

## THE FUTURE OF THE WESTERN ALLIANCE:

### AN HISTORIAN'S VIEW

In 1999, I published a book called *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963*. My goal there was to show how a relatively stable international system came into being during the Cold War period. That system, I argued, was stable *not* because Soviet power and American power balanced each other in Europe. In fact, I did not think that the United States and the USSR balanced each other so completely that those two powers, and the European countries as well, were all more or less locked into the status quo—that no one, that is, had any real choice but to live with things as they were. The system, I thought, was just not to be viewed in such simple terms.

The basic structure, as I saw it, was more complex; the basic dynamic was more subtle. The key point here was that there was a third major element in the European political equation—namely, Germany. In the system that had taken shape by 1963, German power was limited, especially in the nuclear area. But Germany was protected by the NATO alliance. The Germans could therefore live with the set of arrangements that had been worked out, and so could the Soviets, since it solved their number one security problem in Europe, the control of German power. But that system depended on a continuing American military presence in Europe: for it to be viable, the Americans had to be willing to go along with it.

So here you had a system composed of a series of interlocking parts. The Soviet threat made Germany dependent on the western powers and thus more or less willing to accept the terms those powers insisted on—provided, of course, that they were willing to defend Germany. And the western countries *were* willing to create a military organization that provided an effective counterweight to Soviet power on the continent. The system was officially directed against the USSR, but it was something the Soviets could go along with, because in that system German power was contained within a structure dominated by the United States, a country that was basically quite happy to live with things as they were in Europe. In fact, everyone could at least tacitly accept a system of that sort, since it satisfied everyone's most basic needs, and that was the fundamental reason why it proved to be so stable.

So what happened when the Cold War ended—when the Soviet Union withdrew from eastern Europe and then disappeared, when Russian power collapsed, and when Germany was reunified? The Cold War political system had rested on three pillars: the Soviet presence in the east, the American presence in the west, and the constraints on German power. One of those pillars had now collapsed, and what was left of the system rested on the two that remained. But why, now that the Soviet threat had vanished, would the Americans stay in Europe? And with the Soviets gone, with the Germans less dependent on the West, and with the Americans maybe on their way out, what would become of the limits on German power? The Germans were certainly not talking about the importance of providing for their own defense and of throwing off the constraints that remained—and above all about changing their nuclear status. But fundamental conditions had changed. And it seemed to me that the rump system, the system that

rested on just two of the three pillars, was not particularly stable. And so the book ended on a questioning note. The American troops were still in Europe, and Germany was still a non-nuclear power. But whether that system could, or should, be kept intact, I wrote, was “bound to be one of the great political issues of the twenty-first century.”<sup>1</sup>

As it turned out, the issue emerged more quickly than I had expected. The United States pursued a course of action that led in early 2003 to a war with Iraq. Most people in Europe, and key European governments as well, were deeply opposed to that policy. The result was a major crisis in U.S.-European relations—the “gravest crisis within the Atlantic Alliance since its creation five decades ago,” as Henry Kissinger put it about a month before the war broke out.<sup>2</sup>

What do these events have to do with the sorts of structural changes I was just talking about—with the fact that the political system that took shape during the Cold War period is no longer rock-solid, and that with one key element gone, that structure is no longer as stable as it once was? Well, it’s clear that there’s a certain connection. The most obvious point is that with the Soviet Union no longer a threat—in fact, no longer in existence—and with the principal successor state, Russia, so weak, Europe and America no longer need each other as much as they once did. People in Europe, and especially in Germany, are much freer now to oppose the United States when they disapprove of what the Americans are doing. And as for the Americans, a strong NATO alliance and thus good relations with the allies are not quite as important as they once were.

And if the two sides need each other less than they used to, and if their common interests are not as strong as they once were, it’s almost inevitable that people on both side of the Atlantic will begin to think about the most fundamental questions relating to the NATO alliance—questions about the purpose it serves and about the point of maintaining it. And those questions, I think, will not be easy to answer. During the Cold War, the Soviet threat provided a straightforward rationale for the alliance. Soviet military power cast such a deep shadow that one did not have to talk—too loudly, at any rate—about the other functions NATO served, above all, vis-à-vis Germany. Now that rationale is gone. But you still can’t say that the function of NATO is to keep Germany down, or even that Europe in general has an interest in keeping the Americans in as a counterweight to German power. How then is the issue to be dealt with? What rationale will people come up with for keeping the alliance intact?

People since the end of the Cold War have tended to dance around thr issue—to talk about the importance of “stability” in the abstract, or to propose new missions for NATO, missions that not everyone felt comfortable with, missions that didn’t conform to the sense many people had for what NATO was supposed to be about, missions that seemed designed to provide a somewhat artificial rationale for maintaining an alliance that had come to be viewed as a kind of end in itself.

But even if those new rationales did not quite work, the absence of a really compelling rationale did not in itself mean that the NATO alliance was destined to disappear. The alliance could remain intact through sheer inertia. People on both sides of the Atlantic felt, in effect—to

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 402.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Kissinger, “NATO’s Split: Atlantic Alliance is in its Gravest Crisis,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, February 16, 2003. For the text, see: [http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/useur/kissinger\(sdut\).html](http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/useur/kissinger(sdut).html)

quote that wonderful piece of American folk wisdom—“it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Still, it was clear even in the 1990s that something fundamental had changed. One sometimes had the sense that the Americans and the Europeans were like an old married couple that stays together through force of habit. The children are grown, the old folks don’t like each other too much, and there’s no really compelling reason for them to stay together. But ending the relationship would take too much effort, so they just go on as they have—on autopilot, so to speak—shying away from the big issues, not willing to confront the question of what their relationship is about, or what the terms of the relationship are to be. Looking at U.S.-European relations in the 1990s, you had the sense at times that the relationship itself had become somewhat hollow, and that it wouldn’t take much to end it.

The key thing here has to do with how the two sides feel about each other, and in U.S.-European relations feelings really are fundamental. Power politics, political structures, core interests objectively defined—all that is of course very important. But a lot of what goes on in the U.S.-European relationship is not to be explained in such terms. It’s not just that there is a certain ideological edge to American policy, under Democratic and Republican presidents alike. One also has the sense that the Europeans are not thinking in cold power political terms—that they are not facing up to the question of what an American withdrawal from the continent would mean for them, and are not framing their policies accordingly. In particular, they are not facing up to the question of how Europe could provide for its security in the long run if the Americans pull out—of whether Russia will stay weak forever, and if not, how that problem might be dealt with; or whether, if the Americans withdrew, Germany would build a nuclear force, and if so what that would mean for the rest of Europe. It is as though the attitude is that if a problem is not on the front burner today, if it’s the sort of problem that might take years to develop, then there’s little point in even thinking about it: in such cases, you can let the future take care of itself.

France, I think, is a good case in point. For most of the Cold War, even for most of the de Gaulle period—French policy was framed in power political terms, to a much greater degree in fact than most people realize. The French believed in balancing—not just in a simple balancing of Soviet power, but in a more complex set of arrangements, of balances within balances, like a Calder mobile. Yes, Soviet power would be balanced by the power of the West as a whole, including West Germany. But within the western bloc there had to be a counterweight to American power, and that would be provided by a Europe—a preeminently Franco-German Europe—that would act as a kind of political unit. But within that unit, German power had to be balanced. France could not be too dependent on the alignment with Germany, so that alignment had to be offset by a continuing relationship with America.

It was a policy, as I say, of balances within balances, and that basic approach made a lot of sense from the French point of view. It put France in a pivotal position and thus enabled France to play a key role in the international system.<sup>3</sup> But the French seem in recent years to have abandoned that traditional and rather subtle approach. Their policy today seems rooted in a desire to rein in the United States—to balance the American “hyper-power”—almost without regard to their long-term relationship with that country and to the effect of the deterioration of their relations with America on their general political position.

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<sup>3</sup> See the first few pages in Georges Soutou, “Georges Pompidou and U.S.-European Relations,” in *Between Empire and Alliance: America and Europe during the Cold War*, ed. Marc Trachtenberg (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

How are these changes to be understood? Are the views we've seen expressed in Europe in the past few years an understandable reaction to the shifts that have taken place in American policy since the end of the Cold War, and above all since September 11, 2001? For someone like me who's spent a lot of time studying international politics, especially in the Cold War period, the charges that have been bandied about in recent years have a certain cartoon-like quality. People talk about the "unilateralism" of the current U.S. administration, and contrast it with the "multilateralism" of its predecessors. In fact, I don't think the current administration is more "unilateralist" in any fundamental way than American administrations have been in the past. The big difference now is that the Europeans, and above all the Germans, are much more willing to oppose the United States when they don't like what the Americans are doing. To see the point, just look at how the Europeans were treated in early 1963. The Kennedy administration was very tough on Europe, and Germany especially was virtually forced to toe the American line; the Germans were in fact practically forced to get rid of their own Chancellor. This really was "unilateralism" with a vengeance. The leaders of the current U.S. administration look like pussycats in comparison.

Or what about the claim that throughout its history, and especially throughout the Cold War, the U.S. government had relied on a strategy of containment and deterrence, whereas today a more radical U.S. government has adopted a more aggressive strategy, a strategy of "preemption," as it is called? Again, the basic claim here does not stand up to analysis. America did not opt for a purely defensive policy during the Cold War period, or even earlier in the century. In 1962, for example, the United States was prepared to attack Cuba, even though there was no "imminent threat" to U.S. territory—that is, even though the missiles in Cuba were not about to be launched—and even though Cuba was a sovereign state with as much right to let the Soviets deploy missiles on its soil as the Turks had to play host to an American missile force. If the crisis ended without a war, it was because the Soviets gave way, not because the Americans had opted for a simple policy of containment and deterrence.<sup>4</sup> The same kinds of arguments can be made about some of the other charges leveled at current U.S. policy, both in Europe and in America—about America's alleged new attitude toward international law, or toward the United Nations, or about the claim that America is now willing to fight "wars of choice," whereas in the past it had only fought "wars of necessity." In fact, all of America's wars, including World War II, were "wars of choice."

So the sort of rhetoric we've been treated to in the last couple of years is not really to be taken at face value. It does not provide us with an answer to the question of why relations between America and Europe have deteriorated the way they have. That rhetoric is instead symptomatic of the underlying problem. Indeed, it serves in itself to aggravate the problem, since these charges are so deeply resented within the United States, even by people who do not see themselves as supporters of current administration policy. The Europeans, by and large, have to come think of the United States as a great imperial power—as an arrogant, lawless "empire" that needs to be restrained by international institutions and countervailing power. But in playing a very active role far beyond their own borders, the Americans see themselves as

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<sup>4</sup> See my "The Bush Strategy in Historical Perspective," forthcoming in a volume on the Nuclear Posture Review to be edited by James Wirtz and to be published by the Palgrave Press, and available now at the following URL: [http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/monterey\(8\)\(endnote\).doc](http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/monterey(8)(endnote).doc)

providing a public good and resent being viewed as imperialistic. And they're bound, I think, as they confront the issue of the purpose of the alliance, to view the problem in that context and to say to themselves, in effect: "what's the point of making this effort? what's the point of providing security to people who feel about us the way the Europeans obviously do?"

So—to get back to the main point—if those cliché arguments are not to be taken too seriously, how then is the current situation to be explained? Are we dealing here with a clash of cultures? Does the Kagan thesis—about how Americans are from Mars and the Europeans are from Venus—provide the key to the solution? I think there's something to this line of argument, especially with regard to Germany. In fact, I think there's a certain irony here, since one of the considerations that went into the design of the air war against Germany in World War II was the sense that the Germans were so aggressive in part because every one of their wars, from the 1860s on, was fought in "someone else's country," "every one of them free from devastation and destruction in their own homeland," and this the Americans were determined to change.<sup>5</sup> The war that time was in fact brought home to the Germans in a very direct way. Germany was in fact transformed from being one of the most aggressive to one of the most peaceful major countries in modern history, and the air war certainly played a major role in that transformation. So U.S. policy was in that sense a victim of its own astonishing political success. But you wouldn't want to take that argument too far, since the same set of considerations also applies to Japan, and the Japanese have certainly not turned against the United States the way the Germans have.

And that means, I think, that there is something else going on here, some element to the story that is not captured by the Kagan theory, some more powerful focal point for the feelings that have taken shape on both sides. And what I think plays the key role here is the complex of issues having to do with the relationship between the western countries and the Muslim world—the Arab-Israeli question, the question of the Muslim minorities in western Europe, the problem of terrorism, the WMD problem and so on. It's very unclear how all these questions will play themselves out, but I think it's safe to say they're not going to go away soon. And what happens in this area is bound, I think, to have a profound impact on relations between the United States and Europe.

No one can tell what that impact will be, but the one thing we shouldn't assume is that no matter what happens, the western alliance is here to stay. Alliances, like personal relationships, sometimes run their course. Since they're not ends in themselves, one should not be surprised to see them falling apart when one side or the other or even both sides feel they're not getting enough from the relationship. When that happens, it might be best to remember what Lord Salisbury had to say about how the "commonest error in politics" was "sticking to the carcasses of dead policies." Instead of trying to breathe new life into dead or dying relationships, it might be best in such cases to think about the sorts of new relationships that should be developed. It might make sense in the case of the western alliance today to at least begin to think about what a post-NATO world should look like and about how the transition to that sort of world should be managed. But an historian shouldn't try to say more than that.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Lovett testimony, describing the origins of the basic air staff planning document from 1941, AWPD-1, in 81st Congress, First Session, House of Representatives, Armed Services Committee, "Investigation of the B-36 Bomber Program," August 1949, p. 24.