

Dr. Ian O. Lesser is Executive Director of the Transatlantic Center, the Brussels Office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and GMF’s Senior Director for Foreign and Security Policy. This paper is based on an essay originally published in *Aspenia*.

Rediscovering a Wider Atlantic: An American Perspective

Ian O. Lesser

Many observers are convinced that the so-called “pivot to Asia” spells less US attention to the Atlantic. To be sure, younger Americans indeed looking to Asia as a region increasingly important to their perceived interests, and in narrow strategic terms, the shift to Asia may be real enough. In geopolitical terms, the US is obviously a bi-oceanic power, and perhaps Washington is coming to the end of a century long pivot to Europe? Yet, leaving aside looming strategic challenges in Asia, transatlantic relations are very much back on the American agenda. From debates over social policy to new trade initiatives, from energy exports to Middle East diplomacy, transatlantic relations – and the Atlantic itself -- are surprisingly visible. Indeed, the strategic significance of the Atlantic could acquire important new meaning to the extent that it is defined more broadly, to include the Atlantic basin as a whole, north and south. The north-south and south-south dimensions of transatlantic relations are poised to take center stage.

A Global Atlantic

Few would argue with the idea that transatlantic relations have gone global. From an American perspective, the quality of cooperation on issues outside the Atlantic space has become a key measure of partnership with European allies. The era of transatlantic relations, narrowly defined, is past. In security terms, cooperation in the first Gulf War marked a clear turning point, formalized in the years after September 2001. Demands in Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, and Iran have all contributed to the

globalization of transatlantic strategy. In economic terms, the transformation has been even more pronounced. Very few issues of concern in trade and finance can be addressed effectively without reference to the role of Asia, and increasingly, emerging actors across the global South. The notion of transatlantic cooperation confined to the Washington-London-Paris-Brussels-Berlin axis, divorced from global partnerships, is fast becoming an anachronism, even for the most traditional Euro-Atlantic institutions.

But the globalization of the transatlantic agenda has, oddly, bypassed a large and increasingly consequential part of the Atlantic space. What about the Atlantic basin south of the traditional north Atlantic axis? The southern Atlantic has hardly figured in transatlantic relations, and this means that these relations have “not been firing on all cylinders.” A decade ago, before the economic crises in the US and Europe, before Brazil became trendy, and before the emergence of dynamic economies elsewhere in Atlantic Latin America and Africa, the notion of Southern or “wider” Atlanticism would have been considered eccentric. Today, a more comprehensive approach to Atlantic identity and cooperation seems natural, even inevitable.

In the longer sweep of history, none of this is new. From the 15th to the early 20th centuries, Atlantic geopolitics had a much more southerly orientation. The long decline of the colonial presence in the south, the rapid industrialization of northern Atlantic economies, the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, and other factors all conspired to focus European and American attention northward. So, too, did the relative decline of once prosperous economies in Latin America, Argentina being the most notable case. Through two world wars, and the Cold War, the strategic center of gravity has been focused firmly on the Atlantic north of the Tropic of Cancer, a notion of strategic geography enshrined in the original NATO treaty. It is a notion increasingly out of step with contemporary realities.

Several elements are now coming together to underscore the importance of a wider approach to transatlantic relations, with greater balance between north and south. Some of these drivers of wider Atlanticism are rooted in American and European unease about their future influence in the face of rising powers elsewhere. Others are based in southern Atlantic societies – those south of the traditional Atlantic axis, and roughly in the Americas and Atlantic Africa south of the Tropic of Cancer. Still others are the result of new developments in the global resource economy, human mobility and trans-regional security. Taken together, they suggest the emergence of a very different kind of Atlantic, with a different place in world affairs.

Looking East, Looking South

The difficult debate over the Syrian crisis clearly underscores public fatigue with military intervention, and ultimately, a wider tendency toward a more careful use of American power and a foreign policy more closely tied to economic security. Much has been made of the “pivot” or “rebalancing” vis-à-vis Asia. This is a shift that has been underway for decades, at least in defense planning. Eurasia and the North Atlantic space simply do not present the kind of large-scale strategic risks that would justify an unchanging approach to American

security priorities. This debate has been the source of considerable unease in Europe, where it is often presented as a harbinger of American disengagement and a declining affinity for Europe as a partner. In reality, the strategic pivot, if there is one, is a pivot toward new and more pressing risks, and not a shift from transatlantic partnership per se. In most imaginable contingencies, from Mali to Iran, Europe is likely to be the partner of choice for crisis management. In terms of financial flows, the northerly axis across the Atlantic remains predominant for both partners. The prospect of a serious attempt to create a transatlantic free trade area will only reinforce this reality. But it is unreasonable to believe transatlantic relations can remain unaffected by longer term, generational shifts in American perceptions of Europe versus Asia in the context of national interest (shifts clearly indicated by survey results, including the Transatlantic Trends findings).¹ Younger Americans are looking Eastward. Over time, they may also look South, an attraction driven by the burgeoning people-to-people links with Latin America, especially Brazil, and the growing significance of transnational communities spanning the US and societies to the south. These connections, and changing demographics inside the US, are also giving rise to a set of specifically regional international ties and policies -- almost a parallel set of foreign policies -- pursued from places like Miami and New Orleans. Many of these connections are with the Southern Atlantic. There are now roughly a dozen flights each day to from Brazil to Miami alone. As Brazil prepares to step even more visibly on the world stage with the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, American popular interest in Brazil is bound to expand.

The already strong links between North America, Latin America and the Caribbean will be reinforced by expanding educational ties. Brazil plans to send 100,000 science and technology students abroad for graduate study in the coming years, and roughly half will go to American universities. At the same time, the Obama Administration has its own plan to bring a similar number of students from elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean to the US.

To the extent that American foreign policy elites worry about the future of the country's power in the context of a rising Asia, they too may see virtue in a wider approach to transatlantic relations in which many of the key partners are in the South. If Americans worry about China as an economic competitor, many Brazilians, and certainly many Mexicans worry as much, and perhaps more. Nor is the concern confined to economics. Observers in Latin America, and Atlantic Africa are beginning to think through the consequences of a future in which China and India are more important actors in the Atlantic, bringing their own set of strategic interests. The economic dimension will acquire greater urgency to the extent that the North Atlantic manages to achieve a comprehensive trade deal over the next few years. Where will Mexico, already part of NAFTA, fit in the TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) equation? Where, indeed, would Brazil and other Southern Atlantic partners fit? Given the immense weight of trade issues in the international policy outlook of major states around the Southern Atlantic – in Brazil it often seems the equivalent of nuclear strategy for Americans in the Cold War years – these are critical open questions.

¹ See Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings (Washington: German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Compagnia di San Paolo, et al., 2013). www.transatlantictrends.org

Energy commerce, and energy security is another key factor. Oil and gas production around the Atlantic already accounts for some 30 percent of global output. The weight of Atlantic energy resources in global trade has grown steadily, driven by the expansion of exports from West Africa, Brazil's emergence as a leading producer – set to grow much further as the country's immense pre-salt reserves are exploited – and North America's own contribution through shale gas and offshore energy production. The extent of this Atlantic energy revolution is just beginning to be felt in the energy security debate. But over time, its effects could be far-reaching, and could combine with voices elsewhere in the American debate to cast doubt on the durability of regional interests long considered immutable, including the role of Middle Eastern energy as a driver of US strategy. As the Syria and Iran debates illustrate, the Middle East is not disappearing from the US radar screen anytime soon, but the lure of the wider Atlantic as a producer of energy security is set to grow, just as disenchantment persists with costly defense responsibilities in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Southern Exposure

Emerging economies on both sides of the Atlantic South, from Brazil and Colombia, to the increasingly dynamic countries of West Africa – likely leaders in what many are describing as “Africa's turn” -- have already captured the attention of policymakers and investors. In Africa, in particular, not all the key partners for economic development will be Western or “Northern.” Brazil is becoming a leading actor in African trade, investment and development assistance, with special expertise in agro-technology and food security policies.

Maritime geopolitics is evolving in ways that will reinforce the place of the Atlantic south in global shipping. Much attention has been devoted to the effect of climate change on shipping routes, with increasingly ice-free passage in the high latitudes opening up previously inaccessible routes such as the Northwest Passage, and even more dramatically, the so-called Northern Route across the Arctic.² But shipping routes to the south are also acquiring new significance, driven by new maritime infrastructure. The expansion of the Panama Canal, to be completed in 2015, will permit the passage of much larger post-Panamax vessels, and the development of new container ports oriented toward transshipment from Asia to North American and European markets. All of this will pull trade routes southward. Countries as diverse as the Bahamas and Morocco are anticipating this trend with the construction of new port facilities. Growth in West Africa could drive further development along these lines over the next decade.

These positive facets of the expansion of maritime commerce southward are, unfortunately, accompanied by a parallel of illegal trafficking across the Atlantic south of the Tropic of Cancer. A growing percentage of the Latin American drugs entering the European market, are now shipped via West Africa and the Sahel. This pattern of

² Even with expanded access to sea routes in the high North, and growing traffic into and out of the Arctic, it is worth noting that some leading industry observers remains skeptical about the viability of these routes for high-volume transit between Asia and the Atlantic. Formidable navigational obstacles remain, especially for container transport where volume and predictability are essential.

trafficking is, in turn, encouraging a parallel trade in light arms, fueling criminality, political violence and terrorism from the Gulf of Guinea to Mauritania. There may also be a connection between these trends and the crisis in Mali, with all its regional ramifications. The connections between security in the wider Atlantic and stability in other settings are growing, and will compel increasing attention on a global basis.

The Atlantic is a Moveable Feast

As wider Atlantic challenges and opportunities expand, new patterns of cooperation are likely to emerge. Despite a few enduring political and territorial disputes (e.g., US-Venezuela, US-Cuba, the Falklands), the southern Atlantic benefits from the absence of large-scale, existential conflicts. Major geopolitical rivalries in South America have essentially disappeared. The security issues affecting the Atlantic south are largely non-traditional problems affecting economic and human security, and the environment. Only in the area of maritime security is there something like a conventional set of security challenges requiring traditional naval and coast guard assets, and cooperation.

This is not a geopolitical space that lends itself to the simple enlargement of existing collective security institutions. Certainly, NATO will have a hard time engaging major southern Atlantic partners, above all, Brazil. There is simply too much Cold War era baggage to be overcome, even as the Alliance revamps its image and purpose, and Brasilia explores a larger international role. Moreover, the grand strategic questions in the southern Atlantic have more to do with the future of global trade and competitiveness, technology transfer, and human mobility. This suggests that future patterns of cooperation in the Atlantic basin as a whole could be led to a notable extent by non-governmental actors, in the private sector and civil society. Existing transnational communities offer a strong starting point. In the security realm, on maritime issues in particular, there will be a need for new forms of cooperation that cut across traditional regional lines. The American (and European) contribution to this is likely to be especially important in surveillance – making the maritime space transparent for policymakers. Given this, it is particularly unfortunate that recent frictions over American surveillance and spying hold the potential to impede cooperation on many fronts around the wider Atlantic, from TTIP negotiations to bilateral security cooperation.

Finally, to the extent that American and other leaders look southward, with an Atlantic vision, there may be opportunities to develop more effective partnerships with countries of obvious importance, but where a more comprehensive approach to relation has proven difficult. Brazil is one example. Mexico is another. An American Administration that takes up comprehensive immigration reform will also need a more comprehensive strategy for relations with this vital southern neighbor. Mexico and the US share Atlantic interests, and this could prove a useful new geometry for both countries in building a dialogue beyond borders. In policy terms, at least, the Atlantic is a moveable feast.