



Transatlantic Relations: Prospects and New Directions

By Dr. Matthew Rhodes

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC) and the German Federal Academy for Security Policy (*Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik*, (BAKS)) conducted a seminar, “**Transatlantic Relations: Prospects and New Directions amidst Political Change,**” in Berlin from 18-19 January 2018. More than seventy-five experts and officials from Germany, the United States, and across Europe participated. The following is a brief summary of conclusions.

- 1) The transatlantic relationship remains robust and mutually beneficial; it is “a glass more than half-full.” Despite recent angst, the usual superlatives used to describe it—the world’s most successful alliance, largest and most open trade and investment ties, and closest community of democracies—continue to apply.
- 2) Nonetheless, strong relations cannot be taken for granted. Among political leaderships, similar threat perceptions on both sides of the Atlantic are accompanied by exceptions in areas such as climate as well as policy divergence in cases such as Iran. A broader perceived change is a reduced sense of shared confidence and commitment toward the liberal multilateral order as a source of common purpose. Disputes over World Trade Organization mechanisms present an example.
- 3) Strains among governments reflect shifts within publics. Generational turnover means fading personal identification with the post-War and Cold War foundations. Moreover, rapid change, widening inequality, and the lingering effects of the 2008 global financial crisis have left sizeable segments of citizens viewing prevailing transatlantic and other multilateral systems as irrelevant or even harmful to their interests.
- 4) Within this context, NATO has managed to remain “an island of transatlantic stability” and make significant strides to address emerging threats since 2014. Headline examples include the Readiness Action Plan, Defense Investment Pledge, Enhanced Forward Presence, Commitment to Enhance Resilience, Action Plan against Terrorism, and proposed command structure reform.

However, the hard work of implementing, consolidating, and resourcing these initiatives is just beginning. NATO’s 2018 Brussels Summit will stress the need for greater “coherence” across initiatives as well as more convincing progress on burden-sharing across the trinity of “cash, capabilities, and commitments.” In the meantime, the U.S. “third offset” strategy for new defense technologies has the potential to further widen gaps with Europe.

5) Amidst the mixed effects of Brexit, the European Union has also stepped up its security role. The EU Global Strategy's aim of "strategic autonomy" is stressed by Germany and other members for both international hedging and domestic political reasons. The EU's PESCO framework represents an important advance in projects and commitments but will likely deliver neither full autonomy nor the high-end "avant garde" forces envisioned in the Lisbon Treaty. While EU operations already display a measure of autonomy in places such as Mali, Europe's security interests will continue to rely on the United States for the foreseeable future.

A "both/and" rather than "either/or" mindset toward NATO and the EU in security is thus warranted. This includes key areas such as military mobility, where a demanding mix of legal permissions, agreed standards, and infrastructure upgrades is needed.

6) The preceding sections plus other measures such as sanctions illustrate perhaps greater than expected Euro-Atlantic unity vis-a-vis Russia. Russia seems set to remain a strategic opponent through Vladimir Putin's next six years as President. Sustainability questions remain, but medium-term trends have Russia eroding NATO's qualitative military edge in Europe, including by expanding anti-access/area denial capability. Russia has also intensified nuclear signaling via increased bomber overflights and more forceful overt threats than during the Cold War. Meanwhile, its economy is proving stronger than anticipated, assisted by an upward tick in energy prices. It continues "active measures" to stoke divisions within the West even as these achieve diminishing returns against cognizant targets. In the face of such pressures, reinforced NATO deterrence is a prerequisite for "Harmel 2.0"-style dialogue.

7) Though easier to wish than realize, transatlantic nations need more robust strategic thinking toward both internal stress and external threats. Given the Clausewitzian "fog" surrounding much of the current discussion, focus on concrete facts would be a good start. Further benefit would come from richer historical perspective, including a tragic sense of the horrors partnership has sought to prevent and appreciation for management of difficult periods in the past.

At the same time, planning and analysis must imaginatively incorporate future trends. Rising global geopolitical competition reinforces the importance of transatlantic alliance even as it transcends the immediate challenge from Russia. For example, China's growing economic presence has opened potential avenues of influence, especially in Central and Southeast Europe, even as it has raised common concerns with dumping and intellectual-property protection. Meanwhile, digitalization and its effects on work are raising new challenges for transatlantic trade relations while also adding opportunities for U.S. involvement in projects such as the Three Seas Initiative.

8) Finally, present conditions call for redoubled promotion of proactive communication. Leaders must more effectively empathize with the legitimate concerns of their people (including youth) and persuasively convey the value of transatlantic cooperation in addressing them. Many governments also already plan more outreach to one another's civil societies. Further opportunities for exchange of viewpoints and experience among working-level officials as well as ordinary citizens will be equally important to bolstering the mutual understanding and informal networks that lend relations endurance and depth.

The views expressed in this article represent the consensus of the participants in this event and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of the U.S., German, or any other government.

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