

The Trans-Atlantic Dialogue in The National Interest

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The trans-Atlantic dialogue remains one of the premier issues for discussion in the pages of *The National Interest* and its weekly online supplement *In the National Interest*. (A list of some of the articles that have appeared in both outlets over the past year is appended to this paper.) After all, the United States, Canada and the states of the European Union hold in their hands the absolute majority of the world's economic and military power. The global agenda – from trade matters to combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – is set largely by the United States and the European Union. Indeed, when a trans-Atlantic consensus on an issue exists, it tends to become the international norm. The Atlantic Alliance--defined both through its institutions such as NATO and through countless other linkages--is the most powerful assemblage on earth.

This is why Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his contribution to our Winter 2003/04 issue, concluded that "America can look to only one genuine partner" in coping with the challenges that the world will face in the 21st century. "America and Europe together represent an array of physical and experiential assets with the capability to make the decisive difference ..." he observes.

But what happens when there are disagreements? More specifically, has the Iraq war created conditions for the disintegration of the Atlantic Alliance? In our Summer 2003 issue, for example, Christopher Layne opined that the "Iraq War has produced a very different kind of rift. The damage inflicted on Washington's ties to Europe ... is likely to prove real, lasting, and, at the end of the day, irreparable." Several pages later, Richard Rosecrance countered that "Amid much bluster on both sides, the paramount truth is that the two major centers are both powerful, but act in different spheres, and they desperately need each other. Neither can, or at any rate should, talk cavalierly about going it alone."

In the absence of an "overwhelming" Soviet threat directed against both Western Europe and North America, on what basis does and should the Atlantic Alliance continue to exist? In a controversial argument in our Winter 2003/04 issue, E. Wayne Merry argues that the Alliance, at least in its current form of NATO, indeed no longer has a *raison d'etre*. "Alliances are not pyramids, but pragmatic undertakings like business partnerships. It is almost a truism of

history that alliances die after achieving victory." In a response in the Spring 2004 issue, Hans Binnendjik and Richard Kugler argue in response, "Remove the Alliance, and the coordinating mechanism is lost."

So this raises the first question. What are the common interests that hold the Atlantic Alliance together? And here many of our authors point out that values, while important in serving as a midwife to the birth of a relationship or in helping to facilitate the smooth functioning of a relationship, are not its core or foundation. After all, Finland and New Zealand share many common values, but one could not foresee an alliance between the two states materializing on the basis alone.

Even in the absence of a Soviet threat, many--myself include--argue that there are still many overriding interests at stake. Maintaining an international system providing for easy communication, free trade and security for its participants benefits both sides of the Atlantic. Terrorism and the threat of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are other non-directional threats. Finally, the extension of a European-style zone of peace and prosperity into adjacent regions (what Brzezinski terms "the Global Balkans" and others "the Greater Middle East") is an effort that can only be undertaken as a shared project.

And this brings us to the second area that must be discussed. How can the trans-Atlantic relationship continue as a "shared" project? Merry's criticism of the current trans-Atlantic relationship is that it is based on "the model of a dominant senior partner and various junior partners." But how should it be structured? Is it a burden-sharing of the "Mars and Venus" type where America provides military power and Europe acts as the financier? Are capabilities and burdens to be more equitably distributed?

This debate about burden-sharing is also dependent on the future development of the European Union itself. If Europe consolidates a super-federalist form of governance capable of generating a single foreign and defense policy, then of necessity the trans-Atlantic relationship would have to evolve into a bilateral alliance of two major powers. If, however, the EU becomes a modern-day version of the Holy Roman Empire, that is, where its constituent parts still retain a great deal of sovereignty and independence of action, then the model put forward by writers such as John Hulsman seems more likely: the trans-Atlantic relationship becomes a "clubhouse, allowing fractious states on both sides of the Atlantic to calibrate diplomatic positions privately, coordinating such positions when it becomes practicable."

But the trans-Atlantic relationship must also have a way to mediate differences between its members. Since uniformity of views (both perceptions of threats and challenges as well as concrete courses of action) is highly unlikely, the relationship must have a way, a middle ground, to avoid predicating policy on complete unanimity or risk destroying the alliance altogether. In the original Washington Treaty, limiting the NATO alliance to geographic parameters was thought to be the best way to ensure this. In the 21st century, however, the threats to both Europe and North America are transnational in nature and emanate from any portion of the globe. The distinction between "in" and "out" of area is rapidly blurring.

Yet, as the war in Iraq has shown, there can be a great deal of disagreement about what constitutes a threat to the peace and well-being of the Euro-Atlantic community and what measures need to be taken to address such threats. But does a refusal to participate in an American-led operation in Iraq constitute a severe blow to the cohesion of the Alliance? And should it impair continued cooperation in other areas (intelligence-sharing, for one thing), and indeed the very existence of NATO, among others? Iraq is the "Suez crisis" of the early 21st century, testing the "red lines" of the Atlantic partnership. So future joint efforts to combat common threats and pursue a shared agenda will depend on the enunciation of a broad strategic consensus regarding what is to be done.

The final question being raised in our pages is the scope of the trans-Atlantic partnership. Is it regional, or is it global in nature? Brzezinski raised this point when he asked "whether Europe, largely preoccupied with the shaping of its own unity, will have the will and the generosity to become truly engaged with America in a joint effort that will dwarf in complexity and scale the earlier, successful joint American-European effort to preserve peace in Europe and then end Europe's division." It is clear that some in the United States and Europe view the United States as the key global power, forming regional alliances with European, Asian, Eurasian and Middle Eastern states (the hub and spokes approach), where the Atlantic partnership is geared primarily to dealing with Europe and the "Greater Middle East." Others, like Merry, have called for a more "balanced" partnership between the two for ensuring global security.

This is by no means an exhaustive survey of what has appeared in our pages over the last year. But even when our authors from both sides of the Atlantic disagree, it seems clear that those writing from a realist perspective believe that continued trans-Atlantic cooperation is essential to secure the national interests of the United States and the states of Europe. And this is an important point to make. The trans-Atlantic relationship should not be based on any sense of sentimentality, appeal to shared history or values, or sense of obligation. The relationship endures and continues because it serves concrete

interests of all parties. And this is the fundamental truth that must be communicated to our publics, at a time when the relationship is being questioned.

Some of the 2003 and 2004 articles in *The National Interest* and *In the National Interest* (<http://www.inthenationalinterest.com>) on trans-Atlantic issues

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