The Future of the Atlantic Community

Theo Sommer

Theo Sommer recalls a meeting that he had with US President Johnson in 1966, during which Johnson voiced his fears that disagreements among European NATO members and the US were pulling the Atlantic Alliance apart, and he likens the situation then during the Cold War with the situation for NATO today.

The Post-Cold War Setting

Thirty-six years ago, during the summer of 1966, I flew down to Texas to interview President Johnson on his ranch near Houston. He was worried about the cohesion of the Western Alliance – about the French pulling out of NATO’s military organization; about the Germans balking at paying more for the American garrison in the Federal Republic; and about rising opposition in Europe to America’s Vietnam War.

To illustrate the dangers inherent in the situation, Lyndon Johnson recounted the anecdote of the young Texan who applied for a job as a railway switchman. The fellow was hauled before an examination board. The chairman told him: “Imagine, young man: you are working on this single-track railroad. You look to the right and see an express train approaching at 100 miles per hour. You look to the left and you see another express train approaching at the same speed. What would you do?” – “I would run and fetch my brother!” – “Why would you do that?” – “Well, he ain’t never seen a train wreck...”

Johnson’s implication was obvious: He feared that Europe and America were on a collision course. For all we know, they may have been; but as a matter of fact the collision never occurred. The Alliance rode out that storm as it has weathered many others that followed. Europeans and Americans quarreled about nuclear strategy. They differed about the handling of out-of-area crises. They never ended their wrangling about how to deal with the Soviet Union. The recent commercial squabbles over bananas, hormone-fed beef and steel were long ago preceded by “chicken wars” and tariff tiffs over soybeans. Thus we have always had our difficulties with each other in the Atlantic community. We have always overcome them.

While the Cold War lasted, self-preservation provided a compelling rationale for accommodating differences, settling conflicts or, if necessary, sweeping disputes under the rug. Yet the Cold War ended twelve years ago. The West won it because of the determination and the perseverance of the Atlantic Allies, not least because of America’s inspired leadership – a leadership that the Europeans gladly accepted. The question today is whether in the profoundly changed world of the early twenty-first century, the United States and Europe will be able to preserve and reinvigorate their partnership or whether it will come unglued under the strains and stresses of the new international environment.

I also feel passionately about the Atlantic community. As a committed Atlanticist, I would hope very much that we shall be able to shore up the foundations of our partnership and give it once again purpose and punch – both of which have not been much in evidence recently. But I am worried, too. We should not delude ourselves. If my reading of the current situation is correct, solidarity between Europe and America, much touted in the immediate aftermath of September 11 2001, cannot necessarily be taken for granted. It will take a serious and deliberate effort to prevent the deep structural forces presently at work on the world scene from pulling us apart.
What are the salient features of the post-Cold War (or, as some would have it, the post-post-Cold War) situation? I suggest that there are three.

First, there is the danger of American unilateralism. The United States, which used to be the mightiest superpower, is now the sole remaining superpower. Its unilateralist proclivities are no longer checked by the need to keep the coalition against the Soviet Union together. There is a powerful temptation to "perceive the national role in hegemonic terms" (William Pfaff) and to deduce from the primacy of American military power a natural right to call the shots — by fiat rather than by catalytic leadership, persuasion or patient coalition-building. This tendency was particularly noticeable in the first seven months of George W. Bush's presidency. Building on Madeleine Albright’s dictum that Americans deserve to lead because they “stand taller and see farther,” Bush Jr. evinced a disturbing propensity to go it alone, turning his back on international treaties like the ABM treaty, ignoring the United Nations, disdainfully rejecting projects like the Kyoto Climate Protocol or the International Criminal Court. After September 11, there was a brief period during which Washington seemed to shift into a multilateral mode, seeking support from a global alliance against the bane of international terrorism. However, it soon became clear that America’s new multilateralism was restricted to the diplomatic field. The actual conduct of the war has remained strictly unilateral. The Europeans were almost completely shut out of military operations. NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Pact for the first time since 1949, declaring the attacks on New York and Washington a casus belli. But nothing followed from this. The Allies were shunted aside — "Don’t ring us, we’ll ring you." The US administration preferred a free hand in Afghanistan to any Allied participation that might entitle the NATO partners to having a say in the decision-making process.

The second new factor is the gradual and unstoppable emergence of a wider and tighter European Union. The Brussels Community was already on the way to the Single Market when the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union disintegrated. It has since enacted the Schengen Accord, which abolished border and customs control between 13 of the 15 EU members. Twelve countries have introduced the euro; the others are pondering its introduction. The European Union is negotiating with a dozen states about their accession. It is in the process of setting up a Rapid Reaction Force of 60,000 men and developing its own defense identity. Its common foreign and security policy is slowly gaining relief. And in March, a Constitutional Convention started its deliberations about a basic law for the future European Union. While the United States of Europe may not be in the offing yet, a United Europe of States is definitely taking shape. It will need time to find its role. Conversely, the Americans need time to adapt to the new actor on the world scene. They must finally make up their minds whether they truly welcome the venture of European integration or whether they begrudge the Europeans their progress toward "an ever closer union," which is bound to be a more difficult partner.

The third salient feature is the onset of globalization. Globalization started at roughly the same time as the Cold War came to an end. It signaled a fundamental change of paradigms. Geopolitics and geostrategy receded into the background; geo-economy became the name of the game. “It’s the economy, stupid” — that admonition was stuck on the pinboards of Chancelleries all over the world, not only in the White House. Commercial interests prevail, and the cry “jobs, jobs, jobs” can be heard everywhere. The bursting of the New Economy bubble in 2001 added poignancy to the issue.

In my judgment, September 11 has not really distracted our statesmen from their economic agenda. In fact, one might argue, that the American reaction to last September’s vile attacks — bailing out ailing industries like their airlines and spending close to $ 100 billion more on defense (including missile defense) and homeland security than originally planned — far exceeds the needs for combating terrorism. It does, however, give the American economy a
powerful infusion of capital and is likely to trigger another technological quantum jump, in the same way that Reagan’s Star Wars project moved the US economy forward in the 1980s.

**Three Arenas of Potential Conflict**

After these prefatory remarks, I would like to draw your attention to three arenas in which Europeans and Americans are likely to clash unless they make a determined effort to resolve their differences and stop the drift in transatlantic relations.

The first relates to the future mission of NATO. What use is an Alliance that, for all practical purposes, declares war and is then relegated to the sidelines? Isn’t there a danger that the Alliance degenerates into a shadow Alliance? What is NATO’s future purpose to be? Could or should it go global? The second field of battle is trade and economics. Can we address the problems arising in this field in a spirit of collaboration rather than in a beastly zero-sum game mood? The third battleground lies in the realm of cultural and attitudinal discrepancies, at a time in which self-images, historical identities and divergent value scales tend to assume more prominence. I would like to take a closer look at each of these three problem areas.

**The Future of NATO**

During the past ten years, the Alliance has been revamped in many ways. In the absence of an existential threat, force levels have been steeply lowered; the American garrison in Europe has been reduced from 350,000 men to less than 100,000; the Europeans have halved the number of men and women in uniform. In this regard, NATO has adjusted to the new dispensation that has emerged in the post-Cold War era. What it has not been able to achieve is unanimity about its future role.

At the fiftieth anniversary jubilee of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1999, the Allies tried to map out a new strategy and define a new purpose for NATO. They failed, however, in their attempt to reforge and redirect the Alliance. The US administration tried to upgrade NATO into a kind of global policeman, to intervene wherever and whenever there is ethnic or religious conflict, the violation of human rights or the menace of weapons of mass destruction proliferating. The Europeans, however, balked at such boundless out-of-area interventionism. Small wonder that the Washington Declaration did not get too specific on what the defense diplomats call the “expanded core function” of the Alliance. Nor did it clearly define where precisely the “Euro-Atlantic space” which NATO is supposed to protect and defend begins and where it ends.

The United States as the “sole remaining superpower” may feel compelled to react in the arcs of crisis around the world – although I wonder whether, once the immediate shock of September 11 wears off, Congress and the man in the streets of Peoria, Illinois, would really lend reliable support to a policy of global hegemonism. Europe, at any rate, will be very reluctant to foray far beyond the borders of the Alliance; the Middle East, Afghanistan and, possibly, the Caucasus and Central Asia would appear to be the outer limit. Even then, while objectives may be identical, there is bound to be considerable dispute about means. This applies to the war against terrorism as well. The transatlantic friction about the whole concept of the “axis of evil” in general and about the question of how to check Saddam Hussein in particular forebodes acrid debates each time such novel contingencies arise. A global Atlantic community is a long way off – and can certainly never be based on imperious American unilateralism.

Against this background, no one should be surprised about the Europeans’ hesitation to undertake the kind of vast arms modernization that the Pentagon has been urging on them. Arguably, they are doing too little in the defense field, and their return on investment in that field is pitiable compared to that of the US. On the other hand, even a Europe that is more
than a supermarket will not be a superpower. There is no need to emulate the present American defense spending spree. Eliminating the current deficiencies—air transportation, satellite intelligence, precision-guided weapons—is one thing, the power hype of a hyperpower is quite another. In general, Europeans take a wary view of Washington’s almost exclusive emphasis on its military arsenal and its downgrading of political and diplomatic methods of conflict resolution. And they remain skeptical of President Bush’s plans for a downsized Star Wars project to provide an anti-missile shield against crazy rogue state dictators. They were perplexed by the Senate’s vote against ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), disappointed by Washington’s stance on the landmine ban, the Biological Weapons Convention, the ABM Treaty. And the idea that has been bandied about recently that war-fighting should be left to the United States whereas peacemaking and nation-building ought to be shouldered by Europe has not found much favor in Europe. The linkage of Iraq, Iran and North Korea in the “axis of evil” does not make much sense to Europeans.

The new buzzword in this part of the world is ESDP—European Security and Defense Policy. The EU partners want a capability to address and solve at least the so-called Petersberg problems without always requiring US involvement. Ever since Henry Kissinger, Americans have been in two minds about such a development. On the one hand they kept lamenting that there was no single phone number to ring when they wanted to talk to Europe; on the other hand, they complained about “the Europeans ganging up on us” each time they encountered an agreed European position. Such ambiguity cannot last. The Americans will have to make up their minds, and the Europeans should help them by making it clear beyond any reasonable doubt that it is not their intention to cut loose from their Atlantic moorings but that they want to place their ESDP firmly within NATO. For the Alliance to survive, it will at long last have to evolve towards the “two pillar” system envisaged by John F. Kennedy almost forty years ago: a transatlantic community of equal partners. The alternative to two twin pillars is two divided camps.

Trade Friction and Economic Rivalry

In the globalized world bread-and-butter questions assume the same importance as strategic concerns: employment, the trade balance, tariffs, and a level playing field on the world market. Nations are tempted to interfere with Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” whenever they feel that the jobs of their own workers and farmers are threatened. Protectionism is rearing its ugly head everywhere.

As a matter of fact, economic issues have been a bone of contention between the United States and Europe for more than thirty years. Our trade relations have never been entirely free of tension. Oilseeds, steel exports, inflation, monetary policies, and the dollar exchange rate have frequently been objects of vociferous exchanges. Thus we should not be overly surprised that Europe and America are once again at loggerheads over economic matters. In recent years, we have seen a number of specific transatlantic irritations give rise to considerable bluster and brinkmanship by trade negotiators of both sides. There is the interminable banana issue, and controversies have raged over American offshore tax arrangements for exporting companies, over the EU decision to ban older American aircraft fitted with expensive noise-reduction devices known as “hush kits,” over mobile telephones, data privacy, aerospace subsidies and champagne.

It is high time to put an end to all this bickering. The Americans object to European intransigence and inflexibility. The Europeans, in turn, fear that in the US the traditional consensus for liberal trade has vanished. There is a lot of mutual spitting. Lobbies set the tone on both sides of the Atlantic, while political leadership is all too often conspicuously absent. In the harsher export climate now prevailing, this raises ominous prospects.
Let's be honest to ourselves. The Atlantic nations are Allies, yet they are also rivals. This fact was powerfully underscored when the clash over banana exports came to a head precisely at the moment when America and Europe were engaged in fighting their war against Serbia. Shoulder to shoulder in war, at loggerheads in war – that is a perverse situation. It jeopardizes an association that has proved its inestimable worth during the past half century. If we allow these trade disputes to fester, there is a real danger that the whole range of transatlantic relations will sour across the board.

A Cultural Divide?

The menace of international terrorism has so far not been able to take the place of the earlier Soviet threat. It is horrifying but vague, present yet not palpable, ubiquitous though hard to localize. Islamic fundamentalism poses a grave challenge to Western culture, Western values and Western principles, American and European alike. Yet it is a curious fact that cultural and attitudinal differences between Europeans and Americans have created a rift in the Atlantic community at exactly the time that the core of their common beliefs came under attack. Different mindsets, traditions, ethical canons and intellectual perspectives impinge on both the bread-and-butter issues and the security concerns.

My least worry, in this context, is the elitist disdain that many European intellectuals – on the right as on the left – manifest with regard to “McWorld, McJobs and McDonalds.” Many of them just love to take their children to the nearest burger place. Nor can I get overly agitated when reading texts by American gurus like Daniel Rothkopf singing the praises of US “Cultural Imperialism.” I don’t mind Americanization where it means liberalization and democratization. I am more seriously worried by that hardy perennial, the never-ending debate about how much Hollywood Europeans should suffer in their cinemas and on their TV screens. America’s cultural preponderance forces all other nations to think hard about how much of their own national patrimony, their cultural identity and their linguistic purity they want to maintain. It is a serious problem, and there are no easy answers. All I know is that parochialism cannot be the solution. Nor, of course, can Europe be expected to turn its back on its rich indigenous heritage.

Then there is a wide range of issues that Europeans and Americans approach from radically different points of departure. In several respects a cultural divide seems to determine political views and attitudes. This goes, for instance, for the whole gamut of questions connected with raising animals, food-processing or gene modification. It goes for the issue of capital punishment. And it goes in particular for value-based differences about global climate change and other environmental issues.

European and American attitudes also diverge when it comes to international organizations, institutions and control regimes, especially the United Nations. Washington has a tendency to use the UN whenever convenient and to ignore it whenever inconvenient; Richard Haass calls this “à la carte multilateralism.” Europeans deplore the failure of the Test Ban Treaty in the US Senate and the rude termination of the ABM Treaty by the Bush administration. They were highly critical of the protracted Congressional refusal to pay more than $ 1 billion in back dues to the UN and they cannot muster much sympathy for Washington’s decision not to support the establishment of an International Criminal Court to deal with war crimes and human rights violations. Nor does Europe share Washington’s sanctions mania, in particular when sanctions – for example, in the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act and the Helms-Burton Act on Cuba – have a penalizing extraterritorial effect on America’s allies.

Finally, Europeans respect and admire America’s stunning economic success in the 1990s. Yet most of them have reservations about the social costs that go hand-in-glove with the American way of running an economy. Europeans are about to reform their own systems, at different speeds and with varying degrees of success so far, but it will basically remain what
it has been for the last half century: “Rhenish capitalism,” that is to say: capitalism with a human face. Europeans recognize the magic of the marketplace, but they remain clear-eyed about its risks and drawbacks.

Conclusion

I do not think that we should allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by our differences. Rather we should try to compose them and strike a new transatlantic deal to shore up and give new momentum to a consociation that has served us well for more than fifty years. All the old reasons for American-European partnership are still valid and compelling – save one: the communist threat. We must resist the temptation to consider this proven partnership expendable.

Of course, America’s preponderance is formidable. But the lone superpower can’t do much alone – Sam Huntington is quite right about that. The world is not really unipolar, he argues. His Harvard colleague Joe Nye agrees: “Even a superpower needs friends.” To deal with any important global issue, the US needs the support of its allies. This implies listening to them and cooperating as well as sharing with them. In the same vein, Henry Kissinger insists that hegemony is not in the American interest. He rejects all dreams of an American empire, arguing instead in favor of leadership. Leadership, of course, means acting with others. If America refuses multilateral commitments in favor of unilateral action, it is likely to wind up as a “leader with no one to lead,” as the Economist once graphically put it. “You are either for us or against us” is no basis for true partnership. Lyndon Johnson’s biblical motto “Come let us reason together” is by far the more promising approach.

Conversely, for all its efforts at integration, at acquiring a defense and foreign policy profile of its own, at getting its act on the world scene together, Europe continues to need America as a partner. The Europeans cannot act alone either. They need the reassurance provided by their link with the United States. But the Europeans must make themselves worthy of partnership. “Euro-whining” is no substitute for policy. We must bring more weight to bear on world affairs if we don’t want the Americans to throw their weight around. Less megaphone diplomacy on the European side, and more sharing of intelligence and technology on the American side would appear to be sound advice.

In human history, times of gardening alternate with times of architectonics. Sometimes it is enough to let things simply grow and develop. At other times it is necessary to build new structures. I think that we are now entering a new era of architectonics. If we let nature run its course, our partnership will wither and wilt. What is necessary at this juncture is a serious debate about the future of the Atlantic community. This debate ought to lead to a new Atlantic Covenant. In my view, such a renewed partnership should be constructed around three central propositions.

The first proposition is to build a modernized NATO – an Alliance acknowledging the emerging European reality by elevating Europe to the rank of equal partner under the common roof of the North Atlantic Pact. The second proposition is to tame economic rivalry and conflict by creating an Atlantic Free Trade Area. It would be a profitable scheme. Perhaps even an agreement on narrower corridors for the exchange rate between the dollar and the euro might make some sense. The third proposition is to create a political organization analogous to NATO’s military organization: a kind of North Atlantic Authority for Civilian Affairs – an Atlantic Steering Committee which would first unsnarl and then tie together the numerous tangled wires and lines in order to deal with issues that are beyond the ken of military men or diplomats. At the same time, we should open a cultural dialogue to give new substance and sustainability to the community of values without which our partnership would lose much of its vitality and viability.
We may be rivals, but we have to remain partners. Our practical interests are likely to diverge on occasion, but in essential areas they will always coincide. For this reason, neither of us should become totally distracted by domestic concerns and electoral calculations. We must not lose sight of the global picture.

Europeans and Americans should take to heart the piece of advice that Jean Monnet, the great Frenchman and European, time and again impressed on his fellow continentals: “Don’t face each other at the negotiation table with the problem between you – place yourselves at the same side of the table and face the problems on the other side.” If our statesmen heed Monnet’s wise counsel, the European-American train collision that Lyndon Johnson was worrying about 36 years ago down on his Texas ranch is never going to happen.

Theo Sommer is Editor-At-Large of the German weekly Die Zeit. This article is the final text of the lecture he gave at the Fiftieth Anniversary Symposium of the Netherlands Atlantic Association on April 5 2002 in the Hall of Knights in The Hague.