Review – Europe and America: The End of the Transatlantic Relationship?

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/07/29/review-europe-and-america-the-end-of-the-transatlantic-relationship/

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Europe and America: The End of the Transatlantic Relationship?
Edited by Federiga Bindi
Brookings Institution Press, 2019

I regularly listen to BBC Radio 4 in the morning, and NPR before I go to bed. The way the media on opposite sides of the Atlantic described the recent G-7 summit of world leaders in Cornwall points to diverging goals by the attendees. While it is true that everyone was offering a narrative of better collaboration after the Donald Trump era, in what was President Joe Biden's first overseas trip, it is also true that the G7 leaders wanted different things to come out of the meeting.

The differences on display in Cornwall and the damage done to transatlantic relations by the Trump era are the main topics explored in Federiga Bindi's 2019 edited volume *Europe and America: the end of the Transatlantic Relationship?* The title's question mark foreshadows the differences that will be discussed. The book is divided into two parts, the first of which considers the foreign policies of eight members of the European Union (including the United Kingdom) and focusses on each state's national foreign policy priorities. The second part covers Russia and the United States, and also contains a conclusion by Bindi that casts a broad historical and geopolitical net that captures the foreign relations of many of the aforementioned countries, as well as Latin America and Africa.

Europe's response to Trump's win

Bindi first brought the chapter authors together as early as the summer of 2011 to write a comparative book on the foreign policy of the EU and its key member states, but due to a variety of other commitments did not finish the text as first conceived. Bindi was provoked into resurrecting the project by Europe's response to the Trump administration, particularly its steps forward in security and defence integration, and its goals to increase acquisitions from European defence industries. However, the case studies used in the text focus instead on histories, geographic relations and the thematic interests of each state, which does not fit well with the introduction and first chapter of the volume, written by Bindi herself. Having said that, the case studies are well written by renowned experts in the nation-states they examine and do provide excellent historical overviews of their foreign policies in relation to the United States.

Several chapters also highlight various crises in the Transatlantic relationship, but with the view that Trump's impact is more important and irreversible than past tests. Bindi (p.26) writes that "as it became clear that the United States would no longer be the trustable partner of the past, the EU decisively pushed on the integration accelerator with a new Global Strategy" and concrete steps in security and defence by way of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Again, in Bindi's analysis (p.27) "PESCO reinforces the EU's strategic autonomy to act alone, [and] for the first time in seventy years the possibility of NATO subordination to the European Union, rather than the contrary, is hypnotisable and may lead to a dramatic change in the transatlantic defence and security landscape."

Bindi is right that in response to Trump's undermining of the unity of the alliance, European leaders gave voice to the possibility that the EU would assume responsibility for its own security and defence. For example, German

Chancellor Angela Merkel remarked that Europe can no longer depend on the U.S., while French President Emmanuel Macron said that because NATO was experiencing "brain death," Europe should defend itself. The European Intervention Initiative (EI2), which includes 14 states (some from outside the EU), the newly financed European Defence Fund (EDF), and the 34 PESCO projects are all initiatives designed to provide autonomous security and defence.

Autonomous Dreams

Despite these measures, the EU's ability to manage future security crises is questionable, especially when its handling of a series of recent emergencies is considered. Unfortunately, inter-member state differences (like the political stalemate surrounding the division of Cyprus) and sovereignty-linked mindsets continue to generate disappointing results. Simon Duke points out several other impediments to NATO's subordination to the European Union. For example, since PESCO takes an "opt-in" approach, exactly how "common" will the permanent framework be? Might PESCO discover the same free rider, burden-sharing conundrum that NATO currently experiences? The Union's capabilities-expectations gap also persists on a variety of personnel and hardware levels. Sven Biscop, in his analysis on the capacities that Europe must acquire for *strategic autonomy*, points out that the EU will not be a strategic actor until it has the wherewithal to deter a would-be attacker.

Thus, Bindi's assertion that PESCO will "help reinforce the EU's strategic autonomy to act alone" (p.27) feels overly optimistic and portrays European military cooperation to be more advanced than it is. If we compare today's attitudes and documents with those of the past, we can see progression at the political and even public levels. However, it is also clear that cooperation is not happening at the military level for a variety of reasons.

Is "America First" actually "America Alone?"

The text on the back cover mirrors the provocative title of the book — "as the United States retreats from the international order it helped put in place and maintain since the end of World War II, Russia is rapidly filling the vacuum." While it is true that America's allies have a case of PTSD in the post-Trump era, it is misleading to conclude that Russia is taking its place or "regaining a major role in world affairs," as is argued on page 297. When looking at both economic and military strengths, Russia pales in comparison to the U.S. It has a $1.7 trillion economy compared to America's $21 trillion, and its global military footprint consists of just 21 military facilities overseas (located mostly in former Soviet republics) in contrast to the U.S., which has more than 1,000 installations and facilities worldwide.

Although, the Nordstream II pipeline is an exception that Germany is willing to resist the United States to maintain, it is not true that economic ties between Moscow and Europe trump Transatlantic ones. In fact, when it comes to Russia, Europe and America seem more united today than in years, with Germany even calling on Russia to stop its "destabilising behaviour and malign activities." This language shows that the G-7 countries are at least keen to re-establish a multilateral effort against Russian meddling and present a united front to Putin after the Trump era.

It is also too rosy to say that "Transatlantic relations reached a peak under President Barack Obama", as the back cover informs readers. Certainly, Obama, who promised a renewed commitment to multilateralism, was welcomed by Europeans as the "un-Bush". However, Obama provided challenges too. For example, he explicitly demanded partners step up to the plate and accept responsibility, rather than letting the U.S. take the strain. He based his policies on a form of *pragmatic realism,* which centred on specific challenges and opportunities confronting the U.S. In meeting such challenges, EU diplomacy had little to offer Obama because of longstanding opposition to key U.S. interests and a growing reluctance to stay in Afghanistan. This meant that the EU struggled to retain the U.S.' attention as it pivoted to Asia. If we engage in an honest stocktaking of the Obama era, pragmatic realism, combined with factors emerging from within and outside the EU, led to a marginalisation of security and diplomatic relations across the Atlantic, at least until 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and began a series of threatening activities.

Similarly, the supposition that the Trump era portends the end of the Transatlantic relationship, feels too alarmist. Although there were plenty of the Steven Miller and Steve Bannon types in Trump's White House (loyalists who

believe that the U.S. is poorly served by the order that it built after WWII), there were staff members who continued to hold the view that a strong commitment to European allies was in America's interest. True, over the course of Trump's four years, loyalists pushed out experienced foreign policy officials, a trend that in a second Trump term could make us all worry. Still, the U.S. Congress continues to firmly support the Transatlantic alliance. For instance, when Trump abandoned the Syrian Kurdish militia in October 2019, Congress condemned him. As many as 159 Republicans sided with the opposition, in part because they knew Trump's imprudent behaviour put additional strains on NATO. By mid-December 2019, the Senate Foreign Relations committee unanimously passed a bill to stop Trump from withdrawing from NATO.

While it is true that had Trump won a second term, Europeans could expect a further shedding of leadership or even withdrawal from NATO, it feels too hasty to ring the death knell of the Transatlantic relationship just yet. This, however, does not mean that the relationship will go back to what it was before Trump. Biden's focus on a foreign policy for the middle class is certainly reminiscent of Trump. When asked about U.S. imposed tariffs on European steel and aluminum in Brussels, he dodged the question. Whether the world likes it or not, some aspects of Trumpism are here to stay.

Continuity and essentially self-serving

In contrast to the hyperbolic back cover and embellished teaser on page ix ("like in a good spy story", the reader must "wait until the conclusions"), the final two chapters in the book argue that in the end, the Trump presidency is not so different from other Transatlantic crises. The chapter written by Jussi M. Hanhimaki, "The Foreign Policy of the United States: Indispensable No More?", is refreshing in its balanced handling of the question of American decline and the U.S.' current foreign policy goals and interests. Hanhimaki points out that pundits have been predicting the U.S.' decline since 1945, and that its major national interests and security policies remain by and large unchanged.

In the conclusion of the final chapter, we finally get to know Bindi's answer to her question posed on page 8 — will world leaders be able to "go back to business as usual" in their relationship with the United States after Trump's "incredible misbehaviour?" Dodging the question herself, Bindi argues that Europe has only now come to realise that "most U.S. policies toward the Old Continent have been, and will continue to be, essentially self-serving" (p.297). Nevertheless, she hopes that America's lost moral capital, helped by its "Hollywood culture", can be re-established in a post Trump era. I guess then, that the answer to her question, whether the Trump era truly is the end of the Transatlantic relationship, is a *no*.

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