

Transatlantic Relations and the Future Defense of the West – Implications for the EU and NATO ¹

Transatlantic relations over the past seven decades have from time to time been troubled by a variety of political, economic and security issues. The members of NATO and the European Union have nonetheless, at the end of the day, demonstrated their commitment to the well-being of this community of liberal democracies. Today, the confluence of several factors, including a surge in popularity for illiberal radical right populist leaders and parties on both sides of the Atlantic, the related election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States and Brexit, and the process of Great Britain abandoning its membership in the EU jeopardize the future of transatlantic relations and the West.

This analysis asks three key questions about the consequences of these developments:

- ★ What is the future of “the West?”
- ★ Why and how should it be defended?
- ★ What would our answers mean for the two main institutional pillars of the West: the European Union and NATO?

To begin, let me elaborate on a few things that influence my approach:

- ★ I support liberal democracy as the best, albeit not perfect, political system for our countries.
- ★ My outlook on how to defend the West is influenced as much by this ideological bias, or set of political beliefs, as it is by the need for governments to defend against physical threats to citizens, the nation, and allied democracies.
- ★ Finally, in my almost 50 years of working on transatlantic relations I have analyzed and written about many “crises.” It is my judgment that the crisis currently facing the West is the most dangerous of any seen in the past seven decades.

Some earlier crises, at the time, seemed to threaten the future of the transatlantic bargain struck between the United States and its European allies in 1949. And yet, every time the clock struck midnight at the culmination of each crisis, Western democracies have decided that cooperation in a transatlantic framework remained in their best interests. No ally has left NATO. Until Brexit, no member state had decided to leave the European Union.

Of course, the transatlantic alliance does not solely constitute “the West.” When the term is defined broadly, it certainly includes Eastern democracies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Ultimately, however, the members of NATO and the European Union represent the heart of the West, and thus the well-being of transatlantic relationships is key to the survival of the West. Not all members of this core group have always met the high standards set in the North Atlantic Treaty and the several treaties that comprise the EU.

But Western nations aspire to and judge themselves against the goal of governing with systems that honor individual liberty, electoral democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These elements define the West. It is not the West that President Trump has referred to as constituting “the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are.”² Trump’s formulation threatens to close the door of the West to those of different cultures, faiths and traditions who, while differing in many ways, nonetheless accept and practice Western values.

Principled American leadership for 70 years has been the main sustenance for the transatlantic relationship. The current crisis in transatlantic relations did not start with Donald Trump, even though he certainly brought it to a head and made its potential consequences even more ominous. From

a historical point of view, the fundamental crisis goes back to the origins of the transatlantic bargain, which included the US Marshall Plan’s support for the beginning of the European integration process and the founding of NATO.

The distribution of costs and benefits of the alliance has always been an issue. Because popular support for leaders of democratic states depends on the ability to deliver the level of security demanded by their constituents and at a price deemed reasonable by the voters, each member of the alliance tries to attain the level of security desired by citizens at the lowest possible cost. The value placed on defense and the willingness to spend varies between countries. Consequently, transatlantic relations will be perpetually plagued by a “burden-sharing” problem that requires constant negotiations and adjustments of the burdens in order to find a balance of costs and benefits with which all nations that benefit from the system can live.

If the fate of the West rests with its transatlantic core, liberal democrats on both sides of the Atlantic should be very concerned about the future. Democracies can be slow to adopt and implement change. If a political system – like the democratic ones of the United States and its European allies and partners – is built on a solid constitutional foundation, major changes need to be considered seriously and tested before public opinion.

That said, democracies that do not deal effectively with the concerns of the populace are vulnerable to pressure from fear-based populist appeals. Such pressures have troubled most of the transatlantic democracies in recent years. Those pressures have been aided and abetted by politicians seeking to build their power through playing on popular fears and making promises of strong leadership to respond to those fears. At the same time,

states with undemocratic political systems are increasingly taking advantage of the openness of liberal democratic systems, freedom of the press, and social media to undermine the democratic systems they see as threats to their more centralized and controlling systems of government. If I were a European who believes in Western values, I'd be worried. The American guarantee of European security has, under President Trump, become very uncertain. Mutual trust among leaders of alliance nations is at an all-time low. At the same time, the threat from Russia has become even more intrusive.

In my judgment, President Putin believes that, if the United States retreats from Europe, Europeans will not choose to replace American power with comparable European power. Putin has constructed a convincing military threat facing the West, mixed it with energy dependence, and clandestine as well as overt political manipulation, all wrapped in the comforting cocoon of a peace campaign. He offers complacent Europeans peace and prosperity under the Putin model of society and governance, to replace the Western model based on individual liberty, democracy, human rights, tolerance and the rule of law. And he is getting a helping hand from the US president as well as from radical right populist politicians here in Europe.

Historical reflection

In December 1953, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened his fellow foreign ministers at a NATO meeting in Paris with an "agonizing reappraisal" of the US commitment to European defense. Dulles, reflecting the austerity concerns of the Eisenhower administration, insisted that the Europeans follow through on their pledge to improve their contributions to transatlantic defense by establishing a European Defense Community (EDC). This was the first and, until the election of Donald Trump, the last time that an American government threatened to abandon its NATO commitments.

The question now is whether the 'Trump threat' will fundamentally alter transat-

lantic relationships into the post-Trump future. How seriously has trust in US leadership been damaged? Will future US administrations be able to regain that trust? Do Europeans still want or need an American partner? If so, what might they do to ensure continued American contributions to their security?

Unique threat environment

In the year of NATO's 70th anniversary, we find ourselves in a unique threat environment. Russia, led by former KGB officer Vladimir Putin, has actively sought to undermine Western unity for several years, while pursuing its own geo-strategic goals. Putin blames the West for the new confrontation, arguing that the enlargement of both NATO and the EU threatens Russian security.

Some in the West accept this argument – apparently now including many Germans, who recently were found to be more favorable toward cooperation with Russia than with the United States. Putin, however, clearly knows that the consensus-based nature of NATO means it is very unlikely to attack Russia. What Putin fears most is that the Western model of free, rules-based societies and governments might take popular root in Russia, threatening his authoritarian rule. And Russia's strategy is to play on existing divisions among the NATO allies and EU members and to create new ones.

Ironically, another external threat is also aimed at destabilizing the Western system. The goal of the terrorists committed to the Islamic State, al Qaeda and affiliated groups is to undermine faith in Western democracy. The Islamic State has used its aggressions in the Middle East and North Africa to produce a flow of refugees to Europe seeking safety and a better future. This, along with terrorist attacks on Western targets, destabilizes the West and disrupts European unity, thus advancing the Islamic State's objectives.

Now, another new element has come into the frame. For many years, the United States has focused on the growing challenges

posed by a Chinese regime whose mounting economic and financial strength are managed in a political system that is the antithesis of the system that I have argued defines the West. It is the system that pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong have been protesting its imposition on them.

Today, President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative has become a potent vehicle for spreading Chinese power and influence around the globe. Perhaps for the first time in recent history, Europeans are looking at China as something more than a trading partner, and increasingly as an expansionist power, relying primarily on its financial and economic strength for its conquests. Velina Tchakarova, Director of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, has called attention to the potential challenge to the West posed by possible alignment of Russia and China in an anti-Western coalition – something she has creatively coined the "Dragonbear."

This challenging environment of internal and external challenges to the West produces big questions about the future of the West. The combination of external and internal threats that I have just discussed will not likely disappear in the near term and can be assumed to present continuing challenges to the survival of both liberal democracy and the transatlantic democracies. NATO and EU member states will likely continue to seek to protect themselves against external and internal threats, and such decisions as they reach will be of major importance to how they individually allocate their resources. They will have to find an acceptable balance of risks and responsibilities to ensure the future of the Western coalition.

Future Scenarios

Against this backdrop, let's postulate for the sake of discussion three broad possibilities for the transatlantic alliance that the allies could imagine or aspire to over the next decade. The basic assumption of this exercise is that a healthy, functioning transatlantic relationship is a "good thing." For those who start from another assump-

tion, the answers would undoubtedly be different.

All three assume relative continuity in the threat environment:

- ★ Russia still poses political and military challenges while its economy continues to weaken.
- ★ The threat of terrorist attacks persists.
- ★ Concerns about Chinese power mix with opportunistic cooperative deals with this emerging Asian superpower.
- ★ It is also assumed that the UK will leave the EU, even though the consequences remain very dependent on how the departure is negotiated and managed.

That said, these three broad scenarios present a range of perspectives on the future:

- ★ Substantial continuity
- ★ Radical positive change
- ★ Radical negative change

Substantial continuity

In this potential future, very little changes the trend lines that have been laid down by history.

The United States remains committed to participate in the defense of Europe, deploy substantial numbers of troops, and retain military leadership of NATO with a senior American general serving as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander. Post-Trump administrations try to repair damage done to US leadership of the alliance without abandoning US burden-sharing concerns. All current members remain in the alliance, despite some wavering (e.g. Turkey) and others experimenting with forms of democracy that do not conform to the values specified or implied in the North Atlantic Treaty.

With the United Kingdom having left, the EU continues with some successes and some failures in attempts to give the Union a more substantial integrated military capability. The UK makes some cooperative military arrangements with its former EU partners while seeking a continued "special relationship," including intelli-

gence sharing, with the United States.

In this potential future, several allies spend around 2 percent of GDP on defense by 2024 as was agreed at the 2014 Wales summit, while others fall short.

Radical positive change

In this future, the goal of a more balanced transatlantic relationship comes more clearly into view.

The United States remains committed to the alliance while supporting European efforts progressively to take on more responsibilities and burdens in the alliance. The members of the EU make substantial advances in coordinating and even integrating their defense establishments. A true European army under the control of a politically united Europe remains out of reach, but all EU members increasingly sacrifice bits of their national control of forces in a variety of pragmatic cooperative arrangements. The UK, despite its departure from the EU, commits to thorough defense cooperation with EU members, while remaining fully committed to NATO.

Increased European spending on defense is accompanied by the revitalization of a European defense industry, with multinational firms and co-production arrangements setting up a healthy competition across the Atlantic whose sharp edges are moderated by stronger transatlantic defense industrial cooperation as well. The stronger European contribution to defense is acknowledged with alternating European and American Supreme Allied Commanders of NATO as a transition to a possible future in which Europeans routinely hold this post. The role of Secretary General – the political leader of the alliance – also alternates between prominent European and North American political leaders.

Radical negative change

This much darker future would see the United States essentially abandoning its transatlantic commitments and leadership roles while its European allies fall into dis-

putes about how to maintain their security and provide new leadership. Such a scenario could be initiated by the reelection of Donald Trump to another four-year term as American president.

In this hypothetical scenario, Trump continues the process of abandoning US international leadership in his second term and decides to remove all US forces from Europe.

Trump tweets that he and Vladimir Putin have agreed that such a move would promote peace and security in Europe. In response, the European allies discuss the creation of strong, integrated European defense structure to replace the transatlantic NATO one but find it too challenging politically and financially.

Even the projection³ made in 2019 by the International Institute for Strategic Studies that overwhelming financial commitments would be required of EU members to create a defense system as capable as that of NATO on their own turns out to be overly optimistic.

Several EU countries suggest that the EU should follow the US lead and sign a peaceful relations accord with Russia in which both sides pledge to take no aggressive actions against the interests of the other. Even though some commentators immediately label this "the 21st century Munich," most European governments decide they have little choice.

In addition, this move toward accommodation with Russia strengthens illiberal pro-Moscow parties throughout Europe and produces several national administrations that lean more toward fascist forms of governance than liberal democracy.

Variants

There are, of course, endless variants on the three scenarios. The continuity option could produce no forward movement and leave the alliance essentially where it was in 2019. Or, it could move more rapidly toward radical positive change. The radical positive change scenario could, despite

this analyst's skepticism, move rapidly toward a united Europe. Ironically, the same could happen in the case of American abandonment. There are all kinds of dark scenarios that could be added to the negative variant. In some ways, it seems the positive possibilities are severely limited and the negative ones more open ended. What can history tell us about the future? In theory, we pay attention to history in the hopes that it will help guide us to the future. George Santayana's wise saying, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," is popular for a good reason. We do need to learn from history, even if it doesn't predictably repeat itself.

In the case of transatlantic relations, two global conflicts in the last century led democratic leaders at the end of WWII to agree on some major international steps to try to avoid another repeat. The fact that this set of creative decisions produced systems of security and cooperation among the transatlantic democracies for over seven decades should not be forgotten – as Santayana's warning suggests.

With all its imperfections and sources of disagreements, this system that still is supported institutionally primarily by NATO and the European Union makes its own case for preservation. Those who argue for major changes in the arrangement still must bear the burden of proving that they have a better idea.

The future?

Will history return to more reliable and familiar patterns, as suggested in the continuity model outlined above, or will the forces of disruption steer the transatlantic democracies in very different and potentially dangerous directions?

The West is still composed, by definition, of democracies, and thus the people and governments of the member nations, especially the most powerful ones, will determine its direction. The ability of the people to decide their future is a basic and great quality shared by the democratic governments that comprise the transatlan-

tic community. However, there remains the risk that the people may make choices that will not serve their or their descendants' interests well. The current collision between history and disruptive forces of change has posed a huge challenge to the United States, Canada and their European allies. I guess, to quote Donald Trump, "we will see what happens...."

Endnotes

1) This analysis is derived from the author's 19 September 2019 presentation in Vienna sponsored by the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy. It is based in part on analysis developed for his book, *Defense of the West: Transatlantic Security from Truman to Trump*, scheduled for 2020 publication by the Manchester University Press.

2) The White House, "Remarks by President Trump to the people of Poland | July 6, 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/06/remarks-president-trump-people-poland-july-6-2017.

3) Douglas Barrie, Ben Barry, Dr Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, Henry Boyd, Nick Childs, Dr Bastian Giegerich, "Defending Europe: scenario-based capability requirements for NATO's European members." International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 2019.

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