Rethinking Transatlanticism:
Toward a New Transatlantic Narrative

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“For the transatlantic relationship, the uncertainty of the current juncture is both boon and bane. In recent years, the narrative of a grand normative project has been largely absent…”¹

- Daniel Hamilton and Kurt Volker,
  “Transatlantic 2020: A Tale of Four Futures”

Introduction

Not quite seventy years ago, Europe and North America emerged from the nightmare of the Second World War to meet a very unclear common future. Common, because the two regions lived it out together. Europe received massive assistance for reconstruction through the Marshall Plan. The U.S. knew that its best assurance of long-term peace involved the immediate rehabilitation of its European counterparts—ally and enemy alike. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was formed as many cities still lay in ruins. Historians articulate the period’s ‘narrative’ as one of collective economic, political, and military burden-sharing. The specter of communism drove Europe and North America together. For people on both sides of the Atlantic, the postwar era became a struggle to establish peace and re-shape a new transatlantic neighborhood. The stakes were nothing short of existential.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and severely divisive periods like the war in Iraq, Europe and North America have been tempted to follow separate paths. Some described global victory for the West in a perceived “end of history;”² others created categories with a belligerent U.S. “from Mars” and dovish Europe “from Venus.”³ The financial crisis of 2008 has spawned pro- and anti-austerity camps. Numerous misunderstandings have clouded vision for a common transatlantic agenda.

Today, Europe and North America are finally on the cusp of developing powerful joint tools to take on the 21st century. But where is the new transatlantic ‘narrative’ that anchors policy at a deeper level? In this paper we argue—under section titles referring to popular Western culture—that a fresh transatlantic narrative is vital if the two regions are to tackle emerging global issues.

In our approach we lean on Benedict Anderson's work on 'imagined communities.' Anderson argues that nation-states are "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." The transatlantic community, while not a nation-state, is in this sense also 'imagined' and is continuously shaped through a self-reinforcing narrative.

The first section in this paper outlines three cases that illustrate today's great opportunities for enhanced cooperation. If the potential rewards are great, so are the risks: section two shows the fragility of a trajectory where policy cooperation is not rooted in a deeper understanding. The third section describes how the notion of transatlantic ‘community’ should be built on the twin foundations of trust and understanding. The fourth and final section provides concrete policy recommendations to make a new transatlantic narrative a reality.

When Harry Met Sally: A Policy Partnership with Great Promise

Three historic opportunities beckon today's Atlantic decision-makers: the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the ongoing transformation following the Arab Spring, and fresh efforts within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The TTIP free-trade deal is of a magnitude and ambition previously unseen in transatlantic negotiations. Though still in early stages of development, the agreement has been gaining momentum between Brussels and Washington. According to Johns Hopkins University professors Daniel Hamilton and Joseph Quinlan, the transatlantic economy already accounts for $5.3 trillion in commercial sales per year. Euro-American commerce generates over 50 percent of global GDP. These numbers are all the more striking given that the transatlantic trading zone represents less than 10 percent of the global population.

Despite these figures, the well-known woes of the 2008 financial crisis have deeply shaken livelihoods, businesses and even entire regional economies like the eurozone. A successful TTIP agreement would secure the latest, best hope for solidified economic prospects for Europe and the United States alike. Hamilton and Quinlan lay out arguments for “cautious optimism” on European and American trade interests, with TTIP of central interest to both sides.

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4 While this paper's emphasis is on the United States, many of the following arguments also hem to North American interests broadly speaking.
Another opportunity knocks in the form of the Arab Spring events that have been roiling the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Following the public suicide by a hope-starved Tunisian in December 2010, the southern Mediterranean has agitated for the twin dreams of economic prosperity and increased democracy. Yet those effecting change in Arab Spring societies should not be left alone. Arguably, a strong Western voice will prove useful in guiding the MENA region out of its autocratic legacy.

The third opportunity remains, as always, a reinvigorated NATO, based around the common values agreed by its member states. Few in the West regret the end of the Cold War, but the big “Why?” question of today’s NATO mission has obscured a common vision.

Recent studies show that the appetite for NATO is still very much alive. The 2013 “Transatlantic Trends” survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States shows that NATO is considered as “still essential” by 55 percent of the Americans and 58 percent of the Europeans polled. Nearly half of the respondents in the U.S., and 56 percent of those in Europe, agree that the organization is “an alliance of democratic countries.” In 2014, NATO countries will convene at a summit in Cardiff, Wales to finally tackle the future of the alliance, offering a chance to deepen and adapt the organization for new tasks.

**Gone with the Wind: How Cooperation Risks Being Undermined**

While opportunities abound for the transatlantic relationship to tackle emerging global issues, so, too do the risks of lost opportunity. The last several years have provided three object lessons in what happens when policy is not anchored in a broader common vision: disarray on Libya, impotence on Syria, and disunity over the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance scandal.

On Libya, Western consensus for establishing a no-fly zone was threatened after Germany abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 in March 2011. Many Atlantic counterparts took the German move as a leadership failure. Some of the most strident critics saw it as a refusal by Germany to join a growing movement to protect Libyan civilians. Others even perceived Germany’s move as a betrayal of the common values of democracy and humanitarian protection. “The shock,” according the *The Economist* magazine, “was that, as its closest NATO and European Union allies united to avert a bloodbath on Europe’s doorstep, backed by the UN and Libya’s Arab neighbors, Germany withheld both legal and moral support.”

The disarray sparked by the German abstention could happen again—when stakes might be even higher.

Syria serves as another painful lesson in transatlantic coalition failure. The prospect of a common transatlantic response to a civil war—which has already caused over 100,000 deaths—has been winding its languorous way through the mechanisms of the United Nations and other channels, with no clear prospect of a solution in sight. The heated discussion in August 2013 of a U.S.-led airstrike campaign proved illusory, and President Barack Obama’s use of the “diplomatic track” to pursue arms controls has delivered scant relief to the Syrian people. American and European media have since been distracted with the U.S. federal government “shutdown,” the Iranian nuclear negotiations, and other

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issues. Yet Syria continues to burn, and with it, a large part of Western credibility as to whether transatlantic partners can exercise security missions worldwide.

A third warning comes in the wake of Edward Snowden’s revelations on mass surveillance by the NSA. Many Europeans are shocked that their data would be used by a foreign power like the U.S. That European powers would have at times shared in the NSA efforts, for counterterrorism or any other reason, embitters public opinion even further. The fallout from the NSA episode has thrown the TTIP negotiations in doubt and sown distrust in Europe, both among European states and vis-à-vis the U.S.

According to Wolfgang Ischinger, former German ambassador to the U.S., “The important question now is how to proceed with rebuilding that trust, while taking care not to damage the transatlantic relationship irrevocably.”8 Now is the time to protect against the further erosion of transatlantic consensus and credibility.

**Back to the Future: Creating a Common Narrative for Transatlanticism**

If a lack of trust and understanding hobbles an otherwise promising policy constellation, what can be done? How can policymakers ensure that new partnerships are built on a solid foundation? It is time to integrate the different policy areas through an overarching common narrative, appealing to public imagination on both sides of the Atlantic. “No one falls in love with a common market,” to borrow a phrase from another community builder, former European Commission president Jacques Delors. We need to revive ‘old’ notions such as a transatlantic community and ‘the West.’

First, such a renewed narrative would foster greater internal cohesion among transatlantic actors from all corners of society. Challenges are not only formulated and identified by elites, but by the perception of the public at large. Broad agreement on primary challenges is a prerequisite for concerted action.

Second, based on challenges recognized as common, public engagement and identification with the community would provide for greater cohesion externally—and a stronger transatlantic voice toward the rest of the world.

How can a transatlantic ‘community’ be nurtured? Policy makers should encourage the ability of Europeans and Americans to see themselves as part of one community, with a joint past and a common destiny. The aspect of shared values is critical, from democratic governance and human rights to basic freedoms. But far from any kind of top-down propaganda campaign, renewed transatlanticism should be a grassroots project. Rather, leaders need to create the basis for debate and interaction.

Two factors should make us optimistic about a renewed narrative. The first is public opinion: majorities in both the U.S. and the EU view each other favorably. Common majority views extend across several fields: a desire for more transatlantic trade, unfavorable views of Russian and Chinese leadership in world affairs, and a need for sanctions against Iran.9 Add to these the large majority opinions in Europe and the U.S.

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about NATO already mentioned above, and the mandate for greater transatlantic action is evident.

The second positive factor is the emergence of a transatlantic public sphere. Thanks to the digital media revolution there have emerged traditional and new media that are consumed widely on both sides of the Atlantic. Today, UK-based newspaper The Guardian draws a third of its online readers from the U.S.\(^\text{10}\) The American news site The Huffington Post has a network of editions across Europe. Spiegel International in Germany reaches audiences in both Europe and North America.

Parallel to the development of this new media landscape, we see a marked rise in English language proficiency in Europe. More than half of all EU citizens claim to speak English\(^\text{11}\) and 94 per cent of upper secondary students learn it as a first foreign language.\(^\text{12}\) With English as lingua franca in Europe, we are witnessing the rise of a transatlantic space that shares not only common values but also a common language.

With public opinion already aligned on many issues and the emergence of transatlantic media, the scene is set for a broader engagement: a transatlantic narrative built from the bottom up. The story could be one of a democratic community of liberal values; a neighborhood that engages with global challenges and constantly reviews, refines, and reinforces itself through public debate and awareness.

**The Magnificent Seven: Concrete Actions to Renew the Transatlantic Narrative**

While community-building and the strengthening of a common narrative might sound abstract, there are a several specific steps that could be taken. These would serve to create common points of reference, build confidence and more explicitly give shape to transatlanticism. Concrete actions could include the following:

- Encourage the transatlantic media landscape. Seize the opportunity to engage with publications, online fora and networks that are already straddling the Atlantic. Some avenues go through established media such as the international edition of The New York Times, or through online ventures like Atlantic-Community.org. Why not direct op-ed pieces and other public opinion efforts at outlets whose readerships are transatlantic already?

- Avoid speaking to Americans and Europeans as though they were from different planets, along 'Mars vs. Venus' lines. Refrain from putting the spotlight on purely national media that risk becoming echo chambers for domestic debates. As borne out by this year’s “Transatlantic Trends” survey, even on contentious issues such as the NSA surveillance scandal, public opinions across the transatlantic space are often similar.


- Ride the wave of new technology by embracing social networks like Facebook and Twitter. They have largely young audiences that are open to exchange and new ways of thinking. Avoid too much focus on traditional media platforms that may have more segmented, national audiences.

- Create a story for a “modern transatlanticism” through rhetoric. The starting point should be, “What does it mean to be transatlantic today?” Avoid acronyms and political jargon that is unlikely to interest ordinary citizens. The rhetoric could be developed through publicly-funded sensitivity campaigns, carried out by civil society organizations or public relations firms.

- Lift up people that can be the ‘faces of transatlanticism.’ Who are the modern-day heroes of our transatlantic community? Whether they are start-up entrepreneurs or environment activists, they can be the human side to an otherwise abstract community. The United Nations’ choice to use Angelina Jolie as a Goodwill Ambassador has served to raise awareness of human rights issues. Likewise, a ‘transatlantic face,’ chosen well and promoted properly, could do the same.

- Bring people together. Set up new, or expand existing, exchange programs between people from all parts of society. Build on successful examples such as the Erasmus Mundus and Fulbright frameworks. Encourage the creation of transatlantic alumni communities.

- Connect the dots. Show that how we cooperate on trade, defense, and diplomacy is part of a wider common vision for a world where the West is a leading, joint force. Avoid using too many separate committees or summits that lead to separate ‘policy silos.’

**Conclusion**

With great opportunities come great risks. With ambitious new policy partnerships on the horizon, Europe and North America cannot afford to steam ahead without strengthening the sense of a shared community. A new transatlantic narrative is crucial. If encouraged by policy-makers, it could be the story of a democratic community with liberal values, a neighborhood that engages with global challenges, and one that constantly reinvents itself through public deliberation. Here we do not prescribe the exact shape of this narrative. It is for Europeans and Americans to write their own shared story for the 21st century. Why not hear what they have to say?