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History Suggests U.S. and Europe Need a More Equal Partnership

By Hall Gardner

Relations between the United States and a Europe in the process of unification have reached a historic turning point that poses significant risks. These risks, however, can be dealt with successfully if the United States and European Union can ultimately adopt a truly concerted strategy with regard to a broad range of new threats and potential conflicts that are arising from both inside and outside the Euro-Atlantic region.

NATO, led by the United States, and the European Union have been expanding their memberships in the Euro-Atlantic region in a largely uncoordinated fashion. On the one hand, NATO has had the tendency to expand without consideration of the potential geopolitical and political-economic consequences.

On the other, the European Union has had the tendency to expand without consideration of the geopolitical and military repercussions. Concurrently, the Allies have

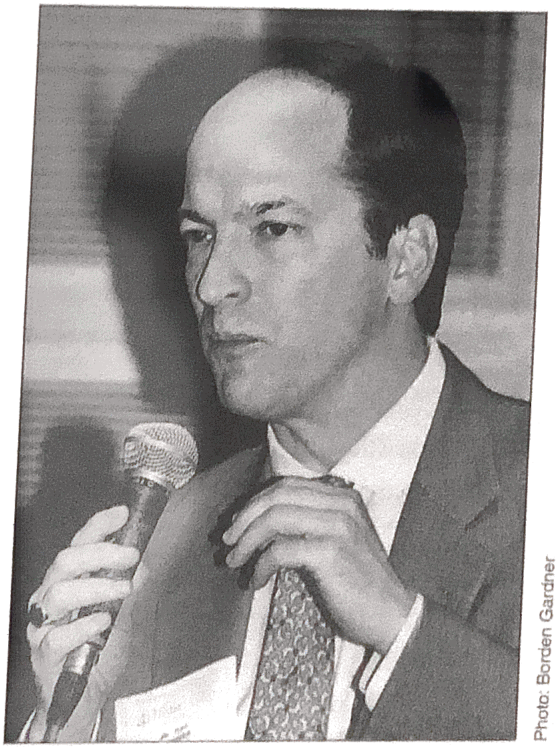

Photo: Borden Gardner

begun to engage in a number of political-military disputes over the appropriate nature of defense capabilities

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and the potential duplication of military assets (not to overlook significant Transatlantic economic disputes).

At the heart of the defense question is the issue of "power" versus "burden-sharing" as these relate to the underlying question of the American security guarantee to Europe. In essence, the Europeans have demanded a greater share in political-military decision-making within the U.S.-dominated North Atlantic Alliance. The Americans have, in response, insisted that the Europeans increase defense spending and share more of the military burden and responsibility, yet have been reluctant to actually share power.

U.S. attention is being diverted from Europe

Concurrently, Washington has augmented its military capabilities to the point where the United States, as an "ultra-power," is quite capable of acting unilaterally – with or without the consent of its Allies.

The concern is that the nature of new threats plus the war on terrorism have tended to draw American attention away from the Euro-Atlantic region, despite the fact that problems in the Balkans, for example, have not been entirely resolved and, most crucially, that new tensions and conflicts may arise as NATO and the EU continue their largely uncoordinated enlargement.

The global range and nature of these new threats and potential conflicts (which will need to be taken into consideration by contingency planning) could result in the over-extension of both American and European capabilities – if not a break up of the U.S.-EU political consensus. That will be the risk if an expanding European Union cannot soon take on greater responsibility for its own defense in close coordination with the United States, on the basis of a rough political-economic and military parity.

Although the historical circumstances are very different in each case, the issues concerning European unity, power and burden-sharing, and the underpinning issues of an American security guarantee to European states, have, to a large extent, plagued the U.S.-European relationship, at least since World War I.

As the United States has historically acted in its own domestic, regional and global interests, U.S. willingness to act in concert with European interests has not always been guaranteed. At the same time, suspicions of European intent have always been part of the American world outlook, ever since George Washington's warning against entangling alliances in his Farewell Address.

During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson attempted to sustain the traditional American policy of neutrality as set by

George Washington for as long as possible. The U.S. decision to enter the war was made in April 1917, only once it was clear that Russia would no longer provide a second front against Imperial Germany.

The United States was not even provoked into an immediate entry into the conflict by, for example, the death of American citizens aboard the Lusitania, which was sunk by a German U-boat in 1915. True to George Washington, the United States opted to engage in Europe in terms of "temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies."

Despite the fact that World War I helped transform the United States from a net debtor to a net creditor nation with burgeoning economic interests in Europe, the United States returned to its more traditional stance of "neutrality" and "isolationism" after the war.

Most significantly, the United States failed to forge a closer alliance relationship with Britain and France in 1919 against the potential rise of Germany. In the heat of the debate over the League of Nations, which was rejected by the U.S. Senate, the fundamental issue, the tripartite Anglo-French-American treaty providing a security guarantee to France against Germany, never even reached the Senate floor.

The United States entered World War II only after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Although it did provide lend lease assistance to Britain, the United States waited until 1944 before launching an offensive on D-Day, despite demands by the Allies for an earlier direct attack against Nazi Germany on the European continent.

When World War II came to an end, Washington initially (1945-46) gave indications of its intent to withdraw from Europe. By trumpeting the Soviet threat, plus the necessity to sustain the occupation of Germany and to rebuild the economies of Europe, however, the American elite was able to convince the American public to remain engaged in Europe.

U.S. rejected a return to isolationism

In the period 1947-48, the United States was confronted with essentially four options (1) a return to isolation; (2) strengthening the United Nations as a security organization; (3) the "dumbbell" approach which would have involved strengthening Europe as an equal defense partner with the United States; (4) the formation of NATO.

The United States, now truly a world power, rejected a return to isolationism; it also rejected an approach that would strengthen the UN Security Council as the primary guarantor of world security. Washington was concerned that

Moscow would veto UN operations deemed in the American or European interest. NATO was consequently created as a regional defense organization, in the words of Senator Vandenberg "within the UN but outside the veto."

Yet the third option – George Kennan's "dumbbell" approach – was ruled out as well. Despite the formation of the 1948 Brussels pact and the Western European Union, which had been framed primarily against the potential for a revived German threat, Europe was not considered unified enough to defend itself against the Soviet Union, and thus could not sustain itself as an equal weight to the United States.

NATO became more integrated than intended

In effect, NATO, created in 1949, largely absorbed the 1948 Brussels pact, and was transformed into an even more integrated alliance than that initially intended with the advent of the Korean War in 1950.

At the same time, however, the United States warmed up to the concept of the European Defense Community (EDC) proposed in 1950-54. This was seen by the Americans as leading to a more unified and prosperous Europe, which would permit Europe to defend itself at less cost to the United States.

After a four-year debate, the French parliament failed to pass the EDC concept in 1954, which then opened the door to German membership in an enlarged Western European Union and then in NATO. Here, it was clear that an American presence in Europe was necessary to maintain Germany in close alliance; France was in no position to "double contain" Germany without American assistance.

Despite the formation of a strong NATO alliance during the Cold War, U.S. and European interests did not always coincide. In particular, secret UK-French support for Israel during the 1956 Suez crisis enraged the Eisenhower administration to the point that it threatened to cut American financial support for the pound sterling.

While not generally stated, UK-French actions in 1956 (which coincided with the 1956 Hungarian crisis) have continued to play in the historical background of U.S. reluctance to support a truly independent European defense capability. Here, the Europeans seemed to be acting in ways George Washington had forewarned!

As the Suez crisis indicated, the United States has opposed independent European actions; yet the United States also opposed a possible compromise power sharing arrangement. Washington rejected De Gaulle's 1958 proposal for a tripartite U.S.-UK-French

decision-making process within NATO.

The rejection of the compromise position ultimately led France to withdraw from NATO's integrated command structure by 1966, and to develop its own independent nuclear deterrent. These actions were largely taken as a means to place strategic leverage on the United States in an effort to get the United States to more decisively support French/European interests vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

France's nuclear deterrent was intended to make certain the United States would, in fact, engage itself in a nuclear defense of Europe if necessary. Once France removed itself from NATO's integrated command structure, the United States and Europe repeated their often-acrimonious power versus burden-sharing arguments. The Nixon-Kissinger "Year of Europe" initiative was followed, at the end of the Cold War, by debates over power versus "responsibility-sharing" under Secretary of State James Baker.

As the Cold War came to an end, and as new conflicts emerged on Europe's periphery, NATO and the European Union unexpectedly found themselves attempting to resolve a range of conflicts in the Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia).

The EU as a whole began to demand a greater role in the resolution of the conflict in the Balkans and in the management of its own affairs through the formation of a Common European Security and Defense Policy – to a certain extent like the EDC of the early 1950s.

At the same time, France began to move, step-by-step, closer to NATO's integrated command structure following the Gulf War and conflict in ex-Yugoslavia, but still demanding a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the United States.

Fears grew of a two-tiered military alliance

Significant political-military differences consequently emerged between the United States and EU countries as to how each of these conflicts should be managed, at the risk of a breakdown in U.S.-EU political consensus. The war over Kosovo, in particular, led to fears of the creation of a "two-tiered alliance" in which U.S. military capabilities far exceeded those of the Europeans.

In reviving the largely moribund Western European Union, the European Union accordingly took significant steps toward the formation of a European Defense and Security Identity (ESDI) within NATO, coupled with a more independent Common European Security and Defense Policy. The EU has also sought the formation of

a Rapid Deployment Force, to be deployed by 2003-06.

The decision to expand European defense capabilities then raised debates as to precisely which force structures were optimal in terms of dealing with the new threats; which capabilities would best complement those of the United States, but also which capabilities might duplicate American assets.

EU realizes need to back up diplomacy with force

The Europeans argued that they could not always rely on American capabilities in intelligence gathering, for example. For its part, the European Union began to realize that it could not deal with conflict on the European periphery on its own terms – unless it possessed a more or less autonomous military capacity and command, communications and control facilities to back up its diplomacy with force and intelligence.

Concurrent with ongoing military operations in the Balkans, NATO and the EU vowed to expand their membership – despite the evident risk of an overextension of their capabilities. NATO could possibly decide to bring in as many as seven new members at its November 2002 summit in Prague. The European Union is likewise expected to bring in as many as ten new members by 2004.

As NATO and the European Union continue to venture into former Russian spheres of influence and security, the concern raised here is that lack of political-military and diplomatic coordination between NATO, the EU – and Russia – could represent a recipe for disaster. Specifically, NATO and the European Union need to coordinate strategy for the defense of the Baltic states, as both regimes expect to bring the Baltic states in as members – particularly as strategically placed Sweden is not a NATO member.

Likewise, the fact that Austria is not a NATO member weakens strategic planning for central and southeastern Europe. As the double NATO-EU enlargement, in effect, isolates the Russian Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad from Russian territory, lack of NATO and EU coordination with Russia could result in a significant crisis.

NATO, the EU and Russia will also need to coordinate policy toward states of "no man's land," such as Belarus and Ukraine on the European periphery, that are not expected to be members of either NATO or the European Union.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it should be noted that one of the primary reasons for strengthening the

new NATO-Russian Council has been to offset the possibility that NATO and the European Union might need to engage in a major defense build-up in Central and Eastern Europe to counter Russian defenses.

Russian participation in circumscribed areas of NATO (and indirectly the EU) planning should accordingly help mitigate the risks of Russian political-economic instability and military backlash by involving Russia more directly in issues related to the war on terrorism, crisis management, arms control, Theatre Missile Defenses – as well as confidence building and peacekeeping in the Euro-Atlantic region.

While NATO and the European Union will need to work closely with Russia, they both must still maintain adequate deterrent capabilities in case a Russian backlash does occur sometime in the future. Here, it is crucial that the new NATO-Russian Council be formally approved at the Prague Summit in November in order to secure a long-term entente with Russia.

With both NATO and EU enlargement on the horizon, combined with the global war on terrorism, American policy has consequently sought to augment European burden and responsibility sharing. Washington argues that the European Union has not really begun to envision the security ramifications of EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe; and with the possible exception of the UK, the European Union has not built its defense capabilities up to par, making it incapable of dealing with the new threats.

Europeans have replied that they have made up the difference through development assistance and peacekeeping; yet they have also demanded greater power sharing in return for greater burden and responsibility sharing.

Answer may be regional security communities

From this perspective, NATO and the European Union, in increasing cooperation with Russia, and other non-NATO, non-EU member states, must first provide a foundation for peace for the entire Euro-Atlantic region. This could be achieved through multinational peacekeeping and preventive war deployments that help to link the states of the expanding European Union and NATO into "regional cooperative security communities."

The second problem is to work out the cooperative NATO-EU-Russian political formulas in case military intervention proves necessary (most likely, through "coalitions of the willing"). The third issue is to pool resources and intelligence for the war on terrorism and to adapt both NATO

and EU capabilities to meet the new threats.

The fourth is to engage in greater EU defense expenditure with a focus on the Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Mediterranean regions – while recognizing the European Union's strengths in financial assistance and diplomacy that most complement the more military oriented capabilities of NATO.

As was the case following Pearl Harbor, the September 11 terrorist attacks have awakened a sleeping giant: U.S. defense expenditure for 2003 has been increased by an amount larger than the entire defense budget of any single EU country.

War on terrorism has strengthened bonds

The war on terrorism has, for the time being, helped to strengthen the bonds between the United States, Europe and Russia; yet it may still prove difficult to continue to bridge the gap between the often divergent geo-strategic and political economic interests of the three. Europeans are particularly concerned with the international repercussions of unilateral American military actions, when they do not possess any major input into the initial decision as to whether or not to use force.

U.S.-European relations are thus at a historic turning point as significant as those changes that took place during World Wars I and II and at the beginning of the Cold War, but in very different circumstances. The Europeans, for the first time in history, are moving toward political, economic and military unity.

At the same time, however, the contemporary dilemmas are not entirely novel: The United States has not always opted to engage in a concerted relationship with the Europeans in general, either during the Cold War or before.

If the United States and Europe are to deal with the present crisis successfully, Washington will need to treat the European Union as a political equal and permit true power sharing. But to establish a position of rough political-economic and military parity between the two sides, the European Union must also begin to stand up to the United States in terms of burden and responsibility sharing so as to make its viewpoint and interests heard.

The European Union will need to develop a more appropriate military capability so as to better enforce a range of options dealing with multinational peacekeeping, preventive war deployments, crisis management, as well as the war on terrorism. Most importantly, however, the European Union will also need to speak with a common voice in a truly unified foreign and security policy. ❑