The Future of Transatlantic Relations:
Europe and the United States in the 21st Century

Charles P. Kirchofer
Webster University, Vienna
Spring I, 2009
IR 5570: Comparative Foreign Policy
Professor: Jozef Bátora

Many have taken for granted the cooperation and good relations the United States and Europe have enjoyed. The long years of the Cold War have erased memories of much more ambivalent times in transatlantic relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent ending of the Cold War, have changed the dynamics on both shores of the Atlantic. The effects these changes will have on transatlantic cooperation are not clear. This paper attempts to take into account several factors that affect relations between Europe and the United States and to draw conclusions about the future of these relations. Looking into the future is always a risky task. My conclusion, accordingly, leaves room for an array of outcomes. This paper attempts to anticipate a range of possible outcomes determined by systemic and cultural factors, as well as factors related to identities, concerns, and objectives. The analysis will be done by weighing opposing forces and estimating where they would come to rest on a balancing scale.

In line with my vision of the European-American problematic as a balancing scale, I have separated forces into two groups: those that unite Americans and Europeans, and those that draw them apart. In addition, I have identified a number of areas across the two groups that are central to understanding the current situation and future direction of transatlantic relations. These factors include: systemic forces at the base level, global forces, identities, interests, and concerns. Within the category “identities,” I have also introduced two key factors identified by Keohane and Cooper that deserve a closer look: conceptions of sovereignty and positioning in two different “worlds.” All of these factors push and pull on both parties, but which forces will turn out to be more powerful? Will relations between the United States and Europe revert to the ambivalent times of the pre-WWI era, is their cooperation still assured, or is the future somewhere in the middle?

We'll start with the plus side of the scale: the things that pull Europeans and Americans together. The first factor is probably the most significant connection between Europeans and Americans: commonalities in their identities. After all, the majority of Americans are of European

decent. This leads to a great deal of shared cultured on both sides of the Atlantic. A subjective questionnaire on “culture shock” would likely show that Americans would experience the lowest culture shock when traveling to other former British colonies (like Canada and Australia). The second lowest level of culture shock would be Britain itself, followed by continental Europe. After that, other regions of the world might start to show up, like perhaps South America, Japan, or India. In any case, most would agree that Europe and the United States are not so different culturally when the entire world is taken for comparison.

But it's not just culture and history. The identity-related commonalities can also be seen in the institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. The Northern Atlantic region sports a large number of liberal democracies that share values such as freedom, protection of minorities, civil rights, and a system of checks and balances to prevent any one person from achieving too much power. In addition, a belief (though with variance in the strength with which it is held) in free markets and free trade (the WTO is or was a primarily western institution) is also shared. And we also cannot omit the effect of (mostly American) media, which is consumed on both sides of the Atlantic. These common institutions, histories, and cultural elements serve to connect Europeans and Americans.

It is naturally true that most or even all states and peoples are interested in security. Transatlantically, however, the situation is somewhat unique in that the security of one means the security of the other. In earlier times, the prisoner's dilemma meant that when one state increased its security (by becoming more powerful), the other states around it felt less secure. This is not generally the case with the U.S. and Europe. Both parties see benefits in mutual strength and security, though Europeans may at times wish to see the U.S.'s power constrained and made more predictable.

This brings us to the next point: trust. Europe and America trust each other. I mean this in the sense that no one believes anyone on either side of the Atlantic is going to invade someone on

the other side (or indeed the same side). Both sides are liberally democratic and are interested in the formation of a liberal democratic world order, even though they may disagree on how best to achieve and maintain this order.

Both sides of the Atlantic also share common concerns. These include Russia, the Middle East, terrorism, and an ascendant China with its sometimes conflicting interests (an unconditional, undemocratic lender and customer, whose security does not necessarily lead the West to feel more secure). Neither side is particularly keen on China or Russia having greater influence on the world order as long as both countries retain their authoritarianism. They recognize, too, that these states are not going away, and that China is becoming stronger. This means cooperation is important and necessary.

The last factors pushing Europeans and Americans toward cooperation are global and systemic forces that are in the works. The uniting systemic force is, admittedly, mostly a habit left over from the bipolarity of the Cold War years. Nonetheless, the U.S. and Europe still have common enemies. At the same time, Europe does not have the capability to protect itself effectively against these enemies, whereas the U.S.'s declining relative power means that it will be increasingly less able to project its military influence unchecked to the farthest corners of the globe. In addition, the global nature of problems characterized by the 21st century means that no one party, regardless of its strength, can go it alone. To make meaningful contributions to security and stability, the U.S. and Europe will find themselves needing to cooperate, whether they like it or not.

But what about the factors that pull the two sides of the Atlantic apart? As mentioned above, these factors fall into the same groups: identities, interests, concerns, and systemic or global forces. We will first look at the ways in which American and European identities do indeed differ. Americans and Europeans have a lot in common, but they are certainly not the same. Besides the superficial differences like a love for wine and cheese and the fact that it's ok to ride to work in a

business suit on a bicycle, there are more significant differences arising from different experiences.

The first, and probably most obvious problem with regard to identity is the lack of a strong, cohesive European one. Although a European identity exists and may be becoming increasingly coherent, it is still fractured and based upon different experiences. This makes communication with Europe as a unit difficult, and cooperation with Europe as a whole even harder. The next issue is the American Anglo-Saxon identity, or, as W.R. Mead would call it, its "Hamiltonian" identity. This represents a different world view from the continental European one. This free-trading, world-order building mentality is at times viewed with skepticism in much of Europe. In addition, the arising European identity that does exist is based on the post WWII "Pax Americana," which led Europeans to believe power was no longer necessary to maintain peace (not realizing that America's presence in Europe was what made this peace possible) (Kagan 2002). The result of these different backgrounds is different feelings about what sorts of actions are appropriate in a given situation. As Keohane (2002) puts it: "Americans tend to support presidents who take bold military measures.... Conversely, proposals for military action divide Europeans, with their different histories of heroic defence (sic) of freedom, aggressive war, weakness, collapse and neutrality."

Next, there are differing interests on both sides of the Atlantic. The U.S. and Europe (here Europe can generally be understood as the EU) have differing opinions about who should run the world order and how, which is related to another topic for disagreement: the role of international institutions. The United States, though it often supported international institutions in its earlier days and may still introduce the ideas today, is hesitant to cede further power to international institutions, as it sees this as an undue infringement on its sovereignty. This brings us to sovereignty, which is another area where the U.S. and Europe do not see exactly eye to eye. Europe sees "pooled sovereignty" as a way to increase security in Europe (Keohane 2002), which is only a natural instinct for a weaker power; the United States, too, wanted more adherence to international law

before it became powerful (Kagan 2002). The U.S. staunchly defends its external sovereignty, which prevents "the delegation of powers over the state to an external authority" (Krasner '99 in Keohane '02). Being constrained by international law is an obvious concern for a more powerful state, which sees itself capable of taking care of itself on its own, while viewing restrictions on its sovereignty as restrictions on this ability for self help (Kagan 2002). Pooled sovereignty, then, would be a violation of external sovereignty and a security *threat* in the eyes of the United States.

Inhabiting a similar vein is Robert Cooper's concept of different “worlds” (Cooper 2003). Because current European policymakers grew up in peaceful, post-WWII Europe and were protected by the United States, making self defense a lesser priority, they have entered what Cooper calls the “post modern” world: a world of collective security and international law and order, a world where force is increasingly unimportant and outmoded. The U.S., on the other hand, remains in the “modern” world, a world where peace and security must be protected by military means, and where entanglements in international law are against the national interest. The paradox, of course, is that Europe would be unsafe without America to protect it, but at the same time, many Europeans do not recognize that and view America as, at best, hawkish, and at worst as a danger to European and world security. If such feelings persist or grow stronger, they could damage considerably the transatlantic relationship.

Next, Europe and the United States have a few differing concerns. Europe is more concerned with Russia than America is, due largely to its dependence on Russian oil and gas, its proximity to Russia, and its history as part of Russia's “sphere of influence.” America is, in my judgment, more concerned with terrorism, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China than Europe is. Such external threats exist in the modern world and sometimes require the use of force, meaning it is only natural that these issues fall to the United States to handle. Different strategic priorities, however, can make cooperation more difficult.

Finally, we have systemic factors à la Kenneth Waltz (1979). As the world moves away from the already destroyed bipolar structure of the Cold War years to a truly multipolar structure, Waltz suggests that the structural effects of bipolarity that allowed intra-European cooperation and transatlantic cooperation will be altered – to the detriment of European and Euro-American cooperation. This can already be observed in the differences mentioned above. Differences in capabilities are leading to different strategies and interests (Kagan). In the bipolar world at the height of the Cold War, Europe was absent of great powers, but surrounded by the only two: the USSR and the United States. The states of Europe could do little other than align themselves with a superpower and acquiesce to their leadership. This is no longer the case today. The Russian threat has been severely reduced, Europe has become stronger, and other powers are rising as well. The era of mandatory cooperation between Europe and the United States is over.

So where do all these conflicting factors leave relations between the United States and Europe in the coming century? I will break down the individual areas and look at the some of the forces they exert. Commonalities in European and the U.S. identities provide a strong pro-cooperative force on the whole. Their similarities are much greater than their differences. The sum of the interests, though not as positive as the sum of identities, is in my estimation still positive. There are still common security interests, but questions of how to address concerns (sovereignty) will remain a big area for disagreement. We can also expect disagreement on the "how," "who," and "why" to intensify. When looking at concerns, I also see a positive sum: Europe and America have more to agree on than disagree on in this area, at least at the basic level. How to address concerns, due to differing interests, capabilities, and logics of appropriateness, will, however, continue to be a topic of intense debate. Finally, systemic forces do indeed threaten to pull Europe and America apart. However, there are two factors that will work in the opposite direction. The first is that Europe remains dependent on America militarily. The second is membership in a league of liberal

democracies, which I feel may override many of the divisive effects of a shift to multipolarity.

I conclude, therefore that the United States and Europe will continue to be able to cooperate. This cooperation will rely, however, on a constant will to continue this cooperation. America may find it requires more soft power and must make more compromises to win European support. Europe may find itself drawn into "American" conflicts that do not fit into its postmodern order for the sake of securing its peaceful, postmodern world. Debate over details will continue to be intense and may still intensify. Nonetheless, I am cautiously optimistic about the prospects for continued transatlantic cooperation, as I see the forces allowing or pushing for cooperation outweighing those that would push Europe and the United Stated apart.

Works Cited

Cooper, Robert. The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the 21st Century. London: Atlantic Books, 2003.

Kagan, Robert. "Power and Weakness." Policy Review. No. 113, June and July, 2002. Hoover Institution, Stanford University. Feb 26th, 2009 <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3460246.html>

Keohane, Robert. "Ironies of Sovereignty: The European Union and the United States." The Journal of Common Market Studies 40 (2002): 743-65.

Waltz, Kenneth. Theory of International Politics. New York: McGraw Hill, 1979.