

Transatlantic Relations: Permanent Alliance or Perpetual Crisis?

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The on-going discussion in the European Union, NATO and in Western capitals about how to understand, and what to do about, Russian aggression against Ukraine has revealed some clear fault lines. Some of those fault lines run through the Atlantic, but even more dramatic ones have emerged between those NATO and EU members who live in Russia's immediate neighborhood and those who do not.

This analysisⁱ provides some historical perspectives on the transatlantic relationship as background for what may become a very difficult Euro-Atlantic debate on how to deal with Vladimir Putin's Russia in the wake of his recent actions in Ukraine. The analysis starts from the premise that the transatlantic alliance was born in crisis, and that the history of transatlantic relations since 1949 can be seen, in part, as driven by perceived crises and the responses of the transatlantic allies to those crises.ⁱⁱ It proceeds from the premise that it is a mistake to look at transatlantic relations as simply an interaction between the United States on one side and "Europe" on the other. Europe has never been so coherent to be able to describe it as one entity, particularly when it comes to defense and security interests of European states.

Origins

Over the past 65 years, the crises in transatlantic relations almost always had something to do with how the allies should deal with the Soviet Union or, since the end of the Cold War, with Russia. But they also frequently were very much about how to deal with each other.ⁱⁱⁱ

The negotiations leading to agreement on the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty responded

to a shared transatlantic belief that the combination of weakness in worn-torn Europe and the apparent expansionist intentions of the Soviet Union necessitated steps to keep Moscow from spreading control further West in Europe.

The Treaty recorded an impressive agenda of values and interests shared by the signatories. They pledged in the treaty's preamble "to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." The Article 5 commitment to collective defense was particularly impressive, in spite of language letting members choose exactly what they would do in the case of an attack on another member. But the outward expressions of consensus on general values, interests and commitments partially concealed the fact that some very different agendas and priorities motivated the original members.

This should not come as a surprise. The policies and perspectives of the original members, those who have joined since, and those, like Austria, who are members of the Atlantic community through their European Union membership, are products of a variety of factors. As I observed writing about US relations with West Germany in 1984^{iv}, "We differ about how to deal with the Soviet Union not because one of us is right and the other is wrong. We disagree because we see the problem from our own geographical locations; our perceptions are based on unique historical experiences; our ideological frameworks have been shaped by different factors; our economic interests have their own separate foundations; and we have substantially different military capabilities and world roles. Thus,

we look at our security problems from the vantage of these unique national perspectives." Today, it seems that: "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!*"

Burdensharing Issue Born

In the late 1940s, the United Kingdom, France and other European countries wanted a substantial American contribution to defense arrangements on the ground in Europe. On the other hand, the United States, and particularly the US Congress, wanted to place limits on that contribution. In addition, some Americans, including leading members of the US Congress, wanted to bring the military capabilities of Germany and Spain into play as soon as possible. This American desire met with strong European opposition.

While the United States was most concerned about countering Soviet power, France was focused on constraining Germany's military potential. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, to win the advice and consent of the United States Senate to the North Atlantic Treaty, reassured the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the treaty would not force the United States to deploy large numbers of troops to Europe. One key to avoiding such deployments would be the rearmament of West Germany.

However, at the same time, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman reassured French parliamentarians prior to the National Assembly's vote on the treaty, saying, "Germany has no army and should not have one. It has no arms and will not have any... It is therefore unthinkable, for France and her allies, that Germany could be allowed to adhere to the Atlantic pact as a nation

capable of defending itself or of aiding in the defense of other nations.”^v

The British, meanwhile, were hoping to minimize their commitments on the ground in Europe so that they could concentrate on maintaining the Commonwealth. A solid American commitment to European defense would support that objective.

The outcome reflected in the treaty represented compromises between all of these approaches. Specifically, the treaty’s Article 3 said that “In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”

The treaty therefore underlined the commitment to the “mutual aid” desired by the Europeans and the “effective self-help” on which the American commitment to the alliance was based.

In spite of the impressive accomplishment represented by the Treaty of Washington, it did not take long for transatlantic troubles to break out into the open. NATO’s first Supreme Allied Commander, Dwight David Eisenhower, was elected President in 1952 at the head of a Republican Party determined to get America’s financial house in order.

The fiscally-conservative Eisenhower administration quickly became frustrated with the minimal progress toward establishing a European Defense Community. In December 1953, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles traveled to Paris to warn the North Atlantic Council that the United States would be forced to undertake an “agonizing re-appraisal” of the US commitment if the Europeans did not do better. The plan for a European Defense Community nonetheless failed in the French National Assembly the next year. This left European defense heavily dependent on the American guarantee – much more dependent than was intended in the original American

concept of the deal it had struck with the Europeans in 1949. Thus, the burden-sharing issue was born. It was to become the “perpetual crisis” for this seemingly permanent alliance.

In the same period, the Eisenhower administration told the NATO allies that the United States was adopting a policy of massive retaliation against the Soviet Union should it attack Europe. The theory was simple: in attacking Western Europe, the Soviet Union would risk American strategic nuclear attacks on its cities and forces. The administration viewed this as a way of deterring the Soviet Union without permanently deploying large numbers of US forces on the continent, thus limiting the burden on the US treasury.

Suez Crisis and the Three Wise Men

Against the backdrop of these difficult beginnings, the residual colonial instincts of the UK and France led to a major transatlantic rift in 1956 when the two European powers attempted to seize control of the Suez Canal. The United States opposed the move in the United Nations, and its two allies were forced to back down, seriously burdening US bilateral ties to the UK and France and threatening political consensus in the transatlantic alliance more generally.

Ironically, just prior to the British/French move against Egypt, the NATO allies had recognized that political and economic divisions among them threatened alliance credibility, and had appointed a senior “Three Wise Men” committee (the foreign ministers of Canada, Italy and Norway) to find ways to improve non-military cooperation in the alliance.

Their recommendation for enhanced consultations on a wide range of issues has been echoed in alliance documents ever since but perhaps never fully implemented, at least in the terms that the “Wise Men” had hoped.

Defiant de Gaulle

In the years ahead, one issue after another posed challenges, and stimulated new crises. The most serious internal crisis in the alliance came in 1966, when French President Charles de Gaulle declared that he was pulling France out of NATO’s Integrated Command Structure. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk prepared to go to Paris to discuss the situation with President de Gaulle, President Lyndon Baines Johnson raised a burden-sharing question of his own, directing a reluctant Rusk to ask de Gaulle: „Does your order include the bodies of American soldiers in France’s cemeteries?”^w

De Gaulle’s decision reflected his belief that Europe, and France in particular, needed sufficient freedom from American dominance in NATO to be able to make autonomous decisions about defense, including decisions about the use of the French strategic nuclear force *de frappe*. But President Johnson’s reaction suggested some of the emotions stirred by de Gaulle’s dramatic assertion of independence could raise further problems for transatlantic relations down the road.

Nuclear Issues

The role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s defense plans remained a contentious issue throughout the Cold War.

In response to European desires to have a larger role in NATO nuclear deployment decisions, the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations developed the idea of a NATO Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF), in which NATO allies would participate in the deployment of US Polaris nuclear missile systems. But agreement was never reached on the terms and conditions for implementation.

At the same time, the growing Soviet strategic nuclear arsenal undermined the credibility of the massive retaliation strategy. Under the administration of President John F. Kennedy, the United States started

trying to convince the allies to accept a new strategy. It was called “flexible response.”

In 1967, following France’s departure from NATO’s integrated military command structure and after several wrenching years of discussion and debate among the allies, NATO adopted the flexible response doctrine. According to the new strategy, NATO would be prepared to meet any level of aggression with equivalent force, conventional or nuclear, and would increase the level of force, if necessary, to end the conflict.

The doctrine attempted to accommodate the American desire for more flexible nuclear options and West European concerns about the nuclear umbrella. While the new approach made strategic sense to the United States, for some Europeans it created the image of a war that could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons on the European battlefield while American and Soviet territory remained untouched. Not for the first or the last time in the history of transatlantic relations, geography asserted itself on an issue having to do with dealing with Soviet power and yet challenging the allies to find ways of accommodating their own naturally-arising differences.

Dealing with the Soviet Union

At the same time, Moscow’s “peace campaign” aimed at Western publics and parliaments posed its own problems. The NATO allies decided that Soviet propaganda proposals would cut into political support for the alliance if nothing was done to modernize NATO’s image. The effort produced the 1967 “Harmel Report,” named for Belgian foreign minister Pierre Harmel. The report famously recommended that the alliance base its policies on both “defense and détente,” the catch phrase that framed NATO policies until the end of the Cold War.^{vii}

The new approach resonated well in Europe, but some leading American observers were skeptical. Henry Kissinger, for his part, speaking at a conference in Brussels

in 1979, dismissed NATO’s détente role as an intrusion into the real business of the alliance. His observations left Europeans, and some Americans, in the audience shaking their heads about Kissinger’s dismissal of a policy that had been key to NATO’s political credibility for more than a decade.^{viii} Perhaps even more stunning was Kissinger’s declaration that the allies could not count on the United States hitting the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons if Moscow were to attack a NATO European ally.^{ix}

When the Soviet Union began a decade-long occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979, the question of how to respond was predictably divisive for the allies, with the United States preferring a far stronger line against Moscow than did the European allies.

Over time, the belief in the United States that transatlantic security could not be geographically limited to the confines of the North Atlantic Treaty (the Article 6 definition of the area to which Article 5 would apply) led some American politicians and experts to warn the allies that NATO would have to “go out of area or go out of business.”

This American warning did not substantially affect allied behavior until, in the 1990s, the Europeans agreed that NATO should act in the Balkans, even though former Yugoslavia did not fall inside the NATO area. After 9/11, the old inhibitions were cast aside completely, if not permanently, when the allies agreed to send NATO’s integrated command to Kabul to coordinate the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Transatlantic Crises

Throughout the Cold War, the transatlantic alliance was on many occasions said to be “in crisis.” I admit to having sung this song myself a few times. In 1982, I produced a report for Senator Joe Biden, entitled “Crisis in the Atlantic Alliance: Origins and Implications.”^x

The crisis atmosphere was fueled not only by US-European differences over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan but also over deployment of Intermediate Range Nuclear Force (INF) weapons in Europe. The missiles were supposed to enhance linkage to American strategic nuclear weapons, as they would have sufficient range to hit Soviet territory from their West European deployment bases. But their main impact was to stimulate a large and loud public protest around Europe, particularly in countries that were designated to host the deployments.

The 1982 report for Senator Biden observed that “The first year of the Reagan Administration has witnessed the deepening of the crisis with events and policies aggravating United States-European differences over nuclear issues, the role of arms control, and how to respond to the crisis in Poland. These issues, combined with the ever-present question of defense burdensharing in the Alliance, have led some Members of Congress to question the U.S. commitment to NATO.”^{xi}

That report also developed a series of possible futures for transatlantic relations. One of the options conceived included the formation of a “United Europe.” At that time, I wrote that a United Europe “would, in theory, relieve the United States of some difficult burdens. U.S. policy since World War II has encouraged European integration without trying to force the pace of the process. Would “shock treatment” finally convince the Europeans to overcome all the traditional obstacles to greater unity? How can the shock treatment be applied without stimulating European unity on terms that are potentially unfavorable to U.S. interests – in other words, a united but neutral Western Europe? Even if the Europeans decided that, in principle, they wanted to organize an independent defense in alliance with the United States, could they do it?”^{xii}

Such questions remain hauntingly familiar some three decades down the road.



Permanent Alliance in Perpetual Crisis?

This very brief survey of some of the “crisis” moments in transatlantic relations during the Cold War was intended simply to illustrate that there never was such a thing as “the good old days” when the transatlantic relationship was actually untroubled. The relationship was always one that faced both external and internal challenges, and required constant management by dedicated civilian and military leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. And, the most persistent problem throughout the alliance’s history is still with us today.

From the very beginning, the United States has wanted the allies to produce more defense efforts than they were willing or able to develop. In the 1990s, officials and experts on both sides of the Atlantic hoped that what has become the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) would lead to stronger European defense efforts. While the CSDP has developed the capacity to run some military missions under a European Union flag, it has done very little to improve European defense capabilities. In fact, from the St. Malo origins in 1999 to the Ukraine crisis in 2014, European defense spending and capabilities have declined even further.

The simple fact is that an alliance led by a superpower will inevitably engender free riding. This will challenge the leading power to decide whether the benefits of alliance are worth the costs, while challenging the lesser powers to decide how much they have to do to continue to realize the benefits of alliance with their senior partner.

Moreover, the burdensharing issue still divides members of the European Union just as it creates fissures across the Atlantic. This aspect has come to the fore once again in 2014, as the EU members bordering Russia are increasing defense efforts while EU members further to the West are more reluctant to take strong steps in reaction to Russia’s land grab in the Crimea and Moscow’s not-so-clandestine efforts to

separate Eastern and Southern Ukraine from the rest of the country.

This perpetual crisis in transatlantic relations is one that most likely will never be resolved, but rather will continue to require effective management as long as the allies and partners on both sides of the Atlantic believe that transatlantic cooperation continues to serve their interests.

Notes

i) This analysis is based on a presentation originally delivered at a workshop on “The Transatlantic Relationship in the Current Global Security Environment” at the University of Florida on April 19, 2014, sponsored by the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, the Education and Culture Lifelong Learning Programme, and the European Education, Audiovisual and Cultural Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission with additional support from the Center of European Studies (CES) at the University of Florida.

ii) For the purpose of this discussion, the word “crisis” is defined as a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger, and a time in which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, may be determined.

iii) For an in-depth interpretation of transatlantic relations from 1949 to 2010, see: Stanley R. Sloan, *Permanent Alliance? NATO and the Transatlantic Bargain from Truman to Obama*, Continuum International Publishing Group [New York: 2010].

iv) Stanley R. Sloan, “United States-German Relations: A Contemporary Perspective,” in *United State-German Relations Past and Present*, Clara M. Lovett, Ed., Library of Congress European Division [Washington: 1984], p. 17.

v) *Journal Officielle*, July 25, 1949, p. 5277, as cited in Michael M. Harrison, *The Reluctant Ally: France and Atlantic Security* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 14.

vi) Thomas J. Schoenbaum, Thomas J. *Waging Peace and War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson Years*. [Ann Arbor, Michigan: Simon and Schuster, 1988] p. 421.

vii) See NATO web site for more information on The Harmel Report: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_67927.htm.

viii) The author was in the audience and this reference is from his recollections of the event.

ix) James Allen Smith, *Strategic Calling: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1962-1992*, The Center for Strategic and International Studies [Washington, D.C.: 1993], p. 123.

x) Stanley R. Sloan, *Crisis in the Atlantic Alliance, Origins and Implications*, Congressional Research Service study prepared at the request of Senator Joseph R. Biden, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on European Affairs, Senate Foreign Relations Committee [Washington, D.C.: 1982].

xi) *Ibid.*

xii) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

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