

The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America are Drifting Apart

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Politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are fond of describing NATO as the most successful military alliance in modern history. Who can blame them? The transatlantic partnership between Europe and America brought peace to a war-torn continent, overcame the Soviet challenge, and provided a safe haven in which to nurture European political and economic integration. Security ties between Europe and America also facilitated cooperation on a host of other issues, and helped foster a remarkable period of material prosperity.

Given these achievements, it is hardly surprising that few voices now call for an end to the alliance, and equally unsurprising that pundits like Zbigniew Brzezinski believe it can work a similar magic in areas far beyond NATO's original mandate. Unfortunately, such claims ignore the deep structural forces that are already beginning to pull Europe and America apart. Instead of becoming the core of an expanding security community, united by liberal values, free markets, and strong international institutions, the transatlantic partnership that fought and won the Cold War is already showing unmistakable signs of strain. No matter how many new states join NATO, and no matter how many solemn reaffirmations emerge from the endless parade of NATO summits, the high-water mark of transatlantic security cooperation is past.

The reasons are not difficult to discern. For the past forty years, the partnership between Europe and the United States was held together by three unifying forces. The first and most important was the Soviet threat. The second was America's economic stake in Europe, which reinforced its strategic interest in European prosperity. The third was the existence of a generation of European and American elites whose personal backgrounds and life experiences left them strongly committed to the idea of an Atlantic community.

All three unifying forces are now gone or eroding, and there is little hope of resurrecting them. NATO's formal structure may remain intact (and the alliance may keep busy adding new members), but Americans and Europeans should no longer base their foreign and military policies on a presumption of military cooperation.

The Pattern of Intervention

To a large extent, the entire idea of an "Atlantic community" rests on America's willingness to commit its military power to defend its European allies. When considering whether this commitment has a future, it is useful to recall when and why it arose in the first place.

In this century, the United States has taken on major overseas commitments on three occasions: World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. The common thread in each case has been fear that another great power was about to establish hegemony in Europe or Asia.

It is worth remembering that the United States did not intervene in either world war until it became clear that the Eurasian powers were unable to uphold the balance of power on their own.

The United States let the other powers bear most of the costs of their competition, and emerged from each of these conflicts in much better shape than anyone else.

This self-interested policy may not have been good for the Europeans or Asians, but it wasn't all that bad for the United States. Instead of letting our allies free-ride on us, as they have done since 1949, the United States spent the first part of the century free-riding on them. Earlier and more extensive U.S. involvement might have prevented these conflicts, but such efforts might well have failed, and at far higher cost to the United States.

Similarly, the United States withdrew most of its armed forces from Europe after World War II, and agreed to bring them back only when it became clear that the European powers were in no position to stand up to the Soviet Union. Yet, even then, U.S. leaders never envisioned the permanent deployment of American troops in Europe and actively sought to bring them home throughout the 1950s.

What these episodes suggest--and suggest strongly--is that the United States has been willing to sustain costly military commitments outside the Western Hemisphere only when another great power has threatened to establish hegemony in Europe (and the same, incidentally, is true of Asia). Europe faces no such threat today, and there are no credible threats on the horizon. Whatever U.S. forces are doing in Europe, they are not there to protect our wealthy and stable allies from external aggression.

No Threat, No Cohesion

Western Europe and the United States were brought together by the raw power of the Soviet Union, its geographic proximity to Europe, its large, offensively oriented military forces, and its open commitment to spreading world revolution. Because the Europeans were loath to sacrifice their independence and the United States was loath to let any single power dominate the entire Eurasian landmass, the industrial democracies of Europe and North America had ample reason to downplay their differences in order to preserve a common front.

The disappearance of the Soviet threat has eliminated this overriding common interest, and though Europe and the United States still share some common goals, they are of a different order of urgency and seriousness. The United States and Europe are separated by geography, language, historical experience, and relative capabilities, and the U.S. interest in Europe is neither as obvious nor as significant in the absence of a potential hegemon perched on NATO's doorstep. This absence is to be welcomed, of course, and it would be foolish--and dangerous--to conjure up new foes merely to keep the West together. But, inevitably, this fundamental shift in the landscape of world politics is already having adverse effects on the transatlantic partnership.

First, conflicts of interest are becoming more visible and significant. The sad history of the Bosnian conflict offers eloquent testimony to this, and only the realization that NATO was coming unglued brought a belated and partial agreement for common action. NATO did manage to make a token show of force in response to Serbian repression in Kosovo, but its reluctance to take meaningful military action was apparent to all and the agreement negotiated by Richard Holbrooke is a temporary fix at best. America's European allies openly reject the policy of "dual

containment" in the Persian Gulf and have been increasingly unwilling to enforce the UNSCOM inspection regime against Iraq. Our allies also hold profoundly different views on the Middle East peace process and on the proper approach to Castro's Cuba, and they are quietly resentful of America's penchant for cloaking unilateral action in the rhetoric of "multilateralism." The United States stood alone at the Kyoto conference on the environment, broke ranks with its allies over a global ban on landmines, and is the only NATO member to vote against the creation of an International Criminal Court to try accused human rights violators. The October G-7 meeting on the world financial crisis was notable primarily for the absence of any consensus, despite the worldwide recognition that concerted action would be helpful. Europeans also resent America's cultural hegemony and are baffled by the partisan bloodletting of l'affaire Lewinsky.

Second, the lack of a common foe exacerbates the familiar problem of credibility. So long as Soviet forces stood on the Elbe, the United States had an obvious interest in keeping Western Europe independent of Soviet control. Although it was occasionally necessary to make symbolic gestures to reaffirm the commitment, U.S. interest in keeping the Red Army out of Western Europe gave it fundamental credibility. Now that there is no real threat, however, our allies have valid grounds to question our staying power. It can hardly be reassuring, for example, that the United States tried repeatedly to get the Europeans to solve the Bosnian crisis on their own, and that the eventual U.S. entry into Bosnia was accompanied by open hand-wringing in Congress and by an all-too-visible reluctance to risk even minimal U.S. casualties. No matter how often or how eloquently the President or his senior advisers reaffirm the U.S. commitment, Europeans now have ample reason to doubt it. Rhetoric cannot substitute for interest.

Third, all parties to the alliance now have a wider array of options. During the Cold War, the rigid logic of bipolarity limited choices on both sides of the Iron Curtain, which meant there was little debate about the fundamentals of Western grand strategy. Europeans had no choice but to rely on the United States and defer to its wishes, and the United States had little choice but to protect them. Isolationism was utterly discredited in the United States, and a truly independent foreign and military policy was never seriously considered in countries like Germany.

Options that were once ruled out are being openly proposed, possibilities that were previously rejected can be reconsidered, and seemingly sacrosanct commitments can be re-examined. This new latitude is itself an important development, because we can never be sure what elites and publics will conclude once an issue is opened up to new ideas.

These sources of strain are not a big secret; if anything, the constant reaffirmations of transatlantic solidarity actually betray the widespread tacit recognition that the alliance can no longer be taken for granted. The key point, however, is that these stresses are not due to a failure of will, vision, or political skill on the part of NATO's present leaders--and therefore cannot be remedied by greater effort in those departments. Rather, they are a direct consequence of the Soviet collapse, which removed the single most important cause of transatlantic security cooperation. This does not mean that NATO will dissolve next week, of course. But it does mean that its strongest source of cohesion is now gone.

Weakening Economic Ties

During NATO's heyday, economic ties between Europe and America helped reinforce the overriding strategic rationale. U.S. policymakers recognized that Europe's economic recovery would contribute to America's own economic growth and strengthen the Western alliance as a whole. Europe was also an important trading partner and a substantial target for U.S. foreign investment, although our stake in Europe was still a relatively small share of the U.S. economy.

This source of unity is now also of declining importance as well. Asia surpassed Europe as the main target of U.S. trade as long ago as 1983, and U.S. trade with Asia is now more than one and a half times larger than trade with Europe. U.S. direct investment in Europe is still larger than that in Asia, but the gap has begun to close.

The shift in U.S. foreign economic activity has been accompanied by a simultaneous trend toward regionalization. European integration has proceeded apace, beginning with the Single European Act in 1986 and continuing through the Maastricht agreement in 1991 and the imminent debut of the single European currency, the euro. A similar tendency may be observed on the other side of the Atlantic as well, most notably in the 1992 North American Free Trade Agreement entered into by the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

These developments threaten transatlantic ties in several ways. First, although economic connections do not determine security commitments, the shift in economic activity from Europe to Asia will inevitably lead U.S. policymakers to devote more energy and attention to the latter. This is especially the case since major security challenges are more likely to arise in Asia, and that is where the most likely future challenger to U.S. hegemony--the People's Republic of China--is located. The Asian financial crisis and the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests are likely to reinforce this gradual shift. Time and resources being finite, all this heralds an inevitable decline in the level of attention devoted to Europe. (Bear in mind that former Secretary of State Warren Christopher took office warning against an overly "Eurocentric" foreign policy. The Bosnian tragedy was thus something of a godsend for Europhiles, because it forced the Clinton administration to pay more attention to Europe than it had initially intended.) Although area specialists and bureau chiefs will continue to keep watch on their appointed regions, high-level officials will devote less time, energy, and political capital to an area whose relative importance is declining. European leaders may try to fight this trend, but will eventually react by paying less attention to Washington. The result will be an erosion of transatlantic cohesion.

Again, the expansion of the European Union is bound to create further tensions. NATO expansion and European political and monetary union are often portrayed as mutually supportive initiatives, which will bring new and old democracies together in an expanding liberal order. These initiatives may be compatible within Europe itself, but a stronger EU will strain ties with the United States in countless ways. Economic and monetary union will make Europe a more formidable economic rival, and the euro could eventually challenge the dollar's position as the principal international reserve currency. Thus, some of the fiscal advantages the United States has long enjoyed in the international financial system will be lost, and there will be new conflicts over the management of the international economic order.

Many Europeans believe that monetary union means greater political unity. If this does indeed occur, the resulting "United States of Europe" will be larger, wealthier, and potentially more powerful than the United States of America. Over time, Americans would probably come to regard such a European superstate as a major global rival. And after having been forced to accept U.S. leadership for over half a century, the leaders of a United Europe would undoubtedly relish the chance to assert their independence. At a minimum, European integration means that the United States no longer needs to stay in Europe to keep our allies from fighting each other. At a maximum, it means the emergence of a potential challenger to U.S. primacy.

Domestic Changes

The structural shifts pulling the United States and Europe apart will be reinforced by domestic developments on both sides of the Atlantic. These trends will be difficult if not impossible to reverse, further weakening the glue that has kept the transatlantic partnership together for four decades.

The United States traces its origins to European civilization, and most Americans have ancestral ties there. These ties are sometimes invoked to justify our present commitments, and to explain why we remain deeply interested in European affairs. Yet this source of transatlantic solidarity is often overstated. The original settlers and Founding Fathers were not exactly loyal Europeans, and many of the immigrants who populated North America did not harbor affectionate sentiments toward the countries they had left. Cultural and ethnic ties between Europe and America did not prevent the United States from staying out of Europe's conflicts during the nineteenth century, and did not make America's leaders eager to enter either world war. And we should not forget that both wars were fought against Europeans as well as with them.

Moreover, to the extent that ethnic or cultural ties reinforced our interest in Europe, their effectiveness is probably diminishing. Not only is the percentage of U.S. citizens of European origin declining, but the original European immigrants arrived several generations ago and assimilation and intermarriage have by now diluted the sense of affinity with the "old country." Recent immigrants from Asia or Latin America are more likely to retain these cultural affinities and to hold strong views about U.S. policy toward these areas.

Furthermore, the past four decades have witnessed a profound westward shift in the U.S. population, away from the Atlantic. In 1950 approximately 27 percent of the U.S. population lived in the Northeast, while the West contained a mere 13.7 percent. In 1995, by contrast, the West had grown to 21.9 percent of the U.S. population while the Northeast had fallen to 19.6 percent. The U.S. Bureau of the Census also predicts that the fastest growing states in the period 1993-2020 will be Nevada, Hawaii, California, and Washington. California (already the most populous state in the country) is expected to add another sixteen million persons by 2020. This shift westward could also encourage a gradual shift in geopolitical focus.

The most important trend, however, concerns generational change. As symbolized by the last two U.S. presidential elections, in which decorated World War II veterans were defeated by a man born after that war who had avoided military service, we are now witnessing the swan song of the generation for whom the Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War were defining

historical events. The people who built NATO were East Coast internationalists with strong personal and professional ties to Europe: men like Dean Acheson, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Paul Nitze, and John Foster Dulles. That generation cut its teeth on conflict in Europe, and the transatlantic partnership was their most enduring professional legacy. They believed that Europe's fate was worth fighting--and perhaps dying--for, and they were willing to risk considerable blood and treasure to protect these allies.

These figures are now gone, and the successor generations have grown up with very different memories and associations. Watching *Saving Private Ryan* is no substitute for having lived through the real thing, and the familiar litanies of transatlantic partnership will not resonate as loudly for the cohort that is beginning to move into key think tanks, government ministries, legislative seats, and eventually into executive mansions. The Cold War partnership between Europe and America will have even less meaning to those now in high school or college, or to children for whom the Cold War itself will be merely an historical episode. Subsequent generations may recognize the value of transatlantic cooperation and try to preserve it, but it will never kindle the reflexive emotional response that it did for their parents and grandparents.

Taken together, these forces mean that, instead of being guided by an elite group of East Coast internationalists committed to Europe by family backgrounds, personal experiences, and professional affiliations, U.S. foreign policy will be shaped by a more diverse collection of elites whose ethnic characteristics, geographic points of reference, and personal experiences will not grant Europe pride of place.

A similar process is occurring across the Atlantic. The post-World War II generation was accustomed to following the U.S. lead, both because it was dependent on U.S. protection and because the war had shattered Europe's self-confidence. These handicaps will not shackle the next generation of European leaders, who are going to be much less willing to follow Uncle Sam wherever he points. To note just one example, the recent German election signals the arrival of a new generation of German leaders, whose "youthful indiscretions" include open opposition to NATO and participation in anti-American street demonstrations. Although men like Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer have moderated their earlier views, it is hard to believe that Germany's new leaders will be as responsive to American dictates as were their predecessors. The ascendance of these new elites does not sound a death knell for the alliance, but preserving it will certainly be more difficult.

Is there any evidence of these trends already? On the one hand, U.S. elites and mass publics continue to support an "internationalist" foreign policy, and have soundly endorsed NATO's eastward expansion. Americans continue to see Europe as an important interest and citizens on both sides of the Atlantic apparently retain a high regard for one another.

On the other hand, there is growing evidence of a declining willingness to engage in costly overseas commitments. Although 65 percent of U.S. citizens still believe the United States should take "an active part" in world affairs (at least when the alternative response is "staying out"), their support wanes when warned that this role might entail real sacrifices. Support for the U.S. deployment to Bosnia, for example, is clearly predicated on the assumption that this will not cost American lives. A similar reluctance to "bear any burden" also explains why the Clinton

administration kept lowering the estimated cost of NATO expansion as ratification approached. Americans may favor expanding NATO, but not if it is going to cost them very much. And the same attitude is reflected in our recent response to terrorist leader Osama bin Laden: the Clinton administration rejected several plans for seizing him because they would have placed U.S. soldiers at risk, and chose instead to send pilotless cruise missiles against targets that could not directly retaliate.

To be sure, Americans still want to retain military superiority, but support for our present level of defense expenditure is unlikely to survive the generational changes noted earlier and the fiscal constraints that loom ahead. Barring the rise of a major and direct threat to U.S. security, U.S. military power will continue to erode. And with that decline will come even greater reluctance to engage in potentially dangerous international activities.

Thus, a powerful set of domestic and international forces is pulling the transatlantic alliance apart. The process may be delayed by adroit statesmanship and bureaucratic inertia, but a gradual parting of the ways is virtually inevitable.

The Dorian Gray Alliance

Wartime alliances rarely survive the enemy's defeat, and in that sense NATO is already something of an anomaly. Its members remain committed to mutual defense even though the threat that brought them together has vanished, and they are trying to sustain a high level of policy coordination even though their interests and goals are gradually diverging. NATO has redefined its mission and is in the process of taking on new members, a process that has been strongly endorsed by the U.S. Congress and the American people.

These events would seem to cast doubt on any gloomy prognosis for NATO. If the divisive forces described above are present and growing, then what explains the persistence of the transatlantic ideal, and especially America's willingness to maintain or expand its world-girdling array of security commitments? I believe four factors are responsible.

First, the end of the Cold War left the United States in an unprecedented position of pre-eminence. Victorious great powers typically try to mold postwar worlds to suit their own interests and ideals, and the United States is not the sort of country that would pass up such an opportunity. Not every foreign policy elite gets a chance to remake the world in its own image, and the energetic internationalists in the Clinton administration have been especially vulnerable to this temptation. We like telling ourselves that we are the "indispensable nation"--to use Madeleine Albright's self-flattering phrase--and it even seems appropriate when the U.S. economy is strong and when the enormous military establishment acquired during the Cold War is at the disposal of our leadership.

Second, the United States is able to extend these new commitments because other states are only too happy to keep free-riding on American protection. Why should the Europeans do the heavy lifting when Uncle Sam is still willing to do most of the work? Why wouldn't Poland or Hungary want the prospect of U.S. protection, even if it is a guarantee that we don't really want to honor? The United States remains Europe's ideal ally, not least because we are an ocean away and do not

threaten to dominate it. Although our allies resent our highhandedness and seek to rein in our impulsive excesses, for the most part they have been letting us have our way.

Third, keeping NATO together made good sense in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, if only because it was unclear how events in the former Soviet Union were going to evolve. We could not be certain that Russia would not get back on its feet and once again pose a direct threat to Europe, so keeping the alliance together was the prudent course until Russia's eclipse was unmistakable.

Finally, the Atlantic Alliance is heavily institutionalized, and no organization goes out of business quickly or willingly. Having been in business for more than four decades, NATO is now buttressed by a large formal bureaucracy and by an extensive transatlantic cadre of former NATO officials, defense intellectuals, military officers, and journalists, all of whose professional lives have been devoted to preserving the "Atlantic community." Ending the alliance would remove their main professional preoccupation and call a halt to the endless series of conferences that these elites have long enjoyed. It is therefore not surprising that they resist any hint that NATO is beginning to dissolve, or that they have labored hard to devise new ways of keeping it busy.

Given these four factors, one can envision an optimistic scenario in which the transatlantic partnership holds together and gradually expands, peace deepens, and prosperity grows. In this scenario, NATO may not have to actually do much of anything, so nobody in the United States minds and everything remains tranquil. This is precisely the vision that the Clinton administration has been counting on: expansion prevents conflict throughout Europe, and the United States never has to pay any real costs at all.

Unfortunately, this scenario is unlikely to weather the challenges that lie ahead. NATO's eastward expansion will provide new opportunities for disputes within the alliance, and we can expect to see repeated quarrels over how far and how fast to expand, and over who will bear the costs and risks of these new responsibilities. If the U.S. economy slows or goes into recession--as it eventually will--support for overseas commitments is likely to shrink sharply. And when one of these commitments eventually costs U.S. lives--as one did in Somalia--skeptics will be quick to ask whether U.S. vital interests are really at stake.

Most importantly, the passage of time will bring European and American differences into sharper relief. Consider the implications of China's continued rise. If China does emerge as a true great power in the next century, the United States is likely to take steps to contain its influence. Such a policy will require allies in Asia and the Pacific; but the Europeans are both less interested in this problem and have less to contribute to solving it. (Indeed, a revitalized Russia would be a more useful ally against a rising China, which is a good reason why the United States should not humiliate Moscow by expanding NATO ever eastward.)

The China example illustrates the fundamental problem once again: shorn of an overarching threat to compel Western unity, the United States and its European partners have less and less reason to agree. Although they retain certain common interests and will continue to cooperate on some issues, consensus will be neither as significant nor as automatic as it was in the past.

Instead, the Atlantic Alliance is beginning to resemble Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, appearing youthful and robust as it grows older--but becoming ever more infirm. The Washington Treaty may remain in force, the various ministerial meetings may continue to issue earnest and upbeat communiques, and the Brussels bureaucracy may keep NATO's web page up and running--all these superficial routines will go on, provided the alliance isn't asked to actually do anything else. The danger is that NATO will be dead before anyone notices, and we will only discover the corpse the moment we want it to rise and respond.

The waning of the transatlantic partnership is no reason to rejoice. NATO was a great source of stability during the Cold War, and its existence helped manage the potentially dangerous interregnum that followed the collapse of the Soviet empire. But nothing is permanent in international affairs, and NATO's past achievements should not blind us to its growing fragility. Instead of mindlessly extending guarantees to every potential trouble spot, and instead of basing our foreign policy on a presumption of permanent partnership, it is time for Europe and the United States to begin a slow and gradual process of disengagement. This is going to happen anyway, and wise statecraft anticipates and exploits the tides of history rather than engaging in a fruitless struggle to hold them back.