


The West adrift?

How North Americans and Europeans need to adjust their transatlantic politics after the crisis

Thesis 1: “Continuity or change” – The “Rift or Drift” of the transatlantic community has been a permanent feature of debates. However, the resilience of NATO as well as of the transatlantic relationship in general have been remarkable. Nonetheless: The end of the Cold War and the onset of globalization have changed the relationship

Looking back, NATO in Cold War times is often described as very much coherent and with a single purpose. This is not true – history often paints a rosy picture. France once went as far as putting an end to the military cooperation in NATO. Many disputes about strategies and weapon systems were extremely fierce in the past. But since the security of some crucially important members like Germany depended on NATO and even more so - on the United States - the European members had to adjust to the will of the hegemon on which their existence depended. In turn, the leading power did not want to “loose” its




partners either and moderated its behaviour. The United States indeed had been the benign hegemon.

NATO had one overarching purpose – the military aim: To keep Russia out of Western Europe. The transatlantic relationship and NATO today are much different from this past. All members are fully independent – not only legally but politically. There is no immediate and single threat by a clearly identified enemy. The number of members has nearly doubled from 15 in the 1980s to 28 today. Capabilities are not matching - neither the systems nor their level of technology. The European weapon systems are not sufficiently adapted to the new challenges. The US considers NATO as a whole no longer primarily as a military means but as a political tool to integrate Eastern Europe's weak democracies or as a tool box for either military help in clearly defined cases or for legitimizing actions by multilateral approach.

Meanwhile, the geopolitical situation has changed completely: Challengers and dangers have multiplied. They are not as clearly defined anymore and they often arise very sudden from various international state and non-state actors.

When we speak of security today, we think of a completely different content in the 21st century compared to the 20th century, when military threats and defence of the territory of member states against aggression by the Soviet Union was the only focus of NATO. Besides terrorism, cyber war, piracy, civil war, failing states etc. new powers are rising and some –




particularly China – try assertively to project power in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

No doubt, NATO or respectively the United States and the EU have to better adjust to the new situation. Adjusting to change instead of continuity is the task.

Thesis 2: Talk about “rift and drift” in transatlantic relations is rooted in overambitious expectations and does not take into account the different structures of the actors involved as well as focuses very much on the Bush Presidency

What went wrong in the first decade of this century? Before we can answer this, we need to consider that both partners differ in some very important aspects. **First**, the United States is a nation state with a coherent – although today often blocked – decision making process. Meanwhile, the singularity of the European Union and its decision making system is hard to understand, even for Europeans. Unfortunately, the United States - a single country highly unwilling to transfer or even share sovereignty - often has a limited understanding of the difficulties of the historic task of transferring sovereignty and uniting Europe. Until today there is no United States of Europe but a European Union constantly absorbed by its internal bargaining processes in respect to further integration. The EU is a construct partially with supranational,




partially with multinational character and with time-consuming mechanisms to find consent or majority between her 27 members.

Second, while Europe was and still is inward-looking, America plays a global role. The EU's interests and responsibilities focus on regions; Europe is not primarily interested in other continents. As such, until today Europe has very much a regional focus (ENP).

Third, no doubt, at whichever historic situation, the EU did not have sufficient mechanisms or instruments to live up to its possibilities. In particular, the Balkan Wars, called the "hour of Europe" by Jacques Poos, then Luxemburg's president of the European Council, could not be ended without decisive US-engagement. The Balkan Wars proved that Europe had not found an appropriate foreign and security policy – a major problem not solved until today. However, the Balkan Wars were thus a catalyst for developing the battle groups and for coordination of weapon pooling.

And **fourth**, Robert Kagan's main point, the military capabilities differ extremely. By default, the readiness to go to war differs just as well. But Robert Kagan turned a blind eye on Europe's historical experience and prudent judgement on military interventions and their consequences on the country itself and the region as a whole. Washington had to learn the hard way that winning war is different from winning peace. It was not alone the



missing military capabilities that turned Europe into Venus and the abundance of weapon systems that turned Washington into Mars.


While in the 1990ies the relationship was – with respect to the dramatic geostrategic change – running mostly smoothly, this has changed during the administration of George W. Bush. At the beginning of the new century both sides had quite different views of how to establish world order. Europeans, first and foremost Germany, were still looking for a peace dividend. The recently re-united Germany was absorbed by its internal problems of unification and the task to find a new role in Europe and the world. The latter is still an ongoing task! Europeans, with the possible exception of Great Britain, saw their primary responsibility in establishing stable democracies in Eastern Europe and in integrating them into the European Union. Reforming and enlarging the European Union was a full time job – twelve new members joined in 2004.

On the other side, Washington saw her European mission completed by democratizing Eastern Europe. The United States expected Europe to unite more quickly and to become a coherent, united partner at the side of the US, living up to her economic and political capacities. The Balkan Wars proved the contrary - a deep disappointment for Washington.



Lured by her enormous military capacity and deeply shocked by its vulnerability to terrorism on its homeland in 2001, Washington started unilaterally on designing the new democratic world order. It was hubris that prevailed in Washington's non-communication with European states or in separating "old" and "new" Europe. It was politically extremely unwise by Germany and France to cut ties on the highest level in 2002/2003 and joining Putin for the sake of demonstrating differences with Washington. Iraq proved to be the deepest rift within the transatlantic relationship ever. Indeed, soon much of Europe was more worried by Washington's reaction to terrorism than by terrorism itself.

In the case of Iraq and even more so in Afghanistan, Washington did not realize that military intervention in very different cultures will hardly be successful in creating stable systems - not to speak of democratic societies. Considering the American military capacity, it is easy to win a war – and extremely hard to win peace. I dare say that the scepticism of some European states concerning the effect of military intervention may not only result from their poor military capacities but also from their own rather bloody history. Indeed, one major difference between the US and the EU members is the latter's preference for soft power tools. The results of the wars of the last decade only deepened European scepticism in military intervention. Astonishingly enough, it was notably Paris and London who later lobbied



unhesitatingly for the Libya mission, while Washington was reluctant to join the mission. By the way, European participation in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as well as in Central Africa proves Kagan's notion of Europe as Venus to be wrong.

Though, trust got lost on both sides due to disappointment over strategies and capabilities, due to diplomatic failure (Schröder / Chirac – Bush / Rumsfeld) but also by not sufficiently incorporating NATO and its members and using NATO as a tool box for a coalition of the willing instead.

Afghanistan and Iraq as well as other urging problems like Iran demonstrate that not only Europe but also the most important global power – the US – cannot be effective and successful without transatlantic cooperation.


Thesis 3: The geostrategic focus of Washington and the economic focus of Europe may have shifted towards Asia but the main economic partners still border the Atlantic. As such, the economy and common values ensure the remarkable resilience of the relationship

Europe has been steadily losing relevance to the United States. Her interest shifted towards the Pacific, as "Pacific President Obama" and Secretary of State Clinton state regularly. The US as



well as the EU look towards China and Asia when talking about markets and economic challenges. Therefore, the EU and the US tend to stand back to back, since they look West and East, respectively. Nevertheless, both sides of the Atlantic are still the most important economic markets for each other. Liberal market economies with clear and reliable legal rules make for safe trade relations. The economies are deeply intertwined by trade and investment. Transpacific trade may outsize transatlantic trade – but only for the reason of intense FDI in the EU or the US. Three times as much is produced by European enterprises in the US or American business in the EU as is traded over the Atlantic. More than 7 million jobs are created by FDI, all together with business following these Foreign Direct Investments about 14 Million jobs are provided, about half of them on each side. American as well as European investment is higher in the Atlantic region than in any Asian country. Any damage to this intertwined market would cause severe harm on both sides of the Atlantic. Of course, there are economic disputes, but the overall situation is stable and conducive to further trade and growth on both sides of the Atlantic.


The economic interdependence can be seen as glue for the transatlantic relationship. But as Charles Kupchan elaborated in his book (How enemies become friends) political relations contribute better to close partnership than economic



interdependence. As they are necessary as well, close political relations are imperative.

The United States has learned that they are not able to deal with the challenges from Afghanistan to the Middle East by themselves alone. This will be even more the case in the future. The new risks and the transition to a world no longer dominated by the US or by the West are a task which Washington can no longer manage on its own – trustful cooperation is imperative. The unipolar moment – if it existed at all – went by much quicker than expected.


Looking at the global stage, there is no other partner whose value system is more similar and whose partnership is more reliable and proven. Who else would fit better? The idea of a G2 – United States and China – vanished promptly. We all know the arguments why the value system East and West of the Atlantic is considered to be different: death penalty, Guantanamo, climate policy, data privacy issues. Although there are differences indeed, both sides of the Atlantic share common values concerning human rights, rule of law, democracy and market economy. Strategic partnership is possible only on the basis of shared common values and the same democratic political system and the same idea of good governance – in short: The conception how human beings should be able to live. Therefore, the United States and the EU are strategic partners. The inflationary use of the term “strategic partnership” just blurs its true meaning of being



able to cooperate closely and trustfully in crises. Therefore, the US and Europe are each other's natural partners. And because the relationship is rooted in common values there are no viable alternatives in sight.

Thesis 4: Not all transatlantic cooperation is easily visible. Political meetings on the highest levels are complemented by a dense net of meetings on lower levels by experts and civil society

The foreign policy monopoly held by the heads of state and government as well as the foreign, defence and trade ministers is no longer existent. The Transatlantic Relations Working Group is responsible for issues concerning EU relations with the USA and Canada. It has built a dense net of cooperation in many policy issues over the Atlantic. Its work covers a broad spectrum of issues ranging from security policy to economics and trade. The group also discusses ongoing political issues on the transatlantic agenda and prepares the annual summits of the EU with the USA and Canada. The number of actors included in task forces and specialized fora has grown substantially. Between 1995 and 2004 their number doubled. This process of mutual transatlantic advising developed from being mostly in the sphere of diplomats and politicians to be more open and include a diverse set of experts. The character of consultations is more informal and




across different levels and hierarchies. Thus, specialized networks sharing a common understanding of their tasks and of cultural norms developed. Therefore, the degree and quality of the relationship cannot be measured by summit meetings alone. Centrifugal forces can be kept at bay because they do not have to rely solely on the “chemistry” of top politicians but on dense networks of experts and civil society.

Thesis 5: The biggest challenge to the cohesion of the West is the domestic situation and the question of governance in the US and the EU

During the last decade, American society and politics have been split in a way not seen before. Partisan polarization has dominated the Obama presidency. The president was not able to provide steady leadership in international relations and to deliver what was promised, neither domestically nor internationally. The economic situation – a deep recession due to the financial crisis of 2008, a so far unknown economic stagnation in the US, lasting high unemployment rates and sky high sovereign debt - weakens the American leadership potential and fosters the popular dissatisfaction with inequality and rampant capitalism.


China not America is the new role model for developing countries. The United States seems to be paralysed even more so by the beginning Presidential campaign. Ironically, Europe’s social system serves as the negative example in the Republican



campaigns while at the same time, the Occupy Wall Street movement accuses the government of backing the financial industry at the cost of the average US voter. Meanwhile, American policy to counter the recession by flooding the financial markets with money and thus deepening the debt crisis is seen in Europe as handwriting on the wall.

But Europe is in no better shape. Greece tumbles towards bankruptcy, other countries' sovereign debt is far too high as well. The EU Commission and the member states fight for the Euro, but it is not sure by now whether Greece or other states will really be able to stay member of the currency union. The highly indebted states fight a vicious circle: austerity policy is enacted to cut the debt while recession and unemployment decrease tax income thus increasing national debt. Legitimacy at the national as well as the European level is impaired. European solidarity of the lending states as well as of the debtor states is strained to the limit. Germany and a few smaller northern states have had a different approach towards competitiveness and financial conduct. However, the European Union is not a single nation state, therefore policies of financial transfers are hardly accepted by those states that underwent hard reforms during the last decade to be in better shape for competition in a globalized world.

The EU is presently completely consummated by the debt crisis in Euro-states. But as so often before, crisis is a catalyst for further




integration: The debt crisis is transforming the political system of the EU deeply – we will soon have a fiscal union in which much of fiscal and economic sovereignty will be transferred and be under the supervision of EU institutions. This can very well mean a new quality of deep European integration. Still, as long as the crisis is not solved – we are facing a new round of challenges by the impatient markets with Spain as a target – the EU is also strained by nationalist movements and fierce debates about the best solution. The key state of the EU, which today is Germany, has a different approach than the debtor states. Germany had a hard time to convince France. Although Merkozy – Merkel and Sarkozy – had teamed up to save the Euro and solve the crisis by debt reduction, Sarkozy has changed his mind a week ago due to his presidential campaign in France. Europe is acting much too slow and too hesitant – the French election campaign will hamper European effectiveness further.

As we can see: the EU does not function as necessary, but who could argue that the individual nation states are doing any better right now?

Thesis 6: Germany's role in the EU is crucial for Europe and for the US - but Germany is still not used to a leadership role

Germany will play a decisive role in Europe and will have to live up to the leadership which Washington expects from Berlin. Often




enough, European states ask Germany to be in the driver's seat - but when Germany does take leadership as in the case of the Euro, opposition will arise promptly by invoking the old clichés of the Third Reich.

The EU members were used to German "check book" policy. But Germany will have neither the means to save the Euro by supporting European deficit spending endlessly, nor will this be accepted by the German Supreme Court, not to speak of the German voters.

Germany still has to get used to her leadership role – misplaced statements demonstrate how uncertain the country still is – politicians and citizens alike. Germany will always have to have a partner in leadership – France – and it will have to practice a hidden hand leadership. While Great Britain is unable to play a substantial role in the EU – except in security policy – Germany will be Washington's partner in the EU – even with all its shortcomings.

Thesis 7: After the crisis sharing global responsibilities is imperative

At present, there is unfortunately simply no room for transatlantic strategic planning for a stable world order. But as power shifts from the West to emerging powers and non-state actors, both sides of the Atlantic must manage the transition together, since



the new structure of the international system entails dangers none of the two can manage alone.


We experience a G20 with most of its member states being democratic - with the exception of Russia and China. Still, we notice at the same time and often to our astonishment that the democratic states of the G20 do not share our western ideas of international order. The new members in global governance institutions or regimes have different priorities and different interests (trade, climate, human rights) and are sceptical concerning intervention – they often enough adhere to the Chinese principle of non-interference. However: We do need these nations to create a safe and stable world order and we do need their constructive contribution. In Asia and in the Muslim world, the United States is often confronted with mistrust and fear of interference. The EU might be better equipped to engage other states with regard to multilateralism and generally accepted rules as a guarantee for peaceful and fruitful cooperation.

Pressure on Iran can only be effective when it is applied coherently by a united West. Europe could serve as mediator in the Middle East or contribute to joint actions concerning arms reduction or elimination of weapons of mass destruction. Talks with China about trade, intellectual property rights and currency should be orchestrated by Europe and the United States together. There are ample possibilities for effective cooperation ...

Conclusion

Although many see the transatlantic relations doomed to be less and less significant, NATO and the transatlantic relationship are a success story: They not only survived but comprise now nearly all European states. And they have worked - albeit not perfectly - but time and again they have proven to be necessary. Only if both sides neglect each others interests, this could change.

In a New York Times article in advance to the 2010 NATO summit, Obama wrote: "Our relationship with our European allies and partners is the cornerstone of our engagement with the world, and a catalyst for global cooperation. With no other region does the United States have such a close alignment of values, interests, capabilities, and goals." And Chancellor Merkel echoed: "Europe and Germany have no better partner than America." Both sides have to live up to this assessment and care for the necessary means and instruments. First they have to put their respective house in order: Europe by solving her crisis, by deeper integration in particular regarding foreign and security policy, as well as more coherence and more efficient defence spending. May I remind you, that the EU member states have more troops under their (separate) national commands than the United States. The United States in turn needs to restore her solvency and bridge her domestic cleavages to able to continue to exert leadership in



the 21st century – with Europe at her side for common policies in global decision-making.

[Unfortunately it will take another major crisis of security policy until EU member states will have the guts to jump into a truly joint foreign and security policy].