

Indispensable, Interdependent or Independent?

A critical analysis of transatlantic relations

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This essay seeks to critically examine transatlantic relations, and within it, to highlight questions of systemic shifts for dominance in the global system as well as the ideological-discursive negotiation of the volatile relationship between the EU and the United States (US). After establishing some of the fundamental differences in both Europe and the US in terms of how publics on both sides think about contemporary transatlantic relations, I point to issues that make a continued alliance difficult, such as competitive leadership perceptions and socio-economic models, the subservient role of Europe during the Cold War and its quest for autonomy, and divergence over European integration and the acceptance of an emerging multipolar world order. While the future outcome of this transatlantic transition is yet undetermined, it is safe to say that the artificial cold-war allegiance of Europe to the US is quickly waning, with unforeseeable consequences for bilateral, and more broadly, international relations.

Keywords: Transatlantic relations, divergence, multipolarity, Europe, European Union, exceptionalism, welfare states, hegemony, ideology, United States, alliance

Introduction

Contemporary transatlantic relations are at its lowest point since the end of the Second World War. Having been a dominant but stable protector of its own interests, as well as of Western European ones during the Cold War, more recent US administrations severely challenged this transatlantic elite consensus. President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq against the protest of many European allies, followed by President Obama's strategic pivot to Asia (away from Europe and the Middle East) culminated in the Trump presidency and its contentious transatlantic policy. Within the first two years in office, the Trump administration withdrew from the multilateral Paris Climate agreement limiting greenhouse emissions, cancelled unilaterally the Iran Nuclear deal that EU governments were instrumental in establishing as well as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and imposed tariffs on European steel and aluminum with threats of more trade sanctions to come. More than just weakening transatlantic ties, the current government also heavily criticized UN bodies and other intergovernmental institutions, and vowed to review any treaties that may expose the US to their

jurisdiction. While this turbulent period may be exceptional and many hope, only an aberration, it highlights the volatility of the post-war transatlantic relationship, and has led to a fundamental rethinking of Europe's relations with its traditional ally. Is this relationship one of interdependently related allies, as often pointed out, or are they too structurally independent to be politically aligned partners? In order to more deeply examine these questions, the following sections will highlight differences in terms of how publics on both sides think about contemporary transatlantic relations, and point to issues that make a continued alliance difficult, such as differences in leadership motivations and socio-economic models, the subservient role of Europe during the Cold War and its ongoing quest for autonomy, and divergence over the acceptance of European integration and an emerging multipolar world order.

Political differences and tensions do not remain only on the policy level as illustrated above or on the elite level, as marked by the various diplomatic faux-pas of the recent past, but are also reflected in EU-wide public opinion: 76% of publics in 12 EU states have no confidence in Donald Trump (as of Spring 2017), and 69% view him as a danger to the world. Foreign policy elites are even more doubtful, as 88% and 86% respectively think so (Pew Research Center 2017). Those negative values are higher than the ones for Russian President Putin's, while German chancellor Merkel has the confidence of 61% of the sampled European public, and 93% of the respective foreign policy experts. Similarly, over two thirds of European policy elites expect a more problematic transatlantic relationship in the years to come, though only 37% of the European publics think so (Ibid). Compared to previous administrations such as the Obama one, which was trusted by 77% of Europeans, the dramatic fall in trust levels in dominant EU states such as in Germany (an 86 % drop to 11 per cent), France (84% falling to 14 %) and the UK (79 % falling to 22 %) exemplify the problematic transatlantic environment (Chatham House 2018). These European data parallel the drop in confidence in the Trump administration, and by extension US' foreign policy, in over 30 countries across the globe, with the exception of Russia and Israel. Trump's approval ratings in Europe are comparable to President Bush's when he left office in 2008 amid an unfolding global economic crisis. Independent of those public opinion swings based on individual administrations, the majority of European citizens now hold unfavorable views of the US in general (Pew Research Center 2018). Public opinion is not only indicative of the poor state of relations, but also to some extent informs it, as public decision-makers are taking account of extreme public approval changes in today's high-information policy contexts to justify their policies. However, the substantial changes in attitudes towards the US shows that generalized propositions of a pervasive Anti-Americanism on the European side (based on American neoliberal capitalism or hegemonic posturing, for instance), or Anti-Europeanism on the US side (based on, for instance, cultural superiority or European integration) do not necessarily correspond to reality. Yet the public remains an influential actor in today's liberal democracies, even despite the fact that on both

sides of the Atlantic a correlating erosion in the traditional representative democratic model has taken hold.

The intent of this essay is not to analyze primarily the role of material structures and capabilities for transatlantic relations, as (neo)realists would prefer, nor to solely focus on the agency of economic and political actors, as liberal institutionalists or constructivists would do. Rather, its rationale is to contrast underlying ideational factors in the transatlantic relationship, taking into account the subtle implications of critical theories concerning ideology and discourse, as well as the (non)material consequences of hegemonic social, economic and political power. Ranging from the Frankfurt School's concerns about ideologies to Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, to Foucault's linkage of power to knowledge, critical theories have received increasing attention as they consistently were able to make sense of the various European crises throughout the 20th century (Outhwaite 2012). In the context of transatlantic relations, they help broaden the often myopic focus on material resources and geopolitical threats, recognizable in conventional transatlantic analyses.

The transatlantic alliance: together forever?

The mutual crisis in trust and confidence has led European governments and analysts to ponder a substantial break with the 'Western' consensus required during the Cold War. On the one hand, many recognize that the somewhat artificial but necessary close European collaboration with the US after 1945 brought with it political and material advantages (for instance by promoting mutual trade or expanding security guarantees in the form of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) as well as dependencies (think of the stationing of US troops or nuclear weapons in Europe). On the other hand, experts view the Trump administration as reneging on the hitherto jointly upheld liberal-international values that characterized the 20th century Western world order. It is perceived as advocating geopolitical strongman stature through its infamous 'America First' doctrine, akin to Russia's contentious foreign policy in its sphere of influence, or China's only slightly more benevolent economic and developmental imperialism. European governments are taking note and now aim for a closer collaboration in the defense and security areas, even though national security prerogatives continue to limit deep continental cooperation. Some US strategists criticized the EU's search for autonomy as a delinking from US dominance (Kagan 2018), reminiscent of post-cold war discussions between the Europeans and then US Secretary of State Albright who demanded from Europeans to continue relying on American guidance and expertise (the infamous 3 D's: no diminishing of NATO, no duplication of existing efforts, and no discrimination against non-EU members). But the current impasse also signals an opportunity for what

Biscop (2018) calls ‘strategic autonomy’, i.e. the ability for European governments to develop foreign policies on their own terms without US interference, yet at the same time without US material or diplomatic support. In fact, the political and scholarly debate about the value and utility of the US’ influence in and on Europe tends to ebb and flow with the leadership on both sides of the Atlantic, and the success or failure in managing common issues of interest or concern.

In order to avoid presentism in these extraordinary times, it is essential to review the historical and structural context of this uneven relationship throughout modern history . Historically, transatlantic relations had been beset with the ambivalence of the US’ formation as a revolutionary outpost seeking independence from the United Kingdom, at a time when European countries were globally dominant colonizers. This ‘special relationship’ continues to be highlighted by both the UK and US, whose foreign policies emphasize close bilateral cooperation based on common language, intertwined history and similar national and economic ideologies. Yet while the close relationship with the UK endured throughout the 20th century periods of war and peace, it initially narrowed the focus of American ambitions in Europe. The US’ engagement in Europe during and following the Second World War, especially through its Marshall Plan aid program, however broadened its activity focus by distributing aid to Western European countries, with the UK being the top recipient. This wider scope materialized in President Roosevelt’s ‘Atlantic Universalism’ as well as President Kennedy’s ‘Atlantic Partnership’ proposal “in an attempt to restore unity of purpose to an Atlantic World in which the establishment of a restrictive European Economic Community demonstrated the degree to which Western European capital had emancipated itself from American tutelage” (Van der Pijl 1984: 237). At the same time, European refugees and expats were instrumental in establishing North American postwar political, economic and scientific dominance. A further widening of the US’ scope occurred when in 1973 the UK and Ireland became members of the European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor to today’s EU. With the accession of both countries to the regional bloc, and the strengthening of common European governance institutions through the consolidation of the EU in 1993, the US had to learn to engage not only individual European governments, but also to take note of Brussel’s own executive decisions and policies. This transformation still remains a learning process for each incoming US government, as the EU’s complexity and US’ sovereignty-mindedness often prevent mutual understanding.

American and European exceptionalisms

The foreign relations of the 28 EU member states – 27 if/once the UK leaves – are still marked by sovereign decision-making, which has furthered the US’ notion that it can ‘pick and choose’ among allies,

or 'divide and conquer' if unilateral policies should appear unpopular for the EU as a whole. This became obvious in the runup to the Iraq invasion in 2003, in which then US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld discursively divided Europe in 'old' Western Europe, taken as outdated and resisting US intervention in Iraq, and the 'new' Europe of post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, which were deemed more supportive of NATO and open to US overtures. In response, public intellectuals such as Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida somewhat ambiguously declared the need to profess 'European-ness' under the leadership of 'core Europe', i.e. the Franco-German tandem and their European allies, in opposition to American ideals and policies (Levy et al. 2005). Since then, leading European elites have increasingly favored a stronger and more united Europe to respond to various security challenges broadly conceived, and to abdicate traditional means of military power. In its efforts to establish a differently configured institutional identity, since the end of the Cold War the EU pronounced an exceptionalism built on moral and pacific leadership. The US, on the other hand, contrasts the EU through its longstanding religious exceptionalism built on its view of divine providence which shaded into its patriotism and penchant to lead by force. Paraphrasing postmodern scholar Der Derian, Hampton (2013, 2) states that "at the core, European and American perceptions about threat are shaped by beliefs about religion and the role of providence, which in turn influences how the 'other' in the international system is defined and perceived". I would add that both types of exceptionalism, the US national-religious one and the EU's pacific-secular one, create frictions based on divergent mutual understandings and resulting motivations. Both express an ambition for global leadership, but with contrarian objectives and different means to achieve those. In this geopolitical dance, both partners have traditionally relied on each other, but the strengthening of the EU questioned the assumed global leadership role of the US, and with more dance partners appearing on the global stage vying for the former's attention and similarly contesting the latter, a break up becomes more likely.

Scholars have actively debated the historical role of the US in Europe's post-war development. The standard opinion highlights the critical material and political support for the rebuilding of European countries, thereby ensuring that the West would follow a liberal-democratic model and deterring the encroaching Soviet influence in the region. This view perceived of US imperialism in the Western hemisphere as necessary to defend liberal democracy, even though early on its ideological component became apparent for revisionist scholars (Williams 1959) who questioned the US' ulterior motives. Post-revisionists were less interested in finding a 'culprit' for the Cold-War bifurcation of the globe, but sought to better understand how international events shaped the relations between the US, Europe and the USSR (Gaddis 1997). More critical views posit that with the upending of the US' Gold Standard and disagreements over relations with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (henceforth China), European integration evolved not because of US support, but based on the increasingly strained

relationship of the transatlantic partners (Schultz and Schwartz 2010). This was followed by an expanding, domineering view of US foreign policy from both, republican or democratic aisles, that perceived the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to cement the unipolar supremacy of the US. After 9/11, critical voices such as Chomsky and Wallerstein (Chomsky 2003) raised the issue of the Bush administration's intervention in Iraq and elsewhere as a means to enrich the US' expansive military industrial complex, and to regain their status as uncontested world power. More moderate voices analyzed the resulting transatlantic rift and were wondering about 'the end of the West' (Anderson et al. 2008). More recently, the US is portrayed as struggling to remain a dominant, if harmful, imperial actor with a global reach (Bulmer Thomas 2018). These debates bring to the fore the geopolitical embeddedness of transatlantic relations, especially with regards to relations with Russia, China and after 9/11, the Middle East. Thus while Europe had an elevated position in American post-war foreign policy considerations, given its historical, geopolitical and economic significance, the US' strategy of creating a liberal order through the UN, transnational corporations and military presence was indeed global. Now that the Cold War is over, a strong US commitment to Europe has become more difficult to sustain given the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century, and Europeans' slow but steady emancipatory quest for 'equality'.

The argument that North America (including Canada and less often, Mexico) and Europe constitute 'the West' and therefore have to closely collaborate in view of other competing powers, however, covers up significant historical, societal and economic differences among both regions. From the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Vietnam War in the late sixties to the Balkan wars in the 1990s and the Iraq invasion of 2003, as well as the handling of many extant crises such as the Arab Spring, the Palestinian conflict or the Syrian civil war, both transatlantic partners exhibited differing and often opposing strategies. And it also highlights related debates about the utility of the common defense alliance NATO, which had been questioned after the end of the Cold War and has since then become a point of contention between US administrations and European governments. The former seems to maintain a commitment to the defense alliance but unhappy about the lack of even burden-sharing, while the latter often have more fundamental issues with it. In this sense, the previously held notion of the transatlantic security community (Deutsch et al. 1957) certainly does not apply anymore at the beginning of the 21st century, although the events of 9/11 and the ensuing rise of violent Islamic extremism have at times contributed to the creation of a common enemy image, reinforced by the US' stance against a supposed 'axis of evil'. Nevertheless, the official pronouncements of the stability of common values and interests such as good governance and democracy promotion, international security maintenance and trade promotion, continue to be cited in transatlantic pronouncements despite a number of disagreements on these issues over the past few decades. And while the US was able to pressure European governments on security or governance related

issues during the Cold War, more recent interventionist appeals and pressures, such as the repeated calls by various administrations for increased government spending on defense, are viewed in Europe as an incapability to understand the continent's pacifistic history and policies. In its most extreme, these are repudiated as paternalistic attitudes from a former superpower. Although this criticism is one of form (of how to negotiate transatlantic commitments) over substance (the value of a transatlantic alliance), as the latter, rendering Gramsci's elitist cultural hegemony in these matters valid, ought not to be challenged.

Hence there is no natural or perennial quality to the transatlantic relationship. That being said, one has to critically examine some of the decisive aspects that cause convergence or divergence of transatlantic relations in the past, present and future. These can be of a more structural (e.g. the constitution of the global economic system), or agency-centered nature (e.g. the different administrations in power). They can remain only for a limited time as superficial issues, but often lead to deeper disagreements over each other's perception and identity. Analysts have highlighted a number of those factors, such as the more obvious ones: history and culture, geography, economics and trade, political leadership, external (common) threat definition and embeddedness in international organizations. Many conventional analyses of transatlantic relations cover the divergence or convergence based on historical factors, geographical differences, economic interests, diplomatic overtures, and the creation of interests based on intergovernmental practices and threat recognition (Chatham House 2018; Anderson et al. 2008; Kagan 2003). Other determining factors are more difficult to recognize, such as demographics, resources or ideology. Demographics are only slowly changing but exert significant power, as do commonalities and differences with regards to non-military material (energy, natural, human) resources that are available to be mobilized. And ideologies are precisely hard to detect because they are often subtly evolving and tactically manipulated in an information age. All of those, depending on their configuration, can lead to either a narrowing or widening of the transatlantic divide (Wickett 2018). Taken together, they create distinct political leadership cultures which can clash when each other's exceptionalism is too strongly pronounced. Having detailed one important ideological impediment regarding the structure in which transatlantic policy-making occurs, the following two sections highlight policy-related differences. These are, however, similarly characterized by underlying ideological differences.

Differences in welfare states and economic models

In terms of how the US and European governments develop their social and economic policies, there are two main distinctions recognizable. These have to do with the creation of the European welfare state, or social model on one hand, and the establishment of European social or distributive market economies, on

the other. These exist in variations across all member states (Esping Andersen 1990, Hall & Soskice 2001), and have shaped the EU's own distinct social, labor and related policies. This European distinctiveness remained throughout much of the 20th century, and while it has come under pressure with ever more neoliberal and often American-borne prescriptions about privatization, marketization and efficiency gains, has remained a basic pillar of European socio-economic policy designs. In the aftermath of World War 2, the creation of the Bretton Woods institutions set in motion a process that has been theorized as either resulting from the dominant exertion of global economic leadership by the US -the 'hegemonic stability theory' of realists-, or the liberal cooperation patterns among partner countries. But both of these mainstream International Relations theories neglect to account for power imbalances, ideological pressures, and discourses that had a less obvious, but equally decisive impact on postwar transatlantic relations.

To begin with, the proto-European welfare state model was devised in the 1880s in Prussia as a way to pacify and coopt the politically mobilized labor class after the popularization of Marx's communist critique of capitalism. The latter constituted in turn a reaction to the excesses of early industrial capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries. After the World Wars, the rudimentary provisions of welfare (such as pension provision, health care and unemployment insurance) spread to other European countries. Over time, a number of nationally distinct variations in welfare coverage emerged: while in Scandinavia, the social democratic model combined high taxation with generous and expansive redistributive benefits, the Anglo-Saxon model was more restrained and means-tested, and the continental heavily contribution-based and in-between both previous models in terms of benefits disbursement (Esping Andersen 1990). More recently, the Southern European model which is heavily reliant on family support, as well as the more limited post-communist Central-and Eastern European systems have added to the diversity of social systems.

In the US, a somewhat similar development occurred after the Great Depression of the 1930s and the end of World War 2, when many soldiers were in need of additional benefits. However, in contrast to the generalized acceptance of the European welfare model of extensive taxation and redistribution, in the US this proposition has had less resonance. An illustration of this lack of commitment consists in the budgetary appropriations for social programs, which in Europe are more than double than in the US and influenced not only by political choices but also by widespread social belief systems about (in)equality and race (Alesina et al. 2004). Especially after the Reagan-administration of the 1980s, who in tandem with the UK's Prime Minister Thatcher – who (in)famously claimed that 'there is no alternative' to free market policies- advocated for limited state intervention in markets domestically and internationally, minimalist neoliberal and individualistic conceptions of welfare, and increasingly, workfare, dominate the

domestic discourse surrounding US welfare policies. For instance, the ongoing partisan fight over the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) introduced by the Obama administration reflects deeper beliefs about individual responsibility and government power. Europe, however, has not been immune from welfare-delimiting austerity-based pressures as well, although the normative and legal frameworks there still provide somewhat of a protection from neoliberal pressures in this regard.

The European economic models, also sometimes called ‘the’ European Social Model, such as social market economies or coordinated market economies rely to a larger degree on the intervention by governments, unions or workers’ participation, than in the US. These nationally distinct systems allow for a larger role of states in setting framework labor policy, also to mediate with mandatory worker or labor union representation on company boards. These economic models, which have existed for over a century but had been re-emphasized as essential for attaining welfare and prosperity after World War 2, are distinct from the US model which largely lacks such provisions. Though they can be introduced, the legal bases for labor rights are rudimentary, such as with the lack of paid vacations (however, private sector companies provide voluntary paid holidays in order to remain competitive and attract the best workforce). The US was instrumental in advancing neoliberal principles in Europe since the 1980s, based on the close and strong economic linkage during the Cold War era. In a neo-Gramscian sense, the US’ dominance led to an early push for economic liberalization that spread and maintained hegemonic structures among and within European elites as well: “Hegemony derives from the dominant social strata of the dominant states in so far as these ways of doing and thinking have acquired the acquiescence of the dominant social strata of other states.” (Cox 1990: 151). There is a growing recognition across Europe that privatization of services and infrastructure, the outsourcing and deregulation of labor, the recommended budgetary and wage restraints and the aforementioned limiting of welfare policies has increased inequality and worker insecurity. As critical theorist Gill points out, this new ideology has a disciplining function, as it “seeks to separate economic policies from broad political accountability in order to make governments more responsive to the discipline of market forces and correspondingly less responsive to popular-democratic forces and processes” (1998: 5). The resulting augmentation of inequality contributes to populist contestations of not only existing economic, but also political structures, which can be seen in the US to a larger degree but are also increasingly apparent across Europe. In the EU this transformation is more strongly apparent as it reverses the original postwar linkage of markets embedded in governing states, whereas now states find themselves implanted in transnational markets with little domestic steering power (Streek 2012). It is no wonder then, that the proposed TTIP agreement was more heavily criticized by European publics, fearing a lowering of labor and environmental standards, even though it was ultimately cancelled by the Trump administration.

Thus while a fundamental socio-political difference over human welfare and the role of the state in the regulation of economies exists, the adoption of ‘best practices’ by intergovernmental transatlantic networks and the transnational capitalist class, as well as the market-orientation of the EU have contributed to a creeping convergence of Europe and the US in welfare and economic models. Critical theorists, while challenging the ‘Americanization’ of European cultures (Outhwaite 2012) and linking global capitalism to ‘legitimation crises’ (Offe 1984) aimed less to contest capitalism per se, but to correct its influences on an ideological-discursive level: “Europe is suffering from a half-hearted or deformed cosmopolitanism, deformed economically by neoliberalism, politically by nationalism [...], and by bureaucracy in the sense of the strengthening of executives at the expense of parliaments and citizens” (Outhwaite 2012: 114). As Fraser and Jaeggi (2018: 7) point out, this theoretical ‘turn away from political economy’ enabled critical theoretical thought to be more widely dispersed among different population segments, with a newfound elevated significance after the great recession of 2008-12. Since then, the debate over the role of the EU in embedding neoliberalism while simultaneously safeguarding social rights has continued, with some scholars arguing that it maintains a balanced compromise between markets and societies through regulation and Court-jurisdiction, and others disagreeing with this optimistic reading and rather viewing the EU as a protector of markets and transnational companies against national protections, with an associated weakening impact on social policies across the EU (Thiel 2013). In this sense, the ongoing EU integration process, while customarily adverse to national social protections, may result in improved social and labor protections, for instance once the UK as one of the foremost neoliberal promoters leaves the bloc. Conversely, the recent polarization in the US based on class and racial inequality, including the introduction of the ACA and the rising popularity of socialist-minded politicians, may in turn lessen the transatlantic gap on those issues. Although this ideological-discursive detente depends heavily on the administration in power, and the political geography of both regions which are increasingly split into liberal-progressive coasts and conservative ‘heartlands’. In sum, it appears that while there are fundamental structural differences in welfare states and economic models, the repercussions of being embedded in the global capitalist system have weakened those differences over the past few decades. Similarly, not only the global capitalist basis of production, trade and finance, but also the ideological superstructures have led to a delegitimization of the (neo)liberal democratic governments on both sides of the Atlantic.

Divergence over European integration and the acceptance of an emerging multipolar world order

As indicated earlier, US administrations had a repeated problem with recognizing the increasing power of the EU, which some attribute to US administrations’ inability to comprehend such supra-national

governance structures (which change slightly with every new EU treaty). With the creation of a more strongly integrated Union in 1993, subsequent US administrations have either misunderstood or sidelined the role of EU institutions in aiding and guiding the cooperation of its member states. This became most pronounced in the current administration, which has actively denigrated the EU, temporarily downgraded the diplomatic status of the EU delegation in Washington, and whose former political advisor Bannon established close contacts to Eurosceptic populists across Europe. The latter move constitutes a new level of ideological intervention in Europe, especially as it is targeted with the 2019 European elections in mind. More importantly, with the EU's rising autonomy and power as European regulator as well as global actor, the US' perception of the usefulness of the transatlantic alliance has waned. In its place, concerns about economic competitiveness (the US and EU are the largest trade powers on the globe, and the Euro has become a major world currency), EU autonomy in foreign policy making, and deeper disagreements over normative commitments in security, trade and environmental affairs have produced anxieties for Washington. Freed from the economic and geopolitical straightjacket of US dominance during the Cold War, the EU has become part cause, part consequence of the decline of American power. And despite augmented institutionalized relations over the past few decades, a certain realization of 'form over substance' has taken hold in transatlantic exchanges over the past few years, which are now tested by broader multilateral negotiation requirements in view of other emerging world powers.

As much as the unification of Europe was a product of the US' post-war reconstruction effort, the strength of the EU's single market in terms of exports and regulatory power, together with the merging of currencies following the US' retreat from the Gold Standard in 1973 into the globally significant Euro currency, has led to a more critical view of European integration by the US. This despite both being the largest and most interconnected trade and investment partners on the globe. With the rise of the EU as economic, and then political power, the scholarly literature reflected this process by theorizing the EU as a differently 'civilian' (Duchene 1973) and later, 'normative' power (Manners 2002). Recently, a more critical comparison likened the EU to the US in its global reach, its ambition to diffuse its values and its increasing militarization (Behr and Stivachtis 2015). Notwithstanding these similar features, the Trump administration equates the EU as a 'foe' and compares it, in its supposed exploitation of US markets, to the more adversely perceived China. While such posturing is primarily problematic on a diplomatic level, unless followed by actual tariff impositions, the EU and its member states have indeed begun to pursue alternative trade deals as a reaction to the US governments' protectionism, including in July 2018 the world's largest bilateral one with Japan. Brussels also started to reach out more strongly to China, India and African and Latin American countries in an effort to deepen multilateral relations with other trade and cooperation partners and may continue to do so as a result of the impending UK withdrawal from the EU. Even among longtime Atlanticists, the notion has taken hold that this is not just a one-term neglect, but

that it may spell out lasting damage if the EU does not prepare against further US actions (Newman 2018).

In terms of accepting multilateral governance, the Trump administration continues to erode international institutions, no matter if withdrawing from UN bodies (such as the UN Human Rights Council or UNESCO or isolating itself from UN courts), or the questioning of the neoliberal order established through the Bretton Woods Institutions and other free trade agreements. Previous Republican administrations have at times also withdrawn their support from political bodies in the past, but have not questioned the fundamental validity of free-trade oriented organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the World Trade Organization, which the US created after World War 2. The most recent reversal of this position is further indication of the isolationist distancing from common multilateral cooperation on these issues. In an ironic twist, however, other regional powers similarly question the dominance and legitimacy of many of the traditional international institutions built by the US – best exemplified in the critique at the outdated UN Security Council membership structure - in their quest for autonomy and dominance (Wickett 2018). They thus respond to the implicit liberal Western bias of those organizations, and contribute, now with the help of the US, to the assessment of those as being outdated. As a consequence they have started to establish their own institutions, such as China's Belt-and Road Initiative or the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, the latter which many European states have joined despite expressed disapproval by the US. The skepticism against international cooperation is not only reducible to individual administrations, or the US' self-perception as exceptional, but is also rooted in its preference for active, output-oriented engagement in foreign policy which tends to be less compatible with the slower, process-oriented modus operandi of most international organizations, the EU included.

The EU being an international organization itself is thus heavily affected by the US' lack of acceptance of true multilateral order. As long as international governance was mainly exerted in the interest of the sole superpower (with other liberal partners profiting as well) and provided a joint bulwark against communist expansion, it was unequivocally accepted. But now that other great and emerging powers such as China, Russia and India claim with the EU a more broadly allocated distribution of authority to co-design global governance regimes, there exists less of an automatic transatlantic reflex. Oscillating between isolationism and extended global guardianship, the US has not yet been able to create a stable and enduring foreign policy doctrine that responds to 21st century challenges. One does not need to resort to Hardt & Negri's 'Empire' (2001) to realize the volatility of unipolar power in an international system with many regionally and increasingly, globally, powerful states. The US may still largely control global military forces and neoliberal trade, but increasingly counter-alliances are available in an increasingly

multipolar system to reject imperialistic pressures and interventions. The EU can be criticized for its mainly declaratory balance of normative ideals and geopolitical concessions expressed in the EU Global Strategy of 2016, but at least there is a concerted effort to create a multilateral roadmap for a rapidly changing global environment. The discussion by strategists on the US side revolves more narrowly about the fear that Europe may be 'lost again' if the US does not maintain its influence there (Kagan 2018), or what an 'abdication of global leadership' may mean for the US in the world (Daalder and Lindsay 2018). In contrast, the EU strategy already highlighted the need for a stronger concerted security and defense policy, and while such policies are still decided intergovernmentally by consent of the member states, in 2018 the Union as well as its members have begun to develop joint capacities through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). And French President Macron called publicly for 'strategic autonomy' from the US by developing more EU-based security resources, including his European Intervention Initiative reminiscent of earlier European multinational rapid reaction forces. The question, however, remains if European publics will go along with a reorientation from its civilian-normative exceptionalism to another power-and security seeking superpower.

In sum, the EU's capacity to act in economic and security terms has increased dramatically over the past two decades, while the US 'won the Cold War but lost the enemy' and has not adequately adapted to a new multipolar international system. Despite its ongoing problems, the EU's intrinsic multilateral DNA prepares it better for a global system with multiple powerful actors. Based on its liberal-democratic system and military and economic dominance, the US is attractive as a cooperation partner for Europeans, but it remains to be seen if it is truly an indispensable one.

Conclusion

The current tensions, while grave, are neither new nor do they signal the imminent breakup of the transatlantic alliance. But with the end of the Cold War order, Europe's continued positioning as American geopolitical extension became questionable, and the Iraq invasion of 2003 led to an initial critical rethinking of the bilateral relationship, which was further weakened by the disastrous cancellation of joint environmental (for instance, the Paris climate agreement), trade (TTIP) and security (Iran) treaties. The current Trump administration reinforces the necessity of Europeans to determine their own foreign policy, but the unilateral cancellation of the EU's hallmark Iran nuclear treaty has caused the EU to actively counter the US by working multilaterally to maintain the existing regime. Such a distancing, coupled with the determination of other BRICS states, especially Russia and China, to create a multipolar world order, provides Europeans with more choice, but also with more insecurity. This becomes

particularly apparent in threat perceptions, which in the US tend to be more consistently framed around Russia, China and other non-democratic governments (Cuba, North Korea, Iran), whereas Europeans have a less singularly focused perception of threats (ranging in Western Europe from ISIS to Eastern European fear of Russia). Moreover, many EU member states, and the EU as such also view global inequality or environmental degradation as global threats that ought to be solved multilaterally. In this sense, a realization by the EU has set in, notable in the pragmatism of its security strategy and the focus on common European defense initiatives, that their pacific-secular exceptionalism may not be the ideal option for a challenging geopolitical environment. A more genuinely European foreign policy which does not rely on a narrow US-European conception of Western liberalism, also recognizes and includes other regions and emerging democracies more than before, which is an essential characteristic for a leading actor in an advanced globalized system. Yet on the other hand, the increasing security-heavy (some would say, militarized) orientation of the Union, coupled with its external protectionist economic policies and internal fragmentation maintains the EU's perennial expectations-capabilities gap in foreign relations.

In terms of citizens and the publics, the EU is well advised to examine its relations to member state governments, and to more deeply engage those, especially when it comes to policies with a transatlantic angle such as TTIP or the EU-US privacy shield legislation. This would make the EU more legitimate in the eyes of European constituencies and help to define a more common European position on EU foreign policy, including transatlantic relations. After all, it is in the foreign policy areas where most European citizens wish for a common action, no matter in defense, humanitarian or environmental policies, if one believes the EU's public opinion surveys (Brummer 2007). It is easy to proclaim that the answer to 'America First' must be 'Europe United' as often heard nowadays by European foreign ministers, but given the current populist-nationalist climate across Europe, resulting from a decade of Euro-, refugee and security crises, more EU policies may not be desired by the majority of citizens in the long run. This could be especially so if the fragmentation of the EU continues after Brexit, while other powers including the US work towards undermining regional integration processes. Yet just like in Europe, the US faces a similar dilemma of 'cultural displacement' politics, whereby citizens are being fed xenophobic narratives aiming to prevent dynamic social change (Boyer 2018) through the reclaiming of past socio-economic models and national exceptionalisms. Depending on one's political outlook, this phenomenon may appear in addition to economic insecurity, or in opposition to a cosmopolitan type of reasoning. But more importantly, it is a real as well as imagined, and often manipulated concern on both sides of the Atlantic that ought to be recognized and appropriately debated. A critical perspective on transatlantic relations that is self-reflective, cautious against ideological manipulations from various sources, and takes into account power asymmetries on domestic and international governance levels, provides the best insurance for an adaptive strategy independent of the postulated necessity of close transatlantic relations.

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