

Transatlantic Relations: A Perfect Storm across the Atlantic?

This essay focuses on the importance of the transatlantic relationship, the values that inform it, the institutions that operationalize it, and the role that the relationships, values and institutions play in defining what we call “the West.” It discusses the meaning of a “perfect storm” for transatlantic relations. This is an over-worked concept, but it unfortunately well describes what has been going recently in Euro-Atlantic relations. The analysis concludes with a few comments about the future, a perspective that is informed by concern about the forces of illiberalism, and hope for energizing liberal democratic paths for our Western democracies.

This analysis is based on the premise that the future of “the West” relies on maintaining a balance between power and values. Power without reference to values, and values not backed by power, are both dangerous for liberal democracy. Striking the right balance has never been easy, and it is no less complicated in today’s complex international environment, where external threats to the West interact ominously with internal challenges.

Meaning of “the West”

Three years ago, the publication *European Geo-strategy* printed my article asking the question: “Does the West exist?”¹ This question was intended to focus readers’ attention on whether the politics and performances of NATO and EU member states still reflected the will and capability to define and defend “Western” values and interests. In the article, I acknowledged that the values articulated in the North Atlantic Treaty, and those on which the European Union is based, are not always reflected in the actions of the member states. Responses to threats to national security have sometimes led to actions that conflicted with those values.

During the Cold War, it was generally accepted that ‘the West’ consisted of the transatlantic democracies and several

nations around the world that accepted, at least in principle, the North Atlantic Treaty’s support for ‘democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.’ Members of the alliance took different paths toward applying these principles in their countries, and they never were in full agreement on all foreign policy or defense issues. But they all understood that ‘the West’ did not include the countries that denied democratic choices to their people, severely limited individual liberties, and substituted regime control for the rule of law. When both Greece and Turkey on separate occasions during the Cold War temporarily abandoned democratic principles under military juntas, NATO allies pressed them to return to democratic governance, which they did. Portugal, a charter member of NATO, which entered the alliance largely as a strategic necessity² under the autocratic regime of António de Oliveira Salazar, finally installed a democratic system after a military coup in 1974.

At the end of the Cold War, the leading question raised about NATO was whether such an alliance would remain relevant without an existential threat. Populations and politicians are strongly motivated by fear – not so much by hope. The new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe rushed to join NATO and then the European Union – the two main institutions of ‘the West.’ They believed that these sheltering roofs would help protect them against a Russian reassertion of power.

To earn their invitations, these countries were required to pledge that they would build their domestic political and economic systems around the core provided by Western values. It was hoped that Russia, too, would embrace the values that motivated ‘Western’ nations. European states were so hopeful that they invited Moscow to join the Council of Europe, the organization designed to be the protector of human rights across the continent.

Challenges to the West

Today, and for the foreseeable future, the members of the so-called “West,” EU and NATO nations, along with democracies in Asia and elsewhere, are facing serious challenges. From northeastern Europe, a revisionist Russia, led by an ambitious authoritarian leader, threatens Western security and values. From the south, the Islamic State and al Qaeda terrorist organizations attempt to destabilize Western nations with the long-term goal of bringing down the Western political, economic and security systems. This is not even to mention the challenges in Asia, including a rising China and an erratic North Korea, which are beyond the scope of this analysis, albeit relevant to the future of the West.

In the meantime, extremist political movements throughout Europe, and in the United States, are calling into question Western unity, and even the validity of a Western identity. These troubling internal divisions – inside and among Western states – could combine with the external threats to form a “perfect storm.” That storm could blow away transatlantic unity and, with it, the definition and reality of “the West.”

Even before Russia’s aggressions against Georgia and Ukraine, a potent mix of political, economic, and societal factors inside member states had begun to undermine the perception of shared values and interests. This mix grew, in part, out of the economic crisis that hammered the United States, Europe and the European Union during the past decade. Weak economic growth and high unemployment combined with the flood of immigrants to help fuel the rise of extremist parties and populist movements in many European countries.

Many of these parties share worrying commonalities, including

- ★ opposing their countries' memberships in the European Union and NATO;
- ★ favoring more autocratic forms of government; and
- ★ sympathizing with Russian President Vladimir Putin's perspectives on politics, culture, religion, and strategic issues.

We know that "populism" and "nationalism" have played major roles in the growth of support for extremist parties that do not accept all the principles on which our liberal democracies are based. If populism is defined simply as concern for the needs and wants of the average citizen, how can anyone disagree with that? If nationalism means pride for the country in which you were born or which you have adopted as your home, that can be a positive thing. However, politicians and would-be leaders can use populist and nationalist appeals to play on fears, base instincts and historical grievances to generate support for their agendas. And those agendas often include personal power and wealth for the politicians who seek to turn popular fears and nationalistic sentiments into something ugly, and undemocratic.

The challenge now, for those of us who believe in Western values, is to demonstrate that the institutions of the West – the European Union and NATO – are serving the needs not only of governments, elites, the financial world and big business, but also the needs of average citizens.

Looking at these issues from the North American side of the Atlantic, we have fallen on hard times, at least politically. Our new leader, Donald Trump, is different from any other in our history.

Some observers³ have compared Trump to one of his predecessors—Andrew Jackson (1829-1837). But Jackson was president in simpler times, when news moved at the speed of the pony express, and there was no country that could destroy ours in a matter of minutes. Nor, for that matter, were we able in those days to threaten the existence of virtually any other country

on Earth. Our current leader may reflect some of Jackson's nationalist and populist instincts, but they were far less dangerous in our seventh president's day than they are today—for us, for our friends, and even for our adversaries.

We are still trying to understand what motivates Trump, and what he will do next. This has been made very difficult by the fact that he tends to make things up, or repeats things that others have made up, and never admits that he is wrong or has made a mistake. For many of us, this behavior makes it hard to trust our president's word and severely weakens his credibility.

We know that European democracies, too, face some difficult circumstances. Our Dutch friends did not completely fall prey to the populist siren song, but the 2017 spring elections in The Netherlands did leave the movement alive and well to challenge the next government. Our French allies—whose strong nationalist pride sometimes clashes with that of us Americans—have faced a challenge from a similar phenomenon. In some other European countries, illiberal tendencies already have made their way into governments or come close to doing so.

In Turkey, which most members of the European Union don't regard as sufficiently European, or now sufficiently democratic, to join the EU, voters narrowly approved a constitutional referendum that has created options for making their government more autocratic, thereby taking them further out of the "Western" circle.⁴

At the same time, we are all in the cross-hairs of radical terrorists who, in their distorted view of Islam, believe that they must kill enough of us to disrupt our political and economic systems. It's incredibly important that we work together to destroy terrorist networks before they can hit us. We need to disrupt their communications, and to make a clear case to our youth that they have better options than joining the Islamic State or al Qaeda.

This is not to forget that Western values and security are being challenged as well

by Russian President Putin, who apparently believes that his nation needs to recapture the greatness of the Soviet Union. He has already been willing to use a variety of forceful, as well as political, means toward that end. Like the radical terrorists, Putin is challenging the "dominance" of the Western political, economic, and security systems. He hopes to replace these with new arrangements in which Russia plays a more dominant role—without reforming the political system that keeps him in power, and the financial system that lines his pockets and those of his friends and political supporters.

What we are seeing on both sides of the Atlantic is a convergence of serious challenges to a Western system of values that we have treasured and, to some extent, taken for granted, ever since World War II. Russia seized every opportunity after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis to try to create divisions among EU members that might mitigate or even block continued economic sanctions. Putin's meeting with Marine le Pen in the midst of the French election campaign suggested that the effort continues.⁵

The mass exodus of refugees from Syria and elsewhere intensified nativist political sentiments and has driven an additional wedge into European and Western unity. These mostly far-right parties have capitalized on a wide range of popular fears by opposing immigration, multiculturalism, and membership in the EU and NATO while pursuing closer ties with Russia.

And Russia is bankrolling their support, trying to chip away at the foundations of Euro-Atlantic institutions it considers a threat. Some ties between these parties and Moscow have become public. For example, the National Front⁶ reportedly received a 9.4 million euro loan from Russia in November 2014. Marine Le Pen, the party's leader, defended the transaction against charges that the loan was a reward for having supported Russia's annexation of Crimea earlier that year. Press sources at the time reported that Le Pen admired Putin as a "strong" leader.⁷ Does that sound familiar?

Leading officials of the government that came to office in Greece in January 2015—Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias from the majority far-left Syriza Party and Defense Minister Panos Kammenos from the rightist Independent Greeks Party—have spoken warmly of ties with Moscow. They suggested that they opposed sanctions against Russia and favored a wide range of cooperation with the Russian Federation. As the negotiations in the 2015 Greek debt crisis approached a critical stage, Prime Minister Tsipras left for Russia to participate in the St. Petersburg Economic Forum and meet with President Putin. He returned to Greece with nothing of value in hand, but he warned his EU lenders, saying, “We are ready to go to new seas to reach new safe ports...” and that “Russia is one of the most important partners for us.”⁸

Putin’s appeal resonated beyond Greece. Just after the Minsk agreement on a ceasefire in Ukraine was brokered in March 2015—an agreement in which Russia admitted no responsibility for the conflict—President Putin traveled triumphantly to Hungary, into Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s welcoming arms. Orbán, whose disdain for liberal democracy and admiration for Vladimir Putin are well-known, represents one of the EU’s weak links, particularly regarding sanctions against Russia.⁹

Many European officials have lamented that trade sanctions imposed on Russia and Russia’s retaliatory measures have slipped wedges into the cracks in Western solidarity. Russia’s high-quality propaganda outlets exacerbate this. In July 2015, Russian news agency Tass praised the comments of Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov who implied it was up to the “big bosses,” meaning the United States and the European Union, to “figure everything out and lift sanctions.” Borissov appeared to place no blame on President Putin for the situation.¹⁰

Moreover, many European business interests and leading politicians have become dependent on doing business with Russian firms as well as the Russian

government. This factor, combined with incredibly effective propaganda produced by Moscow’s media machine, led to a phenomenon in which many Germans became Putin *Versteher*, or Putin “understanders.”

This all led the German historian Heinrich August Winkler to lament that many Germans have “this irritating desire for equidistance [between Russia and the West]....” He continued, “A strong minority is questioning vital elements of our Western orientation namely our memberships in NATO and the European Union. I find that unsettling.”¹¹

The United States, even before Trump, has done its share of damage to the transatlantic relationship. The unauthorized release of secret US intelligence documents by Edward Snowden led to the disclosure in 2015 that the US National Security Agency (NSA) had been spying on the German and other European governments, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s private telephone conversations.¹² The common adage that allies spy on each other did not cut it among European peoples. The NSA scandal outraged many Europeans much more than Americans truly appreciate and significantly undermined European trust in the United States. Prior to the disclosures, there was already fertile ground for anti-Americanism in many European countries. The appreciation for the American role in World War II, and even in the more recent reunification of Germany, had faded. Differences over the Iraq war linger strongly among some European allies. And, in Germany’s eastern regions as well as in some former Warsaw Pact countries, a certain romantic memory of the “predictable” days of communist control has lingered. In a 2015 public opinion survey, the German public even edged away from NATO’s key collective defense commitment. Some 58 percent of Germans in the survey opposed using force in support of a fellow NATO ally attacked by Russia.¹³

A growing “values gap” between the United States and some European countries was illustrated by the European Parliament’s vote in October 2015 to absol-

ve Edward Snowden¹⁴ for illegally releasing highly classified American documents on the grounds that he was defending democracy. This took place while Snowden was being sheltered in Moscow by the hardly democratic Russian government.

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Even prior to the NSA revelations, the Obama administration’s 2012 strategic “pivot” to Asia had sent signals across the Atlantic that the United States was divesting politically and militarily from its sustained commitment to Europe. The Obama administration’s thinking that Europe could take on more of a leadership role was overly optimistic. The EU has stumbled in attempts to produce coherent and effective foreign and defense policies. In these realms, Europe has remained decisively a *Europe des états*. It was unrealistic to expect “Europe” to speak as one, to say nothing of acting as one, on matters still so deeply embedded in national sovereignty. That remains true today, particularly as the UK’s Brexit move has produced echoes elsewhere in Europe, where not everyone appreciates the strategic contributions that the process of integration has made over the past six decades.

This new US approach came in the midst of serious economic weakness in Europe, a time when there were neither political nor financial resources to finance a confident European defense and security-policy role. It also turned out to have come at a time when threats in the Middle East and Europe would take dramatic turns for the worse.

The gridlock in the American domestic political system has seriously weakened

the foundation on which American leadership rests. In 2015, one of the most widely respected Washington hands and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta judged that dysfunction in Washington was the biggest threat to US security.¹⁵ Nothing has improved since. If the American political system is dysfunctional for the United States, its dysfunction spreads to the transatlantic alliance and Western Europe.

Washington's dysfunction—from Republicans labeling German Chancellor Merkel an appeaser while the administration tried to engage her, to a 2013 government shut-down that hampered military spending, to some of the angry political messages in the 2016 presidential campaign—has further diminished US credibility, soft power, and leadership in NATO.

Implications

All of this suggests that the future of the transatlantic community could come down to three very basic questions:

- ★ First, should the United States and its European partners acquiesce in Russia's geopolitical demands for a buffer zone between Putin's kleptocracy and the democratic West, or should they assert the liberal values that they hoped would shape post-Cold War Europe?
- ★ Second, what should the United States and its allies do about the threat posed by ISIS and other groups determined to attack the foundations of Western values when there is little taste in Europe or in the United States for more involvement in the Middle East?
- ★ Finally, how can NATO and EU members effectively deal with domestic illiberal trends and political movements that have called into question the validity of Western national and international institutions, and could undermine the very political systems the Alliance is designed to defend?

Today, the United States and its European partners must deal decisively with the

threats posed by a revisionist Russia and by Islamic terrorism. But NATO and EU members should also focus on dealing with the factors that are giving rise to illiberal political tendencies that are eroding democratic institutions and processes.

While the external threats to the West are real, internal weaknesses could block Western democracies from effectively and cooperatively confronting them. If transatlantic solidarity fails, then the future of the West would be in doubt. As then-US Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated upon NATO's founding, "the North Atlantic Treaty is far more than a defensive arrangement. It is an affirmation of the moral and spiritual values which we hold in common."¹⁶ Nearly seventy years since NATO's founding, these values, and not external threats, will be what keeps the Alliance strong.

Today, however, while the United States and its European partners must deal decisively with the threats posed by Russia and Islamic terrorism, NATO and EU members should also focus on dealing with the factors that are giving rise to illiberal political tendencies that are eroding democratic institutions and processes.

It seems clear that economics plays a role in stimulating such tendencies, but other factors contribute as well. Last year, New York Times editorial writer, Roger Cohen, asked how it is possible that Donald Trump could become American president. He answered his own question with a list of factors, many of which have their counterparts in European countries. According to Cohen,¹⁷

It is possible because spectacle and politics have merged and people no longer know fact from fiction or care about the distinction. It is possible because fear has entered people's lives and that fear is easily manipulated. It is possible because technology has created anxiety multipliers such as have never been known before. It is possible because America is a country living with the dim dissatisfaction of two wars without victory and the untold trillions spent on them. It is possible because a very large number of people want to give the finger to the elites who brought the crash of 2008 and rigged

the global system and granted themselves impunity. It is possible because of growing inequality and existential dread, especially among the white losers from globalization who know minorities will be the majority in the United States by midcentury. It is possible because both major parties have abandoned the working class.... It is possible because the identity politics embraced by urban, cosmopolitan liberals have provoked an inevitable backlash among those who think white lives matter, too. It is possible because Trump speaks to the basest but also some of the most ineradicable traits of human beings — their capacity for mob anger, their racist resentments, their cruelty, their lust, their search for scapegoats, their insecurities — and promises a miraculous makeover.... It is possible because history demonstrates there is no limit to human folly or the dimensions of the disasters humanity can bring on itself.

These observations suggest we all should pay more attention to the need for democracy revitalization in each of our countries. European democracies need to ensure that political, social and economic conditions provide hope for successor generations, promote economic growth, increase employment opportunities, and rebuild faith in the European integration process, the transatlantic partnership, and the values of the West.

The United States, if it wishes to serve as a "shining city on a hill," needs to recognize that its democracy is still a work in progress. The model provided by annual town meetings in which citizens set local budgets for the next year and debate local issues, for example, shows democracy at its best. But other aspects of American democracy, including the gerrymandering of congressional districts and the influence of big money in American politics, remain defects that raise skepticism about America's model.

The future credibility of the EU and NATO as value-based organizations of "the West" will therefore depend not just on more effective defense spending and other security measures, but also on the quality of the democratic systems and market economies of the member states.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Finally, what are the implications of the Trump presidency for the future of transatlantic relations, and what standards should we use concerning how well this President seeks to lead the Western alliance?

In my view, the United States should lead by example, reaffirming that shared Western values, common security interests, and mutually interdependent financial and economic systems require a strong transatlantic relationship. US policy should be based on the recognition that a healthy transatlantic alliance is an enabler for the United States; it is a force and influence multiplier. Support of transatlantic allies not only enhances American influence and power, it also reaffirms and reinforces American values.

For the time being, American leadership does not seem to be informed by such guidelines. The Trump presidency has introduced great uncertainty into US foreign policy and international relations more generally. What the president has said about NATO and the EU is not reassuring, even after some modification of his original assertions about both.

President Trump is, to a certain extent, constrained by a free press, the constitution and checks and balances provided by the Judicial System and the Congress. But he already has done serious damage to the US ability to lead, and even act, internationally.

Both NATO and the broader transatlantic relationship can survive the Trump presidency, but plenty of reconstruction may be required in its wake. What can European Atlanticists do in the meantime?

First, the reassertion of Western values that was recently made by EU leaders in the Rome Declaration¹⁸ is an important start. The leaders said that the EU was a “unique union with common institutions and strong values, a community of peace, freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.” Hopefully they understood that EU member states must make the

institutions work better to help protect the values against the external and internal challenges.

There are also some things that Europeans can do to maintain transatlantic values and cooperation while they are being questioned in Washington.

First, the NATO allies should demonstrate that they are actively supporting the pledge to spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense by 2024, with 20% of defense spending going to new equipment, research and development. What each country buys with its defense spending is critically important, but the process all starts with the input¹⁹: as is often said, quantity has its own quality.

European NATO and EU nations should look for opportunities to make no- and low-cost defense improvements, and to improve intra-European and transatlantic cooperative efforts.

When improvements can be demonstrated, they should be publicized. Back in the waning years of the Cold War, the so-called “Euro-group” served as a publicist in the United States for European defense efforts.²⁰ Perhaps the concept should be revitalized by the European allies.

It also is important for European countries to express appreciation for US contributions to their security. We know that the United States has not always made the best decisions when it has come to the use of force, but we also should recognize that European freedom and democracy have benefited greatly from the American role in European security. Europeans expressions of this sentiment to American Members of Congress and the American public reinforces US support for continued transatlantic cooperation.

Finally, all NATO and EU members should work on improving cooperation between NATO and the EU, particularly on terror-related challenges. Progress has been made in the last couple of years, but much more is needed.

For our part, we American Atlanticists should work with like-minded Europeans to re-establish mutual trust and confidence between the United States and the European Union. We should support those American officials and politicians – of both parties – who understand how our cooperation in NATO and collaboration with the EU help defend against the external threats that we face.

This will require that we revitalize the political center in the US and other Western democracies. Political extremes can fire up electorates, but it is at the center where the hard work is done and results are produced. The US and European political centers must become positive forces for constructive change, and then demonstrate the will to make it happen. This must include tax and financial reforms ensuring that Western economic systems, national and international, benefit the average citizen and not just the top 1%.

Toward this end, Atlanticists must act as the “populists of the West” – individuals who subscribe to Western values and cooperate to defend them.

If Winston Churchill were with us today, I’m sure he would confirm that this “imperfect” Western system is nonetheless better than any of the alternatives. It should be the mission of the “populists of the West” to preserve and energize it for the benefit of future generations on both sides of the Atlantic.

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NOTES

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