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The Atlantic Alliance in Crisis

THOMAS RISSE

The transatlantic relationship is in a deep crisis, despite patching-up efforts since the Iraq War. Although some have attributed this crisis to structural changes in world politics—the end of the cold war, unprecedented American preponderance, 9-11 and the rise of transnational terrorism—a more focused view finds the source of current conflicts in domestic political developments on both sides of the Atlantic. These developments have led to different perceptions of contemporary security threats and, more important, different prescriptions on how to handle them. Such differences have existed before, and they have been managed through various institutions of the transatlantic community. There is little to suggest that these channels of mutual influence no longer work. This is the good news.

The bad news is that unilateral and even imperial tendencies in contemporary US foreign policy and particularly in its official discourse violate constitutive norms on which the transatlantic security community has been built over the years, namely multilateralism and close consultation among allies. Building “coalitions of the willing” to deal with world problems rather than relying on enduring alliances has become the official talk in Washington. The more that US foreign policy emphasizes unilateralism, the more that it renounces international agreements and institutions that the United States itself has helped to build, then the more it touches upon—and threatens to erode—fundamental principles of world order and the rule of law in dealing with international conflicts. These principles have been part of the post-World War II Western consensus. In this sense, current disagreements between Europe and the United States go beyond ordinary policy conflicts and touch issues of common values.

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It is no longer possible to paper over the differences in joint communiqués and attractive photo opportunities. What is needed is a new transatlantic bargain that includes a European response to the challenges of the Bush administration. A European countervision is already expressed through practice—from European efforts in conflict prevention and peacekeeping to European support for the International Criminal Court and multilateral efforts at dealing with global environmental challenges. But the neoconservative discourse emanating from Washington also requires an articulated European response, an alternative vision of world order based on the rule of law and liberal principles.

A European countervision of world order does not have to wreck the transatlantic security community. The rhetoric of building a counterweight to American hyperpower, emanating today from politicians and intellectuals in parts of “old Europe,” is bound to fail, since it splits Europe itself further apart in foreign policy. Instead, efforts to develop a common European foreign policy and a European “grand strategy” should revive a serious transatlantic dialogue and re-create the transnational alliances across the Atlantic among like-minded groups that seem to have been silenced after 9-11.

A LIBERAL SECURITY COMMUNITY

The United States and Europe form what can be called a “security community.” Inside a stable security community, behavior will not be regarded as threatening that might be perceived as highly dangerous and requiring a response if it came from states outside the community. The United States, for example, has never been concerned about British and French nuclear weapons, even though theoretically they could inflict heavy damage on the US mainland. Europeans and Japanese might strongly disagree with America’s decision to go to war against Iraq and its attempt to change the Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense Treaty, as well as its failure to ratify the

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, to sign the international treaty banning land mines, and to join the regime against climate change. They might feel annoyed by American unilateralism. But none of this is seen as a military security threat to the other democratic powers in the international system. None of it should provoke balancing behavior or the construction of counteralliances.

Three mutually reinforcing factors account for the democratic peace in the contemporary security community of major powers. One is collective identity—that is, a shared sense of belonging together. Another is economic interdependence among societies, creating substantial interests in each other's well-being. Third is the existence of robust institutions to manage the relationship and support social order and enduring norms among the community's members.

These factors—identity, interdependence, and institutions—also can serve as indicators for the state of the transatlantic security community, helping to provide a precise picture of the current situation. While collective identification among members of the community may have declined slightly in 2002 and 2003, the basic common values and shared principles are still intact. In the wider world, European and North American societies have more in common than any other societies in the world. Transatlantic economic interdependence remains equally strong.

The current challenges to the security community mainly concern its institutions and the constitutive norms on which they are based. Conflict has arisen over the unilateralist trend in US foreign policy. To understand the sources of this conflict, we need to look at the domestic politics of the countries that comprise the community.

THE NEOCONSERVATIVE MOMENT

The current tensions in the transatlantic security relationship are reminiscent of those that tested relations during the first administration of President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s. Just as George W. Bush is widely perceived as a unilateralist president in Europe, Reagan was seen as abandoning nuclear arms control in a similar fashion. Yet the similarities run deeper than perceptions in public opinion. Most important, US foreign policy today is controlled, as it was two decades ago, by a domestic coalition whose worldviews differ sub-

stantially from those of Europe's major foreign policy coalitions.

Three competing groups dominate the Bush administration's foreign policy making, and they hold worldviews strikingly similar to those of the prevailing and equally competing domestic coalitions during Reagan's first term. During the early 1980s, a neoconservative group that hated détente and arms control and despised the “wimpish” European allies was largely in control of the Pentagon. Some members of this group, such as Richard Perle, now have roles formally or informally in the current Bush administration. Now, as then, this group consists of devoted militant internationalists who prefer American unilateralism over entangling alliances.

During the early 1980s, neoconservatives were convinced that arms control had to be abandoned in favor of arms racing in order to ruin the Soviet economy and thereby win the cold war. Twenty years later, this group believes in the “unipolar moment” as a unique opportunity to re-create international order following an American design. Their “imperial ambition,” as John Ikenberry calls it, is prepared

to accommodate temporary alliances, but they fundamentally reject stable partnerships—such as the transatlantic community—as too inhibiting to suit US interests. In other words, the neoconservatives reject the principles on which the security community between the United States and Europe was built. They are anti-European to the degree that they consider the transatlantic alliance as largely superfluous and a constraint on American foreign policy.

There are in fact two versions of neoconservative thinking that compete today in US foreign policy. Both factions include unilateralist and aggressive internationalists. Both are prepared to use American power offensively when they see national interests at stake. But they differ in how they view the world and which values they seek to promote. One group, among them Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, sees the world in Hobbesian terms, as a “dog eat dog” universe. They are aggressive realists who believe in a US role as world policeman to keep order in an anarchic international system.

The other group of neoconservative hawks is prepared to use US power not just to counter threats but to promote liberal values and to construct a

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world system based on liberal democracies, universal human rights, and American-style capitalism. Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is among the most prominent representatives of this group, aptly described by Pierre Hassner as “Wilsonians in boots.” In this group’s view, the purpose of American power in the world is to spread democracy and capitalism. US power is to be used aggressively for a liberal world order, including support for regime change in “rogue states” such as Iraq. The two groups of unilateralist neoconservatives constitute what can be called the “Pentagon party” in the current US administration.

THE OLD SCHOOL

Balancing the neoconservative factions both politically and bureaucratically is a third, more traditional conservative group that played a role in the early Reagan as well as the current administration. Officials such as Richard Burt, Paul Nitze, and George Shultz in the early 1980s, President George H. W. Bush’s foreign policy team of the late 1980s, and Secretary of State Colin Powell in the current Bush administration see the world in more moderate, realist terms. While they certainly share liberal values, they are not Wilsonians in the sense of wanting to create a liberal world order. They resent the “imperial ambition” of the unilateralists and are convinced that the United States cannot go it alone—even in a unipolar system. This group also remains skeptical of the nation-building ambitions that the neoconservatives’ liberal visions imply. Today, as well as 20 years ago, this group has remained committed to the transatlantic security community. With a little help from their European friends, the traditional conservatives succeeded in gradually moving Reagan toward the resumption of nuclear arms control. They also succeeded in encouraging George W. Bush to seek support for his Iraq policy from the United Nations.

From the beginning of the Bush administration, a tug-of-war between the neoconservatives and the traditional conservatives—between the “Pentagon party” and the “State Department party”—has characterized the foreign policy decision-making process in Washington. The president himself was not known initially for favoring the liberal vision of the neoconservatives. He did embrace unilateralism—indeed, his administration abandoned most efforts to

seek multilateral solutions for the world’s most urgent problems. Then came 9-11. The attack against the US homeland by transnational terrorism, and the understandable shock and sense of vulnerability it generated among Americans, had profound consequences for the domestic balance of power in US foreign policy. It opened a window of opportunity for ambitious neoconservative policy entrepreneurs such as Wolfowitz. As a result, the domestic balance changed in favor of the neoconservative group whose vision, including “Wilsonianism in boots,” was increasingly shared by the president.

The September 2002 presidential National Security Strategy, as well as the administration’s focus on Iraq, constituted expressions of the new domestic balance of power in Washington. Nevertheless, both examples also show that neoconservative unilateralists had to make concessions to the traditional conservatives and their allies in Congress and in Europe.

The National Security Strategy expresses a liberal vision of world politics: “Finally, the United States will use this moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe. We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world.” Reflecting neoconservative views, it commits the United States to preemptive if not preventive warfare against terrorism and “rogue states” with weapons of mass destruction; to unilateralism “when our interests and unique responsibilities require”; and to military superiority “to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”

But the document also expresses America’s continuing commitment to NATO, the European Union, and other allies. It commits the United States to active engagement in regional crises and to a substantial increase in foreign aid. Finally and significantly, it commits America to a multilateral and liberal international economic order. This latter point is often overlooked in Europe, but it is of utmost importance for the future of world order. The much-criticized National Security Strategy in fact represents a policy compromise between neoconservative unilateralists and traditional conservatives in the Bush administration.

As for Iraq, the postwar disaster in that country has already led to a strengthening of the “State

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Department party” in the Bush administration and a weakening of the “Pentagon party,” which is held largely responsible for the shortcomings of US policy. As a result, the Bush administration is gradually moving back toward the political center in the United States and toward the mainstream pragmatism of the American public. This, of course, makes life easier for Europeans who have to deal with the United States. But one should not overlook that the dominant foreign policy elite coalitions in Europe differ substantially from their American counterparts—and this includes the Democrats.

EUROPE'S CAMPS

The three dominant coalitions that are in charge of not only the EU's foreign policy but also the most important member states' foreign policies have a different cast from the factions within the Bush administration's foreign policy team.

The first group could be called “liberal internationalists.” It is often overlooked that the European center-left shares with American “liberal” neoconservatives a commitment to the promotion of democracy and human rights as their foreign policy priorities. In sharp contrast to the right in the United States (and like liberal Democrats), however, this European group is equally firmly committed to a cooperative foreign policy and to working with and through multilateral institutions. This group (currently in charge of German foreign policy, for example) pursues the foreign policy of a “civilian power.” It shares a Kantian vision of world order in the true sense of the “perpetual peace”—that is, building a pacific federation of democratic states and strengthening the rule of law in international affairs. European Kantians are not pacifists; they support the use of military force if necessary, as can be seen in German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's stance on Kosovo and Afghanistan. Yet military power, they believe, has to be embedded in political and diplomatic efforts. Unilateralism is anathema for the European center-left.

A second group among Europe's foreign policy elites holds a more realist view of the world than either the American neoconservatives or the European center-left. Since this group thinks primarily in realist “balance of power” terms, it is concerned about the growth of US power and promotes a European foreign policy of balancing and building a counterweight to American primacy. One could call this group the “European Gaullists.” The rhetoric of the French political elites exemplifies this vision. Their mantra is to build a multipolar world in con-

trast to a unipolar one dominated by US “hyperpower.” Oddly enough, the Franco-German anti-Iraq War coalition brought together the European center-left and the European Gaullists. Both were concerned about American unilateralism. But the center-left was primarily opposed to the use of force for liberal purposes (“regime change”), while the Gaullists opposed the war because of concerns over US “hyperpower.”

The third group within Europe's foreign policy elites occupies a position similar to that of traditional American conservatives. This faction—call it “European Atlanticists”—remains strongly committed to preserving the transatlantic partnership almost no matter what. Exemplified by British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government, it formed the core of the European “coalition of the willing” during the Iraq War, and is strongly motivated to avoid policy disagreements with Washington that could weaken the transatlantic community.

DIVIDING LINES

The core of current transatlantic disagreements within the security community does not concern value commitments such as the goals of promoting democracy or human rights. When it comes to the question of whether foreign policy should primarily promote liberal values or serve strategic and economic interests, European elites are as much divided among themselves as Americans are. Despite their different positions on the Iraq War, however, Europeans are overwhelmingly in favor of multilateralism and cooperative foreign policies, while the neoconservatives in Washington are unilateralists. Thus, the main dividing line between the United States and Europe concerns the commitment to multilateral norms that undergird the transatlantic security community. This is obvious if one compares the Bush administration's National Security Strategy with the strategy document adopted by the European Council in December 2003. For all its talk about “preventive engagement,” the EU security strategy remains firmly committed to international law and multilateralism.

It is also obvious that the two opposing camps in Europe that emerged during the Iraq crisis—“new” versus “old” Europe—constitute anything but stable foreign policy coalitions. German foreign policy is unlikely to buy into French “European Gaullism” for a long time. And it remains unclear whether the new Eastern European EU members will line up permanently with Britain and its “special relationship” with the United States. As a result, neither European

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Gaullism nor European Atlanticism of the old kind can form the basis of a foreign policy consensus.

THE EUROPEAN PARADOX

What policy consequences follow from this assessment of the transatlantic conflict, particularly for European responses to America's "imperial ambitions?" Building Europe as a counterweight to US power is not feasible in practical terms. Moreover, a European consensus—including the United Kingdom as well as the new EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe—cannot be built around this goal. Bandwagoning—that is, aligning with America almost no matter what—is not an option, either. It would betray core principles of the Europeans' worldview based on multilateralism and respect for international law when dealing with US unilateralist tendencies. Thus, a European paradox presents itself. Europe and the EU need to speak out with one voice to be listened to in Washington. Yet a European foreign policy will fail and split Europe further apart if it is constructed as a counter-hegemonic project.

Fortunately, there is a way out. The traditional European reaction to American unilateralist impulses remains valid even today. In the past, Europeans have usually responded to transatlantic conflicts by strengthening transatlantic institutional ties rather than counterbalancing. They have used America's open domestic political system for their purposes by successfully forming transnational and transgovernmental coalitions across the Atlantic to increase their leverage on US foreign policy. There is no compelling reason why this strategy—which worked well during the first Reagan administration with a similar domestic configuration of forces—cannot be successfully employed today. The natural allies of Europeans inside the administration and Congress are the moderate conservatives who care about the transatlantic community. Moreover, European foreign policy can exploit the fact that American public opinion continues to hold views much closer to European outlooks than to those of the neoconservatives inside and outside the administration.

It is important that European voices be heard loud and clear in Washington. While European governments should pick carefully their conflicts with the US administration and cannot fight simultaneously on all fronts, the Bush administration's National Security Strategy warrants a common European response. It could be argued that the response already exists in practice—in an emerging European

foreign policy that focuses on human rights, democracy, and multilateralism. But European practice has to be complemented by a European foreign policy discourse, of which the recently articulated “European Security Strategy” is only a start. The goal of such discourse is not to weaken institutional ties in the transatlantic community, but to strengthen similar voices inside the United States.

A TRANSATLANTIC BARGAIN

A European foreign policy strategy needs to tackle the conflicts over world order and worldviews that constitute the root causes of the transatlantic policy disagreements. This would include a clear expression of a liberal vision of world order based on the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and the market economy. A failure to recognize that Western foreign policy is first and foremost about promoting liberal values would be disastrous. Equally disastrous would be to leave the articulation of liberal visions to American neoconservatives. In particular, a European response to the neoconservatives’ political agenda of promoting democracy in the Middle East is required—a strategy that rejects democracy promotion by force and focuses on strengthening civil societies in the Arab world.

Also needed is a clear European expression of unambiguous commitment to multilateralism and the rule of international law. This is the characteristic feature and trademark of contemporary European foreign policy, which distinguishes it from some of the ideas articulated in the US National Security Strategy. A liberal vision of world order cannot be promoted unilaterally without being inherently contradictory. If it is a constitutive norm for domestic liberal orders that no one—not even the most powerful—is above the law, then this must be true as well for a world order based on democratic principles.

Within this framework, Europe has to articulate a clear strategy for dealing with new security threats, such as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the hands of dictators and the dangers emanating from transnational terrorism. Transnational terrorist networks and WMD are real threats to liberal societies that require not just political but also military answers. In this respect, a proposed transatlantic division of labor—the United States as the military fighting force and world’s policeman, Europe as the main provider of state- and nation-building (“The United States does dinner, and

Europe does the dishes”)—is not sustainable. It would be a grievous error to let the use of military force be dictated by American unilateralists. This is particularly true if one rejects the idea of preventive war in the absence of a clear and present danger. We need a serious transatlantic debate, not on preventive war, but on preventive action to stem the double dangers of WMD and transnational terrorism. The new EU foreign policy strategy, which promotes “an international order based on effective multilateralism,” marks a step in the right direction.

In short, a new transatlantic bargain is required if the US-European security alliance is to meet the world’s most threatening challenges collectively and effectively. Such a bargain requires a firm American commitment to the transatlantic community and a rejection of “the mission creates the coalition” policy and rhetoric. Europeans for their part must put their money where their mouths are—that is, make sure that their preference for multilateralism cannot be read as indifference to the world’s pressing security problems. ■

A Current History Snapshot . . .



“The moral energy of nations, like that of individuals, can only be sustained by some ideal superior to themselves, stronger than they are, to which they can cling with a strong grip when they feel their courage vacillate. Where lies the ideal of contemporary Germany? The time has passed when her philosophers proclaimed the inviolability of justice, the eminent dignity of the person (the individual?), the obligation laid upon nations to respect one another. Germany militarized by Prussia has thrust far from her those noble ideas which came to her formerly for the most part from the France of the eighteenth century and the Revolution. She has made for herself a new soul, or rather, she has docilely accepted that which Bismarck has given her[:] . . . ‘Might makes right.’”

“The Vital Energies of France”
Current History, December 1914
 Henri Bergson