The Future of the Transatlantic Security Relationship
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ABSTRACT Globalization, the financial crisis, and the U.S. pivot to Asia are profoundly changing the transatlantic security relationship. Some observers believe that these developments call for a new transatlantic bargain based on a Europe that would take greater responsibility for upholding security and stability in Europe and along its periphery. However, low European defense budgets and numerous political differences among European nations make such a bargain appear unlikely. At the same time, while the United States will reduce its military footprint in Europe in the years ahead, it will still want to remain a “European power.” Hence, the most likely outcome of current developments will be a transatlantic security community with lower ambitions, yet with a continuously solid institutional relationship based on a reformed North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

KEYWORDS Asian pivot; defense; Europe; globalization; NATO; pooling and sharing; security; smart defense; transatlantic bargain

INTRODUCTION

The transatlantic security relationship is undergoing profound change. This change is not primarily in response to new threats nor in response to the reemergence of old threats. It is neither the result of a more self-confident Europe nor of a less-confident United States. The transatlantic security relationship is changing because the world around it is changing. The shift of economic power—but soon also political and military power—to the Asia-Pacific has led the United States to officially “pivot” toward this region. Globalization is generating new, nontraditional threats that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the epitome of the transatlantic security relationship, is finding hard to address. The financial crisis is forcing Europe to look inward. On both sides of the Atlantic, defense budgets are going down—with European budgets declining faster than that of the United States. And yet, we hear remarkably little discussion about all of this.

Comparing the current transatlantic debate with that of one or two decades ago, the contrast could hardly be greater. In the mid-1990s, the transatlantic security debate revolved around prospective EU “autonomy” in security and defense, about the wisdom of NATO enlargement, and about the pros and cons of intervening in the Balkans. Even 10 years later, big
questions were still to be answered. Should the transatlantic partners go to war with Iraq? Did Americans, who were said to come from Mars, have a better grasp of the nature of international relations than the Europeans, who were said to come from Venus? Should NATO play a role in Afghanistan, thus ending more than half a century of rather comfortable “eurocentrism”?

Today’s discussions are not dominated by such fundamental questions, with little appetite in evidence for big ideas or grand designs. Rather, on both sides of the Atlantic, nations are struggling to adjust to events over which they appear to have very little control: globalization and the power shift to Asia happen by default; the financial crisis was as unforeseen as it seems unmanageable; and even the U.S. pivot to Asia appears to be something Washington is pursuing out of a sense of unavoidable necessity rather than free choice. Put differently, the transatlantic security relationship is changing not because the transatlantic partners decided to change it, but because various powerful developments have already made the choice for them.

A NEW BARGAIN?

Some have tried to make a virtue out of necessity. They postulate a new “transatlantic” bargain—a bargain that would take due account of the new global realities but use them as a starting point for a rejuvenated transatlantic security relationship. That bargain usually looks like this: the United States “pivots” to Asia but keeps a substantial military presence in and around Europe to reassure European allies that it remains a “European power.” The European allies take on the main responsibility for maintaining stability in Europe and its periphery. All allies arrest the decline in their defense budgets; consolidate their collective military capabilities through “smart” approaches (“pooling and sharing”), both within NATO and the EU; and start reinvesting in defense once their economies are again on the upswing. The EU finally develops a true identity in security and defense, and it engineers its own “pivot” to Asia, where it supports the United States—if not militarily, then at least politically. According to its advocates, this bargain will be underwritten by a grand new project that will bind North America and Europe together in the very area in which the transatlantic relationship will predominantly manifest itself from now on: economics. A Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, formerly known as Transatlantic Free Trade Area, is said to be able to boost the Atlantic economies and thus constitute a formidable counterweight to the growing markets in Asia.

Is such a bargain attainable? Will financial pressures finally bring about the equitable transatlantic burden-sharing that had proved elusive for six decades? Is Europe really going to do more to compensate for a United States that wants to do less? What are the prospects of Europe maturing into the security player that such a new bargain would require? And, is the United States really turning away from Europe now that most of the continent’s security problems appear to have been settled?

WHAT EUROPE CAN (AND CANNOT) DO

The foremost issue that needs to be resolved is Europe’s future role in security and defense. Indeed, a Europe more willing and capable to look after security in its own backyard is at the heart of any readjustment of the transatlantic security relationship. Some observers believe that the U.S. Asian “pivot” could (and should) act as a wake-up call for Europe to finally “get serious” on defense. As the United States will be increasingly unwilling to engage in Libya-type operations along Europe’s periphery, Europe would from now on have little choice but to conduct such engagements on its own.

Such hopes are likely to be dashed, however. If Europe cannot run such an operation today, it will be even less able to run it with shrinking defense budgets. What was lacking in the Libya operation—from intelligence to sufficient stocks of precision-guided munitions to air refueling capabilities—cannot be acquired if budgets go down, unless European nations suddenly discover an appetite for radical integration that they have lacked in the past. And, even if the budgetary problems could eventually be overcome, the political obstacles remain formidable. European nations continue to have different security priorities, their national outlooks are influenced by vastly different economic and demographic realities, and their ability to contribute to military operations also varies because of different
military capabilities, different strategic cultures, and also different constitutional systems.

All these differences were around long before Europe was hit by the financial crisis. They will not be overcome simply because the United States will be focusing less on Europe. Neither will the budgetary squeeze bring European nations closer together: all current efforts toward “pooling and sharing” are deliberately designed not to clash with considerations of national sovereignty. Moreover, pooling and sharing cannot compensate for the massive decline in defense spending: current efforts to reduce redundancies could potentially save European nations a few hundred million euros, yet the budget cuts since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008 amount to more than 30 billion euros. There is more. As many future security threats will be non-existential, they will be tackled by flexible coalitions. Consequently, many European nations will remain wary of relying too much on the “assured” availability of their neighbors’ military capabilities. The risk that these neighbors may chose not to participate in an operation is simply too high to base security and defense policies on.

For all these reasons, Europe is unlikely to fill the gap that the United States may be leaving behind. The transatlantic security relationship has never followed the principle of communicating vessels, where lesser efforts of one side would be compensated for by increased efforts on the other. Calls for a “European Army” or similar grand projects will be equally futile, as they put the cart before the horse: defense has never been a driver of European integration, progress in this area will only occur as the result of deeper political integration. The budgetary squeeze has not invalidated this logic. Less money will result in less defense. In principle, declining defense budgets could be seen as an opportunity for European nations to reduce redundancies, streamline their defense industries, and develop a common military strategy. Thus far, however, national prerogatives prevail over “European” considerations. Moreover, European leaders will see the lower defense budgets that will result from the withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan in 2014 as the new norm, in line with a low-threat environment. In sum, military ambitions will be tailored to budgets, not the other way around.

WHAT THE UNITED STATES WILL (AND WILL NOT) DO

But, what about the United States? Is Washington going to abandon Europe, either because of a general drive toward reducing overseas engagements or out of frustration with Europe’s underperformance as a military partner?

Current U.S. policy reflects a certain fatigue with respect to large-scale military engagements. Both the U.S. government and the broader population appear sympathetic to the concept of “nation-building at home” (President Obama). However, the United States cannot and will not disengage from international politics. Several U.S. governments have tried repeatedly to reduce their engagement in certain key regions, including the Middle East, yet events quickly forced Washington to reengage and continue to play the very role it had wanted to shed. The alleged dawn of “multipolarity” notwithstanding, the United States remains the only country that is widely accepted as an honest broker in difficult crisis areas around the globe, not least because it has managed to combine the pursuit of its national interests with a broader responsibility for maintaining international order. Absent the emergence of a similarly benign and powerful contender, the United States remains locked into this leadership role—a role that, despite public misgivings, is also deeply ingrained in American culture. Indeed, the “Asian pivot” is yet a new manifestation of the internationalist vocation of the United States.

What does this mean for the relationship between the United States and Europe? Stability in Europe remains of central importance to the United States. Hence, no serious political force in the United States would advocate a complete military withdrawal from Europe. Even though the project of “completing” Europe as an undivided democratic security space has made great progress, the United States remains a key provider of military reassurance for European NATO members, continues to lead the enlargement process, and also plays a key role in connecting the Caucasus region to Europe. Moreover, any security issue that would involve Russia would bring the United States into the game, as would any crisis with a potential nuclear dimension or any conflict that would threaten an escalation onto NATO territory. And, only in Europe will the United States find the
political "milieu" of a group of countries predisposed to working with Washington, including in contingencies outside of Europe. By contrast, in Asia the United States will have to work through complicated bilateral relationships with partners whose desires (nuclear technology, long-range missiles) may clash with U.S. interests and priorities.

All these interests can only be pursued successfully if a general legitimizing framework remains for U.S. military engagement with and in Europe. This framework is NATO. It gives the United States privileged access to—and influence over—European defense. That is why Washington will not relinquish the NATO framework, even if this framework may become less central for the pursuit of U.S. foreign and security policy aims.

The number of U.S. troops in Europe has long ceased to be an accurate yardstick for measuring U.S. interest in European security. The increasing mobility of U.S. forces also makes Europe less important as a springboard for the Middle East. Some years down the line, even fewer U.S. military combat forces might be permanently stationed in Europe. However, even such a reduced presence will still be more substantial than the U.S. military footprint in most other places outside the continental United States. In short, even in this "Pacific Century," the United States can only be a global power if it also remains a "European power."

**A SENSIBLE NATO AGENDA**

This leads to the third and final set of questions: What can NATO do to support the transatlantic partners in adjusting to new realities? What should NATO's agenda look like if it wants to continue to offer a solid institutional foundation for the transatlantic community in an era of change?

Of course, NATO does not exist independently of its member nations. Hence, it is also affected by the current major geopolitical and economic transformations, just as it is affected by the fallout of the financial crisis. Still, NATO has always been more than the sum of its parts. The collective identity of NATO has been instrumental in getting the allies to agree to policies that individual members would never have dared to pursue on their own. This formative element must be preserved.

First, NATO must remain outward-looking. Militarily, it must remain focused on expeditionary missions, with matching capabilities ranging from reconnaissance to air refueling to precision-guided weaponry. Bringing NATO "home," as some have labeled a reemphasis on collective territorial defense, would be a regression. It would reverse two decades of NATO's evolution, and it would signal to the United States not to count on NATO member states' support in demanding contingencies outside of Europe. As a result, Europe would become even less relevant in the U.S. security calculus.

Second, NATO needs to continue to push "smart defense" projects, hopefully in cooperation with the European Union. While the military-operational or financial benefits of pooling and sharing may remain small, the pursuit of such approaches has meanwhile become a political imperative irrespective of potential military gains. Simply put, through such approaches, nations demonstrate their willingness to explore new paths of cooperation—an essential message to their own electorates as well as to one another. "Smart defense" and pooling and sharing have become symbols of both fiscal responsibility and political aspiration. This alone makes them indispensable.

Third, NATO needs to retain a strong focus on training and interoperability. Largely as a result of the Afghanistan mission, the armed forces of NATO nations are currently at their peak of operational experience. To make sure that this experience is not lost in a period without major operations, allies will need to expand their education and training, step up their exercises, and rejuvenate the NATO Response Force as a vehicle to demonstrate operational readiness and to serve as a "test bed" for NATO's military transformation. Although such an exercise-oriented commitment also constitutes a considerable financial burden, European allies are well-advised to shoulder it, as it may be become their major means of remaining interoperable with U.S. forces.

Fourth, NATO must further enhance its partnerships, notably with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The recent past has shown that NATO's partnership mechanisms are more vulnerable to disagreements between individual allies and partners than initially thought, yet partnerships remain an opportunity for achieving several major goals simultaneously: partners improve the political legitimacy and military effectiveness of NATO-led operations.
and, over time, also enlarge the pool of interoperable forces NATO can draw from. Moreover, acting with partners from across the globe also forces otherwise reluctant allies to address partners’ security concerns. Accordingly, NATO allies collectively acquire the “global” outlook that will be essential for its future as a viable security organization.

Fifth, NATO needs to explore how to enhance flexibility in its decision making and in the implementation of collective decisions. On the strategic level, the consensus rule must remain, as it allows nations to prevent NATO from embarking on policies that would run fundamentally against their national interests. However, the Libya operation has demonstrated that the implementation of a policy that is agreed “at 28” varies according to the interests and capabilities of the allies involved. This may appear like a frontal assault on the very concept of a permanent alliance, yet it need not be. NATO will remain the pool from which such flexible coalitions will largely be drawn and around which larger coalitions will be built. Moreover, as these coalitions will not always involve the same countries, the logic of maintaining close political and military ties through a standing arrangement like NATO remains unchanged.

Sixth, NATO must become the forum for a much broader security approach in which new threats and potential responses can be discussed without artificial constraints. The hesitation of allies to discuss certain security developments (e.g., the security implications of a nuclear Iran) out of concern that some of these debates might be controversial diminishes NATO’s importance, notably in the eyes of the United States, and risks the alliance losing touch with the globalization age. NATO’s role in defending against cyber threats or addressing proliferation concerns or energy vulnerabilities may ultimately turn out to be modest, as these challenges do not lend themselves to traditional military responses. However, an alliance that turns a blind eye to these challenges risks being surprised—and, eventually, divided—by them.

Finally, NATO’s public diplomacy efforts need to put transatlantic relations left, right, and center. Accordingly, Europeans must make the case for NATO (and for an “Atlanticist” European Union) in the United States, even if this is a tough sell. Even more important, Americans must make the case for NATO. Nothing is more effective than Americans telling their fellow Americans that a vibrant NATO is in the strategic interest of the United States. Hence, the overriding objective of NATO’s public diplomacy must be to support the group of NATO-friendly stakeholders in the U.S. administration, Congress, think tanks, and the military.

CONCLUSION

If the transatlantic relationship becomes more dominated by economic considerations, and if security becomes less central, NATO’s role will also become less central. To admit this is not fatalism, but realism. Realism also suggests that Europe is unlikely to compensate for diminishing U.S. military engagement by stepping up its own efforts. Rather, Europe will lower its collective military ambition—all the more so as most future conflicts may be “wars of choice” rather than “wars of necessity.” American frustration with Europe’s military underperformance will, therefore, remain. However, as long as Europe cultivates its willingness and ability to cooperate militarily with the United States, the alliance is unlikely to fade away. The U.S. “Asian pivot” will not change the fact that no continents are more like-minded and more geared toward cooperation, including in the military domain, than Europe and North America. If NATO—even at lower levels of allied defense spending—manages to preserve its unique combination of political appeal and military competence, the institutional foundations of the transatlantic security relationship will remain strong.