

53. Transatlantic Relations

Policymakers should

- support the Bush administration's plan to redeploy U.S. forces from Western Europe to the continental United States and implement a plan to withdraw all U.S. forces from Europe during the next five years;
- refuse to appropriate funds to construct new U.S./NATO bases in East Central and Southeastern Europe;
- forge a new, balanced transatlantic relationship based on recognition of the European Union as an independent "pole of power" in the international political system and a geopolitical equal of the United States;
- refrain from interfering in decisionmaking areas—membership and enlargement, for example—that are properly within the EU's province; and
- endorse the EU's efforts to forge an independent foreign and security policy.

Since its inception, NATO—and the transatlantic relationship generally—has always been, in Henry Kissinger's apt phrase, a "troubled partnership." NATO has been strained almost to the breaking point by serious crises, including Suez (1956), French president Charles de Gaulle's challenge to U.S. leadership of the alliance (1958–66), Vietnam, U.S.–West European differences over détente with the Soviet Union (during the 1970s), and the deployment of Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (in the early to mid 1980s). Reflecting the stress those crises have placed on the alliance, predictions of an impending transatlantic divorce—which intensified following the Cold War's end—long have been a staple of the American foreign policy debate.

The history of recurrent transatlantic crisis notwithstanding, U.S.–European relations reached an all-time low during the Bush administration

in 2003. In considering American policy toward NATO and Europe, policymakers will face a paradox. On the one hand, events since September 11, 2001, have demonstrated that NATO is militarily irrelevant and its existence contributes little to American security. On the other hand, there is an urgent need to repair America's relations with Europe and to put that relationship on a new footing. This is a daunting challenge, because in a time when transatlantic relations visibly are foundering, it will not be easy to disengage the United States from NATO while simultaneously strengthening U.S.-European relations.

NATO after the Cold War: Tottering toward Irrelevance

The common understanding of most Americans—including policymakers, scholars, and foreign policy commentators—is that the North Atlantic Treaty (1949), which evolved into NATO in 1950–51 following the outbreak of the Korean War, committed the United States to deter a Soviet attack on Western Europe and, if deterrence failed, to help the West Europeans defend the Continent. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–91, NATO had fulfilled its mission, and it might have been expected to dissolve. That, of course, did not happen. Instead, under the first Bush, the Clinton, and the second Bush administrations, the United States spearheaded efforts to save NATO by vesting in it new, post-Cold War missions.

Specifically, NATO has reinvented itself by declaring that it is no longer just a defensive military alliance but is, rather, a political alliance that reflects its members' shared values. At the same time—especially during the Clinton administration—NATO undertook a process of “double enlargement.” One prong of that double enlargement was expansion of the alliance's membership; the former Soviet satellite states of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were admitted. The other prong was an expansion of NATO's missions to include maintaining regional stability in Europe (and its peripheries), addressing “out-of-area” threats to the alliance's members, and combating terrorism. The Kosovo war was the alliance's first post-Cold War test, specifically assessing its role as an instrument of regional stability. The aftermath of 9/11 triggered NATO's second post-Cold War test.

A Neutered Alliance: The Military Ineffectiveness of Post-Cold War NATO

How has the “new” NATO stacked up with respect to fulfilling its post-Cold War missions? Not very well. Post-9/11 challenges—rooting

out the Taliban in Afghanistan and eliminating the threat of alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq—were precisely the kinds of out-of-area threats with which the “new” NATO is supposed to deal. But NATO, as an *institution*, made no contribution either to the campaign in Afghanistan or to the Iraq War. Although NATO now has made commitments to assist in “nation-building” efforts in Afghanistan, its contribution has been both minimal and of questionable effectiveness. With respect to Iraq, the alliance has made a commitment to assist in training a reconstituted Iraqi security force. But again, NATO has sharply circumscribed its involvement in the reconstruction of postwar Iraq, and its contribution clearly will be no more than marginal. Notwithstanding calls that the ongoing effort to stabilize postwar Iraq should be “internationalized,” it is apparent that NATO as an institution is not going to step up to the plate and contribute forces for this purpose.

It is true that after 9/11 the alliance invoked the collective defense provision of Article V for the first time. Certainly, individual members of the alliance have effectively cooperated with the United States on the anti-terror campaign (through intelligence sharing, tracking down terrorist cells operating on their own national territories, and going after the terrorists’ sources of financial support). Britain and Canada contributed small contingents to fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and Germany and Turkey have stepped forward to help to stabilize postwar Afghanistan. And the British, of course, have contributed a substantial military contingent to fight alongside U.S. forces in Iraq. All of those contributions, however, have been made on an individual (that is, national) basis, not through the alliance. And a strong case can be made that even if there were no NATO, Washington would have been able to assemble the same limited “coalition of the willing.”

Why has the “new” NATO been such a bust? There are three reasons. First, the military capabilities of the European NATO members are limited. Second, the European members of NATO do not share Washington’s view of out-of-area threats. Third, Washington has deliberately chosen to bypass the alliance, because it wants to maximize its own strategic freedom of action and it regards the European NATO military capabilities as a drag on American power, rather than as a contributor to it. Simply put, the United States prefers to rely on ad hoc “coalitions of the willing” rather than be constrained by the need to forge consensus among the NATO allies.

Except for Britain and France, NATO-Europe lacks the ability to project military power outside of Europe. And, as became evident during the

Kosovo war, all the European NATO members lag well behind the United States in leading-edge conventional military capabilities such as: precision-guided munitions and advanced command, control, reconnaissance/surveillance capabilities. Even former NATO secretary general Lord Robertson warned that NATO-Europe is a military “pygmy” and must do more to enhance its military capabilities. Although the European NATO members have made some noises about increasing their military spending (and France, notably, is doing so, though not necessarily for “Atlanticist” reasons), it is an open question whether NATO-Europe really is going to allocate the resources to close the transatlantic gap in military capabilities (Table 53.1).

Transatlantic Drift: Differing U.S. and European Perspectives on Out-of-Area Threats

That the Europeans do not view out-of-area threats, including Iraq, in the same way Washington does is clear. But there is nothing new about this. Since the United States failed to back Britain and France in Suez and the French in Algeria in the 1950s, the Europeans have always taken the position that NATO’s area of strategic responsibility is confined to the European continent, and consequently the Europeans have been unwilling to have the alliance used in support of the United States outside

Table 53.1
Comparison of Defense Budgets, 2002

	Total Defense Expenditures (millions of U.S. \$)	Spending per Capita (in U.S. \$)	% of GDP
United States	329,616	1,138	3.3
France	38,005	636	2.5
United Kingdom	35,249	590	2.4
Germany	31,465	383	1.5
Italy	24,210	421	1.9
Turkey	8,727	127	5.1
Spain	8,253	206	1.2
Netherlands	7,330	459	1.6
Greece	6,154	579	4.4
Belgium	3,435	332	1.3
Norway	3,434	759	1.9

SOURCE: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2003–2004*.

Europe. That certainly is one reason that France and Germany refused to back the Bush administration in Iraq. A second reason for the divergence between Washington and NATO-Europe is that the Europeans have different interests at stake in the Middle East and Persian Gulf than does the United States, and they believed (and still do) that those interests could be affected adversely by a war with Iraq. Finally, throughout much of NATO-Europe, especially the French and German core, the Bush administration's Iraq policy has been opposed both because many Europeans are uneasy with Washington's "unilateralist" proclivities and because of concerns about the implications of "unipolar" American power in the post-Cold War world.

Atlanticism without NATO: Toward a Balanced U.S.-European Relationship

Analysts of U.S.-European relations long have recognized that the unbalanced nature of that relationship has been a source of serious transatlantic tensions. American policymakers, Congress, and the public believe that the United States contributes far too much to defending common interests and that the Europeans fail to pull their weight. For their part, Europeans feel that an overbearing America uses its power to run roughshod over European interests. Events since 9/11, especially the Iraq war, have sharpened negative feelings on both sides of the Atlantic.

Doubtless, the Bush administration's sledgehammer diplomacy in 2002 and 2003 exacerbated the transatlantic divide. But that divide itself is the product of deeper, structural forces. First, with the end of the Cold War, NATO had no compelling *raison d'être*. Second, in the absence of the Soviet threat, diverging American and European interests—which never went away, even during the Cold War, but were placed on the back burner—have come to the fore. Third, the European Union has embarked on a process intended to culminate in the EU's emergence as an independent "pole of power" in the international system. This effort gained momentum following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and accelerated during the late 1990s as the European Union sought more formal, legal rights and responsibilities under the EU Constitution. That is, the EU integration process—which now encompasses the realms of foreign and defense policy—is meant to create an EU that can punch its weight in international politics and stand as a geopolitical equal to the United States.

American attitudes toward the emergence of a truly independent Europe traditionally have reflected a profound ambivalence. Policymakers should overcome that ambivalence and endorse the EU's efforts to forge an independent foreign and security policy. The price of European independence is bound to be less than the price of Europe's continuing subordination to the United States, which is bound to fan resentment (albeit of a different kind) on both sides of the Atlantic. Second, attempts to maintain American preponderance are bound to trigger a nasty geopolitical backlash against the United States. By gracefully accepting Europe's strategic self-sufficiency—and acknowledging that the EU stands on an equal footing with the United States—U.S. policymakers can go a long way toward repairing the damage caused to the transatlantic relationship by the Iraq war and ultimately put that relationship on a healthier, more sustainable basis.

Atlanticism can exist without an ongoing American military presence in Europe. Here policymakers should revisit the views of President Dwight Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, leading Republican internationalists who were instrumental in the creation of the alliance. Unlike their successors of both parties, they welcomed a truly independent Europe instead of fearing it, and they regarded the U.S. role in NATO as temporary. Eisenhower and Dulles eagerly anticipated the day—once the West Europeans recovered from World War II and could again assume full responsibility for their own security—when the American military presence in Europe no longer would be necessary. In historical perspective, the EU's continuing march toward political unity and its quest for military self-sufficiency represent the triumph of the hopes for Europe held by Eisenhower, Dulles, and other leading U.S. policymakers during the late 1940s and 1950s. To be sure, they saw the emergence of a stable, prosperous, and independent Europe as the sine qua non for an exit strategy that would allow the United States to bring its troops back from Europe. But they also viewed the emergence of such a Europe as the foundation for a healthy long-term U.S.-European relationship. A U.S.-European relationship based on mutual independence, equality, and autonomy likely will prove far stronger than NATO, the bonds of which are fast being corroded by the recriminations generated by America's dominance and Europe's subordination.

Working together, the administration and Congress have a historic opportunity to refashion the relationship between the United States and Europe. The time has come for the United States to withdraw from Europe militarily and allow the EU to assume responsibility for defending both

the Continent itself and the EU's extracontinental interests. In this respect, while Congress should welcome the Bush administration's plan to reduce substantially U.S. force levels in Europe, especially in Germany, it should insist that the administration go further and commit itself to a five-year plan to withdraw all American forces from Europe. Similarly, Congress should refuse administration requests for funds to build new U.S. bases in the recently admitted NATO members in East Central and Southeast Europe. The time has come to recognize what has become obvious: NATO, as an institution, does not enhance America's strategic power. By the same token, Europe no longer needs to rely on American military guarantees for its security. Europe can take care of itself and should be encouraged to do so.

Recommended Readings

- Asmus, Ronald D. *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Carpenter, Ted Galen. "The Bush Administration's Security Strategy: Implications for Transatlantic Relations." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 16, no. 3 (October 2003): 511–24.
- Layne, Christopher. "America as European Hegemon." *National Interest*, no. 72 (Summer 2003): 17–28.
- . "Casualties of War: Transatlantic Relations and the Future of NATO in the Wake of the Second Gulf War." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 483, August 13, 2003.
- Lebl, Leslie. "European Union Defense Policy: An American Perspective." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 516, June 24, 2004.
- Merry, Wayne. "Therapy's End: Thinking beyond NATO." *National Interest*, no. 74 (Winter 2003–4): 43–50.
- Walt, Stephen M. "The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America Are Drifting Apart." *National Interest*, no. 54 (Winter 1998–99): 3–11.

—*Prepared by Christopher Layne*

