

US-European Security Relations after January 2009

An American Perspective

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'We like Americans – we just hate George W. Bush and US foreign policy.' For the past seven years, this refrain has echoed throughout much of Europe. The outcome of the 2008 US presidential elections is unknown, but one fact is sure: George W. Bush will no longer be president after 20 January 2009. Nor are any of the current Republican candidates directly connected with his administration. We will thus soon discover what a post-Bush world will mean in terms of US-European security relations.

European attitudes towards the United States have already begun to change, as reflected in the elections of Angela Merkel in Germany and Nicolas Sarkozy in France. Both leaders want a better relationship with the United States than that enjoyed by their predecessors. In the United States, the field of presidential candidates is so large that it is impossible to speculate in any detail about future policy. However, as the general consensus is that one of Bush's biggest failings was his poor relationship with Europe, any new incumbent in the White House would most likely want to improve transatlantic ties substantially.

If we therefore assume that, on both sides of the Atlantic, political leaders will want to improve transatlantic ties, two questions arise: what constraints will they face in pursuing this aim in the next three to five years; and what concrete goals can they realistically expect to attain? This article will identify several key constraints: continuing differences in security threat assessments; the lingering effects of 'Bush-hatred'; and declining US interest in and knowledge of Europe, particularly the EU.

As for achievable goals, the article will recommend that NATO focuses more on the territorial defence of Europe, and that the US and EU develop a closer security relationship, particularly in the counter-terrorism domain. Governments must take the terrorist threat more seriously, attacking its ideological roots, as well as improving cooperation both within Europe and the United States, and across the Atlantic.

The Constraints

Differing Threat Assessments

The foundation of any security relationship is general agreement on the threat faced by the parties. The United States and its European allies have had strong differences over the threats that they face since the end of the Cold War. While those differences have decreased somewhat in recent years, the two sides still remain quite far apart.

The United States sees itself as the global peacemaker of last resort, and is focused primarily on combating terrorists, rogue states, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and any nexus between the three. After several years of reduced military spending in the 1990s, the United States began to rebuild its forces and to transform them – with difficulty – into lighter, more mobile expeditionary forces.

Europe's response to the fall of the Berlin Wall was different. Its citizens perceived no significant external threat, unless from non-traditional dangers such as food safety or global warming. Military spending fell to low levels, most of it used to maintain existing territorial forces rather than on the research and development of new technology, or restructuring to develop expeditionary forces. Military reforms are advancing very slowly, and in piecemeal

fashion, and there is general agreement that Europe will do well simply to maintain its current level of military spending. European governments agreed to a first-ever out-of-Europe military deployment in Afghanistan, but are far from embracing an aggressive strategy against terrorists or rogue states.

Similar differences characterised the US and European responses to Islamist terrorism. The US response to the 11 September 2001 attacks was to commit itself to fighting an offensive, rather than a defensive war against terrorists. Europeans were divided, some agreeing on the need to counter this new threat, while others seemed to feel that the United States 'had only gotten what it deserved', or that it was good for the United States to feel vulnerable.¹

After the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London and any number of thwarted ones in Spain, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and elsewhere, many Europeans are increasingly concerned about the terrorist threat and are demanding that their governments do more to protect them. However, unlike the United States, when Europe talks about terrorism, it remains primarily focused on the domestic, or European, threat, rather than the global one.

Other differences over strategic threats extend to foreign policy. Many Europeans believe that their terrorist threat has been brought on them because their governments have followed the US foreign policy lead in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East. They also believe that the US intervention in Iraq has increased, rather than decreased, the terrorist threat.

Such views may become more pronounced as Muslim minorities in key European countries exert more influence on foreign and defence policies, including where or how those countries intervene abroad. As a document issued by the European Defence Agency states: 'Governments and societies increasingly concerned about internal security and social cohesion may be even more hesitant to undertake potentially controversial interventions abroad – in particular, interventions in regions from where large numbers of immigrants have come'.² Many of these regions are precisely those that are prone to conflict – and where either NATO or the EU might in future want to consider a military operation.

Finally, there are signs that the years of relative peace and quiet in Europe may be drawing to a close. Europe's success in expanding the European Union has brought it into direct contact with Russia, and the potential for political friction over the future of countries such as Ukraine or Georgia. At the same time, growing dependence on foreign energy sources has added to Europe's sense of vulnerability to pressures from Russian or Middle Eastern suppliers. A militarily weak Germany, in particular, at the centre of Europe yet without sufficient will or capabilities to protect itself, is vulnerable to blackmail from a resurgent Russia or a nuclear-armed Iran.³ Any threats to Europe are of concern not only to Europe but also to the United States, but the two Atlantic partners may disagree on how to respond to them.

'Bush-Hatred' Has a Cost...

In my view, an obsessive hatred of President Bush has greatly damaged the Democratic Party in the United States by crowding out all other thoughts, such as the formulation of alternative, workable policies regarding Iraq or the 'war on terror'. What is true for American Democrats is also true for the many Europeans across the political spectrum who have succumbed to the same illness.

The practical impact of 'Bush-hatred' is visible in the US Congress today. Elected by a majority, the Democrats now enjoy a level of popularity even less than President Bush's – and his is very low. Their lack of achievements, whether on energy, immigration or health care reform, has certainly contributed to these ratings. And yet their biggest challenge still

lies ahead: what if the surge in Iraq goes well and the Iraqis manage enough political reconciliation to make the country of Iraq a going concern? Having wagered their all on failure in Iraq, the Democrats risk being left high and dry should events turn out any other way. As former Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman noted in a recent speech: 'Democrats remain emotionally invested in a narrative of defeat and retreat in Iraq. [...] For many Democrats, the guiding conviction in foreign policy isn't pacifism or isolationism – it is distrust and disdain of Republicans in general, and President Bush in particular'.⁴

Both Chancellor Merkel and President Sarkozy won on platforms that were neither anti-American nor anti-Bush, which is an encouraging sign. Nevertheless, to project realistically what transatlantic relations will look like in the post-Bush era, the following question must be asked about European politicians and publics: how would the majority react to US success in Iraq? This blunt question may anger many readers, but it needs to be answered, because it will reveal the degree of flexibility at the European end of the transatlantic relationship.

A cautionary note is also in order regarding the second half of the political slogan cited at the start of this article – the implicit expectation that US foreign policy will change as soon as George W. Bush leaves office. This expectation is probably misplaced. As US analyst Kori Schake notes, it was President Clinton, not President Bush, who bombed Iraq, attacked Afghanistan, or started a war (the air campaign in Kosovo) without UN Security Council approval. She cautions that European expectations that the policies of the next US president will differ profoundly from those of President Bush are unlikely to be fulfilled.⁵

A second cautionary note should be added regarding anti-Americanism. Defined as an 'obsessive hatred' of the United States extending beyond any rational criticism of specific faults or actions, anti-Americanism has a long history in Europe, particularly in France and Germany.⁶ Previously confined to the elites and the left and right fringes of European society, today it has spread to the mainstream and most of the media. This situation will not change quickly or easily.

... And So Does US Inattention to Europe – Especially to the EU

'Freedom fries' aside, Americans tend to spend much less time denigrating Europe than Europeans spend denigrating the United States. In principle, that is a good thing. However, they also spend much less time thinking about Europe at all – and that is not at all a good thing. Surveys by the German Marshall Fund, and others, typically report that majorities of Americans want to improve US-European relations, but that sentiment does not lead in practice to more knowledge of, or engagement with, Europe.

In fact, one of today's best-kept secrets is the constantly expanding and constructive relationship between the United States and the EU, including on security issues. Security ties received a big boost after 11 September 2001, and a second boost after President Bush made better relations with the EU a priority for his second administration. Unfortunately, too few senior career officials in the foreign policy apparatus have followed his lead.

At the working level (and occasionally above), the EU and the United States now consult and cooperate on a range of issues, from law enforcement, regulatory and border security, and counter-terrorist cooperation, to foreign policy regarding the Middle East, Russia, Iran, India-Pakistan, East Asia and elsewhere.

The lack of senior-level focus, however, means that US policy-makers remain largely unaware of these developments. When cooperation proceeds smoothly, this is not an issue. But when problems develop, considerable damage can occur if they are not resolved in a timely manner. For example, information and intelligence-sharing are the keys to combating terrorism, particularly in the law enforcement and regulatory areas. The United States is

moving towards greater protection requirements for such data, while the EU is recognising that it too needs to share such data urgently. Yet there is a distinct risk that this convergence could be obstructed by perceived differences over what constitutes an adequate data protection regime.

One issue that has succeeded in catching the attention of the American public is the impact of growing Muslim minorities in Europe, as well as the expanding influence of radical Islam. The actual and projected decreases in native European populations and the perceived lack of confidence in defending Europe's culture or values give cause for concern. A Europe in which radical Islamists exert a decisive influence on politics and society would clearly not be in US interests. Nor would it be to the US advantage if far-right parties gained power because they were the only ones willing to take on the radical Islamists.

However, what many Americans are just beginning to suspect is that while the dangers from Muslim extremism may be more visible in Europe, they also exist in the United States. Indeed, although a recent study concluded that most American Muslims were doing well economically and had not been isolated in ghettos, some 15 per cent of the under-30 age group (equivalent to over 100,000 people) felt that suicide bombings could be justified.⁷ While this does not mean that they themselves are likely to become terrorists, it does suggest that the ideology of a 'global caliphate' dominating the West is seductive in the United States as well as in Europe.

To date, transatlantic cooperation related to the Islamist threat has been largely restricted to law enforcement, financial sanctions, and border and transportation security. While important, these measures do not address the broader political and societal issues. The EU is seeking to address societal issues, with varying degrees of success. The United States could benefit from a serious dialogue with Europe, including the EU, on such things as Islamist recruitment and radicalisation, as well as Islam's treatment of women and those considered to be blasphemers or apostates. By not paying sufficient attention to Europe, the United States is missing an important opportunity and constraining potential gains from transatlantic ties.

Achievable Goals

If one assumes that the United States and the vast majority of European countries want to repair transatlantic ties, yet must confront or somehow circumvent the obstacles described above, what can realistically be expected of US-European security relations in the next five to ten years? This analysis will look at the potential within the two main transatlantic channels for discussing security issues: NATO; and US-EU ties.⁸

NATO

NATO relationships were badly damaged by the dispute over Iraq. Some of that damage has been repaired, and further improvements could be made if, for example, France was to rejoin NATO's integrated command. Nevertheless, the disparity between available forces on either side of the Atlantic will inevitably colour the overall security relationship. It may be time to accept these disparities, and to build from there.

Most of the discussion about NATO has revolved around NATO's role in providing expeditionary forces for trouble spots outside Europe. Yet it is difficult to imagine that NATO's role will develop much beyond where it is today, given the shortfall in trained personnel and operational capabilities.

Of the 1.7 million European service members, only 40-50,000 are estimated to be available for 'robust combat operations' at any given time.⁹ European allies were thus poorly

positioned to respond to the challenge of Afghanistan. They now find themselves committed to a dangerous mission in a faraway land, but are not prepared to embrace combat operations. (In the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), US, British, Canadian and Dutch forces have done most of the fighting.)¹⁰ The NATO Response Force, which was intended to develop NATO's expeditionary capabilities and take on the more difficult tasks, has instead been dubbed the 'Rolls Royce in the garage' – it has yet to be used in Afghanistan. Rules of Engagement restrictions keep many national forces from direct combat engagement. That is unlikely to change any time soon, as, according to a recent poll, European support for combat operations is only about 31 per cent.¹¹

There is little doubt that 'NATO would be shattered' by failure in Afghanistan.¹² However, it is unclear how the situation there will evolve in the next year. Much will depend on whether Pakistan reduces the ability of al-Qaeda and the Taliban to conduct operations in Afghanistan from its territory. In addition, the situation in Afghanistan could be affected by progress in Iraq.

Even if the NATO mission in Afghanistan 'succeeds', I still find it hard to see NATO's future as expeditionary. However, the next US president will continue to worry about global threats, and will seek global friends and allies to respond to such threats. These efforts could take the shape of a proposal for a 'global NATO', or some other formulation.

NATO should instead enhance its traditional focus on territorial defence – now of a much-expanded group of allies. Russia has shown, through its increasingly truculent statements regarding the installation of missile defence sites in Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as military flights and cyber attacks, that it still can – and does – seek to bully Europeans. Its success in such bullying is affected by the underlying balance of military forces, even if there is no direct military threat.

In a recent interview, Henry Kissinger said that the real difference between Europeans and Americans lay in 'what governments can ask of their people. [...] Europeans governments are not able any more to ask their people for great sacrifices...' Kissinger saw this as the kernel of the difficulty in finding consensus between Europeans and Americans.¹³ Several years ago, the then head of the EU Military Committee proposed that the American and European pillars of NATO assume responsibility for their respective territorial defences.¹⁴ The United States will never be indifferent to the threats that Europe faces, but it will be looking to Europeans to 'step up to the plate' to solve them – regardless of the party in power in the White House.

US-EU Relations

Upgrading and enhancing the US–EU relationship should be the priority on both sides of the Atlantic during the next three to five years. The EU and the United States should establish an ongoing high-level discussion of the security threats that they face; developing common assessments and goals is essential for future cooperation. The US government has long resisted such a step, fearing that US interests would be harmed if a dialogue with the EU (where the United States is not a member) replaced the one at NATO, where the United States has a dominant position. Similarly, some EU member state governments (most notably the French) have sought to keep the United States at arms length in order to preserve the EU's independence of action.

Yet the world is a dangerous place – and becoming rapidly more so. The EU has capabilities that NATO does not, and it should have the self-confidence to engage with the United States across a broad spectrum of issues before its policies are set in concrete. The United States can receive benefits from using each channel, without fearing that one will undercut the other. Both the EU and United States are holding back, out of fear that they will find

themselves playing a zero-sum game. If they could overcome this perception during the coming years, that would also be a large step forward.

By taking the EU channel seriously, the United States will be better able to keep open crucial information-sharing channels with Europe that are vital to combating terrorism. At the same time, as Europeans develop their approach, they should not assume that US counter-terrorist policies will change fundamentally once President Bush is gone. Some may, but others – particularly those linked to real or potential threats to homeland security – rest on a bipartisan consensus in Washington and are likely to continue regardless of who is elected president in November 2008.

Failure to resolve these information-sharing issues could result in a bureaucratic nightmare similar to the one that afflicts NATO-EU ties. While the EU and NATO have cooperated well on the ground in crisis spots, formal ties in Brussels have been hamstrung by rivalry between the two institutions and political manoeuvring by individual governments.¹⁵ Both the EU and the United States need to ensure that transatlantic information-sharing is enhanced, and not obstructed, at the end of the day.

Beyond such immediate problems affecting ongoing cooperation, neither side has engaged sufficiently with the 'elephant in the room': the ideological challenge posed by the Islamists. Many Europeans – and Americans – have criticised the concept of a 'war on terror', arguing that terror is merely a tactic. Yet there is a surprising lack of agreement on just what we should be fighting, let alone what to do about it. Indeed, there is no consensus on whether such terrorism is even linked to Islam – despite the best efforts of the terrorists themselves to make that linkage clear. Opinions differ widely as to whether the threat comes only from 'violent' Islamists, or both 'violent' and 'non-violent' individuals and groups. Finally, there is no general consensus on what constitutes non-Islamist, or 'moderate' Islam, or whether Western societies should insist that immigrants accept Western legal, cultural and social traditions.

European governments have many differences among themselves, but are trying a variety of approaches. US officials – and the US policy-making community in general – could profit greatly by learning more about European experiences. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic need to acknowledge the vital importance of combating Islamist ideology as well as its violent manifestations. That will then help them to find practical ways to support Western values and to integrate successfully those Muslim immigrants who wish to live in, and contribute to, Western society.

Finally, enhanced US-EU security cooperation will provide a better framework for the inevitable discussions, in the next three to five years, on regional or country-specific issues such as relations with Russia, the status of Kosovo, Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, or the accession of Turkey or Ukraine to the EU. Particularly regarding questions of EU membership, US diplomats could make their case more effectively by demonstrating a better understanding of the tremendous effort, as well as the legal and political commitments involved, in accession to the EU.

Conclusion

This panorama will probably not satisfy those who believe that the post-Bush world will differ fundamentally from today's situation. But it does represent a realistic assessment of what the US-European security relationship could become in the near to medium term. The transatlantic relationship will not return to what it was in the 'good old days', but it can still yield a great deal of value.

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1. See *America Admired, Yet Its New Vulnerability Seen as Good Thing, Say Opinion Leaders: Little Support for Expanding War on Terrorism* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 19 December 2001), available at pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=145.
2. *An Initial Long-Term Vision for European Defence Capability and Capacity Needs*, (Brussels: European Defence Agency, 3 October 2006), p. 12, at www.eda.europa.eu/genericitem.aspx?area=Organisation&id=146.
3. Mark Helprin, 'The Soft Underbelly of Europe: Our German Friends Present a Tempting Target for the Jihadists and Others', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 November 2007 p. A17.
4. *Lieberman Delivers Major Address on 'The Politics of National Security'*, press release dated 9 November 2007, at lieberman.senate.gov/newsroom/release.cfm?id=287039.
5. Kori Schake, 'Transatlantic Relations after Bush', *Centre for European Reform Bulletin*, no. 56, October/November 2007, at www.cer.org.uk/articles/56_schake.html.
6. See Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Dan Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans: An Essay on Anti-Americanism* (Princeton NJ: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 1996).
7. *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 22 May 2007), available at www.pewresearch.org/pubs/483/muslim-americans.
8. While the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is also an important channel, it does not bear the primary brunt of resolving transatlantic difficulties.
9. Julian Lindley-French and Franco Algieri, *A European Defence Strategy* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation, 2004), at www.german-foreign-policy.com.
10. See Leo Michel, *NATO's 'French Connection': Plus Ça Change...?*, website of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, 13 April 2007, for a discussion of France's potential contributions.
11. Hans Binnendijk, 'Finishing the Job in Afghanistan: Our European Allies Are Dropping the Ball', *Opinion Journal*, 11 November 2007.
12. Binnendijk, 'Finishing the Job in Afghanistan'.
13. Quoted in David B. Rivkin Jr, 'Diplomacy in the Post-9/11 Era', *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 November 2007.
14. Finnish Gen. Gustav Hagglund, quoted in Peter Starck, *Time Europe Defended Itself – EU Military Official*, Reuters, 18 January 2004.
15. NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has referred, only half jokingly, to NATO-EU ties as a 'frozen conflict'. See Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, *NATO and the EU: Time for a New Chapter*, keynote speech to the German Presidency-sponsored ESDP Seminar in Berlin, 29 January 2007.