

What drives the Transatlantic partners? The West needs to redefine its strategic objectives in the age of globalism

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Thomas Bauer

What drives the Transatlantic partners?

The West needs to redefine its strategic
objectives in the age of globalism

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Introduction

Addressing consequences
of globalism

Considering the dramatic changes in the geo-strategic environment one can encounter every day, the future development of the transatlantic partnership as one representative of international coalitions in terms of shaping global politics is inevitably a key factor for finding answers and solutions to the demanding tasks and challenges we are confronted with in the age of globalism. Sovereignty, mobility, security, prosperity are just a few of a whole variety of different aspects combined with the development of interdependent and interacting political, economic, financial and social networks we have to deal with. The future of transatlantic relations is therefore a major topic for defining and implementing the future role of the European Union in the area of foreign, security and defence policy, which will have substantial consequences concerning the political impact of Europe and the United States on the global level.

Adjusting institutional
framework

For quite some time both the United States and Europe have been dealing with the question of whether the transatlantic relations still have the importance of former times or if they still matter for each other. Workshop meetings and expert panels have gone through the whole spectrum from “Re-Inventing the West” to “Establishing a new strategic partnership”, leading us to one key conclusion: We need to adjust the institutions and content of transatlantic relations to the strategic environment of our time, so it may develop again into an effective and at the same time principle-orientated partnership, capable of coping with the risks and challenges on a global level and on a long-term basis. Therefore it is necessary to discuss what we have to expect from the relationship between Europe and the United States in the first run, and we have to define major objectives before we can identify the instruments and means we need in order to be able to implement them.

Key assumptions

There are four basic assumptions that have to be considered concerning the current status of the transatlantic partnership before focusing on finding the appropriate solutions to the tasks of our time. These assumptions are essential for understanding the current dilemma in the once strategic relationship between Europe and the United States.

Imbalance between
strategy and tactics

First, there seems to be a substantial imbalance in the relationship between strategy and tactics when it comes to political action. The lack of strategic concepts in certain areas has led to a lack of public support and legitimacy for the transatlantic partners when it comes to foreign, security and defence political decisions.

Assessment of political impact

Second, despite the fact that there may be a common threat perception moreover it exists a different if not even a diverging assessment in regard to the political impact of the current threats and challenges as well as in regard to the means in order to respond to them.

Political commitment

Third, there has been some progress in Europe and the United States concerning the dilemma of a “single set of forces” when it comes to civil and military contributions, but there is no common understanding of a “single set of member states” in regard to the political commitment inside NATO as well as ESDP.

And finally, the imbalance of strategy and tactics within the transatlantic partnership, the lack of a common understanding concerning the political impact of certain

actions and measures and the unresolved question of political leadership concerning security and stability within and for Europe has led to a *strategic vacuum* in the international community, which is currently being filled by other state and non-state actors in a most clever manner. The West therefore shouldn't point its finger at those who manage to gain the most political or economic benefit out of the current situation. It should also not accuse other international or regional players of undermining the international system, only because they seem to be more successful than the West. The transatlantic partners should rather ask themselves why and how they manoeuvred themselves into this dilemma.

Strategic vacuum

Imbalance of strategy and tactics in international politics

Considering the various challenges of our time, many of them of political, economic, social or ecologic origin, political attempts to respond to them have led to the formulation of a whole spectrum of national as well as multinational strategy papers. With the inflationary use of the term strategy in this context, one can get the impression, that the terms *strategic* and *comprehensive* are the most abused phrases of our time in international and security policy, because the so-called strategies are more like pumped-up versions of tactics.

They do not provide the relevant players with key strategic objectives nor do they refer to specific means or instruments for achieving those objectives. Most of them are rather reactive than pro-active. Coupled with the complexity and rapid changes within the international relations, this leads to certain risks when dealing with specific challenges or threats. The transatlantic partners tend to either react on a very abstract level, leaving much room for interpretation and without clearly defined objectives or means, or to find answers limited to very detailed questions. The latter leads to narrow-minded specialist approaches, neglecting the broader perspectives of international politics and the interdependency of economic, financial and political life in a globalized world.

No pro-active measures

The Chinese General Sun Tsu already stressed the importance of assessing conflict situations in his thirteen chapters on *The Art of War* 2500 years ago: "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning and losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril."

Referring to certain military, economic and social challenges it seems as if the transatlantic partners are closer to the latter than they would like to be. Both the United States and Europe lack a true and open-minded assessment of both the options at hand and the political impact of certain actions. Examples for that are the question of missile defence, sanctions on Iran, enlargement of NATO, operation ISAF in Afghanistan, and stabilization efforts in Iraq. Both sides also lack the intelligence concerning the abilities and the rational of state and non-state actors and the effects and consequences of certain challenges and risks we have to counter. Examples for that are the whole spectrum of climate change, energy-security and migration. These deficits and the inability to create common awareness for different perceptions and interests are the true source for the strategic rift in the transatlantic relationship.

Assessing challenges and conflicts

The strategic dialogue between the two partners in terms of security and defence related issues seems to have come to a standstill. Despite pressing issues and chal-

Loss of strategic depth

allenges and despite a broad agenda that lies ahead of us – for example the nuclear dispute with Iran, the situation in Afghanistan and the issues of proliferation and transnational terrorism – it has become very quiet in the transatlantic forum. The partnership has lost its strategic depth and it has limited itself to a club of working meetings. Not even the Transatlantic Economic Council, which has been established during the German EU-Presidency in early 2007, seems to have had a positive effect on the situation up till nowadays, despite the fact that economics seems to be the preferable area for finding common agreement.

Incomplete profile of EU concerning security in and for Europe

Missile Defence

The question of missile defence in Europe, which has exposed its strategic weakness, can be seen as a perfect example for analyzing the lack of common understanding of the role of ESDP for the transatlantic partnership. The core dynamics of the debate have much less to do with the technical possibility of establishing radar sites or launchers in Eastern Europe than with the safeguarding of particularistic interests either on the international stage or within domestic disputes between political parties. Key issues include the unresolved questions about the respective role of NATO and the European Union within the fields of security and defence policy in general and for Europe's security in particular. It touches the fundamental principles and the self-understanding of the European Union on its way to become a comprehensive security actor on the global scale.

To understand the true nature of the transatlantic dilemma on that topic and the political impact an installation of such a system might have, we just have to ask ourselves a simple question: Why should Europe be part of a game-changer in international politics, and that is what missile defence besides all the technical and military aspects really represents, while at the same time it is anything but close to the decision-making level concerning the use and further enhancement of such a game-changer?

Strategic irrelevance

When critics in Europe and the United States today argue that Europe has a strategic deficit, then accepting the installation of such a system under US-control would inevitably lead to the strategic irrelevance of Europe in the future. Despite the undisputable military advantages the decision to build missile defence sites within Europe could turn out to have a devastating political impact for Europe, the United States and the role of the transatlantic partnership in the international community. One only has to look at the reactions from Moscow concerning that issue on the one hand and the important role Russia plays for finding solutions to the nuclear-dispute with Iran, the Israel-Palestinian conflict or the question of North Korea on the other, in order to understand that the West must base a possible decision to commit itself to missile defence on the right reasons and on a thorough analysis of both the military and the political consequences on a broad spectrum.

Gaining global reach vs. serving global interest

Reality of multipolar world

The strategic rift between the United States and Europe also relates to the self-understanding of the transatlantic partners concerning their role in international relations at the beginning of the 21st century, and it refers to the different approaches of the US and Europe towards *global responsibility* or *global governance*. Acting according to global responsibility can be defined as a well-balanced combination of gaining global reach and serving global interest. It is important to understand that

you cannot serve global interests by purely gaining global reach and that of course gaining global reach does not automatically lead to serving global interest. For the Europeans it seems that they are currently struggling if and how they should gain this global reach, while they are very keen on finding solutions on consensus, stressing the importance of compromises in order to serve global interests.

Washington already has the global reach. But the United States seem to be unwilling to accept that global interests could be in any way different from US-interests. Washington still has difficulties to accept the reality of a multi-polar world. It is no longer the transatlantic alliance that lies at the heart of international relations. Together with increasing political, financial and economic interdependencies in a complex global network of newly established centres of gravity, one can observe a constant shift of power from the West to the East and South.

Shift of power

The influence of population development

A brief look at the numbers and statistics underlines the irrationality of trying to preserve the hegemony of the West. In 2030 there will be roughly 800 Million people living in Europe, the United States and Canada, representing less than 10% of the overall world population of approximately 8.5 Billion people. It will be rather difficult for the transatlantic partners to explain why they should remain reference point number one for the rest of the world concerning democratization, security, social, economic or ecologic policy when it is the other 90% that are primarily affected by the consequences of the dark side of globalisation such as desertification, global warming, pollution, natural disasters, or supply-shortages concerning energy resources, water and food. So why should the rest accept the Western model, why should it approve Western democratization-efforts, its values and interests, when the political implementation of the Western model seems to be orientated more at preserving the global political and economic leadership of one tenth of world population?

The transatlantic partnership has lost its shaping power on global level because the Western model is no longer convincing people that it is capable of solving problems or finding answers to the challenges at hand. And what should make the transatlantic partners worry even more: Regions of interest for the transatlantic partners are rather willing to accept the effective solutions by – one might call them problematic – international players such as Russia or China, than waiting for the United States and Europe to reinvent their strategic shaping power of former times.

Western model not convincing

Question of strategic arrangements

A third aspect can be identified concerning the deficits of the North-Atlantic partners when it comes to addressing the pressing challenges of our time: It is not only about the imbalance between strategy and tactics, and not only about the inability to accept the reality and consequences of a globalized, multipolar world. The West no longer thinks or acts in the long-term perspective. This deficit becomes obvious when we compare the current situation with the cold-war era. Considering the cold war what automatically comes into one's mind is the importance of the *strategic arrangement* that was established between the West and the East. A *strategic arrangement* in terms of accepting a situation less than optimum, or accepting a less preferable compromise, providing the relevant actors with time and ground for working out strategies, that define objectives and means, in order to gain a more perfect solution in the end.

Long-term perspective

The Berlin Wall became the symbol for such a *strategic arrangement*, and the nuclear tie between Moscow and Washington was the means for securing the balance within it. Nobody was happy with the situation, there were lives lost, there were still people suffering directly from the dividing line in the middle of Europe, but we arranged ourselves with it in order to find a solution under better circumstances. That's why the cold war never developed into a full-scale military engagement, and that's why the Cuba crisis didn't lead us to World War Three.

Popular vs. effective solutions

But what does this mean for the current situation? Who could think of such a *strategic arrangement* for today? What would be the symbols and what the means for achieving and securing a certain stability within such an arrangement when it comes to issues such as the nuclear dispute with Iran, the Middle East conflict, the economic, political and military rise of China, or combating transnational terrorism? Finding answers to those questions requires the willingness to think of long-term solutions and the persistence to hold on to promising strategies even if they suffer a serious setback or become unpopular. International Policy founded on popularity only is neither serving global interest nor is it helpful for gaining global reach. This is especially true when it comes to the role of international politics in national elections.

What to expect from a new US-Administration

So what will be the situation for the transatlantic relations in the beginning of 2009, when a newly elected US-President will deliver his inaugural address at Capitol Hill in Washington DC? From an economic point of view, the situation will more or less stay the same. Taking into account trade statistics and foreign direct investment (FDI), the relationship between Europe and the United States is going pretty well. With the total amount of over 1.5 Trillion US-Dollars, they are each others most important direct investor, making up for twelve to fourteen million jobs on both sides of the Atlantic. Two-third of European FDI goes to the United States. The same goes for FDI from the United States to Europe. Trade between US and Europe makes up for 40% of the overall global trade, and the numbers increase annually. Neither the transatlantic dispute over the Iraq-war nor the financial crisis 2007/2008 were able to cause serious long-term damages to the excellent and growing economic relations.

Chance for multilateralism?

Concerning the security related issues some experts state that the further cooperation between the United States and Europe will depend on whether the new Administration in Washington will be looking for a more multilateral approach or not. But even more important will be whether the new US-President knows about the costs of such a multilateral approach and whether he will be willing to pay the political price. That's where one can up to now identify the only major difference between the two candidates for the White House, Barack Obama and John McCain, when it comes to international policy. While the Vietnam-War-veteran McCain states, that he would not start direct negotiations with the Mullah-regime in Teheran it is the young Senator Barack Obama who declared, that he would be willing to find multilateral solutions to the pressing issues of our time by starting talks with the enemies of the United States, too. One will have to wait and see whether a US-President Obama will be able to get the support by the public, the media and – even more critical – the Congress in Washington for a change in international policy, knowing that serving global interests on a multilateral approach takes much longer, costs substantially more and delivers less US-preferable solutions than a unilateral policy.

Risk of expectations unfulfilled

Some people argue that the strategic vacuum in the transatlantic community might be resolved with the election of the young charismatic Senator from Illinois as next President of the United States. This could lead us to a “crisis of rising expectations unfulfilled” as Kori Schake has titled his working paper for the Center for European Reform, because whoever puts his hope into a new Administration will be disappointed. The complexity of the tasks that lie ahead will stay the same, and even a new US-President will not be able to substantially change the strategic environment. Some people argue, that there will be no revolutionary change in US foreign and security policy, nor will the Europeans be ready to take on more responsibilities or carry a heavier burden. Those people could be right, because the current tensions in the transatlantic relations do not result from animosities between state leaders. They are rather the consequence of fundamental differences in the assessment of the strategic environment and the political impact of government action and diplomatic initiatives.

It seems as if the people on the street are much more aware of that fact than the politicians. A Transatlantic Trends Survey by the German Marshall Fund of the United States has shown that only 35% of the European and 42% of the American citizens believe, that the relations will improve with a new President in the White House. At the same time 77% percent of the European and 73% of the Americans favour a more substantial role of Europe in global affairs, the majority on both sides stressing the need for a closer US-EU cooperation.

Pessimistic public opinion

These results like many other surveys and studies show one thing: The strategic partnership between the United States and Europe has been overstretched, and it has been militarized since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Too many and too high expectations are bound to the fate of the NATO-Alliance. The transatlantic partnership alone will not be able to find adequate answers for dealing with the global challenges that characterize the dark side of globalization in the 21st century. We need additional partners, more flexible co-operations, and de-militarized forums for strategic exchange. We need to establish a community of interests and solidarity, which goes beyond missile defence and war on terror, if we want to progressively succeed.

Transatlantic partnership overstretched

Perhaps accepting the normality of asymmetry within partnerships can help to understand the true nature of providing shaping power in the 21st century: That is to manage the consequences of the changes in the distribution of power on a long-term basis and to arrange oneself with strategic stabilized situations – even though they do not represent the optimum solution.

While experts and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic will continue to discuss the character and the dynamics of the current development, one basic conclusion needs to be kept in mind, defining the heart of the debate: The world has up to now and will also not in the future wait for the transatlantic partnership to regain strategic shaping power on a global scale. It has instead developed into a complex net of a whole range of new centres of gravity, all interlinked with each and – even more important – all competing with each other. It is therefore not a question of adapting ones policy to the interests and strategy of the partner on the other side of the Atlantic, it is a question of how to provide common answers and solutions that provide stability and security also in those issues and areas, where the transatlantic part-

Need for common answers

ners do not share the same interests. That's how effective and lasting strategic partnerships are born, especially in times of crisis and setbacks.

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