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The Transatlantic Allergy: Partnership or Strategic Counterweight?

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The deterioration of transatlantic relations is no longer a debatable issue—it is a reality that has resulted from a variety of convergent circumstances. For some, transatlantic tensions stem from the difficult but temporary adaptation of the Alliance to the new security threats of the 21st century; for others it signals a long-deferred re-balancing of responsibilities within the Alliance or even a divorce of the transatlantic couple. Probably it is a bit of all of these, but what is certain is that the criticisms, sometimes the outright insults, that have been hurled across the Atlantic by both sides have provoked a mutual loathing that threatens the interests of both sides.

Taking the long view, history has merely retaken its normal chaotic course after the parenthesis of the cold war. Unfortunately, we have not experienced history in the same way on both sides of the Atlantic. Confronted with a new strategic threat, that of terrorism, we reacted differently because our historical experiences and the implications for our geopolitics are different. One need not be troubled by this divergence—the United States and Europe have taken different but not inherently incompatible approaches. The United States has adopted a classic imperial stance that emphasizes hard power, military tools, and immediate solutions to pressing problems. The still-consolidating European Union emphasizes a new method of gradual expansion of its zone of peace that offers the possibility of escaping from classic balance of power dilemmas. The challenge is to find some strategies for common action that will permit the Atlantic Alliance to confront together what is primarily a crisis of modernity.

Transatlantic Differentiation

When the Soviet threat disappeared and no other threat emerged to replace it, the core rationale for transatlantic system also began to disintegrate. After the Cold War, the base of transatlantic relations seemed to be recreating itself through the articulation of distinct societal models. American society, universally identified with modernity, established itself as an ideal that held a powerful attraction for youth throughout the world. However, especially on the periphery of the Atlantic world where American standards of living remained unattainable, strong frustrations and even violent backlashes resulted from unrealized aspirations. Within Europe, the celebrated American model was adapted to the regional context in effort to create an original European

model. European society became an extension of the American dream, but one with very distinctive characteristics that showed the possibility and the advantages of distinct models of social organization.

The terrorist attacks on September 11 against symbols of American civilian and military power also targeted the transatlantic values of democratic societies and liberal economies. As a result, one might have expected an immediate re-constitution of the Cold War front, even if this time, the enemy could not be so clearly identified. This did not happen. Instead, the Iraq crisis triggered a deepening of the process of transatlantic divergence leading to a very visible clash over the use of force against the Iraqi regime.

These events have already been well analyzed, as have been the roots of latent anti-Europeanism in the United States and reflexive anti-Americanism in Europe that exacerbated the recent quarrels. No one should believe, however, that the parties to this transatlantic dispute, despite their often overblown rhetoric, were questioning the Alliance's founding virtues of liberty and progress. These virtues form the basis for the U.S.-European geopolitical alliance and stand at the heart of a civilization that exerts enormous influence over a world in which Westerners constitute a small, yet disproportionately wealthy, minority of the population. Rather than a disagreement about such fundamental values, the Iraqi crisis revealed the autonomy of two self-assertive groups of Western players and their distinct approaches to assessing and managing global threats.

Theoretical debates about multilateralism or multiple models of capitalism are no longer really the point. From now on, the important issue is the division of responsibility in the world of the 21st century. This doesn't mean a new Yalta agreement that will divide the world into spheres influence, but rather a new strategic partnership that will enhance global stability. The task of adjusting the international architecture will, over the next few decades, bring together the pragmatists on the two sides of the Atlantic. This process must take into consideration not only the redistribution of power since the end of the Cold War and the fissures resulting from the current crisis but also the change in the notion of power that occurred during the Cold War, especially in Europe.

It will start from the premise that the entire Western world exists within an interdependent transatlantic community whose strategic interests are at base compatible. The Atlantic Community currently has a decisive advantage over other—Asian, Arab-Muslim and African—geopolitical poles, in part because the different actors within the Atlantic Community are able to mobilize different tools towards common goals. In this view, the current disagreements between the United States and Europe on dealing with international terrorism do not reveal a fundamental disagreement over goals so much as a debate on the most effective way to exercise power to achieve those goals. This profound and important debate has only just begun, but it has already highlighted the transformation of the European Union, its emergence as an international actor, and the novelty of the EU approach to power as an alternative and a complement to American practice.

The European Model

"Europe" qua Europe did not play a role in the Iraq crisis and, indeed, few of the important debates on the future of the transatlantic alliance have taken place in the halls of the European Union. Nonetheless, it was, paradoxically, in the middle of this troubled period that the European Union made some of its greatest strides toward a common security and defense policy. The EU finally ratified its own space project, Galileo, ("complementing" the American Global Positioning System [GPS]) and launched three crisis management operations, the first such operations in European history: The EUPM (European Union Police Mission) in Bosnia taking over from the UN's IPTF (International Police Task Force), "Concordia" in Macedonia taking over for NATO's Allied Harmony , and "Artemis" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in a mission of urgent military support for an existing United Nations operation. It was also during this period the Union finished its preparatory work to establish a constitutional treaty that plans to add coherence to the Union's Common Security and Foreign Policy in several ways: through a European solidarity clause committing the Union to unity in the face of security threats, through approval of the principle of pre-defined or "structured" cooperation between willing subsets of member states, and through the creation of an agency devoted mainly to arms procurement. With these efforts, the European Constitutional Convention decisively committed itself to the creation of an EU strategic identity and defense capability. Lastly, and also in the middle of the Iraq crisis, Javier Solana presented to the heads of States and the governments of the Union the first outline of a European security strategy[1] that asserted that EU would be a global actor in the 21st century, distinct but still working in harmony with the United States.

This evolution of EU policy clashed with the aspirations of the heterogeneous club that had formed during the Iraq crisis: the British and Spanish governments and most of the 10 countries due to accede to the European Union in 2004. One can understand the source of their unease with the attempt of Europe to play an independent role during the crisis. For the British, London has for over fifty years served as the European entry point for the United States and its privileged intermediary in Europe. This relationship is the central policy and basic strategic choice of every British government since the Suez Crisis in 1956. Madrid discreetly aspires to take over from London as Washington's favorite transatlantic intermediary. The states of Central Europe are caught between an old dream—that the American "liberator" will guarantee their security against the hordes from the East—and a recent nightmare—that they would be forced to choose between the American offer of a security guarantee and the European offer of prosperity. This ad-hoc alliance formed by the United States created new dividing lines on the European continent. These divides will last a long time, even if they do not have the potential to completely disrupt the movement toward integration in Europe. In the meantime, the United States has completely and abruptly re-nationalized the American defense posture and effectively deprived the Atlantic Alliance of any military role.

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[1] "A Secure Europe in a Better World," Report by Javier Solana to the European Council at Thessalonika, Greece, June 20, 2003. This document, in an modified form, was accepted by the European Council in Brussels in December 2003 as the European Security Strategy.

In the US, the policy differences with Germany, France, Russia and China, the latter three permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, came as a terrible shock. Even more, the return of the Franco-German couple to the world stage triggered a visceral reaction of stupefied fury. This initial reaction only intensified after the interventions of these two accomplices stymied U.S. efforts to gain approval from the UN Security Council for an invasion of Iraq. The emerging Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis, as well as the mini-summit in Brussels on April 29, 2003 that asserted a European desire for an autonomous defense capability presented Washington with a momentous challenge to its leadership. These assertions of strategic autonomy by meaningful actors in the international community are being progressively taken seriously by Washington, apparently more at the Pentagon than at the State Department and the White House.

The central challenge today is thus to define Western solidarity within the new system defined by these assertions of autonomy. Given the array of challenges the West faces, many think that Western ranks must close. The most prominent advocate of this approach is British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who addressed the U.S. Congress on July 17 in precisely these terms: "Do not abandon Europe, work with it …. All great alliances begin with America and Europe…" Clearly, the threat that today justifies this alliance is that of terrorism, and for the future, the creation of another pole of power in Asia. But this Western solidarity, obviously needed to meet these challenges, should not prevent Europe from consolidating itself as a center of power.

Everyone understands—Blair better than anybody—that to establish the European Union on the model of the United States of America would trigger a process of direct confrontation that would be intolerable to London and harmful to the entire Atlantic Community. Thus, Britain does its best to undermine the creation of a fully integrated and sovereign version of the "United States of Europe," suspecting that French diplomacy is working unremittingly toward just this goal. But this very notion is an illusion. The EU is about something more complex and more innovative than just recreating in Brussels a new state according to a model of power that European governments consider, mostly without regret, entirely out of date. The EU does not seeks to be a counterweight to the United States. Rather, it offers itself as a partner to the United States, but one that presents a new type of international actor that has specific values, responsibilities, and interests that neither completely correspond nor completely conflict with those of the United States.

The European Union in 2004 has its own security strategy and will soon have a constitutional treaty capable of regulating its complex operations for the coming decades. In enlarging to twenty-five members, with possibly over thirty member states by the end of the decade, the EU offers an example of a regional integration process capable of moving beyond the outmoded notion of national sovereignty and of providing a forum for mutually beneficial exchanges between its different peoples. In the process, it acts as a sort of pacifying force for the local or regional conflicts that it touches. Enlargement, thus presents neither a historic opportunity for sovereign expansion nor a risk of dilution, but rather a detailed plan for forming a peaceful and prosperous strategic neighborhood around the core European zone of peace. As such, it will have an important impact on transatlantic relations, because it privileges the regional dimension of European unity above Atlantic ties, be they cultural, ideological, or political.

This is model of a stable international actor based on a "community spirit" has emerged out of Europe's common troubled past and out of the recent experience of shared governance of the continent. This European model does not conflict directly with the American one that rests on the hard realities of military, economic and technological power, but it renders some of these dimensions meaningless. More geared towards development, prevention, securing common interests than towards superiority and preemption, this model of regional power could be very useful for global security in the 21st century. All the more so because the European zone of peace will promote the spread of stability and prosperity to its closest neighbors and partners, in the Arab and Slavic world, in the Mediterranean and in Russia, until, in some cases, they are eventually integrated as new members. In this way, the European Union is undoubtedly the indispensable partner to the United States. It balances American preeminent power while offering a more acceptable image of a Western club that today seems to many outsiders to use the rest of the planet a means to preserve its members' privileged status.

From European Model to Global Governance

Beyond the Western Club, each of the big players in the world of the 21st century—Europe, America, China and Russia—must be assigned a role in the common effort to stabilize the international security environment. It is not for the United States, on its own, to define these roles. Neither America's resolute efforts to promote liberty in the 20th century, nor its sense of a universalistic mission to spread the American creed confers upon it that right or that capability. The global challenges to come will require different types of power centers that each operate according to their own logic.

The creation of a new informal executive that could give coherence to United Nations action would certainly help toward meeting these challenges. In this new structure, the European Union, along with the United States, Russia and China, will set the tone of international relations. The EU can provide to that structure the experience and legitimacy that comes from having pursued a successful regional integration process. It can also share with its partners from the old "imperial" culture the new experience of cooperative multinational regulation that they currently lack but will desperately need in the future.

So, will the EU be a partner or counterweight to the United States? Strictly speaking it will probably be neither, rather it will form the basis of a compromise vision of Western responsibilities and of burden sharing that can promote security and spread prosperity in the 21st century.