

Rethinking the EU: Why Washington Needs to Support European Integration

Ronald D. Asmus

It is time for the United States to rethink its policy toward the European Union and European integration more broadly. The challenges of the twenty-first century and America's changing priorities and strategic needs are making the United State more rather than less dependent on the EU and its success. Already America's ability to achieve its own top foreign policy objectives – defending the US homeland, winning the 'war on terror' and promoting the spread of freedom and democracy around the world – increasingly require a strong, politically cohesive and outward-looking Europe. Today America needs a functioning EU as much as an effective NATO.

The rejection in France and the Netherlands of the European constitutional treaty has clearly plunged the EU into a crisis. While some American conservatives may have enjoyed a moment of *schadenfreude* over the EU's current difficulties, this is not the time for the United States to walk away from the Union or celebrate its troubles. For this crisis has paradoxically created an opportunity for US policy. The constitution's rejection has kindled a much more fundamental debate about what the EU is all about and how it can or should be reconstructed. How the EU should shape its relations with the outside world, including the United States, is a central issue in that debate. And as Europe engages in that debate, the views of Washington can be important in shaping its outcome.

For Washington to seize that opportunity, however, requires a more supportive and proactive approach toward the EU. The fundamental problem facing Europe today is its weakness. The United States should support the creation of an EU capable of becoming a global strategic actor and open to jointly confronting common challenges around the world. Philosophically, the United States needs to return to the spirit that guided US policy in the 1950s and 1960s under Eisenhower and Kennedy, when Washington was

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unabashedly in favour of European integration because US leaders believed the process could produce a unified and Atlanticist Europe. In practical terms, the United States needs to pursue policies that help empower those European countries that share this vision of the EU, be prepared to lobby for that vision and work to restructure the US–EU relationship. In other words, as opposed to being ambivalent about the EU or trying to keep it down, Washington should be seeking to help build it up while encouraging it to be as outward looking and pro-Atlanticist as possible.

Americans should support the creation of a strong EU for reasons rooted in their own interests. Yet a shift in US policy along these lines would also help boost America's image on the continent. In other words, this is not only smart strategy but good public diplomacy. The European project remains Europe's number one political priority, notwithstanding the failed referendums in France and the Netherlands. Few aspects of American policy have cost more goodwill in Europe in recent years than loose talk in Washington about dividing Europe or undercutting European integration. If the United States is seen as ambivalent or hostile to Europe's top concern, it will breed resentment. Conversely, there are few steps that will go further in restoring that goodwill than a clear American commitment to the successful creation of a strong Europe.

From Atlanticist origins to Gaullist counterweight

Today it is often forgotten – on both sides of the Atlantic – that the origins of the European project were Atlanticist. Jean Monet and his colleagues were as Atlanticist as they come. Similarly, in the 1950s and 1960s Washington was profoundly pro-European integration. It is inconceivable that this early generation of Europe-builders would embrace today's fashionable talk about the EU as a counterweight to American power, or that the American foreign policy establishment of the 1950s and 1960s would have embraced the kind of Eurosceptic sentiments prevalent in some American conservative circles today. The prospect of a German chancellor mobilising anti-American sentiments to get elected, or his American counterpart using anti-French themes to do the same, would have been considered irresponsible and unthinkable.

To be sure, there was anti-Americanism in Europe in the 1950s, while not all Americans in the early post-war years were pro-European Atlanticists. But for that generation of American and European leaders, the Atlantic and European projects were inherently linked and complementary. Both sides were deeply and actively involved in ensuring the success of the other's project. In contrast, it is common today for NATO to be seen as 'America's project' and the EU to be seen as Europe's. In the 1950s it was often the other way around: Europeans were frequently the bigger boosters of NATO and

Americans were at times the integrationist hawks. And both sides would have instinctively agreed with the argument that they were natural partners in trying to build a better world order.

Much has changed since then. The realignment that occurred can in large part be traced back to French President Charles de Gaulle. He was determined to turn the European project into something distinctly European and non-Atlanticist. He wanted to create a Europe liberated from American influence, which would be built in contradistinction to the Atlantic project rather than be complementary and intertwined with it – what is known today as the ‘counterweight’ movement. De Gaulle’s shift also helped set in motion the intellectual and political realignment in American policy that we see today. For as European integration developed what many Americans considered to be an anti-American hue, Washington also became increasingly ambivalent about it.

For much of the next 20 years Washington and Paris were locked in a wrestling match over the relative weight that the Atlantic and European frameworks would enjoy in the US–European relationship. The requirements of the Cold War nonetheless imposed a certain discipline. Both sides sought to mobilise different coalitions to assert themselves. Countries such as Germany sought to build bridges and avoided choosing between Washington and Paris. While European integration was proceeding, most allies other than France refrained from supporting plans that would challenge the Atlantic framework. However, with the collapse of communism and the withdrawal of Russian power from the continent, the question of Europe’s future, the acceleration of the European project and reorganising the US–European relationship were all on the table.

Bill Clinton, the first post-Cold War American president, was also the American president most supportive of the EU and European integration since John F. Kennedy. He was committed to the building of a Europe whole and free, and supportive of the vision of a strengthened EU that would eventually grow into a global partner of the United States. He came within one sentence of agreeing to an understanding that would have brought France into NATO and reharmonised the Atlantic and European projects. That sentence was a compromise formula on who in NATO would lead the Alliance’s southern command. One cannot help but wonder how much of the subsequent European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) debate and the difficulties between the EU and NATO might have been muted if this deal had been consummated. In any case, Clinton believed it was in the US interest to encourage a strong and unified EU to become an actor on the global stage and was more relaxed about and less threatened by EU aspirations than most of the Washington foreign-policy establishment.

At the same time, the consensus within Washington on this issue started to fray. By the late 1990s, conservative ambivalence and open questioning of American support for the European project started to emerge in the debates over the 1998 UK–French St Malo Declaration and the ESDP. Having failed in his effort to reintegrate with NATO, President Jacques Chirac returned to his Gaullist roots and increasingly and loudly embraced the ‘counterweight’ thesis. This in turn only deepened growing scepticism in American circles over whether Washington’s support for the EU still made sense.

With the advent of the George W. Bush administration, many of these differences burst into the open. Several leading officials during the president’s first term let it be known that they were either agnostic or critical of the European project. While such views never became official policy, loose talk of disaggregation sent shivers down the spines of European allies. The degree of contempt and vitriol that emerged on both sides of the Atlantic over the Iraq war threatened to spin out of control. There were few

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issues that angered Americans more than the chorus of European voices claiming it was the United States that had suddenly become the new danger the EU had to counter. And there were few issues that created more resentment in Europe than real or imagined American attempts to pursue a policy of ‘divide and conquer’ vis-à-vis its former allies.

Both Democratic and Republican policies over the past decade have been largely ineffective. The Clinton administration believed in a strong Europe and European integration but was often worried that in practice the EU would pursue policies that would undercut the Alliance. It therefore combined a policy of principled support with a tactic of being vigilant when it came to the details of ESDP and other issues. The result was often seen as contradictory and did not give the United States the kind of influence or results it wanted. The Bush administration came into office with a good number of Eurosceptics in its ranks. It stepped back from the principled support the Clinton administration had offered and its initial ambivalence toward the EU, its unilateralist policies and the outright hostility of some American conservatives often undercut America’s Atlanticist friends and actually strengthened the hand of Euro-Gaullist opponents who argued that this demonstrated the United States was incapable of ever treating Europe as an equal partner. And the public mood in Europe has shifted against the United States in a dangerous way. While Atlanticists still exist in significant numbers in Europe, there are few policies they would like to see revised more than US policy on the EU.

If it is time for a change of US policy toward the EU and European integration, the point of departure must be a clear understanding of what American interests are. Part of the problem the United States faces today is that its policy is bogged down in conflicting assessments of the European debate over what the EU is all about. America has not kept its eye on the ball of what its own interests are, but instead allowed US policy to become reactive and, in a sense, passive-aggressive in response to the different, and at times contradictory, currents of the debate in Europe. These currents should not set the course for Americans deciding their own interests.

Why America needs the EU

There are four fundamental reasons why the United States has a real and growing interest in the success of the EU and European integration more broadly.

The first is simply to sustain peace and stability in Europe. It is often taken for granted that Europe has ceased to be a theatre of geopolitical competition and conflict. This is an extraordinary historical accomplishment for which Americans and European statesmen laboured for most of the last century. It is stating the obvious to note that the United States has a core interest in Europe remaining peaceful and secure. Just imagine what the world would be like if Washington today – in addition to the problems of the broader Middle East and Asia – was also confronted with the prospect of strategic turmoil on the continent. The success of the EU is the best guarantee that Europe remains peaceful, democratic and secure in the decades ahead.

The second reason is the profound stake that Washington has in the EU remaining a magnet with influence beyond its borders, helping anchor to the West the young and still fragile democracies on the continent's periphery. There is a long queue of countries seeking closer relations with and eventual membership of the EU. That list starts with the Balkan countries and Turkey, reaches deep into Eurasia to include Ukraine, and extends to Georgia and the southern Caucasus.

The potential role of the EU in helping these countries transform themselves can hardly be overstated. The perspective of EU membership for several countries is key to a long-term settlement of the Kosovo final status issue and peace more broadly in the Balkans. When one looks at Turkey and the dramatic changes that have taken place there in recent years, it is clear that the desire for EU membership was behind the recent drive to reform – with NATO playing little role in the reform process. While the United States has played a key role in supporting democratic breakthroughs in countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, it is the EU flag that the leaders of the Rose and Orange Revolution now often fly in their offices in Tblisi and Kiev to signal their aspirations to go West.

The simple fact is that the EU, with its comprehensive integrationist approach, is critical and often better equipped to help lock in enduring change in these countries. Americans have rightly concluded that it is in their national security interest to see the EU reach out to these countries – which is why Washington is such an enthusiastic supporter of EU enlargement. Too few Americans, though, ask themselves what kind of EU will be able to manage this challenge and what they can do to help achieve the goal. The answer is that only a more politically cohesive, unified and self-confident European Union is likely to be willing and able to continue to enlarge and anchor these countries to the West.

The third core reason why the United States has a growing interest in the success of the European Union is the need for strategic cooperation between the United States and Europe to meet the new challenges of the twenty-first century. Imagine two lists: the first contains the top ten American priorities in terms of strategic cooperation with Europe in 1975 or 1985 (that is, toward the end of the Cold War); the second contains the top ten strategic priorities today, or ten years from now. It is safe to say that the vast majority of issues on the first list would have been tasks for NATO. The second list would look very different: it would contain problems that were more global, less military and where the EU either already has responsibility or aspires to acquire it in the future. Only a much smaller set of issues on the list would involve NATO.

One issue at the top of today's list is homeland security, an area increasingly in the EU's bailiwick. It is no accident that the US Department of Homeland Security is a strong supporter of European integration. Its success depends in large part on close and successful European integration and US–EU cooperation. Homeland security is the United States' first line of defence against future terrorist attacks. In his final news conference, outgoing Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge commented that one of the things he regretted during his tenure was not reaching out to the EU sooner. His successor, Michael Chertoff, made an early visit to Brussels and the EU. In the future, this relationship will become as important as the US–European military relationship was in the past – and it will increasingly take place with and through the EU.

Nowhere is this more true than when it comes to the signature initiatives of the Bush administration – the war on terror, the fight against the spread of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and the goal of promoting freedom and democracy around the world. On all of these issues, a stronger and more effective Europe would be a critical partner. Indeed, the EU's legitimacy, resources and support are critical if the United States is to succeed. Although NATO can and should play a supporting role in the 'war on terror', this is a war in which the EU is as important as NATO for the United States. This is

especially true when one looks at tackling the root causes of terrorism and the need to combat them with new policies on democracy promotion, economic growth and trade and addressing the root causes of terror.

Although Americans still instinctively turn to NATO as the primary framework in which to cooperate with Europe, the new reality is that the areas where the United States needs close cooperation with Europe have outgrown NATO's narrow and military-focused framework. And the administration's treatment of the Alliance as a 'toolbox', as opposed to a broader political and strategic forum for debate, has thus far prevented the broadening of that framework. To his credit, NATO's current Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, has been pushing for the Alliance to assume a more political role. Yet, even if he succeeds, the changing nature of the threats and the strategic needs that flow from these will make the United States increasingly dependent on a politically strong, effective and outward-looking European Union as well as NATO.

Last but not least, the United States and the EU have the potential to form a natural coalition of democracies that work together to confront new challenges around the globe. When the United States and the EU cooperate, they have the ability to set a global agenda. They become a magnetic pole that can attract other countries and regions to coalesce around a common view. The ability to set that kind of agenda will in all likelihood decrease over time as other countries grow in stature and power. This makes it all the more important to use this historical opportunity to shape a global system that is conducive to Western values and interests.

This is not just theory. The ability to influence Russia, for example, is directly affected by the degree of US–EU cohesion. When it comes to the grand task of managing the rise of China as a global economic and military player, Washington and Brussels are clearly in a better position to influence Chinese behaviour if they have a common approach. To be sure, today the United States and EU are at odds on many of the issues of global order and governance. The other truth is that there has never been a real strategic dialogue or an effort to narrow the gap on these issues akin to what America did during the Cold War or what Europe has done to create a common foreign and defence policy. Does anyone doubt that if Monnet, Truman or any of the other great statesmen from the early post-war era were alive today, they would be appealing for the United States and the EU to make common cause in setting a new transatlantic global agenda?

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The ghost of de Gaulle

If America's interest in a politically strong, effective and outward-looking European Union is so clear and obvious, why is it so hard for Washington to recognise it and to pursue a policy consistent with that goal?

First, the simple fact that generations of American leaders and officials have been conditioned to think first and foremost of NATO as the key, if not the only, framework for transatlantic cooperation. It is the framework Americans know the best and are most comfortable with, and the one structured to allow them to pursue their interests. All too often working with the EU or NATO is seen as a zero-sum game where the gain of one institution comes at the expense of the other. Washington has understandably avoided any initiative that could potentially weaken NATO. After all, the Atlantic Alliance is the only contractual link binding the United States and Europe together. There is no equivalent bond on the US–EU side.

The United States, in its desire to protect the prerogatives of NATO for those situations where Washington and its allies will want to undertake joint military operations, runs the risk of becoming myopic. A strong and effective NATO remains a vital American interest but Washington can not lose sight of the bigger strategic picture where it needs a strong EU as a foreign policy partner in a host of non-military fields. It is in these other areas that the United States is likely to need assistance and where the EU's success will mean that it increasingly has something real to offer. Washington needs to find a way to continue to support a strong Alliance and also support the emergence of the EU as a strong foreign policy partner. Therefore, the recognition that the United States has new and different needs and priorities that require closer cooperation with the EU should not be equated with a downgrading of the Atlantic Alliance. Instead, we are sketching out a much larger and wider strategic realm of cooperation in which the EU can also play a central role. The lion's share of what the EU does and what the US and EU need to do together has little to do with military security. The Alliance can and should remain what it is, and keep doing what it does best: a political–military alliance to defend the security interests of its neighbours, and which is being transformed to better enable it to defend those interests from new threats emanating from beyond its immediate borders.

Military power is no longer the only important currency, and the traditional political–military arena is no longer the sole or even most important sphere where Europe's assistance and cooperation is needed. It is the area in which the United States is probably the most self-reliant. Yet the changing challenges and threats now faced require deep cooperation in areas where the Europeans have decided to pool their resources and sovereignty under

the umbrella of the EU. If the United States wants effective cooperation in those areas, it has a profound interest in seeing the EU succeed.

The EU is still widely seen as an institution hostile to American interests and one that Washington should keep at arm's length rather than embrace and support. In some ways, American policy has become hostage to French rhetoric and America's own paranoia about the EU becoming the Gaullist 'counterweight'. The result is that the United States ends up 'playing defence' and investing effort in countering real or imagined French ambitions rather than 'playing offence' and thinking about ways to support the kind of evolution within the EU that would better mesh with America's own interests. The name of the game today is not to try to keep the EU down but to help it build itself up while encouraging it to be as open to working closely with the United States as possible

It is time for US policy to exorcise the ghost of de Gaulle – and now Chirac. There are some leaders in France and elsewhere in Europe who do believe the EU should become a counterweight to American influence and power. But they are a minority – and increasingly so in an enlarged EU that is being reshaped by a new set of actors and dynamics. The vision of the EU as a counterweight is only likely to become reality if the United States pursues policies that makes this a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Instead, the task facing American diplomacy is how to assist those in the EU who want to build a political and unified Union that is a strategic partner of the United States. Critical Eurosceptics will suggest that the EU is incapable of evolving into this kind of animal, but such a view is ahistoric and anachronistic. It is ahistoric because it denies the Atlanticist origins of the European project and anachronistic because it overlooks how the EU is changing under the impact of enlargement and other factors.

It also ignores the opportunity the current EU crisis paradoxically offers. Today a clear majority of member states would concur with the kind of vision laid out in this essay. The question is whether a European leader will emerge who can mobilise that majority and steer the EU in a new direction. Paradoxically, the new debate in Europe over how to reconstruct the EU in the wake of the French and Dutch rejection of the constitution, coupled with upcoming elections in Germany, may open the way for a new group of leaders to steer a new course. An enlightened American policy could help.

