US–European relations: past and future

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The closest of America's postwar alliances has been with the west Europeans. This closeness was shaped during and immediately after the Second World War. Both the United States and the Soviet Union undertook, each in its own way, to restore a continent that had been overrun by Nazi Germany and found itself in dire condition in 1945. Moreover, already during the war and even more in the period that immediately followed it, the United States found that it had to supplement Britain's waning power in a decisive way. Reading the correspondence between President Roosevelt and Sir Winston Churchill is quite edifying in this respect. In the postwar situation, the United States was indispensable for Europe's economic reconstruction, a challenge it handled with considerable skill, in particular by insisting on cooperation among the west Europeans. Above all, the United States undertook to protect western Europe from the looming Soviet peril and, in order to do so, it accepted the need to draft and to participate in an Atlantic alliance treaty that clearly represented one of those foreign entanglements against which America's founding fathers had warned the fledgling nation. Out of that treaty came the organization of NATO. It never eliminated the divergences among its members: over decolonization, over German rearmament and, a little later, over detente, over the Vietnam War and, as far as US–French relations were concerned, over the degree of military integration France was willing to accept. Despite all those difficulties, the alliance fulfilled its function; it was not seriously damaged by General de Gaulle's decision to withdraw France from the integrated military structures of the alliance, especially as he was keeping his forces in Germany, and as he remained an ally of the United States in the North Atlantic Treaty itself. In the 1980s NATO survived one more crisis, this time over the deployment of American missiles in Germany.

Despite some gloomy predictions, after 1991 the alliance, having lost its main enemy, nevertheless survived. It was useful to both the United States and the west Europeans as a kind of reassurance policy in case of difficulties with Russia.

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It survived also because it became a tool for the management of relations between its members, on the one hand, and the newly liberated central and east European countries and Russia, on the other. Then, also in the 1990s, the alliance had to face a real problem of civil war within the disintegrating Yugoslavia. Divisions of course continued, especially over the Yugoslav wars, but the European members, despite their original preference for an arrangement that would have made eastern Europe and Russia partners but not members of NATO, more or less grudgingly accepted the American plan for NATO expansion, especially as it was managed in a way that took into account Russian susceptibilities. Another contentious issue was that of the European Union's 'military ambitions'—the desire of some of its members to increase the military capabilities of the EU, so that the latter would cease being primarily an economic and monetary enterprise.

The remarkable thing is that, from crisis to crisis, the alliance survived and found ways, if not of pleasing everyone, at least of keeping very diverse countries together. In a sense, the 'Atlantic community' rested on two myths. One was the absence of any necessary conflict between European integration and the Atlantic community—a myth that served both to help contain de Gaulle's ambitions for a generally autonomous 'European Europe' and to reassure Atlanticists on both sides of the ocean that European integration could be seen as a subset of the Atlantic community. The second myth was that Europe remained, for the United States, the most crucial diplomatic and strategic theatre, one with which the US was linked not only by vital economic and security interests, but also by a common culture and common values.

In retrospect the 1990s appear as a somewhat amorphous transition period. The Atlantic alliance had played a quite remarkable role during the Gulf War of 1990–1, since this time the alliance functioned far from Europe without any major dissent even from France, which had been the most keen to limit the scope of NATO to Europe and the Mediterranean. British and French forces played a significant role in that first Gulf War. The defeat of Saddam Hussein led in Washington and elsewhere to dreams of reviving the original conception of the United Nations, the 'new world order' mentioned several times by the first President Bush. The original UN was intended to be dominated by a Security Council which had to make all the important decisions in matters of war and threats of war, and whose resolutions could be, under Chapter 7, actual commands; and of course, Roosevelt's dream had been one in which the five permanent powers on the Security Council (or rather the 'Big Four' plus France, on Britain's insistence) would be in effect the arbiters of war and peace. However, this was not to be. The UN never managed to acquire the forces and the military structure that the Charter had envisaged and, in economic matters, antagonisms between the developing countries and the richer ones made discussions far more contentious than they had ever been expected to be. With the end of the first Gulf War the Atlantic allies found themselves, with some relief, in a world in which no major enemy could dictate their common diplomatic and strategic agenda.

NATO then became a field for US–European relations. These encompassed rivalry and cooperation. Rivalry dominated the approaches to eastern Europe. The Europeans wanted, or perhaps rather felt that they could not prevent, the eventual entry of central and east European states into the European Union. (Mitterrand had made a first attempt at such a policy in 1991, but the scheme presented at a meeting in Prague invited the newly liberated countries to become members of a confederation because they were not ripe for full membership—and it was a confederation in which Russia would participate but not the United States. It turned into a resounding fiasco.) However, since the EU was still primarily an economic operation, the host of economic differences between the two halves of Europe, and the fact that membership of the EU required the adoption by the new applicants of an enormous mass of EU regulations that had been accumulating over the years, meant that accession could not be easy or fast. This allowed the United States to extend the protection of NATO to several central and east European countries quite swiftly, and deftly enough not to antagonize President Yeltsin. In this respect the US won the race with the west Europeans. Cooperation prevailed in the Balkan crisis, at least after 1995, when NATO played a considerable role in the military intervention against Yugoslavia and provided the necessary legitimacy to the war against Milosevic in defence of the inhabitants of Kosovo. Meanwhile, the sum of difficulties the Europeans had encountered with the Americans in the Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts, and the evidence provided by these conflicts of the huge technological gap between the military establishments of the United States and the European nations, led to a greater desire on the part of the latter to reinforce military cooperation among themselves. When Tony Blair, at St-Malo in 1998, decided to follow this trend, even though Britain had usually been much more protective of NATO's military pre-eminence, it looked like a major shift. In fact it was probably both an indication of Britain's need to assure the continental Europeans of its desire for full participation despite the British refusal to accept the euro at that time, and also a way of making sure that the renewed strategic cooperation within the EU would not go so far as to make it an emancipated rival to NATO.

At this point President George W. Bush was elected, in rather extraordinary circumstances. At first, during the election campaign, he said very little about America's foreign policy, except that under his leadership it would be 'humble', and there would be a return to the wise precepts of realism, which meant coping only with threats to the national interest of the United States; in other words, there would be no altruistic nation-building (as Condoleezza Rice once put it, it was not the mission of American soldiers to escort children in Kosovo to their schools) and no deep involvement in hopeless situations (which meant, as one realized quite quickly, after the Clinton fiasco at Camp David, no continuing entanglement in the Palestinian–Israeli tragedy).

The real turning point came, of course, on September 11, 2001. It is still difficult to evaluate fully the violence and depth of the shock experienced on

that day by a country that had never in recent times experienced war and heavy casualties on its own soil. Two years later, the citizens' anxiety and preoccupation with security remain as great as immediately after the terrorist attack. September 11 provided a whole new rationale for President Bush's foreign policy, and for his domestic policy as well. He declared a global war against terrorism, without much consideration for the arguments of those who, like Sir Michael Howard and Jacques Chirac, warned him that the fight against terrorism was something quite different from a war among states, not only because seeing the former as analogous to the latter gave one the illusion of a possible and decisive victory, but also because the methods needed in a war against terrorist gangs required essentially police methods and police cooperation rather than the mobilization of armies.

Whereas the containment rationale that had prevailed from 1947 until the fall of the Soviet Union had turned out to be quite effective, on the whole, as a national doctrine capable of rallying allies abroad, the new American rationale proved to be quite divisive. The Europeans were more than willing to participate in a fight against Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, but they did not see this issue as the central problem in international relations. Other issues, such as the conflicts in the Near East or in the Far East or over Kashmir; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; the economic issues of world disease and poverty (so often mentioned by Tony Blair); the environmental problems of the earth—all these were seen as at least as perilous for world stability and for the future. In so far as the US president's presentation of this new war suggested a heavy emphasis on the use of force, the Europeans were suspicious, given their growing aversion to the militarization of international relations.

As for the United States, it became quickly apparent that the war on terrorism was an exceedingly big tent indeed. On this change of priorities was grafted a whole new approach to international relations. It amounted to a rejection of the restraints so long accepted by American diplomacy on American independence. The new doctrinaires were above all 'sovereignists' and had made explicit and effective their hostility to a variety of treaties, ranging from the comprehensive test ban treaty and the ABM treaty to the Kyoto Protocol on the environment and above all to the International Criminal Court, on which the United States practically declared war as if it were a terrorist organization, with sanctions attached against allies that dared to support the court.

This comprehensive new approach meant not only a rehabilitation of the national interest over more international interests, but an extension of the national interest to threats in the whole world, going as far as imposing some restrictions on the very globalization of which the United States had been and remains a champion, for instance through restrictions on students and foreigners travelling to the United States, and implying a much tougher attitude in economic negotiations. It meant also war against countries that harboured, equipped and supported terrorist gangs; this led of course to the invasion of Afghanistan, endorsed immediately by the other NATO members because the

behaviour of the Taleban in sheltering and helping Al-Qaeda seemed to provide the United States and its allies with a perfect case on grounds of self-defence.

Next, it meant the replacement of the prudent policies of containment, aimed above all at preventing war, with an embrace of preventive war, seen as necessary not only against terrorists, who were indeed difficult if not impossible to deter, but also against rogue states hostile to the United States, eager to build arsenals of weapons of mass destruction, and linked to terrorism. Above all, it meant an enthusiastic embrace of unipolarity and unilateralism. The new attitude towards members of the United Nations (President Bush kept referring to the United States *and* the United Nations, as if the US were not a very important member of the organization) was one of suspicion, and America's own allies were told that if one was not on America's side, one was against it. What this meant, especially in the eyes of the neoconservatives who were in control of the Pentagon and of the vice-president's office, was that institutions—even alliances—that did not fully support the United States in its war on terrorism would be sidelined and replaced with 'coalitions of the willing': ad hoc groupings, case by case, for which these institutions would serve as a kind of pond from which the US could pick out those fish that could be, so to speak, drafted for the coalition. It was up to the United States to pick and choose its clients, just as it was up to the United States to pick, in the mass of international norms and agreements, those which it deemed necessary to maintain international order.

This was not the only extension of the fight against terrorists. Then came Iraq, which had been a sore point among members of the Bush administration for many years. Many of them who had been in or around the administration of Bush the father had been very bitter about the decision made by him and his main advisers not to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime at the end of the first Gulf War, and not to come to the rescue of the Shi'is and Kurds who had revolted and been massacred by Saddam's remaining forces. Dick Cheney, who was then the Secretary of Defense, and had seemingly gone along with this, obviously had belated second thoughts. As for Colin Powell, who as head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had vigorously pushed for an early end to the war, arguing that nothing would be worse than engaging the American army in civil conflicts in Iraq, he was consequently viewed with great suspicion by his rivals in the current administration. The whole strategy of Iraq's enemies in Washington consisted in their persuading the president that Iraq deserved to be made a test case in the war on terrorism because of its weapons of mass destruction, which Saddam could not but possess, especially after the UN inspectors withdrew from Iraq in 1998, and because of possible links to terrorist organizations. Moreover, many of the 'neoconservatives' who were anything but conservative had developed a radical dream of using a war against Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as a lever to change the whole complexion of the Middle East. The idea was to push for democracy in states that did not have it, and to use this threat of democratization as a way of putting pressure on several of America's

old Arab allies whose attitudes towards terrorism were highly ambivalent, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. One of the benefits this grand operation would have, in the eyes of many of its advocates, was to establish moderate governments in the Arab world, willing to accept a settlement of the Palestinian issue more favourable to Israel than anything Arab states had accepted before. The president gradually came to endorse this conception and the battle between the more moderate State Department and the neoconservatives was in effect settled. It continued over issues of procedure in which Colin Powell, in his preference for obtaining UN legitimation for an assault on Iraq, had the full support of Tony Blair.

I will not go into details of the period of UN bargaining from September 2002 to March 2003, but will look briefly at the first effects of the victory of the American and British forces. Swift victory with low US casualties raised President Bush's popularity to new heights; this popularity had already been bolstered by the American public's acceptance of the president's main arguments concerning the threat to world and American security represented by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, and the horrors of Saddam Hussein's regime, and they had also swallowed whole the very dubious argument about the connection between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Al-Qaeda (particularly concerning the hijackers of planes on September 11, not one of whom, in fact, was an Iraqi). It is quite remarkable that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction did not deeply affect the president's standing in the eyes of the American public and that, unlike in Britain, no thorough investigation arose of the intelligence that had been provided to the government and of the possible degree to which members of the administration might have 'sexed up' these reports. If one remembers that the main reasons given for refusing to extend the UN inspections were the bad Iraqi climate in the summer and therefore the need to act very quickly against such dangers, one realizes that the administration had never been serious about letting the UN inspectors persist in their tasks, nor even about the possibility of subordinating an invasion to a clear-cut resolution by the Security Council.

Europe was badly split by this whole episode. The US was successful in obtaining the approval of a number of governments from the present EU and from the countries that had asked for, and obtained, an admission date in 2004. The result was not only a division between what that great phrasemaker Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld had called the old and the new Europe, but also a split between all of the publics in continental Europe, east and west, and several of their governments. While the EU was split, NATO was sidelined. The slightly absurd clash over an alleged Turkish request for military aid in case of an attack from Saddam Hussein—a request which was not presented by the new Turkish government itself—made it clear that it would be difficult for the United States to obtain unanimity within NATO and, just as the offer of NATO's services for Afghanistan had been rejected in 2001, the United States left it aside in the case of Iraq. The United Kingdom found itself in a most uncomfortable position, having inspired at least one of the two letters of support of European governments to

the United States, and rather unfairly put all the blame for the failure to obtain a second resolution at the UN on the French. In other words, the casualties were international institutions.

One interesting aspect of American foreign policy in the current administration has been the rise of US dogmatism as compared with European empiricism. Most European governments have made it clear that not all terrorists, hideous as their methods are, can be lumped together. Their grievances have many different causes, their targets have very different ranges; some of the causes of terrorism are religious, others are intensely secular and parochial; and declaring a global war on terrorism risks both fomenting more terrorists and creating an unholy alliance between very different types of terrorism. In particular, if the eradication of terrorism is made the priority in world affairs, a solution of the Palestinian problem, or indeed of the Kashmir problem, is likely to remain elusive. Even though President Bush, under pressure from Tony Blair, other European countries and Colin Powell, returned (so to speak) to the Palestinian conflict by drafting his 'road map', the priority he accorded to the dismantling of Palestinian terrorist organizations—which would mean a civil war among Palestinians—contributes to reducing the gains one may expect from that initiative. It has seemed for a while that US diplomacy has fallen into the hands of rather gleeful neo-imperialists, who believe in diplomacy by threat and hope for the crumbling under such threat of the hostile policies or even the regimes of countries such as Syria or Iran or North Korea. The price that has had to be paid so far has been a precipitous decline in the prestige of the United States, which seems to have abandoned the practice of what Joseph Nye has called 'soft power', for a policy that relies primarily on force and the threat of force.

However, the battle is not quite over. The difficulties encountered by the United States in Iraq, due in large part to an astonishing lack of adequate preparation for the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's collapse, have not yet turned American public opinion against the war itself, but they have nevertheless awakened many anxieties. Rising casualties and rising costs are worrying the public and even more the members of Congress, already disturbed by the huge deficit that has resulted in part from George W. Bush's tax cuts. It is therefore not surprising that this turn of events has somehow strengthened the rather weak position of Colin Powell and the State Department and persuaded the president that, given the choices available in Iraq, the least risky was an appeal to more countries, including more European countries, to send forces to supplement the so-called coalition. At the time of writing negotiations go on, between, on the one hand, Americans still rather bound by the evident reluctance of the neoconservatives, and of the president himself, to appear to be eating humble pie and to endorse a transfer of supreme authority (if not military command, which nobody has actually suggested) to the UN, and, on the other, a number of governments, including those of France and Germany, that had been hostile

to the American-led assault and do not perhaps see why they should contribute forces and money to a war that had been waged rather deliberately against the wishes of the UN. To American legislators and pundits it may seem that sharing losses and costs is the right thing to do for America's allies and potential partners, but why it should appear to them in this light is not a question one often finds discussed in Washington.

What is striking is the absence of any attempt, even in these somewhat difficult moments for the administration, to return to the old institutional game: to go to NATO and to an EU which is in the middle of an institutional reform aimed at, among other things, reforming its foreign and defence policy. Nor has Tony Blair made much of an effort at restoring bridges blown up between the UK on the one hand and France and Germany on the other (the EU has figured in none of his recent speeches). While the embarrassments of Iraq may have curtailed the ambitions of those who had already been talking about exporting the same kind of strategy to countries such as Iran and Syria (or even North Korea, which the administration has, somewhat reluctantly, chosen to approach in a more multilateral way), it is not at all clear at this point how deeply the Iraq adventure will affect the tone and substance of American foreign policy and in particular its relations with Europe. Here we are still in limbo; the one thing it may be possible to predict with some degree of confidence is that the central importance of Europe for the United States will remain under a cloud. Many people in Washington, and not only among the neoconservatives, see in the prospect of a Europe with greater defence ambitions a pipe-dream, a waste of money and a source of irritation, and in the economic and monetary strength of Europe a potential threat to American economic predominance. The days of relative harmony have not returned.