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Troubled Times for Transatlantic Relations

Internal and External Challenges for Transatlantic Relations

One could hardly disagree that the transatlantic community today faces the “dim, if not dismal” future that former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned about in his 2011 farewell speech. Indeed, both sides of the Atlantic are currently grappling with serious problems starting with Europe’s continued failure to maintain stable economic growth and strengthen its security, leading to an increasing mistrust in the European economic and political project. This has found its most obvious expression in the victory for the Brexit “Leave”¹ campaign and the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties in France (FN), Austria (FPÖ), Germany (AfD), etc. Then there is the increasingly polarized 2016 US Republican and Democratic primary elections, personified by the unexpected rise of two anti-establishment candidates, the nationalist megalomaniac Republican candidate Donald Trump and the self-proclaimed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders, the latter still strongly defying the ultra-insider, former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.

Moreover, in addition to these internal challenges straining the transatlantic relationship, one should also add at least two external threats²: Russia’s assertive and revanchist foreign policy, especially towards Ukraine, resulting in the annexation of the Crimea in 2014, and the breakdown of order in the Middle East caused by the fallout of the US military intervention in Iraq (2003) and the Arab Spring popular uprisings. Especially significant is the civil war in Syria (2011), which has become the root cause for the current massive refugee flows to Europe and the rise of jihadist movements (ISIS) and Islamic terrorism.

In the face of the internal and external challenges outlined above, the future of the transatlantic community has never been as uncertain as today and its future course depends to a large extent on three essential questions.

The EU at Risk of Unraveling?

The first question is the unity of the European Union (EU) itself, today more problematic than ever, now that Brexit has become a reality. While it is still too early to speculate on the consequences the exit of the UK from the Union will have for transatlantic cooperation, in particular in the areas of economics and security, some analysts hasten to stress that “the EU is at risk of unraveling”⁴ because Brexit might prompt other “exits” of EU Member States (MS), such as Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary, not to mention the risk of sparking an independent movement and separatist initiatives inside the UK (Scotland and Northern Ireland), as well as in Spain (Catalonia) or Belgium (Wallonia).⁵ Moreover, while calculating the cost of Brexit for the transatlantic economy seems to be complicated at the present stage, there have already been some studies, such as the detailed economic analysis of the Treasury published in April 2016, which revealed that if the UK left the EU, its GDP would be 6.2% lower and each British family would lose £4.300. Thus, the outcome of this economic analysis is that “the overall economic benefits of EU membership are significantly higher than in any potential alternative”.⁶

On the US side, in a special statement about the UK decision to leave the EU, President Obama stressed that the US and the UK would continue to be “indispensable partners” and their “special relationship”, along with the UK’s membership of NATO, remained vital cornerstones of US foreign security and economic policy.⁷ Despite having called on the British to remain in the EU by arguing in an article published in *The Telegraph* a few months before the British referendum, that “the European Union does not moderate British influence” and that “a strong Europe is not a threat to Britain’s global leadership; it enhances Britain’s global leadership”⁸, Obama then said he respected their decision, but also evoked the challenges ahead.⁹ While the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton sided with Obama’s position, the Republican candidate Donald Trump welcomed the result of the Brexit vote by calling it a “great victory” that, according to him, would allow the British to take their independence back.¹⁰ Beyond the contrasting political reactions to the

UK's exit from the EU, two main positions stand out in the academic debate. The first one is defended by those who consider that the US needs to renew its economic and political leadership in Europe because "a weak, fractured or failed EU would have devastating consequences for the United States, the global economy, and the wider region".¹¹ According to this view, strengthening transatlantic economic relations on the basis of free-trade agreements, such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) currently under negotiation, is crucial for the economies on both sides of the Atlantic. In contrast, according to the second position, the absence of Britain in the EU, acting as an EU security pillar and a natural proxy in promoting US-UK interests, would further exacerbate the American disengagement from Europe.¹² In fact, this process has already started if one recalls the famous "US pivot to Asia" in the 2012 Strategic Guidance of the Pentagon.¹³ This was announced as the new US defense strategy aimed at rebalancing the US military presence and investment from Europe to Asia Pacific in order to contain China's economic and military ascension. However, recent events in Ukraine could, to some extent, reverse this trend. As a result, in June 2014, the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), costing Washington more than \$1 billion per year, was put in place so as to increase the US military presence in Europe and assure military training and exercises with European NATO members.¹⁴

NATO: In A Quest for a More Balanced Burden-Sharing Alliance?

This brings us to the second issue concerning the future of the transatlantic community which is closely related to the first one as it is focused on NATO. It is a recognised fact that NATO is an asymmetrical alliance in which the US assumes the largest part of the burden-sharing. Pressure from Washington to make the European NATO members spend more on defense and increase their military capacity has had little or no effect, given that most of them still fail to meet "the 2% target" and continue to rely largely on the American security guarantee. As a result, the gap between the US and the European military capacity inside NATO has grown even more asymmetrical in recent years, with the defense budgets of European spenders, including the Big Three (France, Germany and the UK) being either frozen or decreased, mostly because of problems relating to public financial constraints. Thus, in 2015, the US share represented more than 75 % of

NATO's total defense budget. Compared to the military budgets of France (\$41.2 billion), Germany (\$42 billion) and the UK (\$54 billion) in the same year, the US defense budget (\$585 billion) was four times higher than the military expenditures of the Big Three taken together.¹⁵

Today the future of NATO seems blurred and hinges on two main issues on the European side: 1) the willingness, and 2) the capacity of European NATO allies to strike a more balanced burden-sharing alliance. With regard to the first prerequisite, the willingness of the European states to consolidate and strengthen their security and defense policy seems to be ever more present after the British referendum, as demonstrated by the new EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), presented to the European Council by High Representative Federica Mogherini on 28 June 2016, just five days after the British referendum.

Building on the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) and the 2008 Implementation Report, but also extending them in terms of strategy and priorities, the EUGS defines five goals: "1) the security of the EU itself; 2) the surrounding neighborhood; 3) how to deal with war and crisis; 4) stable regional order across the globe and 5) effective global governance".¹⁶ The new EU foreign policy strategy of "principled pragmatism" put forward by the EUGS, represents, in fact, a "return to Realpolitik" but the Realpolitik in its original sense of combining realistic and liberal ideas¹⁷ as stressed in the document itself – the strategy of principled pragmatism "stems as much from a realistic assessment of the strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration for the advancement of a better world".¹⁸ To implement this strategy, the EUGS affirms the need for a "closer Atlantic" by committing the EU to invest further in strong bonds across the Atlantic and maintain a solid transatlantic partnership through NATO, which "remains the strongest and most efficient military alliance in the world".¹⁹ Additionally, the EUGS goes further by stressing the necessity for a "strategic autonomy" for the EU grounded on "the mutual and assistance solidarity clause" (as defined in arts. 42.7 TEU and 222 TFEU) and the EU enhanced contribution to Europe's collective security closely related to its deeper investment in NATO.²⁰

However, if the willingness of the EU MS to become further committed to NATO seems real this time (at

the same time, they no longer have a choice because Brexit will inevitably weaken the European common security and defense policy, especially in terms of delivery, which in return could bring European states closer to NATO), the question of their capacity for achieving this remains open. Increased military spending should be coupled with making military capabilities more efficient at a bilateral level (the 2010 Franco-British treaties on security and defense cooperation), at NATO and EU level through “deeper industrial and operational cooperation, including the pooling of resources, specialization and sharing”.²¹

On the US side, the future of NATO might be impacted by one specific factor worth mentioning here, namely the result of the US presidential election on 8 November 2016. In fact, Trump’s position about NATO is quite extreme - for him, the alliance is “obsolete” because it was formed to combat the Soviet Union, whereas the main threat today is related to global terrorism, which is not necessarily state-bound. Trump has also repeatedly pointed out that NATO is “unfair economically” to the US because of the disproportionate share that his country pays.²² He has also taken a very critical stance regarding the European NATO members describing them as “free riders” who stay aside from military intervention and conflicts and rely only on the US to defend the world. While the Republican candidate calls into question the need for NATO itself, he also advocates a non-interventionist approach and a light footprint in the world²³, which is in striking contrast with the Republican party’s line generally focused on US interventionism abroad. If elected, Trump’s isolationist populism would definitely represent a threat for the transatlantic community and NATO because “engagement and US attention rather than isolation” are the best means of pushing back illiberal political parties and movements.²⁴

External Risks for the Transatlantic Community

Finally, the third question that will inevitably influence transatlantic relations is related to the two most challenging current external threats the transatlantic community is facing – Russia’s aggressive foreign policy with regards to eastern Ukraine and the unchecked rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria that brought about a wave of terrorist attacks in some EU members states, namely France and Belgium. Dealing with Russia in the case of Ukraine needs a very smart strategy pursued by US and EU officials, given that Russia is a key player in the war against

ISIS and an important “game changer” in the civil war in Syria. While the Obama administration’s approach to Russia is based on pragmatism, restraint and efficient deterrence so as to avoid any escalatory response from NATO, this might change depending on the outcome of the coming US presidential election. Breaking again with Republican orthodoxy, Donald Trump advocates a rapprochement with Russia by stating that Putin is a “strong leader” whom he “would get along with very well” and calling on the US to disengage from Syria in order to “let Russia fight ISIS”.²⁵ As for Russia’s involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, Trump remains vague by stressing that the US has no vital interest in Ukraine and “that’s really a problem that affects Europe a lot more than it affects us”.²⁶ On the Democratic side, despite being one of the promoters of the “reset” policy in US-Russian relations, Hillary Clinton has now adopted a more hawkish position by claiming to strengthen sanctions against Russia for its intervention in Ukraine, help Europe be less dependent on Russia’s energy and expand US missile defense in Eastern Europe.²⁷

That all shows that there might be a change in the US foreign policy towards Europe and its periphery after Obama’s departure from the White House in a few months.

Conclusion

Based on the internal and external challenges the transatlantic community faces today, as outlined above, one can conclude that we really are living through troubled times today since we face a “new strategic moment perhaps less obvious but no less important than those of the last century”.²⁸ The way of getting out of this crisis depends on the US and EU officials’ willingness and capability to mitigate risks and act collectively by using responsible, pragmatic and appropriate means to deal with the numerous internal and external challenges. For the risky world we live in today needs not only a renewed US leadership of NATO to help Europe get out of the crisis, but also a stronger European Union, as rightly argued by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini: “A fragile world calls for a more confident and responsible European Union, it calls for an outward- and forward-looking European foreign and security policy”.^{29*}

***Anna Dimitrova**, CIFE Alumna, Professor and Researcher in International Relations at ESCE International Business School, Paris

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