

Diskussionspapier

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What Really Matters in Transatlantic Relations

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1. Introduction

There has been much noise recently about the state of transatlantic relations – loud even by the standard of the general murmur that is constantly surrounding the issue. Most of the current debate deals with the question of whether the recent tensions between the United States and Europe over the right policy towards Iraq mark the beginning of the end of the special transatlantic relationship. One can find almost as many opinions on this question as there are contributors to the debate. One of the reasons why there is so little agreement on the implications of the clash over Iraq is that the protagonists of the discussion are mostly talking past each other. What constitutes a crisis? What sets this disagreement apart from previous differences in opinion among the transatlantic partners? And more fundamentally: What constitutes the special relationship between the US and Europe and what criteria have to be met to consider it broken? There is no consensus about the basic concepts that would be necessary to engage in a serious discussion beyond the ever-changing short term interpretations of the daily press¹.

The goal of this essay is to put the many arguments into a more systematic context. As I will argue, the conflict about the right policy with regard to Iraq is not qualitatively different from previous disagreements, and will have no long lasting, fundamental impact on transatlantic relations. There is, however, a real danger of an increasing estrangement, between the two sides of the Atlantic on questions of world order, or what has been called global governance.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I will question the assumption that the Iraq crisis constituted an unprecedented rift in transatlantic relations. Then, I will attempt to clarify what constitutes the special relationship between Europe and the United States by drawing on the concept of the transatlantic security community. Against this backdrop, I will present some reasons why I believe disagreement on world order is the real danger to transatlantic relations. And finally, I will address factors that influence the American position on questions of world order, in the light of recent literature and my own research on the subject.

2. The Disagreement Over Iraq

To many observers, the controversy between countries that supported and those who opposed the invasion of Iraq appeared to be the worst crisis in transatlantic relations we have seen since the foundation of the special relationship in the aftermath of World War II. And the tone of the arguments was indeed unusually harsh. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder accused the US of adventurism in Iraq, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice called the relationship poisoned. But while the disagreement about the issue was real, the attacks remained largely rhetorical. Except for some mildly successful attempts to boycott French wine or American fast food economic and trade relations did not suffer. Below the highest level of government officials, institutionalized diplomatic consultations continued. Unlike Turkey, Germany did not deny the US the use of its territory and airspace during the course of preparing the invasion of Iraq. Apart from symbolic actions, neither side seriously considered sanctioning the other. This has not always been the case.

In 1956 Great Britain and France secretly plotted to annex the Suez Canal without consulting the United States. In reaction the US actually implemented economic sanctions against Great Britain, which led to a heavy devaluation of the British pound and severely damaged the British economy (Bially Mattern 2001). In 1973, during the run-up to the Yom Kippur war between Israel and its Arab Neighbors, the German government under Willy Brandt denied the US government the use of German airspace for the delivery of arms to Israel – as did the governments of Great Britain and France.² It is an illusion to think that during the cold war there were no trans-

¹ Thomas Risse has **coined** the term „editorial ad-hocery“ for this phenomenon (Risse 2003).

² I would like to thank Caroline Fehl and Peter Rudolf drawing my attention to these events. It is interesting that previous crises are so often omitted in the debate. Compare for example a statement by Josef Joffe (2002): “No German chancellor would ever have dared to refuse a call from Washington, as Mr. Schröder did, while Moscow’s armies were still poised at the gates of

atlantic tensions. The history of transatlantic relations is a history of crises, and put into historical perspective the recent clash looks far less dramatic.

But what's more important, these past disagreements, which were in some respects more serious, did not lead to a break up of transatlantic relations. Instead, once the disagreements were overcome or had faded into history, all sides renewed their efforts to bring relations back on track. The same can be observed with respect to Iraq. Even though the governments of France and Germany are not yet ready to contribute substantially to the occupation forces in Iraq, the bitter verbal exchanges have all but vanished from the rhetoric of the involved parties. "We have put our differences behind us" is now the name of the game from Washington to Berlin. After a few small concessions, the French even supported UN Security Council Resolution 1546 legitimizing the occupation of Iraq by the US and its coalition partners. So does that mean that everything is well again in transatlantic relations? Not quite. But before looking into where the more fundamental problems lie, I will spend a moment, exploring the nature of transatlantic relations a little more systematically.

3. The Concept of the Transatlantic Security Community

As it is most widely used, the term "transatlantic relations" refers to a general notion that a special relationship exists between the United States and Europe. Closely related to the concept of "the West", the implication is that they are partners who share a similar outlook on the world and common political goals. However, this description of the term is so general that it is impossible to establish criteria for determining whether or not the nature of transatlantic relations is changing and how.

A more precise way to think of transatlantic relations is to use the concept of the transatlantic security community (Deutsch et al. 1957; Risse 2003). According to this concept, the transatlantic security community has three characteristics, the so-called three "I's": *interdependence*, *common institutions* and a *shared identity*. In combination, these three factors constitute a relationship in which the concerned states perceive themselves as partners. They do not feel threatened by each other, and exercising violence against each other is unthinkable. Furthermore, they agree on certain norms, such as refraining from the use of material pressure against one another and consulting each other before making political decisions that will affect the other side. Interdependence, for example in terms of economic and trade relations, and common institutions are fairly common between most of the world's countries, though not to the same degree. But a shared sense of identity goes deeper and is not found as often. The identification with one another rests on a shared set of values, such as the belief in democracy, economic freedom and human rights.

While these values are not challenged, I would argue that a consensus on the multilateral world order that emerged after World War II – largely initiated by the United States – was also a component of that shared set of values constituting the common identity. This multilateral world order rested on international law as an organizing principle for international politics. It acknowledged the central role of the United Nations to maintain peace and to provide a forum for the discussion and resolution of problems. And it encompassed a desire to continue developing additional institutional mechanisms to prevent war and spread human rights. This is not to say that the states in question did not pursue their own national interests or followed a purely idealistic or altruistic foreign policy. Nor does it mean that the principles of multilateralism were never violated – the examples mentioned show otherwise. But the general conviction was that the interests of the members of the transatlantic community were best served by a continued multilateral engagement and the advancement of international law. This consensus is increasingly being questioned by a certain segment of the American political establishment.

➤ Hamburg and West Berlin."

4. Diverging Views on World Order?

The current US administration has made no secret of its disdain for international law and multilateral organizations. The obvious disregard for the Geneva Conventions by lawyers of the Defense and Justice departments is only the latest and most outrageous example of this general attitude. Under President Bush the United States has withdrawn its support for agreements such as the International Criminal Court, the Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines, and the Kyoto Protocol on the reduction of the emission on greenhouse gases. There is ample record of opinions of members of the administration on international law and multilateral agreements. One particularly extreme yet symptomatic example is John R. Bolton, who as Permanent Representative to the United Nations as well as in his previous post as Undersecretary of State for Arms Control has been in charge of coordinating multilateral efforts for disarmament and the conclusion of treaties, and was also responsible for carrying out US policy towards the ICC. Before entering the administration he published extensively on the dangers of global governance and international law (e.g. Bolton 2000).

But the skepticism against a multilateral world order did not come about with the advent of the Bush administration. Although the Clinton administration did not choose the path of outright rejection of those agreements, its support of them remained largely symbolic (Burroughs, Deller, and Makhijani 2003; Ikenberry 2003; Karns and Mingst 1990; Luck 1999; Patrick and Forman 2002). Other agreements that were rejected long before Bush came into office include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention against Every Form of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on Biodiversity, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. While these treaties concern a wide range of issues and the reasons for US opposition vary, they do have one thing in common: they all concern questions of global governance. Definitions of global governance differ, but at the core is the assumption that there are problems that by their nature cannot be solved by individual states, but that require international cooperation. This can happen by the establishment of organizations in order to regulate a certain issue area, or by mutually binding agreements. As the term “governance without government” indicates, the organizational forms of global governance are usually non-hierarchical and they often give a role to non-state actors such as NGOs (Czempiel and Rosenau 1992). Generally speaking European decision makers have acknowledged an increasing importance and potential of global governance mechanisms, while parts of the American political elite view them as a threat to national sovereignty. In the following sections I will examine some of the reasons for this skepticism.

5. Two Factors that Do Not Sufficiently Explain American Resistance Towards Global Governance

There are two points that are frequently mentioned with respect to the American attitude toward global governance: *culture* and *power*. I will deal with each in turn, arguing that neither by itself is sufficiently convincing when attempting to explain American policies towards multilateral regimes.

The first argument reads something like this: There are aspects of American culture which can somehow account for the opposition of the US against multilateral regimes like the UN. One reason often given is the strong attitude against big government in the US. What applies to US government, so the reasoning goes is also true for international institutions: less is more. This attitude is frequently contrasted to the Europeans who have less of a problem with a strong state, and also less of a problem with a bigger and more powerful international bureaucracy. Another slightly different variant of the cultural argument points to different historic connotations of nationalism. While Europeans and especially Germans have mixed emotions about the nation-state, Americans refer to it in more positive terms. Therefore they are more skeptical of the international community (Rubenfeld 2003).

While on the level of observation these arguments contain some truth, posing the phenomenon in cultural terms overemphasizes the difference in conviction between Europe and the US and, more and importantly,

misses the point.³ The term “culture” implies something that includes the whole society, and is very stable. To qualify as cultural a certain trait must be quite encompassing and evolves very slowly. Looking at the opposition to multilateral regimes, this is not the case. To begin with, resistance to multilateral regimes is most of all an elite phenomenon. Polls in the last decades show a consistent majority supporting international organizations like the UN and even speaking out for US participation in newer initiatives like the ICC or the Kyoto Protocol (Kull 2002). It is a myth that the average American is afraid of a UN that will eventually come with black helicopters to take over the country. UN skeptics are mostly to be found within the political establishment.⁴ Furthermore, this resistance is not stable over long periods of time – as the term “culture” would imply – but subject to change. While there has always been a reservoir of UN critics, this trend has increased during the course of the 1990s. After 1945 it was not impossible to convince a comfortable majority of the US Senate to support the multilateralist project.

Which brings me to the second point, the power argument. Long before Robert Kagan wrote his notorious “Power and Weakness” piece (Kagan 2002), political observers claimed that US power would lead to a more unilateral foreign policy (Krauthammer 1990/91). As the only remaining superpower – so the argument – the US will inevitably pursue a more unilateralist foreign policy. There is one aspect about this argument which is as true as it is obvious. Without its international standing and influence, the US could hardly pursue a go-it-alone approach. But the proponents of this line of argument confuse a *necessary* with a *sufficient* condition. Just because the US needs power to act in a unilateralist manner, does not mean that power necessarily leads to unilateralism. Thus, at least in this context, it doesn’t suffice to point to power to explain policy. Hegemonic stability theory argues that precisely because the US is the only remaining super power it should continue with the multilateralist project (Nye 2002). In the terminology of International Relations theory, this means that the champion of the power argument, structural realism, is indeterminate with regards to US behavior toward multilateral regimes (Dembinski 2002). Structural realism makes two central claims: (1) The power position of states in the international system determines their behavior and (2), the main goal of states is to acquire material capabilities to sustain their power. But this doesn’t tell us very much about the right policies towards multilateral regimes. Most international regimes do not significantly affect US material capabilities. And in exercising its power the US has two choices, seeking to maximize its autonomy or increasing its influence. With regards to international organizations there is usually a trade-off between the two, increased influence only comes at the price of decreased autonomy. And if it is impossible to have it both ways, structural realism does not tell which path to take. This brings us back to the aftermath of World War II. Before the dawn of bipolarity, the US was arguably in a position of power comparable to today’s. Back then it nevertheless chose a multilateralist path. This variance in behavior cannot be explained convincingly by the structural argument.

So where can we look for explanations instead? If broad statements about culture and power politics do not tell us what we want to know, there is no way of getting around the tedious business of looking into the domestic political process.

6. Domestic Determinants of US Foreign Policy

The American system of checks and balances, in which policy making powers are divided between the executive and the legislative, goes a long way in explaining why so many international agreements fail to get ratified in the US. The institutional barriers for a treaty to become effective are unusually high. A treaty has to be ratified by two-thirds of the Senate, but even before the Senate votes on a treaty, the committee system allows for certain key players, such as the chairman of the committee responsible for a certain treaty, to hold up the vote. This means that there are a lot of veto players who can effectively block the process of ratification. On the one hand, it gives



³ This is not to say culture does not matter at all. As I will show later, ideas do matter, and it is plausible to argue that ideas are derived from a cultural environment. But this environment does not extend to all of or even the mainstream of America.

⁴ To explore why there is such a de-linking of mass public opinion and the perceptions of policy makers is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information on that subject see Destler (2001).

determined individuals strong leverage to block legislation. One example that comes to mind is former Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms, who single-handedly prevented many of President Clinton's plans with regard to the UN from becoming reality. On the other hand, organized interest groups have a lot of access points in the political system. Since most international agreements provoke opposition by one societal group or another and the institutional setup favors the opponents of change over the supporters, the more impact a treaty has, the more difficult it is to get it adopted.

However, the institutional hurdles do not make it impossible for the US to join multilateral regimes and every now and then treaties *do* get passed. The overall number of agreements is even increasing. Important examples from the 1990s include the Anti-Torture Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and – perhaps more puzzling because of their enormous consequences for US legislation – the treaties creating NAFTA and the WTO. To explain why some treaties get passed and others don't is indeed tricky. Falling back on the standard explanation of national interest obscures more than it clarifies. What's in America's interest depends a lot on who you ask. For that reason it is necessary to look more closely at the role of the various political actors. According to liberal International Relations theory actors with certain preferences try to influence the political process in order to achieve a specific outcome (Moravcsik 1997). To explain a certain outcome, it is therefore necessary to look at the actors involved in the process and their motivation for becoming involved. This has to be done on a case by case basis, before one can reach generalized conclusions, since the actors involved and the motivation for their preferences may vary by issue area. More research is needed to determine specific patterns among the adoptions and rejections of treaties. Just one example to illustrate the role of actors with specific preferences in the political process: Whether or not someone is in favor of a treaty banning antipersonnel landmines, depends a lot on whether that person represents a company that produces landmines, a humanitarian NGO involved in the clearing of mined areas in post-conflict situations. Sometimes preferences are not quite so clear cut and depend on assessment and interpretation of costs and benefits or even more general convictions. Think of a member of the military who uses landmines to defend an army base, but on the other hand faces the danger of entering mined territory during an intervention.

7. Global Governance: Problem or Solution?

From a European point of view, the problem begins with the more general attitude of certain political actors towards a multilateral world order in the US. In some cases their preferences are less the result of a certain material cost-benefit calculation than of their general ideological outlook on the world. There is a trend in the American political elite to regard global governance as negative. The American debate about multilateral treaties shows that ideas greatly matter, especially in cases where material interests are unclear or contradictory. An influential group of academics and policy makers rejects a multilateral global order not so much on the basis of the specific provisions laid out in a treaty, but because to them international efforts that regulate state behavior are *per se* a nuisance. While the prevailing view in Europe is that global problems require global solutions, some parts of the political spectrum in the US view such attempts to regulate the international system on the basis of multilateral agreements as a threat to sovereignty (Rabkin 2004). To them global governance is the problem rather than the solution.

If this attitude prevails in the American political process, we are in for a more troubled relationship in the future. These disagreements are not limited to single events like the war in Iraq, but reach across issues and time.⁵ No matter whether the subject of debate is the environment, the global economy, human rights or armed conflict the question of whether and how it can be addressed on the international level will stay with us long into the foreseeable future.



⁵ American willingness to engage multilaterally does vary between issue areas. For example the US tends to be more multilateral on economic than on human rights issues – as is implied by the term “multilateralism à la carte”. But ideological unilateralism can spill over from one issue area to another.

8. Conclusion: Transatlantic Coalitions in Support of Multilateralism Needed

I started out by arguing that the debate about the right policy in Iraq, heated as it is, is not fatal to transatlantic relations and must be viewed in the context of other disagreements in the past. What really matters in the long run, is whether the US and Europe continue to see themselves as partners who share an identity based on common values. To reach a positive verdict on the future of transatlantic relations, it does not suffice to point out that we share the same goals like democracy, free markets and human rights, as many transatlantic community like to do. This position is just as simplistic and flawed as its opposite, namely that the Iraq crisis destroyed transatlantic relations for good. As long as there is fundamental disagreement on how to construct a world order, which helps us to achieve our common goals, there is more trouble ahead. For Americans it is important to remember that, not only were they the ones who founded the UN system 50 years ago, but it has also served them quite well in the past. For Europeans it is essential to deepen their understanding of the American political process and take into account its peculiarities. This can mean that they have to lower their expectations. Global governance is not something that can be forced onto the world, least of all on its most powerful member state. But it can also mean that, instead of accusing the US of unilateralism, Europeans should look for coalition partners within the US who share an agenda of global governance. The US system is not only open for domestic veto players, but also provides ample opportunities for international actors to state their case for international cooperation.

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