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**REINVENTING
TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS**
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REINVENTING TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

For more than a decade after the collapse of communism, transatlantic relations were considered to be in much better shape than they actually were. Beneath the surface of diplomacy and public speeches, tremendous changes were going on in the transatlantic relationship unobserved by most specialists both in the United States and in Europe.

Perhaps not quite unexpectedly, the debate over the war in Iraq made these changes suddenly visible. While the “war after the war in Iraq” is still being fought with uncertain prospects as to how to win peace and stability, one certainly would agree with David Frum’s assessment of the long-term effects of this war. President Bush’s former speechwriter, who is said to have coined the phrase “axis of evil,” plainly stated during the first stage of the war on Iraq that, “The critics of the war against Saddam have been right about one thing: this war will overthrow and transform the status quo in the Middle East. But there is another status quo that is also being overthrown and transformed—the status quo of the transatlantic relationship between America and Europe.”¹ He is obviously right. And transatlantic relations will never be what they used to be in our political perceptions and in public opinion.

For many “core Atlanticists,” developments in transatlantic relations appeared like a bad dream. But perhaps this metaphor helps us better understand what is really going on. Just imagine walking through an early summer night. The air is pleasantly warm and fresh, and the birds are still singing. It is already dark, so you can’t really see much except for the shadowed outlines of the landscape, but you can feel the peace around you while walking on in a most relaxed mood, enjoying the warm night after a long, cold winter. But out of the blue—as it sometimes happens in nights like this—lightning strikes. And, for a second, you can see the seemingly peaceful landscape as it really is: dangerous pitfalls ahead, deep slopes all around, and rocks blocking your way. And then you realize that even those paths that you know so well are suddenly full of thorny weeds.

Dreams about the “summer night” landscape of international relations were struck down by the lightning of 9/11. The Cold War is over, but the post-Cold War world is still far from having established a new and reliable order. Risks have not diminished; instead, they have grown and changed in nature. New challenges still await satisfying answers. And many of those who have dedicated their careers to transatlantic relations find themselves with scratches and bruises on their hands and faces.

What has happened to transatlantic relations? Where are we today and where will we go from here? What challenges must be met in order to reinvent a basis for functioning relations across the North Atlantic as a prerequisite for international order and cooperation?

While the “shock and awe” that struck many observers is slowly abating, the rush to write op-eds and policy papers and a new boom of attempts at “talking” transatlantic relations back into shape is impressive.

The traditional debate is based on three assumptions: Transatlantic relations are as important for the future of peace, stability, and welfare as they were in the past fifty-odd years. They are based on a set of common values and interests. And with the first (and

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, March 24, 2003.

probably easier) part of the war in Iraq over, it will be possible to repair them by bringing diplomacy back in.

The debate itself is stretched over a remarkably broad spectrum of competing positions. While Europeans continually stress the importance of transatlantic values as the most important basis for future cooperation, some of their American counterparts—especially those described as neo-conservatives—hold shockingly different positions. In *The Weekly Standard* of May 5, Max Boot writes, “A centralized E.U. will be an Atlanticist’s nightmare, for it will give clout to France, Germany, and their lapdog Belgium over those nations that are more sympathetic to America. For too long, Washington has looked benignly on European integration; we should awaken to the potential danger before a Brussels bureaucracy robs us of our remaining allies on the continent.”

It is exactly positions like this that make a European’s blood boil. But Europeans will have to realize that American strategists and pundits are asking different and more challenging questions than just how to best bring back transatlantic relations to what we all think they should be. What are these questions? And what are the possible future prospects for transatlantic relations?

A closer look at the real picture leads us to a very simple view: The transatlantic partnership is under serious strain. The United States and major European countries are having more and more disagreements on common threats and, above all, on the necessary strategies to deal with them.

The list of disagreements is obviously long: economic disputes relating to steel and farm subsidies; limits on legal cooperation because of the death penalty in the United States; repeated charges of U.S. “unilateralism” over actions in Afghanistan; and U.S. decisions on the ABM Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and the Biological Weapons Protocol. There are other disagreements as well. There is no agreement over what to do about Iraq or other state sponsors of terrorism, or on the crisis in the Middle East. European critics have continuously complained about U.S. unilateralism, which seems to range between isolationism and preemption, and decades-old doubts about the utility of NATO in the post-Cold War world have been revived. One could conclude that there is today a serious question as to whether Europe and the United States are parting ways.

Things sound even more worrisome in the academic debate.

Charles Krauthammer says NATO is dead as a military alliance due to the huge disparity in power between the U.S. and Europe. Jeffrey Gedmin, known as a committed Atlanticist, recently penned an op-ed entitled, “The Alliance is Doomed”—doomed mainly because of what he calls the European “obsession” with chaining down the Americans. Former Secretary of Defense and long-time NATO stalwart James Schlesinger complained vociferously about European attitudes in a recent *Financial Times* piece, questioning whether we have a common agenda anymore. And, in a very thought-provoking article called “Power and Weakness” in the journal *Policy Review*, Robert Kagan concluded that, because of our different military capabilities and philosophies towards power, the United States and Europe no longer share a common view of the world; and that

this is not a temporary phenomenon. These are serious people making serious charges. They reflect some deep divisions in European and American perspectives—divisions that I believe must be addressed in a forthright manner.²

The consequences are obvious, but also unpleasant:

1. The present crisis in transatlantic relations will not simply blow over as the dust over the Iraq crisis settles. Although the basics of cooperation are still there despite the frictions between top-level administrations, this situation may change in due course.
2. The United States under the Bush administration is pushing for international hegemony, led by a vision of leadership and preemption and relying mainly on U.S. military power.
3. Traditional security aspects in transatlantic relations will continue to lose importance. The Soviet threat against Europe is gone, and no comparable threat is to be expected in the foreseeable future. The United States and Europe share a common vulnerability to terrorist attacks, but even U.S. military capabilities are neither sufficient nor suited to prevent that danger. You simply cannot fight terrorism with armies.
4. The United States is strong in military terms, but in major aspects of international relations it is more dependent than ever on its allies—mainly from Europe—and on their respective “soft power” skills.
5. The European states no longer will be obedient followers. Thus, tensions and competition in transatlantic relations are likely to grow. After all, Europe is much stronger, influential, and potentially more successful than many present commentators acknowledge.

A theoretical perspective may help us better understand what really happened to transatlantic relations. The long-term debate between different schools of international relations will probably never end because it is such fun to indulge in these debates. As far as effects for policy issues and practical politics are concerned, the conclusion is obvious—all of them have their benefits and weaknesses depending on situation, place, and time.

What we learn from an idealistic perspective is that cooperation is possible whenever it opens up the options of solving problems at lower costs for all actors involved. This is, however, only true as long as all of the actors abide by the principles of cooperation. As the war on Iraq shows, when one powerful actor decides to bypass institutional arrangements preferred by most other actors, these institutions are rendered irrelevant as a factor in the resolution of a specific problem.

This is where realism comes back in. Despite all of the debates about the increasing importance of non-state actors, the effects of globalization, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT), states still are—and will remain—important actors,

² John Kyl, “The Future of Transatlantic Relations,” Heritage Lecture 756, August 6, 2002. See <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/hl756.cfm>, 4.6.2003

especially when they, like the United States, find themselves in a position of unchallenged dominance after the end of the Cold War.

Political scientists have spent a lot of energy over the last decades analyzing the motives, requisites, and effects of institutionalized international cooperation. Theories of international regimes have contributed to a better understanding of how and why states cooperate in an anarchic international environment. When looking for the necessary preconditions for functioning international cooperation, regime theory informs us that we have to look at four different levels: values, norms, principles, and procedures.

Applying this approach to the present state of transatlantic relations leads to a somewhat different picture. On the first level, common values—democracy, liberty, human rights, free trade, etc.—have been discussed again and again. It is easy to find common ground on the highest levels of abstraction. We do accept that we share many of the same values: the Wilsonian triad of democracy, liberty, and market economy, but also the rule of law, democratic self-determination, and human rights as individual rights rather than collective rights. As Philip Gordon informs us, “... Americans and Europeans broadly share the same democratic, liberal aspirations for their societies and for the rest of the world. They have common interests in an open international trading and communications system, ready access to world energy supplies, halting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, preventing humanitarian tragedies, and containing a small group of dangerous states that do not respect human rights and are hostile to these common Western values and interests.”³

Wonderfully written, and most European politicians do applaud—if only because such rhetoric prevents them from asking the really intriguing questions. In their speeches to American audiences over the last months, all European politicians (and many scholars, as well) have deliberately pointed to the importance of this aspect of cooperation which is most obvious, but not really helpful when it comes to everyday work.

But even on this most general level of cooperation there are signs of disagreement when it comes to basic assessments of change versus stability. A major difference between the United States and Europe seems to be that for the United States, solving problems is much more important, while the Europeans pay more attention to due process. In the end, even “coalitions of the willing” would be acceptable to many Europeans if procedural legitimacy were given by the United Nations.

Things get worse when we move down to the more pragmatic levels of cooperation. Do we still agree on such norms as sovereignty or alliances? The debate on the war in Iraq clearly underlined the fundamentally different approaches of the United States and Europe. First of all, leadership needs followers. Since the attacks of 9/11, the aim of American diplomacy was not to balance interests, or create real coalitions. The aim has been leadership based on a coalition of followers, a policy that may work as long as others want to follow American leadership. The very moment they stop doing so, the United States tries to either buy their support or avoid institutions that might offer resistance. U.S. behaviour in the UN is a striking example. To be sure, American military hegemony is undisputed. There is no other nation in the world right now that could equal the United States in military terms. But politically, the wheeling and dealing for a second

³ Philip H. Gordon 2003, “Bridging the Atlantic Divide.” In: *Foreign Affairs*, January/ February, 74-75.

UN resolution on Iraq made it more than clear—the power of multilateral cooperation even against a hegemon is impressive, although in the end it may not be able to prevent unilateral military action. Economically, the United States is not able to get any resolution on trade regulation without paying attention to a very strong form of multilateral balancing by other actors.

And—one more level down—do we still agree on accepting (majority) decisions in the United Nations? We obviously do not, as long as an American administration does not want to be tied down by other countries (especially by close allies) when it comes to real or perceived dangers to American security. But a majority of European countries do not agree with Bush's approach to preemption.

Pre-emption, the doctrine made famous last year in Mr. Bush's national security strategy, gives countries the right to strike a nation that is about to strike them. Iraq, most experts say, does not fit the definition, unless Mr. Bush can prove it is handing off weapons of mass destruction to terrorists. So far, he has talked about that prospect, but offered no evidence it is happening. A preventive war is conducted by a powerful state against a potential enemy that it fears could become powerful some day. That seems to fit the current circumstance, though administration officials do not like to talk about it in those terms, because preventive war has not been judged kindly by history."⁴

Nor is it being judged kindly by some of the United States' major partners in Europe—and the events following the end of major military action in Iraq seem to prove them right.

No wonder then that, on a procedural level, it becomes clear that the rift in transatlantic relations is much deeper than many thought possible. We do not agree on how best to fight terrorism. Should it be done with a strategy based mainly on military strength, or with strategies allowing for the European experience that one cannot succeed in fighting the political, economic, and social roots of terrorism with military strength alone? And how powerful, after all, is multilateral weakness? Philip Gordon reminds us that acting “on the false premise that Washington does not need allies—or that it will find more reliable or more important ones elsewhere—could ultimately cost the United States the support and cooperation of those most likely to be useful to it in an increasingly dangerous world.”⁵ A *Boston Globe* commentator adds that, “Allies are more important than ever in a world reordered by the end of the Cold War and the emergence of rogue nations and individuals equipped with terrible weapons. The United States may not need the French, the Russians, the Mexicans, and the rest to forcibly disarm Saddam, but it will need international partners to fight the continuing war on terrorism and other unknown enemies to come.”⁶

From the perspective of regime theory, one has to argue that transatlantic relations as they were in the past have lost much common ground, at least for the time being. There is, therefore, no way simply to rebuild relations as they were. While “shock and awe” as

⁴ *The New York Times*, March 17, 2003, A 10.

⁵ loc.cit., p. 72

⁶ *The Boston Globe*, March 14, 2003, p. A 18

an immediate reaction is abating, it is time to reinvent the basis for our future cooperation. While Europe will be much stronger than many neo-conservative strategists in the United States seem to believe at the moment, it is necessary to reconstruct transatlantic relations and place them on a new and solid foundation; otherwise, growing competition might, in the end, lead to growing irritations, attempts at mutual constraint, and, finally, to the danger of a transatlantic rift reflecting a “soft containment” of U.S. power.

While transatlantic debates over the last decades seem to have been concentrated too much on core aspects of the transatlantic relationship, changes in international relations will now force us to broaden the perspective of our cooperation. The message, then, is simple at first sight. While there is no successful strategy of rebuilding transatlantic relations with a top-down approach, the necessity to choose an approach for reinventing them from the bottom-up is obvious. In other words, as NATO has already done, transatlantic relations on all levels of cooperation will have to go “out of area.”

For the time being, terrorism seems to be the major threat. But the roots of terrorism are in those regions of the world that will pose major challenges for a functioning transatlantic partnership in the future. How to deal with “disconnected countries” will be the test case for any attempt at reinventing the transatlantic partnership. Thomas Barnett of the U.S. Naval War College reminds us of the real danger and true fault line in international relations after the end of the Cold War.

Show me where globalization is thick with network connectivity, financial transactions, liberal media flows, and collective security, and I will show you regions featuring stable governments, rising standards of living, and more deaths by suicide than murder. ... But show me where globalization is thinning or just plain absent, and I will show you regions plagued by politically repressive regimes, widespread poverty and disease, routine mass murder and—most important—the chronic conflicts that incubate the next generation of global terrorists.”⁷

Reinventing transatlantic relations bottom-up, first and foremost, means to come to agreement on how to deal with these challenges. Dialogues on Asia, especially on China and security in Asia Pacific, but also on Iran, North Korea, on failing and disconnected states, on the origins of and strategies against terrorism will be increasingly important for a common understanding of successful approaches to dangers ahead. Going out of area and moving up step by step on the four levels of cooperation described above will be paramount to the future of transatlantic relations.

The incentives for cooperation may be further increased by a final and potentially more important observation. In a geopolitical perspective, Henry Kissinger correctly points to the fact that in different regions of the world different principles of international relations are still at work. In transatlantic relations, it has been a solid and well-established multilateralism based on more or less idealist assumptions. Between major powers in Asia it has always been a realist balance of power, in the Middle East it has been and remains a pre-Westphalian series of conflicts based on ideology and religion,

⁷ Thomas P.M. Barnett, “The Pentagon’s New Map. It explains why we’re going to war, and why we’ll keep going to war.” In: *Esquire*, March 2003.

while Africa, a continent forgotten after the end of the Cold War, does not fall into any of these categories. The African continent instead offers pre-medieval types of ethnic and tribal conflicts that might, like in the case of Rwanda, spill over into an international crisis. This crisis may come sooner rather than later—and transatlantic cooperation should be prepared for it.

CONCLUSION

1. The danger that competition and conflicts across the Atlantic are growing and may well result in a policy of “soft containment” against the U.S. military superpower may not be underestimated. The only alternative, it appears, is that we not only agree to disagree but, above all, that we start reinventing transatlantic relations based on a bottom-up strategy of mutual collaboration.
2. There is no way of simply rebuilding or repairing transatlantic relations. There is also no way to repair them by pointing to common values and experiences. Instead of assuming that talking to one another about transatlantic relations will improve them, the United States and Europe must act together and, on a very pragmatic level, coordinate out-of-area activities that address the challenges we face.
3. After all, it’s still the economy, stupids! Europe is stronger than many American neo-cons think—nation-building, FDI, management of transitions, peacekeeping, monitoring, giving legitimacy to multilateral actions—it is here that Europeans are strong, and it is this strength the United States will need to transform easily won military victories into lasting successes.
4. There is no need to be pessimistic: Transatlantic relations will be different but not necessarily less important or less efficient in the future.

And since it seems impossible to write about transatlantic relations without referring to Robert Kagan’s pun on Mars and Venus, here is a little bit of optimism for good old Europe. In classical mythology, Venus always wins over Mars. It’s only in the arms of Venus that (literally) bloody Mars, coming home in the evening after a long day of fighting, finds consolation and peace. If mythology is our guide, then optimism is justified. The United States is only strong as long as Europe is willing and able to provide the soft skill of balancing the effects of military action. By offering indispensable support in order to prevent U.S. imperial over-stretch, Europe is stronger than many observers seem to believe.