemed to be the assumption that if the Europeans did not see the light, it did not matter. Allied support would be nice but certainly not indispensable to a United States that deemed itself by far the most powerful nation in history. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it with regard to the Iraq issue, "it's less important to have unanimity than it is to be making the right decisions and doing the right thing, even though at the outset it may seem lonesome." The new U.S. National Security Strategy document published in September 2002 officially enshrined this notion: that it is up to the United States to decide what is right and to use its unprecedented power to achieve its goals.

There is much to be said for assertive American leadership. As developments over the past decade -- from the Persian Gulf to the Balkans to Central Asia -- have shown, Washington's willingness to lead often seems to be the only way to get the rest of the international community to act. But it is also clear that when taken too far, assertive leadership can quickly turn into arrogant unilateralism, to the point where resentful others become less likely to follow the lead of the United States. Few have put this argument better than did candidate Bush when, in October 2000, he warned that potential allies around the world would "welcome" a humble United States but "resent" an arrogant one. The Bush team's policies, however, thus far seem to have been based on the opposite premise. Telling allies that if they do not support Washington's approach to the war on terrorism, they are "with the terrorists," slighting key NATO allies (and NATO itself) in Afghanistan, and refusing genuine consultations before important decisions seem far more likely to foster resentment than to muster support. Whatever the merits of the administration's opposition to the long list of multilateral agreements it has fought since coming to office -- and many of those agreements were genuinely flawed -- it should have been clear that the United States could not abruptly pronounce the Kyoto Protocol "dead," seek to undermine the International Criminal Court, raise tariffs on steel and increase agricultural subsidies, and oppose a range of arms control agreements without such actions' having a cumulative impact on the attitudes of European leaders and publics toward the United States. The September 2002 German election, where for the first time in the postwar period a leading candidate concluded that major electoral gains could be had by running against the United States, should be taken as a warning that American unilateralism could indeed come at a price.

Some, of course, would argue that it does not matter whether the Germanys of this world -- and their $28 billion defense budgets -- support the United States. And it is true that the United States, with a vast military budget and after a decade of spectacular economic growth, seems as well placed as ever to go it alone. Yet such an approach would be extremely shortsighted. The United States still needs its European allies not primarily for their military contributions -- although even that could change in a few years if Washington continues to run up massive fiscal deficits and expands its military commitments around the world. Rather, even an all-powerful America will need Europe's political support, military bases, cooperation in international organizations, peacekeepers and police, money, diplomatic help with others, and general good will. The "war on terrorism" declared by the United States will not be a short-term military battle but a multidecade struggle not unlike the Cold War -- in which "soft power," diplomacy, legitimacy, allies, intelligence cooperation, and an ability to win hearts and minds throughout the world will be as important as military power. Not to do the minimum necessary to ensure that Europeans remain positively disposed to American aims -- or worse, to actually provoke Europe into playing a kind of "balancing" role -- would be to squander the potential advantages of a position of strength.

The United States maintained a sort of "European empire" so successfully in the past because it was what historian Geir Lundestad has called an "empire by invitation" -- the United States was predominant in European affairs because Europeans wanted it to be. Today the United States risks alienating those it is most likely to need as twenty-first-century allies. European sympathy and support for the United States will not disappear from one day to the next, but over time, treating allies as if they do not matter could produce that very outcome; the United States would find itself with an entire European Union that resembles the common U.S. perception of France: resentful of American power, reluctant to lend political support, and out to counter American interests at

every turn.

Europeans have an equally important role to play in avoiding this outcome. The more they reject the notion that some international problems do have to be dealt with by force, the more they reinforce the conclusion among some Americans that consultation is a waste of time and Washington must go it alone. When Europeans appear to play down American concerns about issues such as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, they also play directly into the hands of those in the United States who argue that there is no point even trying to get the Europeans on board. The European argument that Bush's approach to terrorism and his "axis of evil" speech are "simplistic" has the merit of being true, but it does not offer much of an alternative plan for confronting the threats that Europeans and Americans face. Europe's repeated "insistence" that Saddam Hussein comply with un Security Council resolutions and allow weapons inspectors to return to Iraq, without the backing of potential military force, was a hollow threat that had no chance of having any effect.

European countries will clearly also have to enhance their military capabilities if they want to be taken seriously -- both in Washington and throughout the world. If not, European forces will find themselves unable to operate alongside those of the United States, reinforcing a division of labor that could undermine the sense of shared risk that an alliance requires. The project to create a European rapid reaction force, launched with fanfare three years ago, was a potentially important initiative and proof that at least some Europeans recognize that Europe needs to get more serious about security and defense. But its development has been far too slow, and the necessary financial backing has not been produced. Some European countries' reluctance to support the U.S.-proposed NATO Reaction Force is also a worrisome sign that they have concluded that even if they had more powerful militaries the United States would not be interested in using them or in sharing decision-making control. France's recent announcement of a $90 billion increase in spending on defense equipment over the next six years -- to be used for a range of power-projection assets including a new aircraft carrier, cruise missiles, and fighter-bombers -- is a positive sign, but there is still a long way to go. If one consequence of Kagan's analysis is that it goads the EU -- determined not to be seen as a richer version of the Andean Pact -- into getting serious about defense, it will have been worth writing for that reason alone.

Europeans, finally, will also have to wake up to the fact that their security now depends more than ever on developments beyond their borders. One of the reasons for the current transatlantic divergences is that while Washington is focused on global developments, Europeans, quite understandably, are preoccupied with the enormous challenges of finishing the peaceful integration of their continent, through EU enlargement, the euro, and a constitutional convention. These are very important projects, themselves major contributions to world peace and stability, but they are no longer enough. By 2004, when ten new members are likely to have joined the EU and a new constitution is in place, the new Europe will have to set its sights beyond its borders if it wants to preserve the close global partnership with the United States that both sides need.

Europeans and Americans are not destined to go their separate ways. But they could end up doing so if policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic act on the assumption that fundamentally different world-views now make useful cooperation impossible. The reality is that despite their differences, in an age of globalization and mass terrorism, no two regions of the world have more in common nor have more to lose if they fail to stand together in an effort to

promote common values and interests around the globe. Now is not the time to start pretending that either the United States or Europe can manage on its own.¶

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