

Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance

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A GREAT DIVIDE

ONE OF THE MOST striking consequences of the Bush administration's foreign policy tenure has been the collapse of the Atlantic alliance. Long considered America's most important alliance and a benchmark by which a president's foreign policy skill is measured, the U.S.-European relationship has been shaken to its foundations over a series of disputes that culminated in the U.S.-led war in Iraq. To be sure, there have been rows across the Atlantic before: American opposition to the seizure of the Suez Canal by French, British, and Israeli troops in the 1950s; France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command in the 1960s; the battle over Euromissiles in the early 1980s; and the deep acrimony over how to stop war in the Balkans a decade ago. Still, the current rift has been unprecedented in its scope, intensity, and, at times, pettiness.

Several factors make the recent collapse in transatlantic cooperation surprising. The crisis came on the heels of the alliance's renaissance in the 1990s. Following deep initial differences over Bosnia at the start of the decade, the United States and Europe came together to stem the bloodshed in the Balkans in 1995 and again in 1999. Led by Washington, NATO expanded to include central and eastern Europe as part of a broader

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effort to secure a new post-Cold War peace. This initiative was also accompanied by the creation of a new NATO partnership with Russia. As a result, Europe today is more democratic, peaceful, and secure than ever. For the first time in a century, Washington need not worry about a major war on the continent—a testimony to the success in locking in a post-Cold War peace over the last decade.

Moreover, although the Bush administration got off on the wrong foot with Europe during its first year in office over issues such as its spurning of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the International Criminal Court, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, unleashed a powerful wave of support for the United States in Europe. Tragedy had handed Washington an opportunity to start afresh and reinvigorate this relationship. For the first time ever, NATO invoked the defense clause enshrined in Article V of its charter, and U.S. allies offered to join the fight in Afghanistan. But the opportunity was then squandered. Instead, the decision to make Iraq the next target in the war on terrorism—and the manner in which the administration chose to topple Saddam Hussein—led to a spectacular political train wreck across the Atlantic.

Somewhere between Kabul and Baghdad, then, the United States and Europe lost each other. It was not only Paris and Berlin that parted ways with Washington; so did Ankara, a long-standing and loyal ally. And despite President George W. Bush's close friendship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Moscow too failed to come on board. True, thanks to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, a number of old and new allies across Europe did stand by Washington. But many of them did so less because they believed in the administration's approach than because of their enduring commitment to the alliance. In the court of European intellectual and public opinion, Bush lost his case. The administration's behavior helped unleash the largest wave of anti-Americanism in decades.

Toppling Saddam's regime was a legitimate and necessary goal. His removal will make Iraq, the region, and the world a better place, the current chaos afflicting parts of the reconstruction effort notwithstanding. But rarely in American diplomacy has the right goal been pursued so poorly (although, to be fair, Europe also spectacularly botched the crisis). The extraordinary success of the U.S. military

campaign should not overshadow the fact that the political and diplomatic effort to build a broad international coalition was a debacle. Whereas U.S. military prowess may be at an all-time high, Washington's political and moral authority has hit a new low.

A decade ago, the transatlantic relationship was at a similar make-or-break point. Then, too, many commentators proclaimed the alliance's imminent demise. Writing in these pages ("Building a New NATO," September/October 1993), Richard L. Kugler, F. Stephen Larrabee, and I argued that the alliance had to resolve its crisis by recasting itself to meet the challenges of a new era—stopping war in the Balkans, stabilizing central and eastern Europe, and reaching out to Russia—as part of a broader strategy to secure peace in post-Cold War Europe. It had to go out of area or go out of business. Rejected by many at the time as too radical, these ideas subsequently helped create the intellectual foundation for the transatlantic success of the 1990s. Overcoming the current transatlantic rift will require an equally bold rethink. After September 11 and Iraq, the United States and Europe must again heed the wake-up call and coalesce around a new purpose and a new grand strategy, one fit to meet a different set of challenges beyond Europe. If they fail to do so, the greatest alliance in modern history will become increasingly irrelevant.

THE NEW CHALLENGES

MANY A GOOD BOOK will no doubt be written on the reasons for the U.S.-European clash over Iraq. Already one detects two competing explanations, each with very different policy implications. The first attributes the split to a growing asymmetry in power that has been pushing the United States and Europe further apart on a host of issues and has made strategic cooperation across the Atlantic increasingly tenuous. This thesis has been seized on by many in the Bush administration to justify its go-it-alone or, failing that, ad hoc coalition approach. After all, if Americans and Europeans no longer reside on the same planet in terms of strategic outlook, who in their right mind would attempt to sustain a strategic alliance between them? According to this view, Washington should welcome Europe's remarkable success in healing itself but not expect it to be a major strategic partner in the future.

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The alternative view is that although some real differences do exist, this crisis is largely the result of diplomatic ineptness on one or both sides of the Atlantic. It could have been avoided or, at a minimum, managed much better with different leaders pursuing other policies. Rather than perceiving the United States and Europe as strategically incompatible, this view contends that no two parts of the world have more in common or are more integrated. The power gap across the Atlantic is neither new nor unprecedented. For example, it was just as great during the 1950s—a heyday of transatlantic cooperation. The crux of the matter is not power but purpose. History has shown that if the United States and Europe share common goals, European allies welcome American strength and the differences between them can be managed.

It is precisely in this realm that the Bush administration has failed—through its inability to define Washington's purpose in ways that its closest allies could support. Instead, it relied on the mistaken assumption that might makes right and that its allies would fall in line behind a simple assertion of U.S. power. Rather than try to accommodate European concerns as part of building a broader coalition, the administration decided simply to override them. Even those allies who supported the United States complained privately about the paucity of consultation and the ineffectiveness of the administration's diplomacy.

If the alliance is to be rebuilt, the United States and Europe must again define a common strategic purpose centered on meeting the major strategic challenges of the day. Even leaving aside the problems of Asia as largely beyond the horizon of future transatlantic cooperation, there are at least two major strategic challenges much closer to home that cry out for closer transatlantic cooperation. The first is what might be called the new "eastern" agenda and the further consolidation of the Euro-Atlantic community. The historic accomplishment of the 1990s was the inclusion of central and eastern Europe—from the Baltic to the Black Sea—in the West. Western countries must now make a comparable commitment to help transform and to embrace the next set of states lying east of the new borders of NATO and the European Union. The most pressing task is to anchor a democratizing Ukraine to the West. Also urgent is the need to abolish Europe's remaining totalitarian dictatorship in Belarus. And finally, the West must help Russia continue its transformation

into a democratic, modern, and pro-Western strategic partner, a project that remains very much a work in progress.

Also needed is a new strategy vis-à-vis countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The West's success in integrating central and eastern Europe has awakened hopes in some of these countries that they too can move closer to NATO and the EU. These aspirations should be encouraged, not rejected. The West needs a more coherent strategy toward the Black Sea region and those countries lying further eastward around the Caspian. These countries vary widely and have a very long way to go; many may only ever achieve a loose link to the West, rather than full membership in the key Euro-Atlantic institutions. But in a post-September 11 world, the United States can no longer afford to treat these countries as a strategic backwater on Europe's periphery and must instead recognize their growing and critical role in the war on terrorism. As the West becomes more involved on the ground in rebuilding Iraq, the importance of stabilizing and transforming these regions becomes increasingly self-evident. Policies and mechanisms developed over the last decade should be enhanced and implemented through steady cooperation with the EU and NATO. Locking in reform and a pro-Western orientation in these countries is the logical next phase in the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

Extending stability into this part of the world becomes even more crucial when the second fundamental challenge is considered: dealing with the greater Middle East, a region that stretches from northern Africa to the Levant, from the Persian Gulf to Afghanistan. If during the twentieth century, Europe was the region from which some of the greatest threats to international security emanated, today that distinction belongs to the greater Middle East. It is here that one finds the nexus of rising anti-Western ideologies, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It is from this region that the greatest danger to American and European lives is likely to originate—for years, if not decades to come. By almost any measurement, the regimes of this region are failing, as was eloquently described in the recent UN development report compiled by a leading group of Arab scholars. Whereas most of the world is now proceeding into the twenty-first century, too many countries in the greater Middle East are moving backward. And their failures are helping to breed

extremist ideologies, movements, and regimes that now potentially pose a major threat to the West.

To meet this challenge, however, the West needs more than a military campaign plan. It needs an approach that addresses the root causes of these problems by changing the dynamics that produced such monstrous regimes and groups in the first place. Otherwise, the names of the terrorist groups and rogue states might change, but the long-term threat will not. Thus, the West must move beyond a strategy of simply trying to manage a crumbling status quo. Instead, it must actively try to help the region transform itself into a set of societies that can live in peace with one another and that no longer produce ideologies and terrorists who desire to kill in large numbers and who increasingly have access to the technology needed to do so.

What would the building blocks of such a strategy look like in practice? The first would be a common effort to win the peace in Iraq, utilizing Western power and influence to build a more modern, democratic, and just society there. Victory in Iraq must be followed by a renewed effort to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord. In spite of the considerable obstacles, such an accord remains critical not only in its own right, but also as a way of opening the door for broader democratic change in the region by removing an issue that clearly inhibits badly needed domestic changes. It is also critical in terms of Washington's credibility. If the United States is to be seen as a promoter of democracy in the Arab world, it must show that it is committed to peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Such steps need to be matched by a strategy for promoting positive regime change in Iran. Unlike the case of Saddam's Iraq, there is a real chance that such change could come from within. Unfortunately, that could take longer than Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons. The West therefore needs a strategy that prevents Iran from going nuclear and encourages democratic change.

But the promotion of positive regime change cannot be limited to adversaries. Washington should also take a close look at its relationship with countries that might be official allies but are ruled by regimes

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and ideologies that are actually part of the problem. This means candidly rethinking the U.S. relationship with countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Promoting positive transformation within countries that are U.S. allies is a different kind of policy problem, but one that must be taken just as seriously.

Last, but not least, comes the problem of building peace in Afghanistan, along with the need to rethink U.S. trade and development policies across the region to more effectively promote positive democratic change. Progress toward internal change in these countries must be buttressed from the outside by new regional security cooperation. The West must begin to create the foundation for a regional system of norms and rules that draws on the positive traditions of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the broader European experience to promote change and help lock in progress.

Military “hard power” will be critical in meeting these challenges, but the real key will be using “soft power” to help these countries transform themselves. Political preemption in the form of democracy building will be as critical as the capacity for military preemption. Positive change will potentially require decades of sustained engagement—not only with the region but also between the United States and Europe. It is going to necessitate the same kind of close strategic cooperation that eventually won the Cold War.

CLOSING THE GAP

CAN THE UNITED STATES and Europe develop a common strategy to address these challenges? Today Americans and Europeans increasingly recognize that these problems pose the biggest threats to their common interests, but they have differing instincts on how to solve them. But past U.S.-European strategic cooperation worked not because the parties always agreed in advance on what the solution should be, but rather because they managed to bring together different impulses in an overarching framework. In the late 1960s, for example, the alliance adopted a grand strategy based on the Harmel Report—one critical to eventually winning the Cold War. That successful strategy combined elements of offense and defense. NATO used a strong military to deter the Soviet Union, along with détente and engagement

to assist the political transformation of communist countries. Such a policy would now be called regime change by peaceful means.

A similar approach is needed today. In an age when the greatest threats come from terrorists or rogue states armed with WMD, the new front line of defense must be transatlantic homeland security. There are few areas in which the need for transatlantic cooperation is more self-evident or America's own interest in the EU's becoming a strong and coherent actor more obvious. In fact, it is precisely in this area that U.S.-European cooperation has continued largely undisturbed by the Iraq crisis. But much more needs to be done. The EU, for instance, needs to create its own Office of Homeland Security to expand cooperation in this area.

Military capability is the other indispensable component of defense. Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated that the United States and Europe need the capacity to intervene militarily beyond their borders both to deter new threats and to respond to them. They also need competence in long-term peacekeeping to aid in the democratic reconstruction of these countries. Tackling these jobs beyond Europe should be a core new mission of NATO. The Bush administration missed a historic opportunity to lead the alliance into this new era in Afghanistan. Belatedly, it is correcting its mistake by NATO-izing the International Security Assistance Force. NATO should also assume a lead role in providing security in Iraq. And it should look for ways to reach out to other Arab states in the region, drawing on the experience of the Partnership for Peace. Finally, if both parties agree and conditions warrant, NATO should be prepared to help enforce an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.

The gap in military capabilities across the Atlantic must clearly be narrowed. But it need not be the showstopper some critics claim. NATO requires modest expeditionary capabilities, but Europe does not have to replicate America's military prowess. It requires the capacity to intervene, together with the United States, in future coalition operations; to sustain long-term peacekeeping missions; and to act on its own in smaller crises. But the Achilles' heel of the West is not military in nature. At a time when Washington spends more on defense than the rest of the world combined, the West as a whole does not suffer from a lack of military capacity. Instead, the weak link is the

lack of an effective transformation strategy that can help create a democratic political alternative in the Arab world. Europe potentially has as much to offer as the United States when it comes to meeting this challenge. The alliance needs a modern-day equivalent of the Harmel Report for the greater Middle East that combines an effective defense against terrorism and WMD with a political strategy to help transform and democratize the Islamic and Arab world.

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

IF THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE is going to get back on track, the United States and Europe must not only heal the rift over Iraq but also forge a common purpose and a framework for tackling the challenges laid out above. As the stronger partner, Washington must take the initiative to set a new direction and establish a framework that could bring the two sides together. To do so, the Bush administration must change tracks on two key issues.

First, it must return to a policy of treating Europe as a partner of choice when building alliances and make finding transatlantic common ground on the challenges faced a top priority. This means abandoning the hard-line view of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who has sought to maximize American domination by treating Europe and NATO as a toolbox from which Washington can pick and choose in order to build ad hoc “coalitions of the willing” on its own terms. No European ally, including the United Kingdom, will accept this approach as a basis for long-term cooperation. Reversing the policy does not mean that Washington is somehow granting Europeans a veto or too much influence over U.S. policy. The old rule that stipulates one’s influence depends on one’s contribution—political, economic, or military—remains a good guide for the future. Washington must stop treating Europe with disdain and reach out to the “old” continent, recognizing that Europe remains the part of the world with which the United States has the most in common and that can provide the support that most amplifies Washington’s ability to accomplish its objectives.

Second, Washington must reaffirm U.S. support for a strong, unified, and pro-Atlanticist Europe as a matter of self-interest and abandon any notion of pursuing a policy of disaggregation toward the “old”

continent. The Bush administration's approach of increasingly relying on a "coalition of the willing," dependent on the United Kingdom and a small handful of pro-American allies, will fail as a model for the future. Not only will it divide Europe, but it is not sustainable over time—as it threatens to lose Washington the support of those European allies that remain. If Washington wants Europe to assume real responsibility, it must recognize that only a unified Europe can do so in a meaningful way. The United States must therefore settle its differences with France and Germany, the two leading powers on the continent.

But if the United States needs to rethink its approach, so does Europe. Unilateralism is not a monopoly of *les Américains*. The flip side of the Bush administration's go-it-alone approach is French President Jacques Chirac's assertion that the EU, too, must go its own way and act as a counterweight to American power. Such talk is dangerous for the future of the U.S.-European relationship and for European unity and integration as well. If one thing should have become clear amid the transatlantic smog over Iraq, it is that any attempt to build Europe on an anti-American basis is doomed to divide the continent.

A European counterweight policy is also a recipe for strategic divorce from the United States. No American leader of any political persuasion will accept the proposition that the basis for a U.S.-European partnership should be the containment of U.S. ability to act. American power is an opportunity, not a problem. It needs to be harnessed and channeled for the right purposes, not countered. Americans will be among the staunchest promoters of European integration if they believe its purpose is to create a stronger, more unified, and more outward-looking partner, willing and able to join with the United States in tackling new strategic challenges. But Americans will increasingly question and eventually oppose European integration if its *raison d'être* comes to be defined in opposition to Washington.

Europe must also realistically appraise current multilateral institutions. If unilateralism and ad hoc coalitions are not the answer, then neither is Europe's insistence on using the UN when that institution, as currently structured, is obviously not up to the job. There is a real gap today between the scope of the problems and the capacity of existing international institutions to handle them. Pressuring Washington to rely on them anyway is not an adequate answer. Together, both sides

of the Atlantic must find new solutions, either by building new institutions or by radically reforming existing ones and reevaluating the norms on which they are based. For the Bush administration, this means following in its predecessor's footsteps and putting its shoulder to the wheel by insisting on reforms that increase the UN's effectiveness at a time when Washington's responsibilities and burdens around the globe are growing.

Above all, both sides of the Atlantic need to reinstate the network of close consultations that has formed the bedrock of transatlantic cooperation for the past half-century under Republican and Democratic presidents alike. Most worrying in the U.S.-European relationship today is the lack of any systematic and close dialogue on these strategic issues comparable to what was created during the Cold War to deal with the Soviet Union. Rather than being expanded to include these new issues, consultations across the Atlantic have actually been cut back. In part, this is because the Bush administration is frequently so divided it is unable to conduct meaningful discussions on many strategic issues. Whereas in the past Americans would complain of or poke fun at Europe's inability to speak with a single voice, today it is the Europeans who ask whom in Washington they should call to find out what U.S. policy really is. But the diminished dialogue also reflects Washington's downgrading of the relationship and its misguided conviction that the assertion of American power is synonymous with leadership.

To be sure, consultations in and of themselves will not miraculously resolve deeper problems. But it is worth remembering that the consensus achieved during the Cold War did not simply materialize out of thin air. It was built from the ground up. When President Harry Truman and his European and Canadian counterparts created NATO, they did not necessarily have a common view on how to deal with the Soviet threat. But they were smart enough to know that they needed one to confront a common problem—and to order their top aides to come up with it. Over the years, a web of formal and informal consultations was spun to pull together divergent viewpoints and to integrate them into a common strategy. Today, a similar system to generate consensus is needed to meet the toughest challenges of the twenty-first century. There is little doubt that the gap across the Atlantic

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can be narrowed if both sides make a political commitment to do so and throw their best and brightest together in order to stake out new common ground.

Meeting in Washington in the spring of 1999, NATO leaders pledged to recast the transatlantic relationship to make sure it is as good at dealing with the problems of the next 50 years as it was in dealing with those of the last. September 11 has opened eyes in both the United States and Europe to those problems and may have heralded the beginning of a dangerous century. It is clearly desirable for both sides of the Atlantic to coalesce in meeting the challenges of this new era. If major instability erupts in either the region lying between Europe and Russia or in the greater Middle East, both the United States and Europe are likely to be drawn in to deal with it. Their ability to do so successfully will be much greater if they find a way to rebuild their alliance around a common framework and strategy.

There is little doubt that if leaders of the caliber of Truman and his European counterparts existed today, they would be setting a new strategic direction and rebuilding the alliance to meet precisely these challenges. Whether President Bush, Jacques Chirac, and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder are up to the task remains to be seen. Progress may very well require regime change on one or both sides of the Atlantic. One thing, however, is clear: if today's leaders fail to achieve such progress, both the United States and Europe will be worse off. Transatlantic strategic cooperation is one reason why the second half of the twentieth century was so much better than the first. If the United States and Europe can agree on a common strategy to meet the challenges of the new era, the world will be much the better for it. 🌐