

# The Nature and Scope of the US-EU Relationship

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“In taking counsel, make the past a guide to the future; for the unknown is most speedily discerned by means of the known,” Isocrates advised Demonicus, the youthful son of his friend Hipponicus, some twenty-four hundred years ago. Clearly, he did not have the relationship between the European Union and the United States in mind, but, as with most of his work, his sayings defy the notions of circumstance and time and provide many salutary lessons to draw from.

As this essay was being written, we were celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was not solely an awe-inspiring development for Germany, Europe, and the West and a triumph for all the values that we had been standing for since the end of the Second World War. By marking the end of the Soviet threat, it has also undeniably transformed the nature and focal point of the transatlantic relationship.

As consul general of Greece in Berlin at the time, I was privileged to witness this major event first hand. My subsequent posts in the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the EU, and now in the United States have enabled me to follow the evolving transatlantic relationship up close.

I have occasionally seen American colleagues frustrated over what is frequently perceived as the EU’s ineffectiveness — not an inaccurate assumption at times. I have heard their argument that Europeans spend much too much time on institutional and technocratic niceties, rather than laying out a broader strategic vision and seeking ways to improve burden sharing. I have felt Washington’s interest in EU affairs at times dwindling, with the Union

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portrayed as a collection of weak and ineffective states that are neither malleable nor collectively helpful.

Europeans, on the other hand, have often voiced, since the end of the Cold War, disappointment that US foreign policy at times appeared to have strayed from our core values and principles; a dim view was also taken of “divide and rule” tactics and cherry-picking of ad hoc coalitions. In short, the case has regularly been made of a transatlantic community divided in geopolitics, with Robert Kagan arguing, in a nutshell, that “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus.”

All the above assertions have the ring of both hyperbole and truth in them. Yet, while there are those American colleagues and scholars who argue that Europe is the force of yesteryear and urge the United States to concentrate on developing relations with China and India, I have yet to hear anyone deny the fundamental importance of the transatlantic relationship. The overwhelming majority of American decision makers recognize that Europe and the United States are each other’s natural allies, as well as each other’s most obvious and important political and trade partners, united by common values and common threat perceptions. As for Europe, it is on record, in its Security Strategy, that the relationship is irreplaceable. Indeed, there are very few areas in which European and American interests and objectives do not coincide, and where we would not benefit from a greater degree of cooperation.

I was still serving in Brussels when the second George W. Bush administration displayed a willingness to reach out to Europe. Official meetings were complemented by many informal visits and contacts, ensuring daily and substantive exchanges of views and restoring concrete and results-oriented cooperation. One might claim that this new approach was simply due to a US military and diplomatic overstretch, with an obvious need for allies to relieve it, but even this interpretation indirectly implies that the EU can and does provide some degree of relief in a dangerous, complex, and complicated international security environment that cannot be confronted effectively with a one-size-fits-all approach.

This desire for strengthened EU-US cooperation has been confirmed in all my discussions here in Washington. The US administrations, as well as the American public, have been increasingly comfortable with the concept

of a more robust and effective Europe on the world scene. Congress has a caucus for European affairs and regularly holds hearings on EU-US foreign policy cooperation. The transatlantic business and trade area remains the most important in the world and has grown dramatically in the past decade, accounting for about 6 million jobs created on each side of the Atlantic.

Calls for going even further are made by distinguished and well-versed voices. Charlie Ries, former US ambassador to Athens, has argued that the relationship between Europe and the United States would be helped immeasurably if it were underpinned by a “big audacious goal,” such as the negotiation of a tariffs and free trade agreement between the two sides. William J. Antholis of the Brookings Institution has argued eloquently in favor of charting a new course for transatlantic cooperation and for uniting forces on climate change.

At the recent EU-US summit, on 3 November 2009, leaders decided to establish a “Ministerial-level EU-US Energy Council that will improve energy security and contribute to achieving our ambitious climate change goals.” Cyber security, antimicrobial resistance issues, justice and home affairs, and nonproliferation were the other important areas that complemented the always dense foreign policy agenda.

Indeed, on foreign policy matters, US and European diplomats are actively joining forces in an effort to deal with the Iranian nuclear program issue and to secure a better future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU also participates in and supports efforts to revitalize the Middle East peace process, aiming at a viable and democratic Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security. The EU-US work plan on crisis management and conflict prevention, concluded in March 2008, is implemented through concrete steps in many related key areas, including early warning. In fact, for the first time, the United States is making an important contribution to an EU crisis management operation (the EULEX rule-of-law mission in Kosovo).

In Afghanistan, while there are misgivings in Washington as regards the quantity and quality of European contributions, European countries do participate, individually as well as collectively, in the effort to stabilize the country. There is also close cooperation in the fight against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In addition, in the economic field,

Europe and the United States are working in partnership to promote the goals of the Doha Development Round and through the Transatlantic Economic Council to ensure that the transatlantic market functions more effectively.

Moreover, the timing is auspicious for further progress. The Treaty of Lisbon has now been ratified and will finally come into effect, enabling Europe to become even more assertive and effective in the international arena. NATO allies will elaborate a new strategic concept, reasserting their unity of action based on the alliance's principles, values, and goals. Many misperceptions of the past regarding the role and ambitions of European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) have been cleared, and France has returned to full participation in NATO's integrated command.

The Treaty of Lisbon, in particular, will enhance Europe's ability to speak with a single and clearer voice, with direct and far-reaching consequences for EU-US cooperation. With the end of the rotating presidency, efforts to ascertain Europe's full potential will not ebb and flow depending on the whim of each six-month presidency. This will also provide permanent interlocutors in both Brussels and Washington. The new president of the European Council will ensure continuity and appropriate follow-up to EU-US summits by keeping track of decisions and making sure that heads of state and government regularly come back to them. The same could be said of the high representative, who, as vice president of the commission, will be able to pursue a more comprehensive approach to the EU's foreign policy, combining political leverage with the necessary financial and development resources. While US frustration over Europe's inability to shore up its military capabilities is understandable and will likely continue against the backdrop of economic difficulties and the ensuing budget pressures, pooling and reducing intra-EU duplications can obviate a lack of necessary financial resources. The European Defense Agency and the Treaty of Lisbon provisions on Permanent Structured Cooperation could be very helpful in this respect.

There is no doubt that a more coherent and capable EU would be good news for the United States. If there is one important lesson that the EU has learned from its recent experiences in crisis management, it is that we must develop a broader concept of burden sharing, which would include a vast array of governance and postconflict instruments and means. Today's global security threats, ranging from international terrorism to state failure, can

be addressed mainly through the right combination of civilian and military capabilities. There is more emphasis, and rightly so, on confronting the root causes of crises and challenges. Early warning and conflict prevention lead to wiser spending by tackling security challenges before they reach a critical stage.

Thus, the EU is gradually becoming a uniquely equipped crisis management actor, and represents an ideal strategic partner for the United States. Apart from the \$36 billion it allocates to foreign aid, the EU's engagement in crisis management is continually increasing, considering the number of ESDP missions and operations and the global security outlook of its contributions, as demonstrated in Aceh, the Middle East, and Africa.

In my view, when addressing the further development of the transatlantic relationship, five important aspects demand special consideration:

1. the limits of what can be expected from direct bilateral US engagement with individual EU member-states;
2. the search for a fitting structural framework for the transatlantic dialogue;
3. the often-called-for need for a common strategic concept to guide all common actions;
4. a smooth and healthy relationship between the EU and NATO; and
5. the real need for Europe to get its act together, both internally and in its dealings with the United States.

First, it is an established fact that, on the basis of their national capabilities alone, individual EU member-states cannot effectively tackle today's complex challenges and their global implications, nor can they be asked to bite off more than they can chew. By way of example, Greek authorities are presently under tremendous pressure as they strive to deal with the huge influx of illegal immigrants and the ensuing economic, security, social, and humanitarian problems that are of immense proportions for Greece's capacity. Greek security forces, in particular, are stretched to their limits, not least because even if one out of the 150,000 immigrants who illegally enter Greek territory every year were an aspiring terrorist, that would be an ill omen not just for Greece but also for its European partners and, possibly, for the United States. In parallel, Greece wants to dedicate more resources to the tackling of human

trafficking within its borders and for continued cooperation in the global fight against terrorism. It wants also to increase its contributions to missions in Kosovo and in Afghanistan. But Greece's capabilities, just like those of any other country, are not unlimited.

While Greece would never renege on its responsibilities, coordinated action with our twenty-six partners on all these fronts, including the protection of member-states' borders, can and does provide considerable real added value to our national efforts. The EU agenda on justice and home affairs issues has been growing steadily. The United States encourages that trend, but there is still much more that needs to be done. On counterterrorism, for instance, there are many areas, most notably the sharing of information, for which I have always been startled that there is better cooperation between individual EU member-states and the United States than collectively among the twenty-seven within the Union. More EU is better for both Europe and the United States.

Second, I sense that the United States continues to fret about how best to structure its relationship with Europe, even though direct strategic engagement with the EU has already amply proved its worth. On this point, I feel inclined to join again Isocrates, when he argued that "nature is better than convention."

The structural machinery of the EU-US relationship is, incidentally, extremely dense and solid, as indeed it should be (including the New Transatlantic Agenda, Transatlantic Economic Partnership, and yearly summits or semiannual ministerial and other high-level meetings of the Transatlantic Economic Council). Furthermore, the United States has developed close bilateral relations with other important international actors and countries, with policy-driven agendas and joint initiatives, even though these relations are not remotely as institutionalized as with the EU.

In my view, the objective must be to ensure the necessary political cooperation between the EU and the United States while avoiding an overly bureaucratic, cumbersome, and, therefore, ultimately not result-oriented process. In many ways, one could argue that we are already proceeding along the right path. In recent years, the proliferation of more informal, low-key, and operational ad hoc contacts has allowed for a deeper understanding of our respective priorities and policies and improved the coordination of policy planning

and assistance. Regular and direct dialogue, at both high and expert levels, has been enhanced on key strategic themes, resulting in a useful exchange of information, coordinated action, and joint consideration of security challenges at an early stage. This dialogue is not a means to produce automatic alignment of one side's views with those of the other. But it has consistently generated pragmatic and workable solutions. (The cases of Kosovo, Bosnia, and piracy off the Somali coast are instructive.)

Third, I have heard, on both sides of the Atlantic, endless debates about the fundamental need to take the conceptual work forward and to lay out a grand strategy that would provide the foundation stone and stewardship for all our common actions. There is no denying that dialogue between the EU and the United States at the strategic level should be conducted as often as necessary and possible. Based on my experience as a practitioner, however, rather than spend precious time and energy in attempts to reach a common theoretical understanding, which will de facto be overtaken by events, we need to be pragmatic and improve focused, sustained, and action-oriented cooperation where it is possible. In today's world with its many security challenges, reality is simply too complex for a single and overly conceptualized recipe; artificial criteria are inconsistent and will simply not work. There can be no single analysis and no clear definition of burden sharing. Ad hoc situations must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

One concrete suggestion is for the US secretary of state to participate in regular Gymnich-type meetings with her European counterparts, to discuss important issues in an informal setting over a two-day span. This would provide for in-depth exchanges of views not allowed by the time constraints of the current type of meetings where the secretary of state presents a condensed version of the US viewpoint while the few European officials who are able to respond barely have time to scrape at the surface, mostly concentrating to avoid unnecessary antagonization of their distinguished interlocutor.

Fourth, and as a logical corollary to the previous point, we must take a little drama out of the EU-NATO relationship, which has borne good fruit in spite of some well-known difficulties. In Washington and in many European capitals, there is a natural tendency to emphasize NATO's role as the primary framework for conducting transatlantic relations. While few would doubt the crucial importance of the alliance, including for Europe's relations with the

United States, direct strategic engagement with the EU can be equally useful. So many issues fall under the competence of the Union (energy, environment, justice and home affairs, economy and trade, and common foreign and security policy, to mention a few) that de facto cooperation with European countries cannot be conducted through NATO alone. Even on crisis management, it is widely acknowledged that ESDP can be effective, and could be more so if endowed with concrete capabilities, including command-and-control structures. Experience has also evidenced that there will be cases in which NATO could not provide the appropriate option, not least because the EU can be more palatable in many parts of the world.

Fortunately, we are slowly moving away from the false dilemmas that initially plagued the EU-NATO relationship. “For just as we see the bee settling on all blossoms and sipping what is best from each, so ought those who strive after education . . . to collect what is profitable from every side,” wrote Isocrates. And more up-to-date, in the words of Simon Serfaty and Sven Biscop, “there can be a distinctive ‘European’ way without endangering the cooperative Euro-Atlantic design and, conversely, there cannot be a cohesive ‘Atlanticist’ way unless it acknowledges specific European preferences and needs, even when these seem distinct from US preferences and needs.”<sup>1</sup> Good practical cooperation, both in Brussels and on the ground, has been developed in recent years, thanks also to the efforts of the secretaries general and the staffs of the two organizations. The organizations should intensify this trend, rather than aim for formal meetings that in the end produce very little.

Fifth, on the EU side, it is imperative that we achieve greater institutional and political integration, strengthened military and civilian capacity, and better working relations with key partners. In short, we must become more capable, more coherent, and more active. It is up to Europe to use the Lisbon Treaty to good account and present a more coherent and unified view and attitude in the world and vis-à-vis the United States. The precondition for a revitalization of the security architecture is that the Europeans speak with one voice. This is the only way to make the EU a more reliable and authoritative partner when responding to US commitments around the world.

1. Simon Serfaty and Sven Biscop, *A Shared Strategy for a Euro-Atlantic Partnership of Equals* (Washington, DC: Center For Strategic and International Studies, 20 July 2009).

In Washington, there is an obvious need for a more efficient public diplomacy and an overall stronger EU presence; the Union is not adequately prepared to do as the Washingtonians do in promoting its foreign policy among US domestic actors. If we want to become better known as a foreign policy actor to be reckoned with, we also must reach out to and engage all those who participate in the US decision-making process: the legislative branch, think-tanks, academic centers, the media, and public opinion. Currently, we are barely active in this context. Moreover, we ought to do a better job of explaining the internal workings of the EU and the roles and competencies of its various organs. Too often, American interlocutors are rightly confused about who in Brussels does what and how.

I will conclude by mentioning the one thought on EU-US relations, among the many interesting ones I have heard since arriving here, that struck me in particular. I was advised to forget about “history and common values” and to realize that the United States and the EU simply have no choice but to work together, since they both need to manage their decline on the world scene and have only each other to rely on for related damage control. I must admit that, while there is some justice to the concept, I found it unnecessarily pessimistic. I strongly believe that we can and must instill a bit more ambition in the transatlantic relationship.

It is a fact that the EU and the United States account for only 10 percent of the world population. Increasingly scarce resources, energy dependency, economic gloom, climate change, escalating migratory pressures, and the numerous interwoven threats do not bode well for our dealings in an international environment that has been in serious flux since the fall of the Berlin Wall and seems to become more ominous by the day. Our societies must deal with some serious new internal challenges. It is also often argued that our economies will not stay afloat if they do not undergo a radical structural overhaul.

But this is not just about the EU and the United States. The entire world is facing critical challenges. I remain convinced that only a collective political approach, based on our common transatlantic values, can provide the key to achieving satisfactory and long-lasting solutions to the many problems we are faced with. “Virtue is the holiest and surest of all possessions,” argued Isocrates.

Spreading democracy and the rule of law, taking on international terrorism, stabilizing failed states and resolving regional conflicts, setting out the new modalities of global economic governance, alleviating poverty, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, tackling climate change and energy security, working for the stability and openness of the global economy: this is indeed a very tall order. By working together across the Atlantic, bringing on board other major players, and cooperating effectively in international institutions, the EU and the United States can continue to make a positive global difference.

A better future for Americans, Europeans, and the rest of the world demands a comprehensive and operational EU-US partnership, which remains today more crucial than it has ever been. In the Isocratic method, “seek after what is best.” This is true of the transatlantic partnership; it must also be true of the ways in which we attempt to move it forward.