

If Effective Transatlantic Security Cooperation is the Question, Is NATO the Answer?

**By
Stanley R. Sloan, Director
Atlantic Community Initiative**

*The following article is an extended version of remarks delivered at the Nobel Institute,
Oslo, Norway, organized by the Norwegian Atlantic Committee
on October 2, 2003.*

The somewhat whimsical title of this analysis nonetheless captures a serious question. The transatlantic relationship has been through particularly troubled times in recent months, and important questions have been raised about the future of both NATO and the transatlantic link. The purpose of this presentation is to consider some of the factors that contributed to this time of troubles and then to discuss the future of transatlantic relations from the point of view of one American observer.

Means and Methods Crisis

Even though George W. Bush has largely presided over the American role in the ongoing transatlantic crisis, the crisis itself has roots in developments well underway before he became President.

One could even argue that the crisis began in 1954, when the European Defense Community (EDC) was defeated in the French National Assembly – another thing we Americans can blame on the French! The EDC had been the intended framework for the European part of the transatlantic bargain. The failure of the Europeans to organize their defense efforts at the European level left NATO heavily dependent on the US nuclear guarantee backed up by substantial US forces deployed in Europe.

This formula ultimately resulted in a victory for the West over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, but it had drawbacks that are even more evident today than they were during the Cold War. First, the failure of the Europeans to establish a community-based, cohesive, credible defense effort led to a perpetual burdensharing issue in which Americans, and particularly the US Congress, constantly complained about the imbalance in transatlantic defense efforts. Over the years, US administrations responded to this complaint with a variety of ploys intended to prod the Europeans to do more while trying to convince the US Congress that undermining the alliance, for example by withdrawing US forces from Europe, was not in the US interest.

At the same time, the revised transatlantic bargain of 1954 produced a phenomenon in Europe that also continues to color US-European relations. The heavy reliance on the United States for security against a Warsaw Pact attack created what might be called a

“defense dependence culture” in Europe. The key characteristic of this culture during the Cold War was that European allies produced enough defense efforts to convince the United States that they warranted a continued US contribution to Europe’s defense without doing so much as to allow the United States to believe that they could fend for themselves and that the United States could go home.

In recent years, Robert Kagan has written colorfully about the gap between the US defense culture and the “counter culture” in Europe.ⁱ Kagan opined that “Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus,” and that the Europeans had adopted a “no use of force ideology.” Kagan, however, did not discover the phenomenon that he has put in caricature. In fact, scholars have noted the tendencies analyzed by Kagan for some time. In 1984, for example, this author asked: “To what extent do US global military capabilities permit the West European allies to concentrate on nonmilitary approaches? Does military strength generate an inclination to use force to further national objectives? Perhaps these questions frame the proposition too dramatically. But it nonetheless seems clear that differing world roles and military capabilities constitute another important source of divergent European and American approaches to East-West relations.”ⁱⁱ

In any case, by the end of the Cold War a large gap had opened up between US and European military capabilities. This gap grew even larger in the 1990s, as the European allies reduced military spending much faster than did the United States and then did not pick up the pace when the United States decided to turn its spending around in view of new post-Soviet threats to international peace and stability.

By the late 1990s, some Americans began to question the European commitment to NATO. Some of these observers came into prominent national security positions in the George W. Bush administration and began moving US security policy away from reliance on formal alliances, of which NATO was the only meaningful example, and toward “ad hoc” coalitions. Meanwhile, many Europeans, looking at the increasing gap between European and American defense spending and military capabilities, began to despair of ever “catching up.” On both sides of the Atlantic, observers suggested perhaps the transatlantic partners should make virtue out of a vice, and divide up responsibilities for security maintenance, with the United States taking the lead on the application of military power and the Europeans concentrating on “civilian” or “soft” power instruments.

US Unilateralism versus European Autonomy and Multipolarity

This problem also did not start with George W. Bush. During the administration of President Bill Clinton Europeans already had begun to worry about the consequences of growing US hegemony and tendencies toward unilateral behavior internationally. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s suggestion that because the United States “stands taller” it can “see further” ruffled more than a few European feathers. Meanwhile, as if to even the score, French President Jacques Chirac from time to time joined Russian and Chinese leaders in calling for a multipolar world, an obvious criticism of US power.

In 1997 I wrote a short report for Congressⁱⁱⁱ suggesting that the United States would have to learn how to be a hegemon without acting like one – we still haven't figured that one out. The 1997 analysis remains relevant today: "...the United States faces the challenge of using its power in ways that reflect U.S. interests and draw on the American public's desire to cooperate with other countries while not inspiring opposition as a result of appearing too dominating."

The bottom line, in 1997 and today, is that "If the United States and its allies do not manage this issue effectively, it could intrude dramatically on a wide range of issues in which their common interests are likely served by pragmatic cooperation rather than conflict inspired by current international power realities."

The Bush Administration's Unabashed Unilateralism

With little apparent concern for the potential consequences of blatant unilateralism, the Bush administration from the outset pushed ahead with foreign and defense policies that it thought served US interests best. The philosophy of many in the Bush administration, particularly with Vice President Dick Cheney and many top level political appointees in the Pentagon, was that the United States should use its position of unmatched power to advance US interests. These officials had been frustrated by the policies of a Clinton administration that they thought was ashamed of US power and afraid to use it.

I think the "unilateralists" in the administration believed then, and still do today, that a United States acting on behalf of its self-interests would, for the most part, be to the benefit of its democratic friends, allies and partners around the world. If the consequences of this approach were not so problematic, the attitude could be seen benignly as classic American idealism and innocence about the US role in the world.

The 9/11 Shock

Against this backdrop, the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001 produced important consequences for US-European relations. The Bush Administration and the vast majority of Americans saw the attacks as an act of war, justifying a strong, decisive response. The administration moved quickly to oust the radical Taliban regime in Afghanistan and eliminate Afghanistan as a safe area for Al Qaeda terrorists

The European allies responded to the attacks with sympathy and offers of support. NATO even invoked Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, setting the stage for allies to assist the United States in its "war on terrorism." However, the Bush administration appeared reluctant to involve either the European allies or the NATO organization in the initial response to the attacks. Whether by intent or by chance, the United States left the impression that it did not appreciate the offers of help from its allies.

Eventually, the administration did accept offers of assistance and found ways for NATO to be helpful, but the initial reaction left the impression that the United States was

determined largely to act unilaterally and without reference to the views or offers of assistance from its closest allies.

More importantly, the 9/11 attacks left fundamentally different impressions on Americans and Europeans. Americans, led by President Bush, had adopted a “war mentality” that seemed to warrant all necessary steps to defend the country, irrespective of the views of other countries or the accepted norms of international law. Europeans, although shocked and sympathetic, did not see the attacks as changing global realities in any profound way. They remained convinced that international cooperation and law remained vitally important foundations for international stability and, indeed, for a struggle against international terrorism.

The Iraq Crisis in Transatlantic Relations

Immediately following 9/11, if not before, some key officials in the Bush administration believed that Saddam Hussein was part of the terrorist problem that should, and could, be eliminated. Early in 2002, it was clear that the United States intended to bring about regime change in Iraq.

While the United States was secretly laying the groundwork for an attack against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the European allies were not prepared to come to the same conclusions reached already by Bush administration officials. Europeans generally agreed that Hussein was a problem and that his regime was in clear violation of international law. Further, they shared some of the US frustration that international sanctions had done much to hurt the Iraqi people but little to undermine Saddam’s rule.

However, most Europeans and many European governments reacted strongly to the Bush administration’s determination to go to war against Iraq no matter what other countries thought, irrespective of how unilateral action might affect the future of international cooperation, and with little regard for the impact on international law.

Although the unilateral US approach to Iraq was the instigating event for the crisis in US-European relations, French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Helmut Schroeder helped make it a full-blown crisis that produced deep divisions among Europeans as well as between many Europeans and the United States.

NATO’s Success in Prague

In spite of all of the above, or perhaps in part *because of it*, the NATO allies went beyond projecting an image of “business as usual” at the NATO summit in Prague, the Czech Republic in November 2002, and made it an historic event. Not only did the allies invite seven new members to join the alliance – another major step toward a Europe “whole and free” – but they also took giant steps toward making NATO an important player in security well beyond Europe.

The summit confirmed that NATO had become an alliance with a global mission. Vaclav Havel hit the nail on the head saying: “NATO has moved from being the main pillar of European security to a key pillar of international security.”

Such observations were warranted by the decisions to create a NATO Response Force (NRF) capable of taking on virtually any military mission anywhere in the world, to reform NATO’s command structure to move away from its old geographic focus into a new functional approach organized around a command for “operations” and another for “transformation.”

As a result of decisions taken at Prague and after, NATO was given a mandate and some of the instruments required to play a meaningful role in dealing with 21st century security challenges. It has already begun using these new tools in Afghanistan, where it took over command of the International Stability Assistance Force (ISAF) and in Iraq, where it is supporting NATO ally Poland’s role there.

Where To Go From Here?

Where do the Euro-Atlantic allies go now, having suffered a period of deep political divisions while at the same time mandating dramatic changes in NATO’s mission and structure?

Get rid of NATO’s decision by consensus and suspend troublesome members?

Following the difficulties in NATO early in 2003 concerning protecting NATO-member Turkey in the case of a war with Iraq, the US Senate passed a resolution suggesting both of these steps in May 2003. As superficially-attractive as such proposals might appear, neither is likely or desirable. NATO is an alliance of sovereign states based on cooperation, not supranational integration. The consensus “rule” has been constructively “bent” in the past, for example when the Dutch took footnotes to language about NATO nuclear policy in the 1980s, Greece abstained constructively (not supporting but not blocking) on NATO’s attack on Serbian forces in Kosovo in 1997, and when, in the recent Turkish case, the decision was moved to the Defense Planning Committee to avoid a French veto.

In the future, the consensus procedure needs to be flexed from time to time, as it has been in the past, not fixed

On the question of suspending troublesome members, simply considering such a procedure would be divisive in the extreme and not worth the trouble. If NATO is not able to function in the future because of the obstinance of one or more members then the alliance will slip toward irrelevance. Chances are, if the United States and the European allies continue to see NATO cooperation as in their interest, they will find ways to compromise difficult issues and to move ahead, using ad hoc coalition approaches when absolutely necessary to get around one or more country’s concerns about making an operation a formal NATO mission.

Arrange a formal division of labor?

This approach to organizing responsibilities in the alliance also appears superficially attractive, given the current disparities between US and European military capabilities. In fact, however, any formal division of responsibilities in the alliance (hard power tasks for the US, soft power jobs for the Europeans) would be disastrous for US-European relations.

It does make sense for individual nations to take on specific tasks, within the overall framework of alliance cooperation. But a formal transatlantic division of responsibilities would create even bigger gaps between the United States and Europe concerning how best to respond to international security challenges. Such an approach would only encourage US tendencies toward the unilateral use of military force as well as European tendencies to believe that all problems can be solved without military force standing behind diplomacy. The response to every future security challenge would have to overcome a growing transatlantic divergence in appreciation of the problem before cooperation could be arranged. Bottom line: there should be a practical division of tasks among the transatlantic partners, but not a political division of labor across the Atlantic.

The NATO nations currently have great opportunities to put the sharing principle into action against contemporary security challenges. Perhaps the most important goal for the alliance today is to pursue successfully its missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, with as many allies as possible making direct contributions. In addition, the allies must make the necessary commitments of military capabilities and other resources to ensure that the NATO Response Force becomes a real and usable asset for the allies to use in dealing with future security challenges that require rapid, effective military responses.

Rebuild a constructive transatlantic dialogue

The most immediate challenge that must be met by the allies on both sides of the Atlantic is to rebuild a constructive dialogue to replace the destructive interactions that have characterized handling of the Iraq issue. This will require the United States to “speak more softly,” as everyone knows that the United States already carries the “biggest stick.”^{iv} It will require the Europeans to bring more resources and capabilities to the transatlantic security table. The US-European relationship needs a better balance in terms of both authority and capability. However, it is not up to the United States to “give” Europe more authority. European nations and the European Union will wield greater influence in Washington and internationally based on their will and ability to contribute to solutions of international security problems.

...Is NATO the Answer?

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this analysis, “if effective transatlantic security cooperation is the question, is NATO the answer?” I offer this response: *NATO is a critical part of the answer – a necessary but not sufficient part.*

NATO has moved from being a key player in European security to, as Vaclav Havel put it, becoming a “key pillar of international security.” NATO remains politically important as the commitment the allies have made to cooperate in dealing with security challenges together and functionally as an instrument to facilitate that cooperation. There is nothing else in the world comparable to NATO’s Integrated Command Structure which helps perpetuate the “habits of cooperation” that are essential to the operations of military coalitions, whether under a NATO flag, EU banner, or in an ad hoc formation led by a NATO member state.

Mastering 21st century security challenges obviously will require the effective use of military power to deal with tyrants like Saddam Hussein and terrorists like Osama bin Laden.. But most of the struggle against terrorism and instability will require deployment of soft power as effectively as the United States used its hard power in Iraq.^v

Soft power is a nation’s ability to influence events based on cultural attraction, ideology and international institutions, about which Joe Nye has written so eloquently.^{vi} Soft power can help legitimize hard power. Hard power is essential to win wars, and often to give credibility to strategic choices, but soft power is vital to win and preserve the peace.

Today, Europe is too quick to shun military might (of which it has little) and too dependent on soft power (with which it is well endowed). Europe’s hard power deficit undermines the gravitas of its diplomacy, particularly in dealing with its superpower U.S. ally.

The other part of the problem is that U.S. soft power policy approaches are all too often the neglected stepchild in American responses to global challenges. Until recently, post-World War II U.S. foreign policy had been designed to capitalize on America’s abundant soft power, including the perception of the United States as a benign force in the international system. This meant the United States decided to cooperate with its allies rather than dominate them, that Washington made its position of strength less offensive to friends and allies by taking the lead in creating and operating multilateral organizations.

President Bush’s administration has called into question this foundation for successful U.S. international leadership. The administration’s unilateralist inclinations have shifted the balance between the hard and soft power instruments of American foreign policy. Some Americans see this as evidence of decisive leadership. However, when the United States fails to bring its considerable soft power into play to support its actions, would-be followers become reluctant or even resistant, as happened in the trans-Atlantic crisis over Iraq. Public opinion studies already have shown how seriously this approach undermined global perceptions of the United States as a benign international actor.

The soft power deficit in U.S. foreign policy has put more focus on the EU's soft power capability. Some Europeans are tempted to shape the EU's soft power into a new pole for a multipolar international system, designed to counterbalance the hard-power-heavy pole of the United States.

This temptation, like the U.S. unilateral temptation, threatens trans-Atlantic cooperation and therefore international stability. François Heisbourg, director of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique think tank, has argued persuasively that his government should avoid the divisive rhetoric of multipolarity and pursue a multilateral agenda of cooperation with the United States and others.

Toward a New Atlantic Community Treaty

In fact, if Europeans would move away from the multipolar temptation and the United States would rein in its unilateralist instincts, the recent U.S.-European divide could be bridged in a soft power multilateral solution. They could demonstrate their commitment to such a constructive direction by preparing a new Atlantic Community Treaty, to be signed by all NATO and EU members, creating a soft power framework of cooperation to complement NATO and the EU's work in the hard power arena. Such a structure would be ideally suited for dealing with the complex issues raised by globalization and the post-Sept. 11 terrorist and security challenges.^{vii}

The treaty would create a new Euro-Atlantic organization to facilitate soft power cooperation. Regular consultations would take place among all members and candidates of NATO and the EU, following patterns already established in both organizations.

To consolidate Europe's institutional architecture, all items currently on the U.S.-EU agenda could be transferred to the new forum. The new body would not replace NATO or the European Union, but the broader framework of an Atlantic Community Treaty Organization would help shed new light on problems and provide additional options for shaping international coalitions.

To advance such a soft power alliance, Europe must show a greater willingness to blend its impressive soft power capabilities with hard power to provide coherent answers to tomorrow's challenges. And the United States must build a better balance between soft and hard power instruments in its foreign and security policy tool kit. In the long run, the effective marriage of U.S. and European soft and hard power capabilities would help prevent some problems from becoming military challenges, and enhance the ability of the world community to deal with post-conflict scenarios in ways that promote stability.

NATO and a new Atlantic Community Treaty (soft power) Organization together could provide the framework for effective transatlantic security cooperation in the 21st century.

Footnotes

ⁱ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). (This book is an expanded version of an article originally published in *Policy Review*, June/July 2002.)

ⁱⁱ Stanley R. Sloan, *NATO's Future: Toward a New Transatlantic Bargain* (Washington, D.C., National Defense University Press, 1985).

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanley R. Sloan, *The U.S. Role in the World: Indispensable Leader or Hegemon?* (CRS Report for Congress 97-1046F, December 10, 1997).

^{iv} The 26th President of the United States, Theodore ("Teddy") Roosevelt adopted the adage "Speak softly and carry a big stick. You will go far" as the best way to deal with other nations.

^v This concluding discussion adapted from Stanley Sloan and Heiko Borchert, "Europe, U.S. Must Rebalance Soft, Hard Power," *Defense News*, September 8-15, 2003.

^{vi} Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power, Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002).

^{vii} A suggested draft of such a treaty can be found in Stanley R. Sloan, *NATO, the European Community and the Atlantic Community, The Transatlantic Bargain Reconsidered* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).