

The Imbalance of Power

On the prospects for effective American-European relations

by STEPHEN M. WALT

FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS, the transatlantic partnership between the United States and Europe has been the linchpin of this country's foreign policy. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) played a central role in containing Soviet power and winning the Cold War, and our commitment to Europe helped nurture the continent's economic recovery and political integration after World War II. Transatlantic security cooperation did not end when the Cold War was over: NATO gradually adapted to meet the security challenges of a new era by shifting its focus

toward peacekeeping and nation-building, and successfully intervening to end brutal ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. NATO also expanded to incorporate new democracies in Central Europe; its total membership will reach 26 in 2004.

Yet despite this remarkable record of success, 2003 also marked the lowest point in transatlantic relations since World War II. Although NATO has faced serious strains in every decade—over the Suez Crisis in 1956, Vietnam in the 1960s, the energy crises in the 1970s, and the Euromissiles controversy in the 1980s—the level of

acrimony in the past year was unprecedented. Relations between key European allies and the United States had already been on delicate ground for several years—fueled largely by European concerns about American “unilateralism”—but the crucial event was the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. As the diplomatic campaign for war proceeded, key European states openly opposed the use of force and even actively colluded to prevent the United States from obtaining a UN Security Council resolution authorizing war—an unprecedented breach in the alliance. American leaders responded by playing a “divide-and-conquer” strategy that challenged the core idea of European unity, and threatened to “punish” allies who had opposed the war.

The dispute over Iraq prompted an unusual level of rancor and rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic and a steady deterioration in public support for a close transatlantic partnership. Between 2000 and 2003, for example, the proportion of the population with a “favorable” image of the United States declined from 78 percent to 25 percent in Germany, from 76 percent to 34 percent in Italy, from 83 percent to 48 percent in Great Britain, from 86 percent to 50 percent in Poland, and from 52 percent to 12 percent in Turkey. By June 2003, only 30 percent of Europeans surveyed “approved” of the way that President George W. Bush was handling international policy; in France and Ger-

many, less than 15 percent of the population approved Bush's policy. Prominent European intellectuals denounced U.S. behavior re-

At a more congenial moment: President Bush with German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (upper image) and French president Jacques Chirac at the G8 summit in Genoa, July 2001.



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peatedly (novelist John le Carré told readers of the *Times of London* that “America has gone mad”), while conservative American pundits were relentlessly critical of European leaders such as Jacques Chirac of France and Gerhard Schroeder of Germany.

Do these signs of friction reflect a temporary transatlantic misunderstanding, or are more fundamental forces at work? Can the United States and Europe still be effective allies—and if so, how?

Centrifugal Forces

IT IS TEMPTING to blame transatlantic tensions on the follies of particular leaders, and to assume that more enlightened statecraft could quickly set things right. Unfortunately, this explanation overlooks the deep structural forces that are pulling Europe and the United States apart.

The underlying cause of U.S.-European tensions is the distribution of world power. From 1949 to 1991, the Soviet threat was the principal glue that held Europe and this country together. Now that the Soviet Union is gone, however, it is not obvious why Europe needs a permanent U.S. military presence, or why our security interests require us to maintain troops there. Europe, after all, is stable, prosperous, democratic, and united within the European Union (EU), and it faces no serious external threats. So why does it still need U.S. protection? This point was not lost on the Bush administration, which began contemplating significant reductions in the level of American troops based in Europe even before the terrorist attacks in September 2001 focused U.S. strategic attention elsewhere.

Furthermore, the collapse of Soviet power has encouraged U.S. allies in Europe to take a somewhat different view of American power. In particular, now that the United States is the world's only superpower—or, as French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine put it, a “hyperpower”—even our traditional allies have reason to worry about how we will use the capabilities at our disposal. According to one recent survey, only 45 percent of Europeans think strong U.S. leadership is “desirable” (down from 62 percent in 2002), and only 10 percent want the United States to remain the world's only superpower. Europeans may not worry that the United States is going to attack *them*, but they do worry that this country will take actions that might threaten their interests, either deliberately or inadvertently.

These structural forces are exacerbated by social changes occurring on both sides of the Atlantic. Those who fought World War II and began the Cold War are now gradually passing from the scene, and the familiar litanies of transatlantic partnership will not strike the same reflexive chord in the minds of their successors. Today's Harvard freshmen were born around 1986—the year that *perestroika* began and the Cold War began to end—and the belief that Europe and America are “natural allies” will not resonate as loudly for them (or their European counterparts) as it did for their parents and grandparents. The growing Muslim population within Europe, the growing percentage of Americans who are of non-European origin, and an increasing gap in attitudes toward religion are all diluting the sense of common iden-



Protesters in London topple a Bush effigy during the president's state visit to England last November.

tity uniting Europe and the United States. These trends do not make conflict inevitable, but they do make cooperation harder to sustain.

All of these forces make it more difficult to keep disagreements within bounds. Signs of strain were apparent throughout the 1990s—most notably in NATO's belated response to the Bosnian conflict and the infighting that accompanied the war in Kosovo—and disagreements multiplied and intensified after 2000:

- Europeans strongly support the establishment of an international criminal court, the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gases, the landmines convention, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and recent efforts to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention and to restrict the global traffic in small arms; the U.S. government now opposes every one of these initiatives.

- Europeans support Israel's right to exist, but tend to see the Palestinians as the main victims today, and they regard Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza as illegitimate and

immoral. By contrast, the Bush administration has for the most part embraced the Likud Party's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has done little to bring that conflict to an end.

- Trade disputes have become more contentious as well, especially now that the security partnership is not so critical. European and Japanese opposition to the Bush administration's tariffs on imported steel, which the World Trade Organization ruled illegal in November, is only the most recent example.

- The terrorist attacks in September 2001 brought an outpouring of transatlantic sympathy—with a *Le Monde* headline famously proclaiming “*Nous sommes tous Américains*”—but that brief moment of unity faded with remarkable speed. Europeans and Americans agreed that Saddam Hussein was a despicable tyrant and that his desire for weapons of mass destruction posed a problem, but most Europeans favored containment while the Bush administration chose to wage a preventive war.

- Finally, Europe and the United States have different views about the proper role of international institutions like the United Nations: this country wants to use these institutions to augment and legitimate its power; Europeans see them as a way to *tame* national power, including ours.

On a host of important issues, therefore, European and American preferences have diverged sharply. These tensions are not simply the result of George Bush's unilateralism, Jacques Chirac's stubbornness, or Gerhard Schroeder's opportunistic use of anti-American rhetoric in order to ensure his own re-election. Rather, these problems are symptoms of the new structure of world politics. During the Cold War, the global balance of power helped bring Europe and America together. Today, the *imbalance* of power (in America's favor) is driving us apart.

Can This Marriage Be Saved?

IS IT TIME TO DECLARE AN END to the transatlantic partnership? The answer is no, because there are at least four major areas where close, sustained cooperation is still in Europe's and America's interests.

Defeating international terrorism. Since 9/11, the need for concerted action against international terrorism has been obvious to Europeans and Americans alike. Terrorist groups like al Qaeda

threaten all of us and operate on both sides of the Atlantic. Up-rooting terrorist networks, identifying al Qaeda members, thwarting specific attacks, and drying up the illicit money flows that sustain terrorist cells require extensive, active, and enthusiastic cooperation by intelligence services and law enforcement agencies around the world; such activities are ultimately more important than military action in places like Afghanistan. Joint antiterror efforts between Europe and the United States have been encouraging thus far, but must be sustained over the longer term. If U.S.-European relations deteriorate further, it will be more difficult for us to get the level of cooperation that we need.

Preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The United States and Europe also share a common interest in preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—especially nuclear weapons. This concern is not new, of course, but it is much more urgent in an era of global terrorism. If al Qaeda were to get its hands on a nuclear weapon, 9/11 would look like a very minor event. Halting proliferation requires multinational action to bring loose nuclear materials under reliable custody, to curtail the clandestine sale of WMD materials, and to coordinate diplomatic pressure on potential proliferators. Iran's recent decision to permit more extensive international inspections and Libya's willingness to abandon its nascent WMD programs demonstrate that counter-proliferation efforts work best when the United States and Europe work in parallel.

Managing the world economy. The United States and Europe are the world's two largest economic zones, and transatlantic commerce is now worth approximately \$2.5 trillion per year. Lowering barriers to trade and investment generates economic growth and is a key to continued prosperity, but such efforts always face opposition from special interests and are easily thwarted when the major economic powers are not on board. The current Doha round of trade negotiations will fail if the United States and Europe cannot compromise in the areas where they have differences (such as agriculture), and if they cannot reach workable bargains with major trading partners in the developing world.

Dealing with failed states. September 11 taught us that “failed states” are not just wellsprings of vast human suffering, they are also breeding grounds for extremist movements and safe havens for anti-Western terrorists. Dealing with failed states—Afghanistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Congo, Somalia, and now Iraq—requires a multinational response. The United States has neither the wealth nor the wisdom to rebuild these societies by itself, and the American public's support for “staying the course” in Afghanistan and Iraq may depend on whether other countries are willing to provide more than symbolic aid. Transatlantic cooperation in “nation-building” is especially desirable because Europe and America have different but complementary capabilities: the United States has the military might and capability to project power that are sometimes needed to oust a rogue regime (such as the Taliban); our European allies have more experience with peacekeeping and “nation-building.” Europe and America share a common interest in fixing these potential sources of instability, and we are more likely to succeed if we work together.

On the verge of war: a Munich protest rally on February 8, 2003



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An Agenda for Agreement

THERE ARE, IN SHORT, plenty of areas where continued cooperation would be desirable. Given the centrifugal forces that are pulling us apart, and the lingering resentments of the past several years, what positive steps might ensure that the United States and Europe remain effective allies? Here are five concrete suggestions.

First, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic should *lower the rhetorical temperature*. It does no good when a German cabinet minister likens the United States to Nazi Germany (as occurred last year), or when an American defense secretary compares Germany to Cuba and Libya. Effective diplomacy requires that officials exercise tact and discretion in public, instead of fueling resentment through ill-chosen accusations. In fact, if American and European leaders are serious about keeping the alliance intact, they need to spend far more time reminding their publics about its virtues, and far less time carping about particular policy disputes.

Second, Europe and America must recommit themselves to the norm of *full and timely consultation*. Many Europeans now believe they have little influence on American policy, and are left with the choice of either agreeing to whatever Washington wants or being left in the dark. This is not what partnership is all about. If the United States and Europe are going to remain effective allies, there will have to be more give-and-take. Europeans will have to defer to U.S. wishes on occasion, but our leaders will have to do some compromising, too.

Third, it is time to develop *new guidelines for the use of military force*. In order to prevent a potentially lethal marriage of terrorism and WMD, the United States has placed new emphasis on the preemptive or preventive use of force. Yet the implications and advisability of this policy were never debated or discussed with America's closest allies, many of whom have significant reservations about it. Our allies have an interest in how this country uses its power, because any significant use of force usually has lots of secondary consequences. It is therefore time for serious discussions about the norms that should govern the use of force in an era of global terrorism. When is preemption or prevention justified, and what criteria should govern the use of overwhelming power? Achieving a broader consensus would mitigate global concerns about the preponderance of power that is now in U.S. hands, and both the United States and Europe will have to give a little to achieve it.

Fourth, the United States and Europe must *come to an understanding on the future of Iraq*. Scholars, pundits, and presidential aspirants can continue to debate the wisdom of the war, but governments on both sides of the Atlantic must face the immediate task of creating a stable and reasonably effective Iraqi government. To its credit, the Bush administration seems increasingly aware of the need for greater multinational support—thereby confirming Winston Churchill's observation that the United States always does the right thing, after first trying all the alternatives.

Finally, and perhaps most ambitious of all, the United States and Europe should redouble efforts to *build a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians*. No single issue has been more corrosive



Street theater: These protesters in London depicted a Secret Service agent, Guantánamo Bay detainees, a U.S. soldier, British prime minister Tony Blair, and President Bush.

to U.S.-European relations, yet the two sides do not really disagree on the broad outlines of a settlement. Both Europeans and Americans want Israel to be secure and prosperous. Both agree that the Palestinians should have a viable state of their own, located on virtually all the territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We also agree that Palestinian terrorism and the expansion of Israeli settlements should stop, and that the Arab world should embrace Israel's right to exist. Thus there is little disagreement about goals; what has been lacking is the political will to get there. To change that, the European Union will have to pressure the Palestinians, the United States will have to pressure Israel, and both Europe and America will have to provide a lot of money to ice the deal. A final peace agreement would be an achievement worthy of the alliance, and in the strategic interests of Europe and America alike.

Taken together, these initiatives would appeal to most citizens on both sides of the Atlantic. If implemented, they would give the transatlantic partnership new life, even in the face of very real structural tensions.

Yet a word of caution is in order. Even though the United States and Europe still have many reasons to cooperate—and can accomplish much good if they do—there is no guarantee that they will. Without the unifying pressure of a powerful common enemy, keeping the United States and Europe together will be harder in the future than it was in the past. In particular, America's dominant global position means that U.S. leaders will have to be even more imaginative, disciplined, and restrained than they were in the past, lest global concerns about U.S. power end up driving traditional allies away and making it harder for us to get the help we still need. Can the United States and Europe still be effective allies? Yes—but it is going to take some work. ▢

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