

The Indispensable Trans-Atlantic Relationship

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American prosperity and security depend on the trans-Atlantic relationship. The scope of the European economy is comparable to ours, and access to it remains vital. American companies do business in Europe, European markets are important for U.S. exports, and both sides benefit from competition and innovation. Despite points of irritation with regard to the terms of trade, forms of protectionism, and a politically sensitive trade imbalance, the trans-Atlantic economic partnership is a net benefit and needs tending by the political leadership.

The partnership with Europe is also a central component of our national security architecture, especially through NATO. While the Cold War-era danger of Russian tanks pouring westward through Germany has lost much of its plausibility, the hybrid attack on Ukraine, the cyber operations in the Baltics, and aggressive disinformation campaigns across Europe demonstrate an ongoing credible threat. Yet the Europeans, divided as they remain, lack the political will or military muscle to defend themselves on their own. American leadership is indispensable.

No doubt, the relative significance of Europe as a region has declined, as East Asia has risen. Yet Europe retains considerable importance: against the backdrop of great power competition, Europe is our likely ally against China and Russia. Ultimately, the liberal democracies of North America and Europe will counteract our shared anti-democratic adversaries only if we stand together. However, to craft

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strategies for a revitalized trans-Atlantic cooperation requires an honest appraisal of the stumbling blocks that stand in the way, in Europe and in the United States.

In Europe, three overlapping sets of problems complicate the alliance with the United States. In terms of the European economy, the Eurozone countries remain saddled with a single currency that facilitates trade but with differential impacts on growth and labor markets, leading to pockets of high unemployment, especially in southern Europe. Yet economic decision-making is dominated by northern European countries, which limited the fiscal response to the 2008 financial crisis and will likely do so again in the wake of the post-COVID recession. We can expect less stimulus in Europe than in the United States with a concomitant exacerbation of the trade imbalance, which will yield political conflict potential. In terms of security, threat perception in Europe depends on location. The eastern flank countries recognize the Russian threat and therefore support NATO in its traditional role; elsewhere the Russian danger is often undervalued, whether due to Germany's pacifist inclination, the influence of Russian and Chinese propaganda, or greater anxiety concerning immigration from the global South. In terms of political governance, these intra-European fractures regarding fiscal and security policies generate tensions within the EU, taking the shape of a conflict between proponents of greater centralization and, alternatively, reassertions of national sovereignty.

American diplomacy therefore faces challenges that require nuance and detailed attention. On the meta-national level, we need a productive engagement with the EU, just as we must provide leadership in NATO. On the national level, our bilateral relations with the individual states are vital, including when they find themselves at odds with Brussels. In addition, the United States needs strategies to engage regionally within this complex continent: with the Central European countries where pro-American sentiment tends to be high, with the South facing immigration and unemployment and where we have important military assets, with the North anxious about Russian and Chinese ambitions in the Arctic, and as always with the three traditional allies with outsized importance in Europe: the UK, Germany and France.

Yet there are limiting factors on the American side as well. The admonitions to return to what is called the liberal democratic rules-based order, which the United States led after the Second World War, ring hollow when they ignore that American economic and industrial preeminence is no longer what it once was: the manufacturing base has shrunk, while other regions, including Europe as well as China, have prospered. American resources are not unlimited. Therefore, the European reluctance to share defense costs equitably is a political liability. Indeed, one of the points of continuity between the Obama and Trump administrations

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is the call for domestic investment, whether as “nation building at home” or the appeal for an infrastructure program. The American public will not tolerate more allied free-riding, nor can we afford it.

Proponents of a robust American foreign policy must take this somber public mood seriously. There are isolationist sentiments on both left and right, and politicians will attempt to appeal to them. The threat to our cooperation with Europe follows from the perception of unfair trade and unequal defense spending—but there is more. For decades, higher education has waged a war on Europe and “Eurocentric” curricula. The teaching of Western culture as vital to American self-understanding has been diminished, denigrated, and denounced. Europe is under attack in our classrooms. No one should be surprised that political leaders follow suit and pivot away from Europe toward other regions. A productive U.S. trans-Atlantic policy requires regaining a place for Europe and its special relationship to America in our education system as well.