U.S.-EUROPEAN RELATIONS AFTER IRAQ

An American Perspective

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U.S.-European relations hit a dramatic and highly visible low point in the weeks leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. With the exception of the British government, which was, of course, supportive of the enterprise, many long-time U.S. allies – including, most prominently, France and Germany – were openly hostile to the American action. Relations have recovered, to a degree at least on an official level, but disagreements persist and resentments fester on both sides of the Atlantic four years after the onset of the war.

Is the damage that has been inflicted on the relationship irreparable in some sense? Or, as on so many other occasions since the establishment of the trans-Atlantic partnership at the mid-point of the last century, is the current unpleasantness likely to prove transitory? While the arrows point in both directions, the evidence continues to mount that the tensions so much in evidence between the two sides over the course of the last half-decade or so transcend disputes over particular issues. If this is true – which I believe it is – then our differences over Iraq are a reflection of something much deeper that is underway within the relationship, and not, in and of themselves, the cause – or even a cause – of the problem.

The real issue, it seems to me, is not whether relations between the United States and Europe can be repaired. Within limits, they can and will be. The more interesting – and important – question is whether the very nature of the relationship has changed (and is continuing to change) and if so,
how, why, and with what implications for the future?

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Let’s begin at the beginning—or nearly so. The twin drivers of what came to be known by the early 1950s as “Atlanticism,” or the emergence of a trans-Atlantic community, were strategic necessity and mutual economic interest. The United States was determined to resist the further encroachment of Soviet power, broadly defined, into the heart of Europe and to ensure vibrant markets for its good and services. The Europeans west of the great dividing line needed American power to provide reassurance, to buttress their security, and to lend a helping hand to revive their shattered economies. U.S. and European interests were for the most part congruent, therefore, and remained that way for nearly 50 years. It took an external shock that few had anticipated—the sudden implosion of the Soviet Union—first to alter and then to disrupt the fundamental geopolitical architecture of the post-World War II Euro-Atlantic community.

That the disappearance of the Soviet Union should have perturbed U.S.-European relations is an outcome that American social scientists would term “over-determined.” With the Soviet menace a thing of the past, we needed one another less in 1992 than we did in 1952 or 1962 (or even 1982, for that matter). Throughout much of the 1990s, policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to keep their policy differences in check—be they over Bosnia, Kosovo or GMOs—and for the most part they succeeded.

We tend to forget in 2007 just how hard U.S. and European leaders worked to smooth over tensions that threatened to break into the open. On Bosnia, the case I know best, the outcome that ultimately obtained was but a distant hope in the first half of the 1990s, when the Americans and the Europeans effectively fiddled while Bosnia burned—and then blamed one another for the catastrophe. It was the same early on regarding Kosovo; the French, remember, were less than enthusiastic about going to war against Serbia in order to induce Milosevic to halt his campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Kosovar Albanians. President Clinton, while determined to stop Milosevic, was reluctant to commit ground troops for fear that the American people would object.

These examples notwithstanding, it is now our collective memory that the 1990s were a reasonably good decade for the trans-Atlantic relationship, especially given what has transpired since. The truth, however, is that the signs of estrangement were everywhere—if only one had the courage to confront the truth.

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The coming to power of the Bush administration in 2001 constituted an important pivot point in the trans-Atlantic relationship, although its significance was lost or at least obscured at the outset by Bush campaign rhetoric about the need to pursue a “humble” foreign policy and to focus U.S. diplomatic energies on “getting the big-power relationships right,” which included, of course, relations with our major European allies. As it turned out, it was the other theme that candidate Bush touched on in 2000 –the willingness to use military power in defense of U.S. interests without excessive regard for the expressed preferences of others –that would reveal in time just how wide the gap between the United States and Europe had become.

Where did this impulse originate? It is as old as the American republic itself, stemming from the circumstances surrounding the country’s founding and birth. It is what historians of the United States refer to as “American exceptionalism,” or the conviction on the part of many in the U.S., including the country’s leaders, that there is something unique about the American experience. Among its many other manifestations, this “exceptionalism” means, for some at least, that the United States is not obligated to play by the rules in world affairs –because the process that gave rise to their formulation was itself corrupt, a product of the Old versus the New World.

Also known, misleadingly, as isolationism, this American tendency to go it alone internationally is nothing new. It is, in fact, the dominant strain in the 200-plus year history of U.S. foreign policy, a fact obscured by the roughly 50 years of manifest internationalism practiced by every U.S. president from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton.

When, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, George Bush offered up the absolutist claim that “Anyone who isn’t with us is against us” in what his administration termed the “Global War on Terrorism,” he was harkening back to this deep and powerful current in U.S. diplomacy, a current that elevates the freedom to act in defense of the Republic –essentially without limits –above all other principles of statecraft. He was not, in other words, departing radically from the American diplomatic playbook; he was, rather, drawing his inspiration from an earlier chapter, one that resonates deeply, by the way, with many Americans.

And what of the European side of the equation? From this American’s perspective, it seems that there were two tendencies at work in the 1990s on this side of the Atlantic that spelled trouble for the continued health and durability of the trans-Atlantic partnership. The first is what I would term Europe’s preoccupation with its own attempt at state building, albeit a “state” of a wholly new kind, and without many of the attributes of a “normal” country.

This intra-European struggle to define the parameters of the European Union –to determine its ultimate depth as well as its breadth –has drawn attention away from the management of
relations with other actors in the international system, including the United States—and rightly so, in my judgment. The time available to policymakers to think about issues and to make decisions is not infinitely expandable, a reality that sometimes escapes even seasoned observers of international affairs. Priorities have to be established and decisions have to be made. When there are more challenges to be met than there is time to meet them, something’s got to give. Increasingly over the course of the last 10 years, that “something” has been relations with the United States.

The second tendency, which derives from the first, is the gradual emergence of a set of norms within much of Europe (especially within what former U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld referred to disparagingly as “the Old Europe”) about the role and use of power in the international sphere. It is the reverse of the American enthusiasm (until lately, that is) for the early and unilateral application of force. Sometimes characterized as the European Way, it essentially privileges diplomatic and economic engagement (or disengagement, as the case may be) over the threat or actual use of force.

Just as many in Europe recoil from the tendency of the Americans, especially in recent years, to shoot from the hip—almost literally—when confronted by alleged enemies, many in the United States shake their heads in disbelief when European political leaders counsel patience and engagement when dealing with dictators, tyrants and intractable regimes of one kind or another. There is, indeed, a thriving cottage industry in the United States that focuses on how vast our differences have become in this context. Even among sober-minded analysts in the United States, the temptation has been to sum up this contrast in approach as “Americans are from Mars; Europeans are from Venus,” or even more unfairly in my judgment as “America fights the wars and Europe does the dishes.”

My point in rehearsing this history is not to take sides in this ultimately silly debate but to draw attention to it as an expression—perhaps the most visible expression—of an underlying realignment of relations between the United States and Europe that has come about first and foremost as a consequence of the collapse of Soviet power. It is a process, by the way, that has affected—and is continuing to affect—geopolitical relationships around the world. To borrow from the geologists, the tectonic plates have shifted in world politics and only now are we beginning to understand what that means.

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In an exquisite irony of history, the attacks of 9/11 initially disguised this fact. Everyone in this room will remember the post-attack headline in Le Monde, which read, “We are all Americans.” Well, it turns out that we’re not all Americans, if being an American means a propensity to engage in wars of prevention—that is, to take military action to deal with threats before such threats are
fully mature.

For policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic, this is why the war in Iraq has been so poisonous in its impact on the relationship. Our understanding of how best to resolve the ongoing confrontation between the West and the regime of Saddam Hussein could hardly have been more different in the months leading up to the war. Recall that on the eve of hostilities, some 70 percent of those polled in the United States supported the use of force to eliminate the Iraqi dictator and his Baath Party supporters. In Europe, the percentage favoring the military option never exceeded 30 percent (with the exception of the United Kingdom, where the number was closer to 50 percent).

Moreover, it is important not to confuse the current dissatisfaction of the American people with the conduct of the war in Iraq with the underlying sentiments in the U.S. about the utility of force in combating the threat posed by terrorism around the world. Overwhelmingly, Americans continue to believe that taking preventive military action in order to lower the odds of a repeat of 9/11 is not only legitimate, but in fact incumbent upon any American president, whose first and most important obligation is to provide for the physical security of the American people.

Americans and Europeans not only differ over how to deal most effectively with threats to international peace and security, they also define those threats in very different ways. Rightly or wrongly most people in the United States have internalized the core message of this administration when it comes to dealing with the terrorist threat, in particular: Waiting to be struck again before doing all in our power to defeat those who would do us harm is no longer an option, if, to paraphrase Secretary Rice, waiting to find a smoking gun before we act might eventuate in a mushroom cloud over one of our cities.

Bear in mind, it was this charge, above all others —namely, that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, had used them on his own people, and could supply them to terrorists—that animated the American people to support the removal of the Iraqi regime by force. (For the purpose of this presentation, I am less interested in speculating on why and how we got it so wrong on this issue than I am in making the point that Americans understood the argument the administration was making and supported the war in overwhelming numbers.)

Try as they might, most Europeans simply do not see the threat of terrorism in these terms. And even those who do, do not subscribe to the view that the best way to neutralize the threat is by the seemingly wanton application of military force. Better to conceive of the problem as essentially criminal in nature, European officials tell their U.S. counterparts. The implication is clear: Rely on practices and techniques used to suppress such activities the world over, including the sharing of intelligence and the pooling of resources in order to carry out more targeted and discrete operations that will yield the desired results without the killing of tens of thousands of innocents. The U.S. response to this suggestion is telling: We tried that. It didn’t work. We’re in a
race against time. We'll do whatever it takes—including collapsing countries—to prevent the next round of attacks.

Just how profound have our differences become over these and related issues? A January 2007 BBC poll revealed that 74 percent of Germans surveyed agreed with the proposition that U.S. influence in the world is mostly negative. Sixty-nine percent of those polled in France felt the same way, as did 59 percent of Russians who were asked.

Even in those parts of Europe where the U.S. has enjoyed much greater popular support, the numbers are striking. In 2005, sixty-two percent of Poles said U.S. power had mostly positive consequences; a year later, that number had fallen to 38 percent. Doubtless, particular policies that the current U.S. administration has pursued, including but not limited to the Iraq war, have contributed to the decline in America’s standing in Europe (and elsewhere). The Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the detention of hundreds of so-called “enemy combatants” at Guantanamo effectively without legal protection, and the practice of “extraordinary rendition” have only made matters worse.

The overall effect of these and other developments has been to transform a kind of latent anti-Americanism that has been quite visibly on the rise since the end of the Cold War into a quasi-permanent feature of Europe’s political discourse.

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If I am correct in my analysis—that our differences over how best to contain the threat posed by terrorist organizations inspired by calls for a global jihad against the West reflect fundamental differences over how we see the world—it follows that papering over those differences in the interest of preserving trans-Atlantic amity are doomed to fail. They could even make matters worse by leading to misunderstandings whose consequences could be profound. So, what to do?

Let me close my remarks today by offering up five recommendations for the management and development of U.S.-European relations after Iraq.

First, we should start by admitting to ourselves that the relationship has changed, profoundly and irrevocably, as a consequence, first and foremost, of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and that efforts to restore the status quo ante will inevitably end in failure.
It is essential in this context that each side avoid the temptation to assign blame for the changed circumstances we now confront. Whether change is a good thing or a bad thing depends on what we make of it. Beginning with the explicit recognition that we cannot go back in time is an excellent starting point in talking about the future shape of the relationship.

Second, we should be explicit about the assumptions that guide our respective strategies for how best to contend with the global challenges we face, including the problem of catastrophic terrorism. The purpose in doing so is not primarily to change one another’s minds, although we should not rule out that possibility. It is, rather, to enable us to move beyond what amount to caricatures of one another’s positions.

There is a logic, informed by a core set of beliefs, convictions and arguments, that animates current U.S. policies toward terrorism. The same is true, of course, for the views expressed by European officials and analysts. It is incumbent on all of us to comprehend, to the very best of our abilities, why each side thinks as it does about these critically important issues rather than dismissing the other point of view out-of-hand.

Third, we should use the American experience in Iraq to reduce the likelihood of a repeat performance. Even the president now admits that he and his administration made mistakes in Iraq. Unwittingly, perhaps, in so doing he has created the political space to allow for reflection on what went wrong –both in going to war against Iraq and in the conduct of the war itself –and how to prevent a recurrence. Pinpointing where, exactly, U.S. and European assessments on the eve of war differed –and why –could lead to learning on both sides.

This assumes that policymakers and those who advise them are both able and willing to learn. I worry more about the second part of the challenge than I do the first, as it is often impossible for those who bear responsibility for a particular set of decisions to admit that they were wrong. Nonetheless, it may well be worth the effort, if not for the current generation of leaders than for those who come after them.

Fourth, we should resist the temptation to argue, as George Bush might say, that “It's my way or the highway” in the campaign to eradicate the threat posed by organized terrorist groups. In other words, and in keeping with the third point, we might usefully concentrate on assembling a strategy that allows for a high degree of specialization among different members of the trans-Atlantic community. The approaches favored by the two sides need not be mutually exclusive.

This suggests, of course, that the Americans are capable of restraint and willing to take to heart the informed concerns of their allies before contemplating military action. Again, this may be
too much to ask for in present circumstances, but circumstances will change in January 2009 when a new American president assumes office. The history of strong Euro-Atlantic ties should have a force multiplier effect when it comes to dealing creatively with the full spectrum of security challenges we face. This has not always been the case. But surely it's worth a renewed effort.

And finally, to the extent possible we should preserve and build upon the thick ties and close relationships – both personal and institutional – that have matured over the five plus decades of our intimate association, while understanding that it is 2007 – not 1957. Notwithstanding all that has transpired since the Soviet Union’s unceremonious disappearance from the world stage at the end of 1991, we remain one another’s best friends, most reliable collaborators, and closest trading partners.

Burdening today’s relationship with some largely imagined memory of an Atlantic Golden Age is not only wrong-headed, it’s counterproductive. In alliances, as in personal relationships, partners’ interests change and grow over time, often in ways that generate tremendous stresses and strains. When this occurs, one option, clearly, is divorce. A second option is renewal and reconciliation, typically on terms and with expectations that correspond to a new reality. In my judgment, this is a fair summation of where we find ourselves today as we consider the future of U.S.-European relations. I hope that we are wise enough and mature enough to make the right decision.