6 Shifting Geopolitics and Contested Politics: New Challenges to the Transatlantic Alliance

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Today, transatlantic cooperation continues to be fraught with mutual recriminations, including Washington's perennial irritation at Europe's dwindling military spending.

For a quarter century now, transatlantic security relations have been shifting from a partnership with a clearly defined strategic purpose to pragmatic cooperation, with priorities often diverging between the two shores of the Atlantic. Despite differences, however, U.S.-European relations have shown a remarkable degree of resilience, and examples of cooperation abound: counter-terrorism, the interventions in Afghanistan and Libya, restricting Iran's nuclear program, and the coordinated response, including the adoption of sanctions, to Russia's destabilization of Ukraine. The contours of a bargain between a leader and his/her followers, in which the followers support the leader's foreign-policy initiatives in return for a promise of protection and stability, are visible under the surface of a looser strategic relationship. Russia's increasingly unpredictable and hostile behavior and the chaos and conflict in North Africa and the Middle East warrant greater cooperation between the United States and its European partners. Yet, while Europe's geopolitics are shifting in a way that favors transatlantic strategic convergence, deeply polarized politics in both Europe and the United States might curb or even reverse these converging trends.

Shifting Expectations

Now as in the past, reality has rarely reflected U.S. and European reciprocal expectations of one another. Today, transatlantic cooperation continues to be fraught with mutual recriminations, including Washington's perennial irritation at Europe's dwindling military spending. Nevertheless, the disparity of military resources is not the only, nor even the main, factor shaping U.S. and European expectations. Many assets of a different nature — diplomacy, trade, sanctions, etc. — make transatlantic cooperation an appealing option irrespective of the gap in military capabilities. Thus, a more important fact than the disparity in resources in shaping expectations are political-strategic considerations regarding the direction the alliance should take.

The debate about the U.S. role in the world, and consequently its relationship with Europe, is unfinished business in Washington. One school of thought maintains that the United States' world primacy endures and expands through alliances and partnerships. Multilateral institutions serve the purpose of containing great-power tensions and advance U.S. global governance goals. Europe, encompassing a group of countries that are similar to the United States in political, economic, and cultural terms, provides Washington with a platform of stability on which the United States can pivot to Eurasia, Africa, and the Middle East. The United States should not only solicit European help, but also seek coordination whenever possible and spur the Europeans to take a more proactive role in containing instability in the continent's neighborhood.

Another school of thought argues that the United States should reorientate its alliance with the Europeans in a way that more closely reflects its imperative to remain the hegemonic power in Europe and the Middle East. According to this view, the United States should rely on those allies most willing (and able) to contribute to keep the United States' rivals — Russia, Iran, China — at bay. Broadly speaking, these two schools of thought can be said to represent the prevailing European views of Democratic and Republican administrations. The Europe policies of future U.S. administrations are likely to oscillate between these two ends, although we cannot rule out the possibility of an abrupt change of tack if the Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, were to win the presidency.

Europe's expectations of the United States are more difficult to discern. On one hand, EU countries are supportive of multilateral rules and regimes; on the

other hand, they are also aware that the endurance of the liberal order rests on the United States' willingness to use its hard power to guarantee it. Thus, the Europeans trade their foreign policy independence for loyalty to a benign hegemon with which they share a Western political and historical identity. The general expectation in Europe is that the United States fulfills its part of the bargain and continues to underpin the liberal order while also protecting European territory and containing the risk of insecurity spillovers from Europe's troubled neighborhood. However, there is no consensus about what U.S. leadership should look like and no consensus about what Europe should do if U.S. leadership is wanting.

Common Interests

In line with the general direction of transatlantic relations, NATO has been affected by the trend toward a more functional kind of relationship. It has become a multi-purpose alliance, with first crisis management and then cooperative security and partnerships becoming — at least on paper — tasks as important as defense and deterrence. In the wake of the severe deterioration in which Europe currently finds itself, however, the situation is changing.

To the east, Russia has turned increasingly hostile, using force to exert as much control as possible over the former Soviet space, building up its military posture along borders with NATO's countries and resorting to provocations to create anxiety, foment divisions, and test the Alliance's solidarity. To the south, the security landscape is punctuated by contested areas in which armed groups with a violent and often millenarian agenda proliferate and criminal networks thrive on illicit trafficking of arms, drugs, and human beings. War- and poverty-driven flows of migrants have put enormous pressure on EU governments and have contributed to the rise of anti-immigration movements in favor of reasserting sovereign control of national policies, including by exiting the EU (or the eurozone). Political fragmentation along parochially defined national interests threatens the cohesiveness of Europe.

To put up a meaningful response to these multifaceted, complex challenges, the Western allies should first deconstruct them. The kind of challenge Russia poses in Europe is different from the one that it poses in the Mediterranean. Russia's interests in the Mediterranean can to an extent be reconciled with the West's. They share opposition to jihadism, cooperate to ensure full implementation of the nuclear deal with Iran, want to preserve Iraq's territorial unity, and are the main framers of the Syria peace talks (even if they support opposing camps). In Europe, however, Russia's challenge is fundamental in nature. Dissatisfied with the post-Cold War security order, Moscow has critically undermined it.

Arms control arrangements, both nuclear and conventional alike, are faltering or gone. Russia is most likely in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty (as probably is the United States, following the deployment of missile defense systems in Romania). Moscow has also suspended the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty, which set ceilings on troop levels and movements, and has terminated cooperation with the United States in the framework of the Nunn-Lugar initiative, aimed at securing unprotected nuclear materials. The fundamental lack of consensus between Russia and the West about the status of former Soviet republics makes it impossible for the OSCE to work as an overarching framework for cooperation. A Europe "whole and free," the visionary goal the West had set itself to pursue in the aftermath of the Cold War, is farther away than it was in the early 1990s.

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Against this backdrop, the priority for the United States and Europe is to ensure that Russia's plans to divide and undermine their alliance fail. Steps such as beefing up NATO's military presence in Central and Eastern Europe (involving as many allies as possible, to spread a sense of joint ownership), deploying systems to offset Russia's anti-area/area denial assets, increasing the number of military exercises, and developing plans to contrast hybrid warfare techniques, have become necessary. NATO should also condemn Russia's loose talks about the possible use of nuclear weapons and remind the Russians that extended nuclear deterrence by the United States remains a pillar of the Alliance.

This needs not to be presented as a return to a Cold War mindset. Gradualism, along with the reactive-adaptive approach NATO agreed on in Wales in 2014, is to be preferred to massive changes in NATO's military posture. As of now, the problem should not be how to contain Russia in the long run, but how to boost NATO's defense and deterrence assets without increasing the risk of potentially uncontrollable escalation. Mechanisms for better NATO-Russia (or U.S.-Russia) communication and addressing emergencies, including in the Syria context that nearly precipitated a military clash between Turkey and Russia, should complement the upgrade of defense and deterrence policies. If Russia and NATO, as it seems likely, are to engage in a softer form of arms race in the near future, they had best keep track of each other's moves through mutual communication.

Controlling competition is hard, but it is not impossible. After all, there is little appetite on either side of the Western-Russian divide for a major confrontation. For this very reason, NATO should tread softly regarding its open-door policy, which is clearly one element that may trigger escalation. Reaffirming the principle that all European countries enjoy full autonomy in their foreign policy does not imply that NATO should aggressively pursue association and eventual accession of those former Soviet republics that wish to join.

It goes to NATO's advantage that most of its members are also EU members, since the EU has important assets that can help in sustaining competition with Russia, most notably through sanctions and energy market regulations. The EU is also critical in complementing NATO's response to maritime, cyber, and hybrid threats. Finally, the EU (taken as a whole) and its individual member states can also manage selective cooperation with Moscow, as they provide diplomatic resources to support key negotiating formats such as the Normandy Process on Ukraine and the Syria peace talks. Thus far, NATO-EU cooperation has been intermittent and at times ineffective, yet the costs have been bearable. It is no longer so: strong coordination between the two organizations is of paramount importance if Europe has to cope with the many challenges it face. NATO's move to increase cooperation with the EU at the Alliance's Warsaw Summit was a much-needed step.

The political cohesiveness of Europe, achieved through decades of cooperation among both EU and NATO member states, is a crucial interest of both European countries and the United States. One could argue that, 25 years after the end of the Cold War, the transatlantic partners again have a vital shared interest, even in light of the United States' growing focus on the Asia-Pacific. Unfortunately, domestic politics is so contested that it might fail to produce the kind of consensus necessary to support action at the service of the goal of safeguarding Europe's cohesiveness.

Contested Politics

The combination of the sovereign debt and the migration crises, along with rising anxiety about

home-grown Islamic terrorism and Russia's savvy use of divisive propaganda, have severely dented the European public's confidence in the EU In the United States, the economic and psychological effects of the long financial crisis recovery, the discouraging results of long-standing military commitments in far-away countries, and years of hysterical partisanship, particularly in the conservative camp, have diminished the public trust in the ability of established parties to run the country for the public good.

A revival of nationalism has followed. Unlike in the past, today's nationalism is defensive rather than aggressive, and inward looking rather than power hungry. It is rooted in the growing perception that multilateral cooperation, international institutions, long-standing alliances, and partnerships favor a process of disempowerment of individual citizens and disaggregation of culturally homogeneous societies at the advantage of unaccountable political and business elites. In Europe, anti-establishment parties once at the fringes of national politics such as the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), France's Front National (FN), and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have seen their numbers grow and their political influence increase. A similar process has occurred in the United States, even though the new political forces have grown within rather than outside the traditional party system.

Courtesy of the electoral cycles in the United States, U.K., France, and Germany, the 2016-17 biennium might well go down in history as a watershed. The electoral cycle started with a bang on June 23, when British citizens shocked the world by voting to leave the EU. The Brexiteers' camp included reasonable voices, but its chances of success would have been non-existent if the U.K. electorate were not permeated with nationalist instincts of the sort described above. Brexit has the potential to do great harm to the EU, which will see its second largest economy and main military power (along with France) go at a time when it faces multiple challenges. Public confidence in the EU is likely to plunge in other countries, opening the way for anti-EU parties. In France, the anti-EU, pro-Russia, and anti-immigration FN leader Marine Le Pen is set to receive a boost in her quest for the presidency in 2017. In Germany, AfD might not have the same prospects as the FN, yet it can still influence the public debate in a way that constrains the room to maneuver of the increasingly weak established parties, particularly if Chancellor Angela Merkel fails to achieve a fourth mandate in the September 2017 federal election.

The combination of Brexit, Le Pen's victory, and AfD's gains would be enough to deal a severe blow to the EU project and the ability of European countries to sustain effective cooperation with the United States. Worse could happen if U.S. voters were to choose Donald Trump in November. Trump favors a return to nationalistic isolationism, whereby the United States would act according to narrow national interests and restructure its alliances along a rigid hierarchical pattern. In Trump's view, the United States' allies are clients rather than partners, who have to pay for the protection U.S. forces provide them or provide for it alone. Trump's state-centered and power-based view of international politics collides with such bedrocks of the transatlantic security partnership as the notion of collective defense, extended deterrence, nuclear non-proliferation and, more broadly speaking, institutionalized multilateral cooperation.

The silver lining is that both Trump and the anti-EU forces face formidable obstacles. The fact that their positions have gained so much popular support means that their arguments will no longer be seen as useful sloganeering of radicals, but as real alternative policies. The vote on Brexit has created more concerns than elation, as the Brexiteers themselves have thus far been unable

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to produce a credible plan for a more secure and prosperous post-Brexit U.K. If a majority of voters rejects the arguments put forward by Trump and other anti-EU forces, they will do so because they ultimately believe in the value of established transatlantic and EU cooperation. The winners, one would hope, should seize upon this and take steps to upgrade that cooperation.

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