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## Europe in an Asian century: Europe between the superpowers: no longer inevitable? the transatlantic relationship from Bush to Obama

### Report

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# ➤ No Longer Inevitable? The Transatlantic Relationship from Bush to Obama

Michael Cox

**U**ntil recently, the relationship between the United States and Europe constituted one of the most intimate in modern times. Indeed, as we ‘over here’ love reminding our American friends ‘over there’, the United States was in the beginning a mere by-product of Europe – initially created by a rising European power in the form of Great Britain, then born out of a long war between Britain and France, and finally transformed into a world power in large part because of large-scale European migration between 1814 and 1914. Europe’s long twentieth century crisis, however, had a massive impact on the balance within this relationship, and by 1945 not only had Europe lost its place at the head of the international table but had become highly dependent on the United States itself. Still, in uncertain times, the US continued to need as many friends as it could muster, and whether one prefers to view the nature of the post-war relationship in the more liberal sense of being a ‘community’, or in more realist terms as being one in which an American hegemon dictated terms to weak dependencies, matters less than in recognising how important the relationship was to become to both countries during the Cold War. Thus, Europe needed the US to survive in a bipolar world: the United States, however, required Europe in order to protect that world from the threat posed by its many anti-western enemies around the world.

This short article says nothing about how the Cold War was fought, or how Europe and the United States then managed to navigate their way from one era of more or less Cold War unity (sometimes more and sometimes less) to another, where the relationship had to be sustained without a clear and present danger. What it does do is something more immediate: namely, examine the problematic impact that the ‘war on terror’ had on the relationship during the G.W Bush years, and then how that relationship fared during Obama’s first term. At one level, the conclusion I arrive at is hardly an original one: what Bush lost, Obama helped restore. Yet, in spite of the Obama bounce, not to mention Obama’s self-evident popularity in Europe in a more fundamental way (and for reasons I will explain), the relationship has become a more fragile one. Its longer term health will therefore require some careful nursing in the years to come. It is no longer the ‘inevitable’ alliance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Vittorio Parsi, *The Inevitable Alliance: Europe and the United States Beyond Iraq*, (2006).

## BACK TO THE FUTURE: 'THE WAR ON TERROR':

If the end of the Cold War represented formal closure on one era, then so too – in many American eyes – did the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Indeed, as the dust began to clear from the streets of downtown Manhattan, a raft of born-again, mainly conservative, pundits emerged from under the rumble to declare the bloody end to a decade of 'drift and lethargy' that had left America at sea and the West without purpose. Each crisis in history produces its own particular version of the immediate past; and so it did once again in the days and months immediately following 9/11. As Condoleezza Rice reportedly declared a few days after the attack, the United States in 2001 (as it had been half a century earlier) was once again 'present at the creation' of a new international order.

There has of course been a vast literature describing the response by the Bush administration to the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, the bulk of it being highly critical.<sup>2</sup> But what has often been left out of the discussion is how much the Bush administration, faced with what it regarded as a quite novel historical conjuncture, constantly returned to history in order to make sense of what it was doing.<sup>3</sup> Referencing the 'surprise attack' at Pearl Harbour carried the important message that when ruthless men did unspeakable things to the United States, they had better beware the consequences.<sup>4</sup> But it was the Cold War, more than any other historical experience, that was compelled to do most of the heavy lifting, so much so, that in a relatively short space of time a number of pundits began to talk of the 'war on terror' as representing something akin to a new Cold War. National security was now back at the top of the policy agenda, led by a 'war President' advised by a group of officials who had been Cold War warriors themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Within the Bush team, the purpose of looking back was less to reflect seriously about the past, and more to establish frameworks within which it could now legitimise its own policy decisions. In the process, it did what all administrations had done since the end of the Second World War: derive the lessons it wanted to draw and ignore those that complicated the telling of a particular tale. That said, the tale it narrated had its own appeal. It began with the end of the Cold War itself. Here the Bush administration was anything but subtle. The defeat of Soviet communism, it repeated, represented a massive victory for the United States and the West, but had left it the sole remaining superpower without a mission.<sup>6</sup> As one well-known American historian close to the Bush White House pointed out at the time, the US might have won the Cold War; but in the process, it had become a nation lacking a grand strategy.<sup>7</sup> Now, at a stroke, the vacuum had been filled by the challenge posed by global jihad. Here was the almost perfect antidote to western complacency, and what some around Bush viewed as an America grown decadent in the era personified by Clinton.

If 9/11 provided what looked like a solution to what some regarded as America's strategic vacuum, the Cold War also offered the Bush White House a ready-made supply of easy arguments about what to do next.<sup>8</sup> Bush himself was highly selective in terms of what he chose to learn and from whom. Unsurprisingly, the Cold War President whom Bush clearly tried to learn the most from was Ronald Reagan – republican hero, enemy of the original 'evil empire' (and it was of course no coincidence that Bush himself later talked of an 'axis of evil') and the ultimate reason (at least according to the American right) why the Soviet Union had finally been consigned into the proverbial dustbin of history. Like Reagan, Bush believed in establishing clearly defined positions of strength. Moreover, there had similarly been many around Reagan who were

2 See in particular Bob Woodward's four best-selling books on the Bush administration, why it decided to liberate Iraq and how then it became defined – some would argue undermined – by that decision. *Bush at War*, (2002) describes the path to war with Afghanistan following September 11. The other three volumes deal with Iraq both directly and indirectly: *Plan of Attack*, (2004); *State of Denial: Bush at War*, (2006); and *The War Within: A Secret White House History (2006–2008)*, (2008).

3 Jeffrey Record, 'The Use and Abuse of History: Munich, Vietnam and Iraq', *Survival* 49(1), (2007), 163–180.

4 'The Pearl Harbor of the 21st century took place today', Bush noted in his diary on the night of September 11th 2001. *Bush at War*, 37.

5 James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, (2004).

6 Michael Cox, *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War: Superpower without a Mission?*, (1995).

7 John Lewis Gaddis, 'A grand strategy', *Foreign Policy* 113, (2002), 50–57.

8 Barry Buzan, 'Will the 'Global War on Terrorism' Be the New Cold War?' *International Affairs* 82(6), (2006), 1101–1118.

anything but 'realist' in international outlook. Perhaps as a result, both sought to challenge the status quo: one by trying to move beyond containment, and the other by questioning America's traditional reliance on authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

Reagan the Cold warrior, and indeed the Cold War more generally, thus served as a significant point of reference for the Bush team. As many inside the Bush administration readily conceded, having a clear threat was not without its advantages. It would remind Americans that the world remained a very dangerous place. It would permit a rapid buildup of US military power. It would justify a more assertive foreign policy. And, as a bonus, it might even help revive that battered ideological edifice known colloquially as the 'West'. Islamic terrorism was not exactly the same thing as communism, but in its own way, it might serve a similar purpose. Indeed, when the day after 9/11 NATO invoked Article 5, insisting that the attack on the United States had been an attack on all, it very much looked as if the West had never been so united. On issues such as the 'Islamic' threat in particular, and views about Moslems more generally, publics on both sides of the Atlantic did appear to be looking at the world in very similar ways.<sup>9</sup>

## CRACKS

Still, even in the midst of all this solidarity, cracks began to appear; and as time went by and the war against al Qaeda segued into a wider war against those states who formed part of what Bush termed the 'axis of evil', relations began to fracture badly. Robert Kagan's influential essay in 2002 explained that the divide was not about personalities or policies; rather it was about the different kinds of international entities the United States and Europe (the EU in particular) had become since the end of World War II. America, he noted, was the only superpower with global reach, international responsibilities, and a military capacity to match its commitments. Europe, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with making peace and building a new kind of Europe following its own disastrous history before 1945. In his own much-quoted words, Americans were from Mars and European were from Venus, having become peace-loving Kantians constitutionally incapable of using force when necessary to address serious international issues.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion about the sources of what was fast becoming a profound breach in the transatlantic relationship continued unabated through most of the Bush presidency. But another, equally profound difference, began to emerge too, but having less to do with power and more with the very different ways Europeans and Americans seemed to construct the threat of terrorism itself. Terrorism, it was agreed, was a massive problem. But when Bush began to talk of a global 'war' against terror, critical European voices started to be raised. As Michael Howard pointed out in an early, but highly influential critique, the idea of a 'war on terror' was a dubious one. Not only did it lend legitimacy to Al Qaeda; it also presupposed an extended conflict that might continue ad infinitum. The notion was also strategically incoherent. No state or group of states could declare war on a method, and nor should they try to do so.<sup>11</sup> Even the Bush team at times seemed unsure of how to frame the problem. At one point, the administration even replaced the notion of a global war against terror (GWOT) with the apparently less offensive idea of a 'long war'.<sup>12</sup> At one level, such rhetorical framing mattered not one jot. However, it did point to (at best) a lack of strategic clarity, and (at worst) to a lack of confidence in what the US and its allies were supposed to be uniting against.

9 '56 percent of Americans and Europeans do not feel that the values of Islam are compatible with the values of democracy'. *Transatlantic Trends*, (2006),

4. 'Large numbers of Americans and Europeans agree on the importance of global threats with the largest increase over the year in those who see Islamic fundamentalism as an 'extremely important' threat.' *Transatlantic Trends*, (2006), 4; 7-8.

10 Robert Kagan, 'Power and Weakness,' *Policy Review*, No. 113, (2002).

11 Sir Michael Howard, 'What's in a Name? How to Fight Terrorism', *Foreign Affairs* 81(1), (2002), 8-13.

12 See 'Abizaid credited with popularising the term 'long war'', *Washington Post*, 3/2/2006. President Bush also sought to place the enemy in the camp of fascism, hence his brief use of the term 'Islamofascism' to describe jihadists of all shapes and sizes.

This, in turn, raises a second, more theoretical issue about whether or not it is possible to sustain any kind of strategic alliance against something as nebulous as 'terror'. Here the comparison with the way alliances have been forged in the past, and the way this new alliance was being put together, bears serious comparison. Alliances may be formed for many different reasons, but one, clearly, has to do with the existence of a credible threat. Barry Buzan observed that 'while serious, the terrorist threat' simply lacked the 'depth of the Soviet/communist one' – and the key reason it lacked such depth, of course, was that it had no tangible reference point in the shape of a well-defined state with serious power capabilities.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in different countries at different times, the threat was perceived in very different ways. Thus immediately after the London bombings of 2005, British opinion was decidedly hawkish, but this reaction soon fell away once the dust had settled. Meanwhile, elsewhere in Europe where no such attacks had occurred views tended to range from the complacent to the war weary.

To complicate matters even further, there was (until Obama's election) a growing belief on one side of the Atlantic at least, that the Bush administration was manipulating tensions created by the security situation either to build a new American 'empire' (a most popular term in Europe between 2001 and 2008) or to further his own political ambitions. The fact that the war on terror helped get the republicans re-elected in 2004 hardly helped generate consistent, across-the-board support for US goals, especially in Europe.<sup>14</sup> Nor did scandals such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Indeed, it was not just the decision to go to war against Iraq that caused such consternation in Europe. It was also what looked to most European as being Bush's abandonment of the core values closely associated in their minds with the idea, and indeed the ideal, of the West.<sup>15</sup> Threat perception is a delicate thing and if ordinary citizens – not to mention influential opinion-formers – feel they are either being sold something phony or dubious, it makes waging any kind of war much more difficult.

## CONSENSUS?

This brings us, then, to the question of Islam itself and the problematic ideological source of 'jihad'. Here again, the global war on terror involving the wider Atlantic community faced significant, perhaps insurmountable, obstacles in creating anything like a consensus. There were at least three reasons why.

First, radical Islam, unlike communism, had and has only limited ideological appeal. It is not, in other words, a universal threat. Consequently, it was much less likely to have the same uniting and mobilising capacity as communism. Second, the overwhelming majority of Muslims (unlike the overwhelming majority of communists during the Cold War) did and do not seek the overthrow of the various states in which they happened to be living. Indeed, as opinion polls in the West have shown, while ordinary Muslims may not approve of western interventions in the Middle East, only a tiny minority is prepared to translate that criticism into militant action. Third, though Islam may be defined by some in the West as 'the problem', policy-makers themselves understood that if jihad was to be successfully contained, the West had to seek some understanding with those states that were themselves Islamic in character. Even the United States was forced by the logic of its 'war' to seek alliances with at least two countries – Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – whose elites have either displayed some sympathy with the terrorists, or have been willing to use them for their own political purposes.

Finally, the 'war on terror' was launched into an international system that was altogether more complex in character than the somewhat simpler world that had been left behind in 1989. As Fred Halliday noted, the Cold War succeeded in forging accord between potentially fractious and competitive states not because the USSR was more powerful than America, but because the United States as the leader of the West was able

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13 Barry Buzan, 'Will the 'Global War on Terrorism' Be the New Cold War?' *International Affairs* 82(6), (2006), 1112.

14 Simon Jenkins, 'They see it Here, They See it There, They See Al-Qaeda Everywhere', *The Sunday Times* (London), 29/4/2006.

15 Paul Wilkinson, 'International Terrorism: The Changing Threat and the EU's response', Chailot Paper 84, (2005), 17-18; 24-25.

to construct the world in such a way that other critical issues were either seen as being secondary, or could be folded into the larger East-West competition.<sup>16</sup> This nesting of issues was to prove altogether more difficult in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as polls showed that until 2008 Europe populations, in marked contrast to the United States, regarded global warming as just as significant a threat to world order as terrorism. With the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, the focus shifted again, towards the profound uncertainties facing ordinary people, as they began to come to terms with the biggest material challenge to their lives since the end of World War II.

## OBAMA TO THE RESCUE

The failed attempt to construct a new foreign policy paradigm that would unite allies and mobilise support on both sides of the Atlantic led to what can only be described as a profound political crisis, most obviously in Europe, where political elites continued to confront a tide of anti-Americanism, but also in the United States itself, where many within the foreign policy establishment were becoming only too aware of how much soft power support the United States was beginning to lose in Europe. Bush did make several attempts during his second term to repair the harm done in his first, but to little avail.<sup>17</sup> It would, in the end, require a very different kind of American leader to make good the damage.

It is difficult to recall a time when the election of a new US President excited as much enthusiasm in Europe as did the election of Barack Obama in November 2008. Indeed, whereas Bush had found it increasingly difficult to visit Europe without a massive police presence to protect him from often violent anti-war activists, Obama on his early visits across the Atlantic was greeted with quite extraordinary enthusiasm. Even in France, where anti-Americanism had become an integral part of that country's national identity, Obama appeared to be able to do no wrong. In Germany too, the mood swung back from sullen opposition to US foreign policy to a recognition that someone very different espousing what many felt was an acceptable world view was now in charge. A year after Obama's election, a new and influential book appeared suggesting that far from Kagan's characterisation of competing world views and different attitudes to the uses of power, Americans and Europeans were in fact remarkably similar in outlook. Some may have liked to stress the differences, but did so not because they were especially great, but because they were in fact fairly minor. As it turned out, Americans and Europeans were more like each other than anybody else, and much more like each other than some conservative Americans or leftish Europeans would ever dare to admit.<sup>18</sup>

Obama's efforts in the early months of his administration to revitalise the transatlantic partnership both in word and in deed – Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued in January 2009 that the US had no 'closer allies' than the Europeans<sup>19</sup> – could not, however, paper over all the cracks. Even Obama himself, with his African father and radical white mother, never quite sounded like a natural 'Atlanticist'. Indeed, not only did he conclude that the US had to think in fresh ways that did not make it constantly hostage to events in the Middle East, but that in the world more generally the United States needed to find some very new partners. Moreover, these partners – not allies in the traditional sense – were more likely to be found in rising and prosperous Asia rather than in declining Europe, where profound problems were rendering the countries there more of a problem than a solution when it came to restoring health to the world economy. Nor was Obama sentimental when it came to thinking about the role America's European allies were playing, or rather not

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<sup>16</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*, (1984).

<sup>17</sup> Adam Quinn and Michael Cox, 'Fear and Loathing in Brussels: The Political Consequences of Anti-Americanism', in R. Higgot and I. Malbasic (eds.), *The Political Consequences of Anti-Americanism*, (2008), 93-107.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Small Differences: How America and Europe are Alike*, (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Hillary Clinton, Remarks during Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing, 13/1/2009. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/01/115196.htm>.

playing, in NATO. When his own Secretary of Defence stepped down from office in June 2011, he expressed quite openly what Obama must have been thinking privately: that NATO had, in effect, become a 'two-tiered' alliance poorly equipped and too divided to deal with the challenges facing the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>20</sup>

The sense that Europe was becoming less useful as an ally and thus beginning to matter less to the United States was made clear by an opinion poll published in the United States two years into the Obama presidency. The results were worrying for those concerned about the health of the transatlantic relationship. The problem was not that Europeans were not doing enough militarily even within the framework of NATO (that was bad enough); rather, it was that Europe as a whole was fast losing its privileged importance in the eyes of a majority of Americans. Indeed, according to Pew, whereas 44 percent of Americans in 2001 regarded Europe as being of the greatest importance to the USA, ten years on it was now Asia that was viewed as being more central.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, within the state system as a whole, it was now China, and not, say, more traditional allies such as the UK or Germany, that was increasingly seen as being more crucial to America's long-term national interests. Nor was this new interest in Asia and China confined to the American public. In the academic world, book after book, and article after article dissected the supposed power transition now underway in Asia. In the popular press, the number one story was China's rise and what this was going to mean for the United States: economic opportunity, strategic threat or a combination of the two? Either way, there was no getting away from the fact that in the United States views about the world were changing, and changing in ways that were starting to generate some nervousness on the other side of the Atlantic.

Yet it was what American policymakers began to say and do that set alarm bells ringing most and, in particular, their repeated reference to a new Asia pivot, in what some were predicting would become a new Asian century - that started to concern Europeans most. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton could not have been more explicit. The United States, she argued, had been for too long preoccupied with threats arising from within the wider Middle East. Now it would be turning its attention more and more towards Asia - in part because this was where the future lay, in part because it was in Asia where real growth was to be found, and in part because Asia was home to two of the world's rising superpowers in India and China. Clinton also made it clear that she was breaking from the tradition that hitherto had led Americans to always think of Europe first, and would now be making Asia her top priority. She even emphasised how many trips she had already made to Asia by late 2011 (seven in all) before going on to outline in some detail why America had always been, and doubtless would always remain, an Asian power. Clinton's bold vision certainly made for exciting reading. However, it had the presumably unintended consequences of upsetting two very distinct audiences: the one in Beijing who saw it as nothing less than a manifesto of containment directed against China; and the other one in Europe, who felt that Europe had become invisible. It was not at all clear where Europe would fit into this brand new order of rapidly shifting partnerships. Moreover, if the world was going to be defined by what transpired in Asia, as Clinton most clearly suggested, then what exactly was the purpose of the Transatlantic relationship? No answers were provided, but the implication was clear: in a new international order where alliances were, in her words, being updated to cope with the challenge posed by China, more established relationships would almost certainly become increasingly marginal. A new world beckoned.<sup>22</sup>

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20 Robert M. Gates, 'The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO)', Brussels, 10/6/2011. <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1581>.

21 Pew Research Centre for People and the Press, 'Strengthen Ties With China: But Get Tough on Trade', 12/1/2011. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1855/china-poll-americans-want-closer-ties-but-tougher-trade-policy>.

22 Hillary Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', *Foreign Policy*, November, (2011).

## CONCLUSION

Two great moments stand out in the history of the transatlantic relationship since the end of the Cold War: one that divided allies because one of those allies – the United States under President Bush – chose to respond to terrorism in ways that many Europeans within the western alliance were unable to accept; and another that has led the same ally to conclude that in a world where economic power is shifting eastwards towards Asia, the transatlantic relationship is bound (at worst) to become irrelevant, or likely (at best) to become far less important. Catalysing this latter feeling in the US has been the apparently unending economic crisis within Europe itself. It is bad enough, Americans argue, that Europeans fail to deliver anything like enough when it comes to international security. But it is almost unforgiveable when Europe then fails to do what it could at least claim to have been doing from 1945 onwards: delivering prosperity to its own people while helping engineer growth in the larger world economy.

How seriously should Europeans be taking all this? After all, in spite of their separate economic woes, the economic relationship between Europe and the United States still remains crucially important.<sup>23</sup> Europe still shares a whole raft of values with the United States and the United States with Europe. And, for all its weaknesses and inadequacies, the NATO alliance continues to be the only serious multilateral military alliance in the world today – one from which the United States as much as the Europeans still derive enormous benefit. Still, it would be foolish to ignore the warning signs by hiding behind the old transatlantic mantra that in a world of uncertainty the democratic West needs to stay united. As we have seen, the West has been anything but over the past ten years. Nor is there much comfort to be drawn from the current foreign policy debate in the United States itself. Obama may sound acceptable to European ears; but he remains a quintessential American president, and one who obviously does not look at the world in traditional 'Atlanticist' ways. Nor, increasingly, do other Americans. Indeed, when his political opponents on the right attack him not just for being not American enough, but for being much too like a European, Europeans should sit up and take note. The old certainties, and in part the old diplomacy, that held the western alliance together no longer pertain; and the sooner Europeans recognise this, the sooner they will be able to forge a new role for themselves in a fast changing world. The answer lies in their – and nobody else's – hands. ■

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Hamilton and Joseph P. Quinlan (eds.), *The Transatlantic Economy 2012*, SAIS, John Hopkins University, (2012). <http://transatlantic.sais-jhu.edu/transatlantic-topics/transatlantic-economy-series.htm>