The US and Europe: Drifting Apart or Staying Together?

US – European relations up until the end of World War II

In his final address to the nation in 1796, President George Washington gave the following advice to his countrymen: “The Great role of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible. ... Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. ... Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent Alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.”

Why, indeed, should the United States at this time have engaged in European affairs? It had just fought a long war of independence against the British, with whom there was now a delicate peace. To have sided with the French, who had helped the young nation in that war, would have been to provoke the British. To side with the British against the French, but for what strategic purpose?

Over the 19th century, a United States in the process of formation had enough on its plate with the expansion to the west into Indian territory, to the south against Mexico and, to the north, occasional campaigns in order to if possible push the border with British Canada further up. Anywhere, therefore, except toward Europe. Indeed, the Monroe doctrine, promulgated in 1823, warned European powers against meddling in Western hemisphere affairs - the understanding being that the US similarly would not interfere in Europe’s. (This, on the whole, it did not do, even though it carried out raids against European powers in the Mediterranean and the Barbary Coast and politically supported Latin American independence from Portugal and Spain.)

During World War I it took the sinking of American merchant ships by the German Navy for the United States finally to involve itself seriously in European affairs in 1917, as it sided with the United
Kingdom and France against the central continental powers of Ger-
many and Austria-Hungary. That support, in the form of troops and
material, proved crucial in breaking the German lines on the western
front, and in bringing about an armistice. That in turn led to the Ver-
sailles Peace Treaty and the various other treaties concluded in 1919
in Paris to settle the shape of post-World War I Europe.

We know the role played by President Wilson in those peace ne-
gotiations, and the hopes placed by millions of Europeans in him and
in a US role in the new Europe to come. Wilson the idealist came up
with his Fourteen Points plan for European and world peace, includ-
ing a proposal for a League of Nations, soon duly set up in Geneva.

However, we also know the strong pressure in the US Congress
for the country soon to withdraw its troops, and with them its politi-
cal commitment to Europe (also because, unlike what was the case af-
fter World War II, there was initially no continental power that need-
ed to be ‘countered’). The US Congress refused to have the country
join the League, and Wilson died in many ways a bitter and disillu-
sioned man. The US observed from afar European developments in
the 1920s, the Great Depression in the early 1930s which had started
in Europe, and the rise of authoritarian regimes in countries like Ger-
many and Italy - with the Soviet Union, declared in 1922, withdraw-
ing into a self-imposed political and economic isolation. There was US
concern over all this, but also US non-involvement.

After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, President Roosevelt
tried hard to move the US to give more active material support to a
United Kingdom which stood alone against Hitler, following his con-
quest of France and his subjugation of many other smaller European
nations. There was still a strong isolationist mood in the US Congress.
(This being said, the US was covertly supplying war material and even
‘volunteers’ to China in the 1930s in the latter’s defence against the
Japanese invasion.)

It was to take several events - Japan’s military alliance with
Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy in the so-called Berlin-Rome-
Tokyo axis, Pearl Harbour in December 1941, and indeed Hitler’s de-
claration of war against the United States a few days thereafter - for
the United States to become engaged anew in a pan-European con-
flict. Again, US military might proved decisive - in supplying the So-
viet Union with massive supplies of arms under the so-called Lend-
Lease programme, in assisting the British and the Free French under
de Gaulle, and in mobilising a large number of troops and a huge war
production - leading eventually to the invasion of northern Africa,
Italy, Normandy and southern France, and from there on to the con-
quest of Berlin together with the British, the Soviets, and soon the
French. (To this came the major US military effort in the war in the
Pacific against Japan from 1941 to 1945.)
US – European relations during the Cold War

This time around the US occupation of Germany - which had been forced to accept unconditional surrender unlike what had been the case at the end of World War I - was much more extensive. With the occupation followed greater responsibilities. Indeed, there was no German government, meaning there could be no peace treaty with the country, and indeed none has been concluded to this day. As an occupying power, the US had a major responsibility for the future of Germany, together with the other three occupying powers.

Furthermore, the Soviet army did not demobilise and showed no intention of leaving the countries in central and eastern Europe that it had come to occupy in pushing back the Germans. Nor did the Soviet Union honour the agreements entered into at Yalta in early 1945 and in Potsdam in the summer of that year, especially the provisions for free elections in the various countries under its occupation. The US had learned a lesson from World War I, namely that it would this time have to remain in Europe in order to avoid a repetition of the 1930s.

In 1949, after a period of “agonising reappraisal” as regards the presumed intentions of the Soviet Union, the United States therefore entered into a formal security alliance – the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – with Canada and ten countries in Western Europe. This was, then, the first time since Washington’s words of caution in 1796 that the United States entered into a formal alliance with outside powers, if one excepts the so-called Rio Treaty of 1947 on the Defence of the western hemisphere. (NATO would soon be followed by other regional alliances around the world such as SEATO, CENTO and by a defence treaty with Japan.)

NATO can be said to have had three main purposes. They were, to use the famous expression of its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, to “keep the Soviets out, the Germans down and the Americans in”.

Other factors also contributed to “keeping the Americans in”. Firstly, there were few prospects of advanced trade with other places in the world aside from western Europe at this time, if one excepts a handful of countries like Canada, Australia, Argentina, Uruguay, New Zealand and, in time, Japan, to which assistance similar to the Marshall Plan was extended. The rest of the world was still comparatively underdeveloped. This added a considerable economic argument for maintaining a political and security presence in western Europe. Furthermore, the Marshall Plan, launched in 1947 and completed by the early 1950s, was a major success, leading to rapid economic growth in all the participating western European countries.
Another factor was the strong domination of the US political scene by the so-called “Eastern Establishment” - that is, the political elite on the US eastern seaboard which had particularly strong links with Europe. The US population was also still highly European ethnically speaking, making it politically easier to raise the funds needed for the Marshall Plan and for a continued US troop presence in Europe.

One should not, however, underestimate a third element, namely the idealism prevalent in the United States at this time to help save western Europe for democracy, in opposition to a Soviet Union increasingly seen as irremediably totalitarian.

US involvement in European security was to last up until the present day - via NATO but also via US encouragement of European unification through such bodies as the Council of Europe, the Western European Union and the European Economic Community in its various transformations up until the current European Union.

Only after a few years following the end of World War II, the “double containment” just mentioned – that of “keeping the Soviets out and the Germans down” – became just “containment” that is, waiting out the collapse of the Soviet Union, whenever that might happen. Indeed, the Federal Republic of Germany joined NATO in 1955.

The wait would be long. It took us past the various Berlin crises, especially those of 1948 and 1961, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 - which was intimately linked to the Berlin issue - and all the way on to the medium-range missile crisis of the mid-1980s, when the West felt profoundly threatened by the stationing of such weapons by the Soviet Union in eastern Europe.

US – European relations in the post-Cold War era

Then, however, came the momentous events of the late 1980s and early 1990s: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the disappearance of the Soviet Union in 1991, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact – the Soviet Union counterpart to NATO – in the same year, and shortly thereafter the swift liberation of the countries of central and eastern Europe from Soviet political control and the communist system with it.

Suddenly NATO no longer had an adversary. It is difficult for any defence or security alliance to hold together under such circumstances. If NATO wanted to survive – and all its members felt that somehow it ought to - it would have to find a new mission. This it did, in the form of peace-keeping and peace-making operations; out-of-area assignments, first in Europe’s periphery and today on an increasingly global scale - such as in Afghanistan and, although on a limited scale, in trying to secure the reconstruction of Iraq following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.
Sometimes the alliance held together, such as when it intervened in the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s and in Kosovo in 1999. It also held firm in the wake of the September 11th attacks, where indeed its pivotal Article 5 on collective self-defence was invoked. This happened - not, as had always been expected, in order to help a European power - but rather in order to assist a United States that had come under attack. NATO also found a new mission in fighting terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, so-called ‘rogue states’ whenever a definition of such states could be agreed on, and countries threatened by civil breakdown. NATO in a way has turned from a traditional defence organisation protecting member states’ territory into a global collective security institution, increasingly operating outside the borders of its member states.

Sometimes the alliance has not held together, however, as was clearly demonstrated in the conflict over Iraq in the spring of 2003. The resulting dispute caused deep divisions within NATO and indeed between many EU members of NATO. In 2003, European division on the Iraq crisis not only led to diplomatic complications with the US but also, at least temporarily, frustrated any ambition to forge a common EU foreign and security policy. Following the declaration by France and Germany against early military action against Saddam Hussein, leaders of eight countries – including Britain, Italy, Spain and several central and east European countries – published a message which extolled trans-Atlantic relations and the historical American contribution to the old continent and called for a resolute attitude vis-à-vis Iraq. The declaration and the ensuing European row reflected both the divided views held by Europeans as regards the US and the dissatisfaction felt by many EU and other European countries with a perceived French-German attempt to dominate the European agenda.

US Secretary of Defence Ronald Rumsfeld at this time started talking about an “old Europe” as opposed to a “new Europe”. By “old Europe” he meant countries that in his view had become staid, set in their ways and overly cautious and comfortable - such as France, Germany and Belgium - while by “new Europe” he meant more action-prone, supposedly dynamic, innovative and Atlanticist countries like the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Poland and various others in central and eastern Europe.

At the heart of NATO’s paralysis over Iraq and other crisis areas lie differences in the perception of threats by countries. The US considers itself basically at war since September 11th, a feeling not shared by most European countries to the same extent. It could even be that both the perception of threats and national interests are diverging, not only between the two sides of the Atlantic but also within Europe, and that this may hamper the adaptation of NATO itself. The dominating position of the United States has a tendency to lead to attempts
among groups of European NATO countries - today led by France but in future perhaps by others - to create a counter-weight, as part of a 'multipolar' instead of a 'unipolar' world. Since, however, threat perceptions and national interests are so different also among Europeans, such attempts rarely lead to anything lasting. This in turn renders more difficult any transformation of NATO toward greater trans-Atlantic equality and symmetry, which it should after all be in the interest of both Americans and Europeans to pursue.

The American writer Robert Kagan argues that the European outlook derives from the fact that the continent over the past half century has reached its current degree of integration through negotiations and compromises. Europe, he says, has come to believe in the superiority of settling differences peacefully, via international agreements supposed to be sacrosanct. The US by contrast, he argues, sees the world as a much more anarchic and dangerous place, which has to be faced head-on through preventive or even 'pre-emptive' action.(1).

To the extent these two approaches reflect reality, they may not necessarily be irreconcilable. If there is any truth in what the 19th century war theoretician Clausewitz said - namely that "war is nothing but a continuation of politics by other means" - then European diplomacy could indeed be helpful to objectives shared on both sides of the Atlantic. The US would carry a bigger stick and a smaller carrot, and the Europeans a bigger carrot and a smaller stick. We have seen examples of such a putative "division of labour" recently in efforts to try to persuade Iran to forgo its nuclear programme, and in the sharing out of police and military duties in countries like the "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Some differences between today and the post-war era

If we compare the situation today with that after the Second World War, there are numerous important differences which would make it almost natural for the two sides of the Atlantic not to agree as fully on everything as in the past. We have already mentioned that "double containment" - that is, keeping "the Soviets out" and "the Germans down" - was soon replaced by just "containment", that is, "keeping the Soviets out". Today, however, the main successor country to the Soviet Union, Russia, is a partner of the European Union and indeed has concluded close co-operation agreements with NATO, in particular through the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Co-operation and Security and the 2002 NATO-Russia Council.

In the economic field, unlike what was the case in the Marshall Plan days, there are now many more markets than just western Europe. There is Asia – as represented by China, Japan, India and others – and Latin America and parts of the Middle East, and the list is not complete. In other words, both the US and Europe have other trading, and potentially political, partners.

Moreover, the domination by the so-called “Eastern Establishment” over US politics is far less pronounced today than in the years following World War II. The US population is less predominantly European in its composition, with strong contingents of people from Asia, Latin America and elsewhere making up a growing proportion of Americans. It is therefore not self-evident that as much political attention should be paid to Europe as before, apart from the fact that other parts of the world are likely to gain in importance and therefore require greater US attention.

Finally, it must be remembered that European integration has gone relatively far. The European Union’s so-called “Internal Market” has been in existence since 1993. It still suffers from many imperfections, but much has also been achieved. Market integration has gone so far as to make it almost natural – some would say necessary – for the European Union also to want a greater political integration and a more autonomous security profile.

In addition, the single currency, the euro, has been in existence since 1999, further adding to the quest for political integration. There may be quarrels over the so-called Stability and Growth Pact, which is meant to ensure observance of the principles governing the single currency. Some people feel that these quarrels are proof that political unification should have been undertaken already before monetary unification. Others argue, however, that the disputes only highlight the need for greater political integration, especially in the security and foreign policy fields, to make monetary integration more effective.

The argument has also been advanced that it is precisely because western Europe has, for over fifty years, been so “overly” protected by the United States via NATO, that it never had to do long ago what would otherwise have been necessary and natural, namely to unite also in the security and foreign policy fields. By the same token it could be argued that the US may have grown so accustomed to this state of affairs that it has problems in accepting a change which, given Europe’s present wealth and degree of political integration, could be seen as normal and overdue. If we accept this line of reasoning, we might even speak of a case of “delayed filial emancipation” as regards a more autonomous European defence and security policy.
A two-way transatlantic ‘bashing slugfest’: how serious is it?

There is widespread denunciation among European political and cultural elites of American ‘unilateralism’, that is, the country’s refusal to agree to ratify treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and the treaty establishing an International Criminal Court to punish alleged war criminals. It is thereby often forgotten that the US constitution provides a strong, independent foreign policy role for the Congress, including control of the purse strings, and that treaties must be approved by vote of the Senate. Many Europeans also feel estranged by America’s forward stance in the fight against terrorism and ‘rogue states’ and see it as yet another sign of US hubris.

There is undoubtedly some opposition to the US in Europe and in the world in general – such as over Iraq in 2003. However, it is scattered and far from shared by all social strata. At any rate it has, since the fall of the Soviet Union, failed to give rise to any formal counter-alliances among countries – in the world in general and more specifically in Europe. Counter-alliances are rendered the more difficult since the US, through its might and overall good standing with all, provides ‘public goods’ to the entire world by maintaining trade and international financing (also through its strong role in the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF), keeping sea lanes open and upholding a degree of global security by clamping down on (at least some) countries seen as intent on upsetting this world order.

If it were possible to sum up the goals the United States has set itself for the world, it could be that it seeks to maintain peace via arms control, prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and promote democracy and free markets. European elites tend, however, to be sceptical of the US, either because they do not believe that the country is honest in pursuing these goals, or because they do not share the American definition of democracy or its belief in the virtues of globalisation.

Another grievance is the maintenance of the death penalty in many US states (and at federal level). They see the US as the main engine behind what they view as inhuman globalisation and ‘McDonaldisation’ around the world. In all these objections there is, then, a moral overtone, implying that the Americans are somehow less environmentally aware (Kyoto Protocol), less caring for human life (death penalty) and more ‘adventurist’ in foreign policy. Still, with so many, especially young, people in Europe and the world at the same time attracted by American movies, culture, universities, food, clothing and technology, any united anti-Americanism has difficulties taking root.

If a European ‘anti-Americanism’ can be said to exist among certain groups of people, and more strongly in certain countries than in
others, then maybe also an emerging American ‘anti-Europeanism’ can be discerned. ‘French-bashing’ and ‘Europe-bashing’ have become legion in many American talk shows, where ‘chicken Europeans’ are chastised. They are said to be ‘liberal’ (that is, generally socialist-inclined), not wanting to fight terrorism or dictatorships and no longer believing in God. As for foreign policy, the popular perception seems to be one of European constant irresolution and immobilism.

France is a special target, not only because it took particular exception to the invasion of Iraq, but also because it is perceived on the other side of the Atlantic as being especially secularised, unduly dominated by ‘les intellectuels’ and in addition endowed with a generous welfare state of a suspiciously socialist blend. In addition, France has the audacity, in spite of its supposed relative powerlessness, to aspire to the same type of ‘mission universelle’ as the United States. The fact, for instance, that the losing democratic presidential candidate John Kerry spoke French and well knew French wines is likely to have been to his disadvantage in the campaign. (He was called Jean Kérry by his detractors.) What has just been said should not, however, obscure the fact that many Americans feel considerable sympathy for ‘the old world’ and side with it on many issues.

Many sceptical Europeans and others are waiting for the US to undergo decline like any other dominant power. This may happen, but the US has a formidable strength in its 200-year old constitution. As Watergate proved, it does not tolerate any attempt at usurpation. Power is strictly divided between the president, the legislative and the judiciary. Such a system tends to involve the citizenry more than do parliamentary systems such as in Europe, Japan and elsewhere. It is a bulwark against excessive power gathered in one quarter, against overly hasty decisions and against any overreach in international endeavours. Where such overreach does occur, such as in Vietnam (and the jury is still out over Iraq), it is likely to be corrected in time due to domestic opposition.

There are other, perhaps more ethereal, reasons to expect American world leadership to continue for some considerable time to come. They include the freedom and independence of thinking that still prevail in the country (in spite of a pronounced concentration of media ownership, sometimes with political overtones); the permanent immigration from the entire world (often of well educated, young and motivated immigrants); the country’s risk-taking culture; an administration which is on the whole uncorrupted; an economic system that encourages enterprise; and a financial system which is constantly proving very good at transforming new ideas into worldwide products and services. To the extent that parts of Europe feel incomprehension as regards American society, this may be due to the fact that they have chosen policies less conducive to such circumstances.
The US attitude to continued European unification: still unconditional support?

The United States has traditionally, ever since the 1950s, supported European unification. After the Iraq crisis of 2003, the question has, however, been raised whether this is as true today - especially after the US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, in 2003 started to contrast “new Europe” against “old Europe”. The new objective of the United States was said to consist in achieving “disaggregation” – that is, a certain division – in Europe and above all within the EU, so as to prevent NATO from becoming irrelevant and more generally to maintain continued US influence in European affairs.

However US policy in regard to Europe may evolve, the likelihood of any pronounced European opposition to the United States is limited. The reason is that especially the EU is divided into at least three “groups”, of which two are ‘naturally inclined’ to maintain an Atlanticist orientation for the foreseeable future.

The group that is more sceptical against the United States includes France, Luxembourg, Belgium and to a certain extent Germany, even though it is unclear how firmly the latter country actually belongs in this group. In a second, and more Atlanticist, group are countries like Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, non-EU member Norway and perhaps even non-NATO member Sweden, which perhaps due to their geographical location on the Atlantic and historic ties to the US feel closer to it politically. The third group includes the new EU members in the Baltic Sea region and central Europe. These latter countries will for a long time remain in favour of a strong role for the United States in Europe (and the world). The reason is that they find themselves facing to the one side a Russia which up until relatively recently dominated them or even (in the case of the Baltic region) denied them political independence; and to the other side the equally proximate Germany which, although it is today altogether peaceful, exerted a similar pressure in a past that the elder generation can still remember.

Over time all these attitudes may change, especially if pan-European cooperation and integration make major strides forward. In the meantime, in the event the United States were to strive for a certain division in the security policy field within the EU, the task would not seem overly difficult. Considering the many different forces that shape American foreign policy it is, however, far from certain that any such deliberate ambition exists.

Toward a new transatlantic understanding?

If we are indeed witnessing a process leading toward a more independent, or autonomous, EU foreign and security policy, then there
are two reasons why this process could prove in the end to be so gradual that it will satisfy both sides of the Atlantic and eventually turn into a new equilibrium with positive consequences for each. The first has to do with the state of today’s world, and the second with the already extremely close economic integration between the United States and its NAFTA partners Canada and Mexico for that matter – on the one hand, and Europe on the other.

As regards present threats, there is no reason why Europe should not want to sign on to the US mission against terrorism; against the spread of weapons of mass destruction, including means of their delivery via terrorists; the fight against ‘rogue states’; and the prevention of ‘state breakdowns’ leading to restless and impoverished populations in such countries, civil wars and a more fertile breeding ground for terrorism. Indeed, Europe has signed on to these efforts already, and much cooperation is going on behind the scenes.

Much of the above is achieved by NATO, as it increasingly goes ‘out of area’. The European Union sometimes carries out independent operations under its European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), while at other times it works in cooperation with NATO. True, there were differences over Iraq, but the recent agreement on a role for NATO in providing training for Iraqi security forces is a sign that divisions over that country may be healing.

NATO fulfils a mission in Afghanistan. (NATO was formally involved in the Afghan operation due to the invocation of Article 5 following September 11, but the US initially chose to go in alone with selected NATO member states and other partners in overturning the Taliban regime.) Furthermore, as has already been noted, the European Union has taken on major military roles from NATO in the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and Bosnia.

In 2002 Europeans protested vigorously against US plans to establish a Ballistic Missile Defence. Little of that is heard today, which probably signifies that Europe has come to realise the major threat posed by such missiles, whether launched by ‘rogue states’ or terrorists.

Another and more fundamental reason why a rapprochement on common threats and challenges such as those mentioned may come about more easily over time is that both sides of the Atlantic – together with what is in fact a widening part of the rest of the world – share fundamental values bequeathed to us by history - whether one prefers to talk about ‘Western civilisation’, the ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’, the ‘heritage of Athens and Rome’, or use some other similar expression. When the core values that underlie our societies do not come under threat we tend to forget them. However, when they do, we tend to rally around them - such as occurred after the Madrid bombings in March 2004 and in the wake of 11 September, when a newspa-
per like Le Monde, which normally takes a rather sceptical stance toward the US, proclaimed on its first page: “Nous sommes tous des Américains!”

Another reason why the US and Europe may drift less far apart politically and security-wise than often assumed has to do with the close economic integration between the two. The American economist Joseph Quinlan points to the intense growing together of the North American - that is the US, Canadian and Mexican - economies and those of Europe. The trans-Atlantic economy employs around twelve million workers on both sides of the Atlantic. The integration takes the form not only of massive trade flows in both directions but also much foreign investment, joint research and the spread of multinationals with many subsidiaries. Since any serious drifting apart between the two sides would have serious consequences for world financial stability and for the economies concerned, it can be expected that major efforts will be undertaken by all sides to prevent it occurring (2).

Quinlan sees many of the economic frictions now arising between the two sides of the Atlantic as resulting from the fact that the two sides have integrated so considerably already. In other words, they have reached such a stage of integration that even the minute functioning of the domestic market of either side will cause great difficulties for companies in the other.

Indeed, in area after area the EU and the US seem to find the way to an agreement after the headlines about erupting conflicts have been forgotten. Thus, in 2004 the two sides agreed on a way to let the European system for satellite navigation, Galileo, co-function with the American GPS system. At about the same time an agreement was reached on common rules for the inspection of containers to prevent terrorist attacks and for checking the identity of airline passengers. It should be noted, however, that the last two cases involved unilateral American initiatives, which Europeans in the end had to accept in more or less unaltered form.

Furthermore, the breakdown of the World Trade Organisation talks on the so-called Doha Development Agenda in Cancún in September 2003 was due less to any split between the US and the European Union than to differences among developing countries and emerging economies themselves. The restoration of the WTO process in the summer of 2004 in Geneva was largely engineered jointly by the EU and the US, in renewed testimony to their basic desire to reach agreement on outstanding issues.

More recently, a common EU-US view as regards the independence of Lebanon has resulted in joint pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops from the country. An American will to heal rifts was evident as President George W. Bush, preceded by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, visited the EU and individual European countries in early 2005, with European leaders also striking a conciliatory tone. As prospects for the spread of democracy in the Middle East improve — whether or not they flow from the changes in Iraq — the intensified EU-US cooperation in the region that may follow such a healing may pay important dividends.

This does not mean that any transatlantic frictions that arise can be taken lightly, or that they will always go away by themselves. Words matter. Careless, overly categorical statements and counter-statements can cause antagonism and lead to a vicious circle of escalating vituperation and indeed over time affect policy—not least since as a result issues may become increasingly charged with emotions and thereby prove less “solvable” than more “rationally” based divergences.

We saw examples of this after the Iraq war in the spring of 2003. Much excellent French wine was poured down sinks instead of gullets, and much tasty German sausage fed to hogs rather than served on plates. Today, however, the worst seems to be over and commercial relations between the countries concerned more or less back on track.

Numerous potential foreign policy differences lie ahead. One is what to do about Iran’s nuclear programme and its possible military objectives. Here the EU wants to induce the country to lift the veil of secrecy surrounding the project in exchange for trade and other economic benefits, while the US — hampered by its not having diplomatic relations with Iran since the 1979 hostage crisis — hesitates whether or not to join the Europeans in negotiations. Another is the EU’s wish to lift the embargo on arms sales to China, in force since the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. Such sales are viewed by the US as potentially jeopardising to Taiwan, toward which the US has defence commitments.

Other, perhaps more mundane, divergences include hormones in beef where, rightly or wrongly, European consumers seem more worried over their presence than their American, or for that matter Canadian, counterparts; genetically modified foods, where Europeans are essentially guided by the “precautionary principle” — that is, that innocuousness has to be proven before they can be admitted onto the market. The United States believes, by contrast, that as long as no harmful effects have been discovered or can be reasonably expected, permission should be granted. As indicated above, however, there is no reason why this type of more pragmatic differences should defy solution over time.
We must be careful in not needlessly jeopardising a trans-Atlantic relationship which has brought both sides - and the world at large - so much good over such a long time. We should save our angry words for occasions when we really disagree, and instead try to find a common way forward. The reason is that the stakes for the future are high indeed. Tomorrow’s world will, if anything, be even more perilous than today’s. The dangers include the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, diseases whether known or yet unknown, and environmental stress in the form of water shortages, climate change, soil erosion or deforestation.

These are only a few of the common threats faced by mankind. It would be a pity if the two sides of the Atlantic, which jointly overcame so many common dangers in the last century, were to show themselves incapable of continuing their work, indeed mission, together in the twenty-first century, on behalf of freedom and democracy around the world – this time jointly with other parts of the globe that increasingly want to share in that endeavour.

Perhaps, in closing, it is worth recalling the kind of (relative) harmony that prevailed across the Atlantic some thirty years ago, long before the Cold War was over but after the US involvement in Vietnam had come to an end. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – an organisation which today has 46 member states but at the time only included the countries in Western Europe – in May 1976 addressed a message to the US Congress on the occasion of the bicentenary of the country’s independence (3). In the message the Assembly expressed its “appreciation of the constant efforts of the American people to encourage the peoples of Europe to cooperate with one another for the purpose of safeguarding their independence, liberty and progress”. It went on to say that “the states of Western Europe and the United States of America, which link human rights principles constitutionally to democratic principles, must make the preservation of freedom a common concern and serve as a pole of attraction in an ever-changing world” and called for “close and constant co-operation and therefore close consultations between the states of Western Europe and the United States of America”.

As Ovid, the Roman poet of two thousand years ago rightly observed: “Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis” (Times are changing and we are changing with them”).

KJELL M. TORBIÖRN

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(3) Message approved by the Bureau of the Assembly of the Council of Europe on 7 May 1976 on the proposal of the Assembly’s Political Affairs Committee under the Chairmanship of Mr GIUSEPPE VEDOVATO, today the Director of the Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali.