The Fourth Age

The Next Era in Transatlantic Relations

Charles A. Kupchan

THE ATLANTIC order is in the midst of a fundamental transition. The transatlantic discord that has emerged since the late 1990s marks a historical breakpoint, not a temporary aberration. The foundational principles of the Atlantic security order that emerged after World War II have been compromised. American and European interests have diverged, institutionalized cooperation can no longer be taken for granted, and a shared Western identity has attenuated.

We are at the dawn of a new era in the Atlantic relationship. Rather than trying to recreate the past, the Atlantic democracies should move forward by acknowledging that the tight-knit alliance of the Cold-War years is gone for good. Instead, they should accept that the character of the Atlantic order is undergoing a profound transformation, seek to understand the attributes of the emerging order, and figure out how to make the most of its cooperative potential.

SINCE AMERICA'S founding, there have been three distinct periods of the transatlantic relationship: 1776–1905 (the era of balance of power), 1905–1941 (the era of balance of threat), and 1941–2001 (the era of cooperative security). The accompanying table identifies the key attributes of each of these three periods.

During the first phase of interaction between the United States and Europe, transatlantic relations were guided by balance-of-power logic. The Atlantic order was one of militarized rivalry, with the major players—the United States, Great Britain, France and Spain—regularly jockeying for territory, trade and geopolitical influence. Each balanced against the power of the other, capitalizing on opportunities for individual gain. For the most part, America steered clear of intra-European struggles. However, to defend its hemispheric interests, the United States fought two major wars with Britain and one with Spain. A host of other militarized disputes among the Atlantic powers punctuated the nineteenth century.

No sense of community existed between the two sides of the Atlantic. On the contrary, the European powers and the United States saw their respective interests as separate and divergent, embracing a zero-sum view of the security environment. Indeed, so worried were Eu-

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Atlantic Orders, 1776–2001

Europeans that America’s rise would come at their expense that they came close to intervening on behalf of the South during the U.S. Civil War, calculating that secession would keep North America divided and weak.

Identities of opposition prevailed, and not just on matters of geopolitics. Americans saw Europe as the old world, stuck in illiberal politics and social atavisms. In turn, Europeans saw Americans as boorish and unsophisticated. As Alexander Hamilton wrote in Federalist 11, Europeans “have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere.”

In the early 1900s, the logic governing Atlantic relations shifted from balance of power to balance of threat. The players no longer balanced against any concentration of power, but only those that they deemed threatening. Regime type started to matter in shaping great-power alignments; the United States and Europe’s democracies began to enjoy pacified relationships. National interests were still viewed as separate, but were becoming contingently convergent. The strategic environment was no longer zero-sum, enabling militarized rivalry to give way to peaceful coexistence.

Anglo-American rapprochement, which began in the mid-1890s, cleared the way for this transformation. At the outset, London and Washington peacefully resolved their differences over the boundary between Venezuela and British Guiana. Soon thereafter, the two parties settled a series of other outstanding disputes over fishing rights and borders. A mutual sense of durable reconciliation set in by roughly 1905, by which time Britain had effectively ceded naval hegemony in the Western Hemisphere to the United States and dropped the U.S. Navy from consideration in calculating its global naval requirements. London and Washington were both coming to see the prospect of an Anglo-American war as remote, if not unthinkable.

Compatible identities replaced oppositional ones, furthered by a growing sense of racial and political affinity. On both sides, talk of Anglo-American “kinship” became commonplace. As early as 1896, Arthur Balfour, leader of the House of Commons, ventured that “the idea of

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war with the United States carries with it some of the unnatural horror of a civil war . . . The time will come, the time must come, when someone, some statesman of authority . . . will lay down the doctrine that between English-speaking peoples war is impossible."^3

The experience of World War I broadened and deepened cooperation among the Atlantic democracies, expediting Anglo-French entente and demonstrating that like-minded states could band together against a common threat. The United States contravened its aversion to "entangling alliances", viewing Germany's continental dominance as a threat to U.S. interests, not just an "intra-European" matter. Wartime collaboration heightened expectations of a new postwar order based on the logic of collective security.

But the Atlantic democracies were not yet prepared for deeper forms of peacetime cooperation; they had banded together only as necessary to respond to common threats. The United States entered World War I and World War II only after coming under direct attack. Britain was similarly reluctant to fight alongside France in both wars. And the interwar period made all too clear the contingent nature of common interest. The Senate rejected U.S. participation in the League of Nations, unwilling to take on standing obligations to collective action. Europe's democracies were more willing to undertake such commitments in principle, but their reluctance to uphold them through action readily became clear during the 1930s. The interwar period proved to be the era of fragile "coalitions of the willing", not collective security.

From Pearl Harbor through the dissolution of the Soviet Union, cooperative security was the guiding logic of transatlantic relations. The Atlantic democracies pooled their defense resources as well as their sovereignty, agreeing to consensual decision-making and binding themselves to each other through integrated military commands, combined forces and multilateral institutions. Far from triggering balancing, material power within the Atlantic community wielded a magnetic attraction, "grouping" states around centers of strength such as the United States and the Franco-German coalition.

During the Cold War, the Atlantic democracies had common interests, not just contingently convergent ones, making their security indivisible and encouraging them to take on institutionalized obligations. Whereas the League of Nations foundered on the shoals of America's reluctance to formalize its foreign commitments, the United Nations enjoyed near-unanimous support in the Senate. Whereas the United States steered clear of Europe's troubles in the 1930s, during the Cold War the United States deployed troops in Germany, legally bound itself to Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty, and took other steps to ensure that the two sides of the Atlantic would not be decoupled.

The compatible identities of the interwar period gave way to a shared Western identity during the Cold War. Individual countries maintained their own national institutions and symbols, but they also worked hard to build a transnational sense of unity and solidarity. Backed up by a discourse of shared values, common culture and durable partnership, transatlantic cohesion took on a taken-for-granted quality during the Cold War years. The Atlantic community was not just an alliance, but also a security community—an international society knit together by a sense of "we-ness."

The THIRD era of transatlantic relations, like the two before it, has been brought to an end by geopolitical change. Yet at

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this historical intersection, the Atlantic community has suffered a serious reversal, rather than an advance. The deterioration began well before the election of George W. Bush and the tragedies of September 11. The reasons are no surprise. The strategic priorities of America and Europe started to diverge soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the absence of a common external threat, Europe and America no longer relied on each other to defend first-order security interests. NATO has continued to exist as a military alliance only in name, its provisions for collective defense having become moot after it shifted its focus to out-of-area missions.

Moreover, in the region that now preoccupies policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic—the greater Middle East—the United States and Europe have often pursued divergent policies. During the Cold War, the impact of such differences was muted by the solidarity resulting from the Soviet threat. Absent a militarized inter-German border, the troublesome issues that used to be distractions have come to dominate the transatlantic agenda. The events of 9/11 have not helped matters. Although NATO now maintains a sizable operation in Afghanistan, Washington initially turned down the alliance’s offer of help in toppling the Taliban, dealing a blow to the spirit and form of transatlantic solidarity. The vast majority of Europeans, taking the War on Terror to Baghdad was both unwise and illegitimate. And Americans and Europeans have embraced different views of the source of Islamic extremism and how best to combat it.

The evolution of the European Union (EU) has added to the transatlantic discord. A Europe at peace and a deeper and wider EU have diminished European dependence on American power. Europeans have accordingly grown more ready to assert their autonomy and chart their own course, upon occasion breaking with the United States on key policy issues such as the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the war in Iraq. Enlargement also extended Europe’s sway eastward and southward, its influence coming at the expense of America’s traditional dominance in the strategic heartland of Eurasia.

The deterioration in Atlantic relations has also been the product of secular change in U.S. politics—in particular, the collapse of America’s bipartisan consensus on foreign policy. The centrist coalition that was the political foundation for America’s multilateral engagement in global affairs has fallen prey to polarization and partisanship, producing a unilateralist brand of American internationalism unwelcome in Europe. The ideological proclivities of the Bush Administration certainly contributed to the fraying of America’s international partnerships. But it will take much more than a change of personnel in the White House to restore bipartisanship and moderation to an America increasingly divided along ideological and geographic lines. The erosion of the centrist internationalism of the Cold War era has contributed substantially to transatlantic acrimony, perhaps ensuring that what might have been a mere drift in the relationship evolved into an open rift.

Although many observers chalk up the recent turmoil to “politics as usual” within a robust West, the Atlantic order is experiencing systemic change. In important respects, the emerging order more closely resembles that of the decades before rather than after World War II. Cooperative security—the linchpin of the Cold War order—is no longer the exclusive logic governing relations. Balance-of-threat thinking is making a distinct comeback. Europe is not balancing against American power, but it is balancing against U.S. behavior. Europe's resistance to U.S. policy
has for the most part taken the form of "soft balancing"—attempts to isolate the United States diplomatically, as occurred over the Kyoto Protocol and the ICC. However, the effort by France and Germany (along with Russia) to block the invasion of Iraq constituted a far more serious form of resistance. These countries did not just opt out of the war—a move that would have been consistent with cooperative security—but they mounted a determined and successful campaign to deny the United States the backing of the UN Security Council.

Had the UN Security Council passed a second resolution authorizing the war, the United States would probably have been able to amass a much larger military coalition and to secure basing and transit rights in Turkey and other states in the region. Furthermore, the United Nations and other international organizations would have been more involved in postwar governance and reconstruction, substantially increasing the chances of a more orderly occupation. In short, by denying the war a UN blessing, France and Germany arguably imposed considerable costs on the United States in terms of both resources and lives.

The United States responded in kind, readily embracing balance-of-threat logic. The Bush Administration sought to drive a wedge between pro-war and anti-war members of the EU. The U.S. government also adopted a decidedly negative view of the project of European integration, worried that a common foreign and security policy might deny Washington the ability, when needed, to secure the support of individual EU members—as it did in the case of the Iraq War. Just as Europe sought to preserve its global sway by hoping that the Civil War would divide and weaken the United States, Washington sought to disaggregate Europe to counter the potential threat it posed to U.S. hegemony. Balance-of-threat thinking prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic.

This record makes clear that Europe and America no longer share the commonality of interest that they enjoyed during the Cold War. Instead, their interests have returned to being separate, even if contingently convergent—precisely why transatlantic security institutions have been strained to the breaking point. Washington now prefers coalitions of the willing because it accurately perceives a more divided geopolitical environment in which individual countries whose interests are affected—rather than the Atlantic alliance as a collective—are likely to be the key participants in most conceivable military operations. Europeans have done their own picking and choosing. Despite America’s debacle in Iraq, NATO—the institutional and symbolic centerpiece of the Atlantic order—has kept its distance, limiting its contribution to the training of Iraqi security forces. That NATO became only tangentially involved in a crisis of the magnitude faced by the United States in Iraq speaks volumes about the erosion that has taken place in Atlantic solidarity.

The Atlantic order has suffered similar setbacks on matters of identity. The sense of "we-ness" that emerged amid World War II and the Cold War has dimmed considerably. In Europe, the French are no longer alone in calling for the EU to act as a counterweight to the United States. In the United States, it is not just Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who denigrates "Old Europe"; New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has labeled France as an "enemy" of the United States. The erosion of communal identity is occurring not only among elites; surveys reveal a troubling increase in the percentage of Europe's citizens holding an unfavorable view of America's presence in Iraq as

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posing a greater threat to international peace than Iran’s theocratic regime.\(^5\)

**The Atlantic democracies have turned back the clock.** As during the 1905–1941 era, balance-of-threat thinking is prevalent, interests are separate even if they on occasion converge and a shared Western identity has given way to a new sense of separateness. This setback is neither a temporary aberration nor a passing by-product of the policies of the Bush Administration. Rather, deeper changes in the geopolitical environment and America’s domestic politics are at work; the Atlantic order will remained frayed regardless of which party holds power in Washington.

Although a step backward, the new Atlantic order that is emerging is not necessarily cause for alarm. Peaceful coexistence and contingent cooperation still provide the basis for a stable order in which militarized conflict remains remote, if not unthinkable. Collaboration promises to continue on many fronts, with the transatlantic area enjoying far deeper and wider networks and institutions than existed during the interwar period. From commercial integration, to interoperable military forces, to cooperation on law enforcement and intelligence, the two sides of the Atlantic remain deeply interdependent.

Such interdependence has helped transatlantic relations make a distinct comeback during Bush’s second term. Soon after re-election, Bush visited Brussels and affirmed his support for European unity and transatlantic partnership. Confronted with the drain on resources that the occupation of Iraq has imposed on the United States, Washington rediscovered the need for international partners. The EU and its member states promptly reciprocated the effort to mend fences. Pragmatic cooperation ensued on a host of issues, most notably Iran, Afghanistan and the Palestine-Israel conflict. From this perspective, the Atlantic democracies may be finding their way to “normalcy”, an order that lacks the unique affinity and cohesion of the Cold War years, but nonetheless enjoys the benefits of pacific relations, economic integration and not infrequent instances of political and military collaboration.

To maximize the cooperative potential of this emerging order, the United States and Europe would be well served to adjust transatlantic institutions to the new realities. If coalitions of the willing, rather than a collective NATO, are likely to be the main vehicle for security cooperation, then it makes sense to reform NATO by loosening its unanimity rule. Article V, the commitment to collective defense of alliance territory, need not be diluted. But as the bulk of NATO’s prospective missions lie well beyond its territory, where only certain members will be capable of and interested in participating, more flexibility is needed for coordinating such operations. Otherwise, future efforts to organize ad hoc coalitions will come off as affronts to multilateralism rather than episodes of pragmatic teamwork. In addition, the United States and Europe should make more use of informal contact groups, a model that has proved its worth in dealing with the Balkans, Iran and the Palestine-Israel conflict.

Atlantic cooperation can be further enhanced by upgrading EU-U.S. linkages. Too many transatlantic priorities are not on NATO’s narrow agenda, and the European Union, albeit too slowly, is deepening its collective character on matters of foreign policy. In this respect, the EU should quicken steps to develop a more unified voice on security matters and acquire the military capability needed to

back it up. Progress on the defense front would enable Europe to capitalize more effectively on opportunities for military cooperation with America. Washington would be prepared to listen more intently to European concerns if the EU had important assets that it could offer in return for U.S. compromise. The United States would get the help it needs in shouldering global responsibilities. The Europeans would get the influence they want, forestalling European inclinations to balance against U.S. policy.

Even with these adjustments, the Atlantic security order will remain far more turbulent than during the heyday of alliance. On a regular basis, Europe and America will differ over issues such as international justice, the role of international institutions and policy in the Middle East—as became clear after the recent outbreak of war between Israel and Hezbollah. Accordingly, the Atlantic democracies need to learn how to disagree more agreeably. They should at all costs avoid open political confrontations of the sort that emerged over Iraq; substantive differences should be aired through diplomatic channels, not at press conferences. In public, officials and opinion makers should guard against the inflated rhetoric of the recent past. Especially among younger Americans and Europeans coming of age after the fall of the Berlin Wall, talk of heated rivalry has the potential to polarize attitudes—and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Atlantic relations are still in a transitional phase; it is too soon to discern the defining features of the era that is emerging. Nonetheless, scholars and policymakers alike would be wise to acknowledge that the Atlantic order has already passed through a historical breakpoint and that the robust alliance of the past five decades is no more. Recognizing that reality and adjusting expectations accordingly offers the most promise for consolidating a new, even if more modest, Atlantic partnership.