INTRODUCTION

In Fall 2002 the Schlesinger Working Group held two meetings (October 1 and November 19) to explore the sources and potential significance of the evidently growing rift in U.S.-European relations. Members of the group identified trans-Atlantic differences over specific political, security and other policies, over reliance on multilateral versus unilateral approaches to international problem solving, and over leadership styles and practices. The discussions underlined that neither European nor American views are monolithic. There appeared, however, to be agreement (a) that the rift is deep and could become lasting and (b) that U.S. determination to move forward on the anti-terrorism war and on the issue of Iraq is forcing both Europeans and Americans to define views on some fundamental issues. Two broad “schools” of thought emerged with respect to historical precedents.

1. The first school holds that the trans-Atlantic alliance has faced serious rifts in the past (Suez 1956, Ostpolitik 1970s, Pershings 1980s) and yet ultimately fundamental values and interests triumphed over short-term differences. According to this view, it is not inevitable that trans-Atlantic ties will continue to spiral downward. Moreover, the rift is not an across-the-board phenomenon affecting all sectors of the relationship or all members of the alliance. Much effective work continues among the allies, including cooperation in the war on terrorism.

2. The second school argues that with American concentration on developing an anti-terrorism/weapons of mass destruction strategy, the absence of a clear threat to European security, and European self-absorption in EU unification, future trans-Atlantic relations may be very different from past patterns and could continue to deteriorate. Associated with this more pessimistic school is the view that American and European societies are inexorably growing apart due to power shifts, diverging social and political priorities, and the presence of severe and mounting challenges to Atlantic community statecraft.

The October 1 Meeting

The first meeting, held October 1, began with opening comments by Dr. James R. Schlesinger (in whose honor the group was established), followed by Professor Francis Fukuyama and Swedish Ambassador Jan Eliasson. Our three presenters framed fundamental causes and implications for the “trans-Atlantic rift”, which was followed by extended discussion.

Schlesinger began by saying that the rift could be lasting. Fundamental trans-Atlantic changes are afoot, in part because the glue that has sustained the alliance — the absence of a geopolitical threat to Europe combined with a decreased American need for European troops to face down the Warsaw Pact — has now disappeared. The rift is a function of issues and personalities; its depth and durability will depend on circumstances, popular and elite attitudes, and events. Schlesinger remarked that understanding between the parties is a two-way street. While European elites complain of American unilateralism, he pointed to instances of European unilateral action. He remarked that Europeans should give up on unratified multilateral accords from the Clinton period and recognize that the U.S. became a different country after September 11, having lost its sense of invulnerability and having undergone a real change of priorities. Despite the strains, the U.S. and Europe, in his judgment,
ought to make every effort to find cooperative solutions to common problems.

Fukuyama argued that European-American strains derive from more than asymmetries of power (a reference to Robert Kagan’s article “Power and Weakness” in Policy Review): they arise out of differing ways of seeing the sources of democratic legitimacy. Americans, he argued, have ultimately no higher source of democratic legitimacy than a constitutional democratic nation-state that can, if it chooses, transfer legitimacy to an international body in a contractual relationship. But many Europeans accept the notion of a higher level of legitimacy in (non-elected) international bodies capable of handing legitimacy down to individual states. Since this divergence of political culture is rooted in the history and constitutional makeup of U.S. and European democracies, it is fundamental and likely to increase with Europe’s growing preoccupation with formalistic multilateral procedures.

Eliasson said that the rift is deep and could be lasting, if we do not seriously and openly deal with it. He reminded the group that when the allies work together they are quite effective (e.g. in Afghanistan and Macedonia) based on their common heritage, values and interests. He reminded American participants that Europe is in a deeply rooted and widely supported process of building an integrated and peaceful international community, beginning within the continent. He urged that the U.S. and EU countries “mentally cross the Atlantic” in order to be better partners and listen to one another. Each side has a story, but the important point is that the perception of divergence could be as dangerous as divergence itself.

CAUSES OF STRAIN

These opening commentaries set the stage for spirited and sustained exchanges over two meetings concentrating on the sources and causes of growing strains, how best to comprehend the trends, what it all might mean for the trans-Atlantic future, and what kinds of surprises might await us. The group concentrated on five major sources of strained relations: (A) the place of Cold War era security institutions and the impact of overwhelming U.S. military preponderance; (B) domestic political dynamics and contrasts; (C) the divisive nature of Middle East policy challenges; (D) divergent views on the utility of military and non-military policy instruments; and (E) the paucity of high quality dialogue and communication.

A. The Power and Weakness Argument and Strains on the Security Architecture

A number of participants made references to the Kagan argument that the mounting disparity between European weakness and comparative American strength accounts for sharp and growing differences over the use of military power to address security challenges and a fundamental difference over the legitimacy of unilateral military action not sanctioned by international bodies. While this analysis had some support among participants, several group members envisaged a contrary perspective of an emerging Europe becoming capable of standing up to and setting itself apart from the U.S. by articulating an alternative vision of international order and alternative responses to security challenges. Europe, according to this argument, is to America today what America was to Europe in the 19th century — an entity that is slowly changing the world balance of power. The interesting surprise scenario, for these participants, would be a stronger and more self-confident Europe than expected. The very fact that policy elites in the U.S. are concerned about the trans-Atlantic rift gives some credence to this prospect. A period of prolonged trans-Atlantic drift will assure that the European endgame will be less influenced by U.S. preferences, opening up the possibility of undesirable scenarios such as an alignment between Germany, France and Russia.

On the other hand, other members reminded the group that Europe is a long way from becoming a coherent foreign and security policymaking entity. It will not be difficult for the U.S. to reject arrangements — such as the Kyoto treaty — that could unify Europe against American positions, opening the prospect that the U.S. will now “cherry pick” nations that will support the policies the U.S. wants to promote. America is increasingly able to seek out allies on a case-by-case basis rather than having to work under the burden of alliance or institutional decision-making processes.

Another participant argued that in the last 10 years, NATO has been forced “to become a community of action and not just one of values”. For a period, there was some limited if difficult progress toward shaping a basis for NATO action and policy — primarily in addressing Balkan challenges — but September 11 made this much more difficult. This was partly because Afghanistan was so much further from Europe, and partly because of U.S. official reluctance to involve the alliance as such (as distinguished from individual allies) in an Afghanistan campaign that
would be directed and controlled by Washington. Beyond the question of overturning the Taliban and taking down Al Qaeda, the challenges at NATO’s doorstep were increasingly playing out in the most difficult and divisive geopolitical arena: the Middle East.

**B. Domestic Political Dynamics and Contrasts**

A second source of strain is Fukuyama’s “democratic legitimacy” thesis summarized above. In this regard, participants differed sharply on the implications for trans-Atlantic relations of a widely reported gap between elite and public opinion in Europe. Some argued that European political systems “allow” political elites to be less responsive to public opinion, citing such issues as the connection between immigration and crime. Others doubted this portrait and cited instances where European political leaders have been hyper-responsive to public opinion.

Despite tensions among Western capitals of late, a recent poll of 9,000 respondents conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and the German Marshall Fund shows a remarkable convergence of American and European public opinion on many issues. For example, sixty-five percent of the Americans and 60 percent of Europeans surveyed said the U.S. should only invade Iraq with UN approval and the support of its allies. Such results suggest that Americans and Europeans still possess a large measure of mutual public support, despite schisms among elites.

Another important source of recent trans-Atlantic tension was found by some participants in the divergent requirements of very different political systems. A conservative Republican administration has often gone out of its way, according to some members, to downplay and denigrate allied contributions to the war on terrorism and to minimize the importance of acting multilaterally or within a framework of UN approval. By the same token, a German socialist leadership found it politically expedient to “run against Washington” in the recent election campaign, using differences over Iraq for domestic political advantage. The resulting “poison” — whether transient or more durable — reflects a changed global security environment and would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

**C. Policies Toward the Middle East as a Primary Driver of Strain**

The “open wound” of Middle East politics and policies, stemming from differing approaches to the Arab-Israeli problem, was cited by several participants as a primary driver of strain. Yet there has been a rift between the U.S. and Europe over the Middle East dating back to the 1940s. As noted in a recently published joint study by the Atlantic Council and the German Marshall Fund, the high levels of cooperation on affairs in the Middle East during the 1990s are actually an exception. But passage of the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and perceived preferential treatment by the Bush administration for Israel has brought back discord between the U.S. and Europe.

The process of European unification has generated a broader set of shared European attitudes regarding Middle East policy, a process which has aggravated concerns about U.S. leadership in conflict management and regional security. Given history, proximity, international trade — especially in oil — and migration issues, Europeans have multiple and growing interests in the region. Islam has become a vital force in the domestic politics of key European allies such as France (where Muslims make up 17% of the population), Britain and Germany. Sensitivity to Islamic issues has significantly risen as a result of the war on terror and the (unwitting) role of European societies in hosting terrorist cells and facilitating terrorist financial dealings. By contrast, the U.S. administration and Congress are more disposed toward Israeli views — particularly given contemporary terrorist attacks on Israelis.

The debate over Iraq is important on both sides of the Atlantic, but for different reasons. The worst-case scenario from an American perspective is to be attacked again; the worst-case scenario from a European perspective may be a misuse of power by the Americans. The U.S. wants to solve the Iraq problem even if it means going to war, while most Europeans wish to manage the problem rather than confront it if this offers a chance to avoid going to war.

**D. Divergence on the Utility of Military Power**

It is not simply a case of the Americans vastly outmatching the Europeans in military power and potential. European elites tend to differ from many of their American counterparts in the relative importance they attach to military power as distinguished from diplomacy, assistance programs and other soft power tools for addressing security challenges. As several participants argued, American policy elites need to show a greater grasp of the demands of coping with failed states in the vast zone of turbulent and transitional societies; this would lead to a greater appreciation
of the need for political instruments and mechanisms such as conflict management and peacebuilding, diplomacy and mediation initiatives, post-conflict reconstruction strategies, and other programs and tools which would provide a focus for shared, trans-Atlantic efforts.

In this regard, some members said it is essential to have a more sustainable division of effort in post-conflict reconstruction, and not a situation where the U.S. fights, and Europe pays and provides institutional support. A European participant argued that while Germany spends only 1.5% of its GDP on defense, it spends 4.5% of its GDP on integration of the former German Democratic Republic and 0.7% GDP on EU budget transfers and humanitarian/development assistance. Europeans considered themselves to be net “exporters” of security, but have not articulated well to American audiences their major contributions. Another European participant agreed that the current division of responsibilities in the alliance is not sustainable: European political elites resent filling an apparently subordinate role, while feeling that their contributions are not sufficiently appreciated. EU nations substantially outspend the U.S. on the more political and “soft” end of international security programs. On the other hand, European nations ought to make serious steps toward military transformation, as the UK has begun to do. Current strains could be overcome if the U.S. recognized its political and institutional responsibilities in supporting international regimes and mechanisms, while the Europeans faced up to their responsibility to build capable, interoperable forces.

Several participants underscored the point that the great majority of problems arise on the security agenda, and that there are less significant disputes over economic issues. While Europe has been preoccupied sorting out its internal security and political arrangements, there has been a breakdown in U.S.-European security dialogue on the wider, non-European world. Meanwhile, on economic and commercial issues, there is a remarkable and continuing convergence across the Atlantic; as one member put it, we squabble over just 5% of our shared trade and 2% of our joint investments. In these circumstances, he argued, the scope for further political deterioration across the Atlantic is limited. This said, it was also noted that trans-Atlantic disagreements over controversial issues such as the Kyoto Protocol and the death penalty sap enthusiasm in Europe for other American policies. Another area of potential long-term strife is over regulation — especially in regard to food safety and the environment — as opposed to traditional trade barriers such as tariffs and subsidies. Failure to work out differences over approaches to regulation could negatively impact global markets.

E. Lack of Serious Dialogue

Several members concluded that there is a lack of serious dialogue between Europeans and Americans on global and regional security challenges. As one participant put it, “we must change the way we talk to each other”. Europeans ought to realize that the way to influence U.S. foreign policy is through candid, private dialogue not public sparring and posturing. On the American side, one problem has been the current administration’s failure to explain ahead of time its intentions and plans for major policy initiatives such as the “axis of evil” speech, the “Doctrine of Preemption” and various pronouncements on the Middle East.

Members pointed out that the war on terror illuminates the cultural and historical differences across the Atlantic. American culture dictates that any difficulty (in this case, our new sense of vulnerability) can be overcome, and any challenge overwhelmed by taking direct action. Europeans — and the rest of the world, for that matter — tend to accept such dangers as part of the landscape, and favor taking measures to cope with rather than confront problems.
THREE FUTURES FOR U.S.-EUROPEAN RELATIONS

Most of the second, November 19, session was devoted to examining possible futures for U.S.-European relations and surprises that could flow from them. Three possible “futures” described below flow logically from the second “school” of unresolved strain (discussed on page one above).

A. The Trans-Atlantic Partnership Endures

Despite recent strains, this scenario projects that the trans-Atlantic partnership will endure and that the U.S. and Europe will become more balanced partners, having a shared sense of values and a mutual assessment of the real threats facing the Western world. The driving assumption in this scenario is that — bumper stickers and slogans aside — the U.S. administration and the European allies are, in fact, still capable of behaving pragmatically and cooperatively. In reality, the administration recognizes that there is “a lot more than just terrorism” going on in the world. Contrary to the unilateralist critique, key U.S. officials believe in a functional, solid trans-Atlantic relationship and would welcome a more self-confident, coherent Europe. Another assumption here is that Europe is stable and secure, and that the real challenges to European security come from outside the continent. In this scenario, Europe, out of necessity, “fall into line” behind American leadership whether or not Europe contributed to a greater military “division” of labor. This would be especially likely if there were a major terrorist incident in Europe. In a nutshell, the task ahead is for the U.S. and Europe to find common ground in assessing threats, and what resources each side will contribute to deal with those threats.

Members — meeting on the eve of NATO’s Prague summit — differed on the seriousness of Washington’s commitment to making the alliance relevant in this new age. Some members viewed positively U.S. proposals that European NATO members develop “niche capabilities” and create jointly with Washington a “anytime anywhere” rapid reaction force for potential alliance engagement in high intensity operations. This rapid reaction capability could potentially benefit both sides: Europeans would avoid additional expense by pledging to the rapid reaction force the same troops that are currently envisaged for EU defense, while Washington would feel reassured at having combat-ready NATO troops capable of deployment at short notice. The NATO summit endorsement of these goals immediately after the working group’s second meeting could be read as a hopeful sign, even if — as always — everything depends on the quality of implementation. It would be an ironic surprise if the nadir months of strain in the alliance somehow morphed into a reinvigorated pattern of trans-Atlantic interaction.

There were a number of skeptical reactions to the scenario of a more balanced Atlantic partnership. Americans might welcome today a more coherent and decisive Europe, but it must be remembered that after World War II Europe was re-created, under U.S. leadership, with the conscious intention of checking the strategic freedom of action of European states and preventing any nation on the continent from taking decisive action. Today, as one participant put it, very few European states are politically capable of conducting a “operational” (as opposed to “declaratory”) foreign policy. Still less can “Europe” in its entirety do so, nor is it clear that Washington would want it to.

Another problem is the reality of European misgivings about the direction in which the U.S. is heading in the war on terror. Europeans welcome U.S. leadership, but they worry that the U.S. is leading them in the wrong direction which could result in a serious undermining of U.S. global legitimacy.

B. From Partnership to a Parting of the Ways

This scenario foresees a sustained downward trend toward a new “normalcy”, including a new era of European “exceptionalism” in trans-Atlantic relations. The basic assumptions behind this scenario are accelerating European strength and cohesion, and also diminishing American interest in alliance consensus building. Europe and the U.S. have changed irreversibly owing to a mix of elements on both sides. (1) Europe has begun to develop a collective identity that will help it to serve as something of a counterweight to U.S. global power. Although Europe will not challenge the U.S. in military matters, its cohesiveness will begin to offset American positions in economic and political/diplomatic realms. This European “maturation” comes in part because the U.S., satisfied that Europe is stable, has shifted its geopolitical priorities to the Middle East, Asia and perhaps in the future, Latin America. (2) U.S. unilateralism and possible over-reach, in this scenario, will create lasting ill will and misgivings among European decision-makers concerning the direction the U.S. is headed in its war on terror. On the U.S. side, Americans — perhaps reacting to the frustrations of their post-September 11...
experience — will depart from their 50-year long internationalist and multilateralist phase back to a more traditional, unilateral way of thinking.

Evidence in support of this scenario includes the emerging U.S. attitude toward alliances. For example, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has said that the mission should determine the coalition, not the reverse. This suggests that on security matters, the U.S. is largely prepared to go with partners of its own choosing (i.e., Northern Alliance in Afghanistan), selecting local and European allies à la carte rather than working within standing alliances and institutions. Europeans, in turn, may decide that the U.S. pursuit of its own global security interests simply no longer coincides with European interests.

There was a wide range of opinion on this candidate scenario. Some participants pointed to the recent polling data (see above) suggesting a general convergence of public opinion between the U.S. and Europe over key security issues. Others criticized the suggestion that trans-Atlantic relations had been particularly harmonious during previous periods. Still other participants rejected the premise that America has lost interest in the Atlantic alliance, stating that, whatever the popular perceptions, American officials fully realize and accept the need for a European allies for the war on terror, and argued that Washington is working more closely with them than is generally perceived.

C. The West Falls Apart

This scenario contemplates a gradual fracturing of political consensus, both within European countries and in the United States so that the trans-Atlantic relationship erodes from a grand alliance into a series of ad hoc collaborations.

Drivers for such a scenario include a sustained American refocusing away from Europe and toward the Middle East, Asia and — due to interest from a swelling Hispanic electorate — Latin America. European reluctance to follow a tough and arguably high-risk approach in the Middle East and Muslim world will exacerbate the feeling that Europe is not a relevant military partner in dangerous times.

Meanwhile, in this scenario, Europe becomes engrossed in meeting the challenges of stability and cohesion that eastward expansion will bring. Among these problems will be the inability to reach consensus on major foreign policy issues (which would impede their ability to act as a major broker in world affairs), continuing immigration and cultural integration troubles — which would be exacerbated by further terrorist incidents, and ongoing disputes with the U.S. over the utilization of NATO instruments and the use of force generally to address non-European threats. A divided Europe, rather than a strong one as in the previous scenario, will contribute to undermining the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Although economic collaboration between the U.S. and EU is generally strong, a prolonged economic downturn could have serious negative side effects. Continual poor performance in U.S. financial markets may contribute to an erosion of European confidence in the American economy. A prolonged recession would also complicate the integration of new member countries into the European Union. Finally, decreased governmental revenues would put strain on the EU budget, which would, in turn, limit humanitarian and stability commitments in support of U.S. strategic goals outside Europe.

Finally, in this scenario, ever-sharpening differences over the Middle East — the alliance’s “Achilles’ heel” according to one participant — could divide and weaken the West.
centrist consensus within the U.S. over support for Israel and a trans-Atlantic tug of war on strategy toward the region. By the same token, a decisive shift in U.S. relations with one or more key U.S. allies in the Middle East could have boomerang effects on trans-Atlantic ties — e.g., a collapse of Saudi/U.S. relations affecting energy flows to the West, or escalating Israeli/Palestinian violence in which the U.S. distanced itself from Israel.

• A nuclear or WMD event takes place. A major nuclear or WMD event in Israel, the U.S. or Europe could unleash piercing calls for retribution, setting the stage for a range of escalation possibilities. While terrorist events can no longer be classified as a surprise in general, the location and type could fall “outside the box”. Such events could have the consequence — depending on circumstances — of driving the U.S. and Europe together or apart.

• The Bush plan works. The post-September 11 strategic initiatives of the Bush administration might be successful, placing the nexus of terror firmly on the defensive, creating a “new Middle East” in geopolitical terms, and consolidating U.S. leadership and alliance cohesion. Given the range and volubility of critical voices among elite opinion-shapers on both sides of the Atlantic, such an outcome would have to be considered a surprise — at least to the critics. The positive implications could be as sweeping as the negatives ones flowing from failure.

• “People power” produces a new regime in Iran. With all the focus on regime change in Iraq, we could suddenly face an unexpected side effect as internal forces in Iran decide that their time has come. The prospect or reality of Saddam’s fall could trigger another dramatic exercise of “people power” paralleling similar developments in Belgrade, Manila, and Eastern Europe as well as the domestic conditions leading to the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. The demonstration effect of such an eventuality elsewhere in the region could be startling.

• Europe becomes “operational”. A surprise flowing directly from the second scenario above is that circumstances in the Middle East or across the Atlantic (or elsewhere) could prompt Europe to become more “operational”, stronger, and more self-confident than expected. While Europe, on present reading, is generally perceived to be only slowly and fitfully moving toward having a foreign policy capability at the EU level, “external” events could trigger a heightened assertiveness and readiness to act autonomously.

• “Regime change” is redefined. Given the sharp and endlessly repeated focus of the U.S. administration on the anti-terror/axis of evil campaign, it may appear that the die has been cast for expanded warfare and open-ended U.S. military presence across the region. Thus, it would constitute a major jolt strategically and politically if the U.S., for whatever combination of reasons, decides to “redefine” regime change and not topple Saddam Hussein militarily. Among the factors which could point in this direction: unexpected difficulties in mustering the necessary cohesion and support in the United Nations, sharpened appreciation of the need for allied cooperation in the war on terrorist networks, or an inability to outmaneuver the Iraqis in the WMD inspection game. Another path to the same outcome, however, could emerge if Washington’s warlike tune succeeds in creating the climate for coercive disarmament of Iraq by UN inspectors, or for Saddam’s ouster by internal forces, thus obviating the need for an American-led invasion.

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