I

For most of modern history, Europe has been America’s Significant Other. For the past half century in particular, an alliance between the two has dominated world politics. But how long can this alliance be expected to last, and in what form? How well does it fit the world likely to evolve in the twenty-first century?

The present close relationship was not inevitable, as a study of its history indicates. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the transatlantic relationship was governed by American isolationism. This amounted to a diplomatic trade-off where the United States refrained from being drawn into European power politics and European states refrained from intervening in the Western Hemisphere. The trade-off held until the world wars of the twentieth century. Of course, the United States was hardly unaware of Europe over this long stretch. America was, after all, a nation whose population was based primarily on constant European immigration. Events in Europe like the Potato Famine, the revolutions of 1848 and Italian unification had major consequences for the flow and character of America’s imported population. Immigration reproduced in the United States something like Europe’s own diverse patchwork of vigorously competing nationalities. But nationalist cohabitation in America was not always peaceful. New immigrants often arrived with their old antagonisms intact.
Absorbing this rich diversity peacefully has been a Herculean task for the American Republic.

Paradoxically, America’s population of European immigrants is one factor in explaining the long persistence of America’s isolationist policy toward Europe. Playing an active role in Europe’s rivalries would have been hazardous for America’s own multinational consensus. Meanwhile, to satisfy its lust for space, America had its own West, where the military threat was seldom formidable, and where internal antagonism among America’s national families could more easily be avoided, at least until territorial expansion grew inextricably linked to the slavery question.

The Second World War saw American isolationism towards Europe replaced by America’s active pursuit of European hegemony. In the process, the United States transformed itself from isolated giant to global leader. The transition was prefigured as America entered the First World War in 1917. Despite America’s still limited military participation, President Woodrow Wilson was soon seizing the political high ground with his plans for a League of Nations. Wilson’s grand initiative failed to win stable support at home. The campaign to support it was bungled and illness incapacitated Wilson himself. The country gradually reverted to its isolationist tradition. But a quarter of a century later, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had been assistant secretary of the navy in Wilson’s war cabinet, had succeeded where Wilson had failed.

As in the First World War, America’s participation in the Second World War quickly took a hegemonic form. As Japan was plunging the United States into the war, Roosevelt was imagining a full set of new institutions for global security, finance and trade – institutions in which the United States would play the leading role. Despite his early death, Roosevelt’s visionary schemes – the United Nations and its economic offshoots – were firmly established and live on to the present day. FDR’s assertive diplomacy proved contagious for America’s elites. As early as January 1941, Henry Luce, owner and editor of *Time* magazine, was proclaiming the ‘American Century’. By 1943, the Republican presidential candidate of 1940, Wendell Willkie, was touring the country at Roosevelt’s behest, attacking the isolationists in his own party and touting the virtues of ‘One World’ led by America.
The renewed Wilsonian ambitions of the 1940s were greatly reinforced by another hegemonic American vision, the product of a patrician geopolitical school which gathered in the early twentieth century around FDR’s distant Roosevelt cousin Theodore, president from 1901 to 1909. The group included John Hay, Henry and Brooks Adams, and the Senator from Massachusetts, Henry Cabot Lodge. It was strongly influenced by America’s own naval strategist with a geopolitical vision – Alfred Thayer Mahan. This ‘realist’ school of American imperialists had quite different assumptions from Wilson’s liberals, and in the end has had perhaps greater influence over American foreign policy. Mahan taught that the global state system requires a hegemonic leader – preferably a naval power with an imposing manufacturing and financial base. Britain was the nineteenth-century model. According to Mahan, Britain would be surpassed as America fulfilled its own continental destiny, and thereby grew able to deploy much greater naval power worldwide. Mahan died in 1914. He and his friends had been in no hurry to displace the British and, in fact, the First World War precipitated the breakdown of British hegemony before the United States was ready. But American imperialists could not be indifferent, any more than the British, to the prospect of Germany becoming the continental hegemon, uniting Europe’s resources for projecting power into the world. Thus Wilson’s America went to war against Germany, despite the resentment of the country’s large and influential German population.1 Paradoxically, at the war’s end Senator Lodge, Mahan’s principal political disciple, led the fight in the Senate to prevent the United States itself from joining the League of Nations. Part of Lodge’s disaffection was philosophical and aesthetic. Mahan’s was a realist vision, rooted in Machiavelli and Hamilton, whereas Wilson’s was an idealist project, rooted in Locke and Jefferson. Lodge was also leery of international commitments that would infringe on the Senate’s own power over America’s foreign policy.

The popular backlash against Wilson’s League had among its sources a reaction from German America, concentrated in the Midwest. Wilson’s failure demonstrated the essential fragility of any domestic popular base for vigorous American leadership abroad, above all in Europe. The presidential
election of November 1920 saw Warren Harding elected overwhelmingly on a platform condemning Wilson’s conduct and opposing the League of Nations. His Democratic opponent, James Cox, supported both Wilson and the League, and was crushed.

The old isolationist hostility to involvement in European affairs persisted throughout the 1920s and 1930s, reinforced by German-American resentment at the Eastern Establishment’s preference for Britain and France. Midwestern banks poured money into Weimar Germany. When war broke out in Europe once more, Roosevelt, although increasingly committed to the Allied cause, found it difficult to edge the United States into it. It took the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to engage the US openly. Even then, Roosevelt was worried that he would not be able to justify joining the war in Europe. He was greatly relieved when, shortly after Pearl Harbor, Hitler himself declared war on America. Thereafter, Roosevelt firmly continued to give the war in Europe priority over the war in Asia. Roosevelt proved to be a superb war leader, who successfully fused Mahan’s realism with Wilson’s idealism. Thanks to him, Americans were finally ready for, as he put it, their ‘rendezvous with destiny’. He was greatly assisted, of course, by the loathsome character of the Nazi regime.

II

America’s victory in the Second World War, followed by the Cold War, radically changed the domestic framework for American foreign policy. Fear of the Soviet Union proved in many ways a perfect catalyst for overcoming the old domestic divisions that had hitherto inhibited America’s pursuit of hegemony in Europe. This proved true despite the populist appeal of Senator McCarthy’s anti-communist witch-hunting directed at America’s foreign-policy elites and popular among former isolationists. But thanks to the brutal, irreligious and generally odious character of the Soviet regime, American popular support for a hegemonic alliance to contain communism was long lasting. The Cold War created the Federal Republic of Germany and transformed it into America’s closest ally. NATO came to be prized either as a protectorate for the homelands of America’s European populations, or as the best hope for the liberation of the homelands already occupied by the
Soviets. Hence NATO’s enduring popularity in the United States and post-war America’s European-centred foreign policy.

Meanwhile, partitioning the world with Stalin and Mao narrowed the scope of America’s hegemonic pretensions and overburdened the Soviets with theirs. Thus, despite the Soviet Union’s heroic military victories over the Germans in the Second World War, in the end it was the United States that emerged as the victor. The Cold War that followed saw the US allied not only with Western Europe, including the major part of Germany, but also with Japan. America’s hegemonic leadership was, for the most part, gratefully accepted. America’s hegemony could truthfully be called an “empire by invitation”. In contrast to America, Russia had only one major ally – China – with whom its relations were generally hostile. America’s victory in the Cold War was thus hardly surprising – as much a triumph of diplomacy and economics as of military power. Meanwhile, West European states, beginning to unite in their European Community, grew skilful in manipulating the superpowers to undermine the bipolar division of Europe.

The Soviet collapse in 1991 ended the Cold War and introduced an amorphous new post-Cold War era that has now persisted for over two decades. Given America’s long tradition of isolationism, with no Soviet Union and, as yet, no reliable substitute enemy, an obvious question hanging over these years is whether, or for how long, support for the Cold War’s transatlantic alliance will persist. There are numerous signs of American impatience: the intellectual elite of the American right have a tendency to see Europe – in particular continental Europe – as the source of uncongenial communitarian tendencies that are anti-individualist and ‘un-American’ culturally, politically and economically. Above all, neoconservatives tend to hold Europeans in contempt for their relative military weakness. By contrast, the libertarian wing of the American right has tended to grow increasingly restive at their own country’s huge defence budget, including the still heavy US investment in NATO. This opposition is hardly surprising, as America’s defence spending is much higher than anyone else’s. Meanwhile, liberal economists in the US have grown increasingly critical of the EU’s reluctance to adopt America’s package of neo-Keynesian remedies for the current global financial crisis – quantitative easing, in particular.
the EU’s rejection of these remedies amounts to a European rejection of American economic leadership in a major crisis. Meanwhile, studies show a ‘values gap’ between the American and European publics. In short, it is not surprising that partisans of the Atlantic Alliance are feeling embattled and insecure.

III

To restore enthusiasm for an active global alliance, both Americans and Europeans need a fresh narrative that explains the new post-Soviet world and convincingly indicates the appropriate American and European roles in it. Among Americans four grand narratives appear to be on offer: unipolar, declinist, pluralist and anarchic. While these are not entirely distinct, each implies different global roles for the United States and Europe, and a different relationship between them.

According to the unipolar narrative, the Soviet collapse has left the United States the only remaining superpower, free to pursue global hegemony so long as America’s own domestic base will support it. Of course, hegemony always has opponents, at home and abroad, and its exercise needs to be managed skilfully. The George H.W. Bush administration, for example, was prompt to intervene internationally but careful to cultivate the support of its European allies, while, at the same time, being wary of encouraging too much European military autonomy. The George W. Bush administration, by contrast, often thought the US might be stronger without its European allies.

The declinist narrative carries a quite different message. According to declinist theory, America’s hegemonic role is unlikely to last. This is because a hegemon, carrying the principal burden of sustaining the order and security enjoyed by everyone else, inevitably exhausts itself. While the free riders grow stronger from the benefits, the hegemon grows weaker by providing them. As hegemony fades, the world grows increasingly chaotic. A new hegemon eventually arises. It is not hard these days to find trends that suggest America’s financial and psychological exhaustion or the world’s disorder. Nor is there any lack of speculation that China will be America’s eventual successor.
Our third, pluralist, narrative sees a global future dominated not by a hegemon, old or new, but by several rising regional powers – perhaps, too, by a variety of non-state actors and interest groups capable of coordinating on a global scale. Whereas a unipolar or declinist narrative calls for a hegemon or hegemonic aspirants, the classic recipe for peace in a pluralist system is a stable balance of power, upgraded into a concert to prevent hegemony, while collaborating to maintain an orderly, law abiding and prosperous system of states.

The anarchic narrative imagines a plural world of interdependent states, rising and falling without a stable balance of power or effective institutions to produce a concert. This is the outcome widely feared from a global system with highly competitive Asian powers whose interests are difficult to reconcile with those of the richer but increasingly less competitive transatlantic states.

These four narratives, in all their variations, have faded in and out over recent years. The 1980s – with the ‘twin deficits’ of the Reagan administration – were the golden age of declinism. These early declinists were concerned not with Soviet strength but with American economic weakness. The Soviet collapse in 1991 sent the declinist narrative into eclipse and instead brought forward the unipolar narrative. The influence of this triumphalist view remained strong in the first Bush administration, through the Clinton administration and into the second term of the George W. Bush administration. By then, the signs of America’s decline had grown increasingly compelling. The American public was weary of indecisive wars; politics was beginning to be affected by the widespread perception that the average citizen’s living standards had been slipping as America’s pre-eminent economic position was challenged by the rising great powers of Asia, China especially. Meanwhile, the banking crisis in America that erupted in 2006 soon spread to Europe. American weakness was leading to global disorder and financial chaos, just as declinist theory had promised. In effect, the declinist narrative, foretelling the end of American hegemony, was also pointing to an anarchic result.

The shrinking credibility of the unipolar narrative, along with the resurgence of the declinist and the prospect of the anarchic, naturally feed a
new interest in a more collaborative approach to managing international affairs. In effect, US policy has grown more accepting of a plural system. This means recasting, but not necessarily abandoning, the traditional alliance. East European states, still frightened by Russian ambitions, would prefer the traditional NATO to continue indefinitely. But even the more secure Europeans, who have wanted to see the new Russia as an opportunity rather than a threat, have all along remained content for a formal Atlantic alliance to continue – as a way of maintaining a balanced framework of order in the face of big and hostile neighbours. So long as Russia or Iran have unfriendly governments, Europeans are unlikely to throw away their American protection. Nor, however, are they willing to pay too high a price for it – as the history of transatlantic relations during the George W. Bush presidency makes clear. Europeans resist any American connection that locks them into a hostile relationship with their Russian and Muslim neighbours. Their hope is ultimately to embrace these neighbours in a cooperative pan-European system. Thus, despite the discouraging features of the Putin regime and the lingering fears of the recently liberated East European states, major West European governments are wary of allowing any NATO expansion that would restore the old Cold War antagonism.

American foreign policy has gradually adopted these European perspectives. Instead of pursuing the isolated omnipotence of the unipolar view, the Obama administration touts a strategy of ‘constant engagement’. It has hoped in doing so to reverse the transatlantic disaffection of the Bush years and to rejuvenate the old alliance, but without designating Russia as the official enemy. Obama’s America has also assiduously avoided trying to exploit military and diplomatic differences among the allies. In particular, it has avoided the old game of rounding up the smaller European countries and pitting them against the bigger. It encouraged the Anglo-French intervention in Libya. It provided support when needed, but was careful not to take over the project. Uncharacteristically, the United States has sought ‘to lead from behind’. Obama’s US has also ‘reset’ its relations with Russia, to discourage Russia-baiting among the East European states and give support to the big West European states trying to develop stable relations with their giant neighbour. Obama has not completely abandoned this strat-
egy, despite the discouraging climate since Putin’s return to the Russian presidency. The US has tried, moreover, to adjust its Iranian policy to suit European perspectives, which traditionally have been more hopeful about negotiation.

These American policies have certainly improved the atmosphere for transatlantic relations. But it remains to be seen whether common interests are strong enough to keep a close transatlantic alliance together. The US and the EU states have competing as well as common interests – in relations with Russia and the Islamic world, or in any new world order generally. Relations with China are certainly vital to both Americans and Europeans, but their policies towards China may not be easily compatible. Each is, after all, competing to fill the role of China’s principal Western partner. In short, even a strong EU would not necessarily always share the same perspectives and interests as a strong United States. Thus it seems far from certain that a close transatlantic alliance must endure.

Since the 1970s an increasingly globalised economy has been shaken by a series of financial crises. The most recent, still very much with us, has already provoked a serious decline in Western confidence and solidarity. While the gloomy prospects and immediate dangers of the present breakdown have been studied exhaustively, analyses of the longer-term implications are in shorter supply.

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If we assume that the EU and the US somehow do avoid being dragged down by the present financial and political crisis, and allow ourselves to take a very long view – say, to mid-century – how might Europe and America relate to each other then? The answer will probably depend greatly on how each evolves domestically. Today’s EU remains in the midst of a lengthy and still inconclusive defining of its constitution. But since the European states do collectively have large resources, the ultimate outcome of their constitutional evolution may well impose significant changes on the rest of the world. If Europe’s sovereign states, while remaining in a confederal union, somehow find the formulas needed to manage their own interdependence
successfully, Europe is likely to remain a major force in the world – both for its amassed resources but also by the example it sets. If a confederal EU holds together, it will remain one of the world’s largest economic systems. If it is still more a confederacy than a federation, it will probably remain disinclined to define itself primarily as a military power. Instead, it will most likely present a model that favours diplomatic bargaining and conciliation. Europe’s natural instinct will be to reach out to Russia and the Muslim world, to entice them into its own orbit of stable peace and prosperity.

If Europe does evolve in this fashion, it may prove ideally suited to acting as a mediating power between the United States and China. Europe’s constitutional character would accord well with its geographical position, occupying, as it does, the cape of the Eurasian continent. Indeed, the institutions and practices of confederal Europe might be the model for building a world system that permitted the mutual accommodation of rising Asia and a still vigorous West. In short, Europe could be a critical balancer in the evolving institutions for global order, a role for which its own confederal character would have prepared it. In this sense, the success of Europe’s confederal experiment should be seen as a critical interest for the whole world.

These expectations, however, assume that Europe succeeds without having to abandon its present confederal structure. Many people now believe, however, that to survive the EU will need to turn away from its traditional constitution toward a more centralised American-style federal model. Given its resources and imperial traditions, if the EU does travel very far down this path it might gradually find itself becoming a superpower. Having such a Europe would point firmly toward our third narrative – a multipolar world of several great powers. If such a plural global system does emerge, the odds for a peaceful and tolerably just global order seem more promising – as long as a relatively rational and conciliatory Europe remains a major player.

The reaffirmation of such a Europe despite today’s financial crisis, combined with the geopolitical and fiscal consolidation of overstretched America and a more measured pace for China’s rise – taken together with a successful reform of the monetary system – would suggest a more rational
and hopeful future for the world. Much, of course, will depend on whether Europe collectively can continue to develop its own model successfully – in other words, whether it can find the right balance in its own affairs between conciliation and effectiveness. Europe’s importance for shaping the world’s future suggests a heavy responsibility for today’s leaders and opinion-makers – a challenge perhaps not well enough understood in either Europe or America.

Instead, underestimating Europe’s importance has already become a bad transatlantic habit in the twenty-first century. Doubtless, Americans cling too jealously to their global responsibilities and imagine too central a role for themselves in the world’s future. For Europeans, however, presuming their own weakness has become too convenient a way of escaping responsibility for the future, of taking a vacation from history. No one should deny America’s contribution to the last century. But possibly Europe will have more to offer to the present. Since the Second World War, Europeans have built a remarkable confederal system – one that retains its nation-states but within a superstructure that demands mutual regard and encourages the search for common interests. At present, it is passing through a delicate moment of constitutional redefinition. It may fail, but the record of the past several decades suggests it may not. Out of its own terrible experiences, post-war Europe has created a durable continental formula, one that may well offer tomorrow’s more plural world its best hope for a sane future. The European Union is Europe’s gift to world history. It should not be thrown away in retrograde quarrels among citizens and leaders suddenly deprived of their generosity and vision. Europe’s historic education has been too expensive to be allowed to fail.

Notes

1 For an account of the German-American positions during the First World War, see Frederick C. Luebke, Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974).


3 See Robert Kagan, Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New

4 The President’s Budget for Fiscal Year 2014 shows that in 2012, US defence spending amounted to about 4.4% of GDP. Office of Management and Budget, ‘The President’s Budget for Fiscal Year 2014’, Historical Tables: Table 3.1 – Outlays by Superfunction and Function: 1940–2017, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2014/assets/hist03z1.xls. Data from the IISS in The Military Balance 2013 shows that this dwarfs any of its Western neighbours or the European countries, which as a whole spent ‘only’ 1.52% of their GDP on defence.


7 An indication of the insecurity about transatlantic ties can be gauged from articles from institutions such as the Center for Transatlantic Relations (SAIS) in its ‘Transatlantic Topics’, EU–US area, or conferences such as the Wilson Center’s ‘The Transatlantic Relationship: Problems and Prospects’, which describe the many challenges ahead and how connections between the partners can and must be strengthened, if the alliance is to exist in the future.


9 The notion of the European Union as a ‘civilian power’ was early described by François Duchêne (1973), who saw the EU (or the contemporary European Community) as a model structure for how ‘influence … can be wielded by a large political cooperative formed to exert essentially civilian forms of power’ and, in his view, should be a ‘civilian group of countries long on economic power and
relatively short on armed force’. In the 40 years following Duchêne’s characterisation of the EU, the notion, which over time also evolved from its original meaning, has been and still is very much alive. In ‘Beyond the Civilian Power Debate’ (Politique Européenne, no. 17, 2005/3), Karen E. Smith sheds light on what the term has come to mean and on the (ongoing) debate.
As an upbeat and peaceful uprising quickly and brutally descended into a zero-sum civil war, Syria crumbled from a regional player into an arena in which a multitude of local and foreign actors compete. The volatile regional fault lines that run through Syria have ruptured during this conflict, and the course of events in this fragile yet strategically significant country will profoundly shape the future of the Levant.

Emile Hokayem’s first-hand experience and sober analysis provide up-to-date insight into the myriad opposition groups, the conflicting external interests and the murky calculations of the Assad regime. Tracking the seeds of dissent that laid the groundwork for rebellion, he looks at how Syria’s largely apolitical society mobilised and at the unpredictable dynamics that have been unleashed as the protest movement has radicalised and militarised. In the face of such profound challenges to its four decades of authoritarian rule, Hokayem also assesses the continued resilience of a regime that has escalated beyond the point of return.