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Understanding the deep origins of the transatlantic rift

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Understanding the deep origins of the transatlantic rift

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The divergences opposing Washington and several European states on the issue of the Iraqi crisis, notably as regards international law and the legitimacy of a military intervention, had been analyzed as a clash between the Allies, thus opening up all kinds of possible interpretations. Therefore, according to some European media, which caricatured it, Jacques Chirac, close to Saddam Hussein and defending the French interests in Iraq, would have opposed himself to the omnipresent oil lobbies in the American decision process! This collective hysteria totally concealed a debate opposing sharply both sides of the Atlantic. Once the war of Iraq over, the discrepancies went on crystallizing, as Washington announced heavy sanctions against France, whereas the Heads of State of Belgium, France, Luxembourg and Germany chose to meet at Brussels on April 28th 2003 to study the possible orientations as regards common security and defense policy. Washington warned Paris on April 20th 2003, by the intermediary of George W. Bush himself, against trying to gather a coalition hostile to the USA. It seemed obvious that Jacques Chirac did not take into account the threats of his American counterpart, when he came to Brussels.

From then on, the crisis seemed to go beyond the Iraqi issue: the American experts considered it as deep, whereas the Europeans, falsely optimistic, went on hoping that a necessary co-operation would get over it, and that the discrepancies would step aside in favor of the partnership. As President Bush would say: "make no mistake", something changed in the transatlantic relationship, and the Iraqi crisis was only the trigger of distinctly deeper tendencies.

It is necessary to question both sides' responsibility. If there is a crisis and if it answers structural discrepancies, it has been inevitably provoked. Is it due to the Europeans or the Americans? Indisputably, the nature and the conditions of a new partnership took shape in Washington, and this was before two visions of the world opposed themselves at the UN Security Council.

From deep tendencies to the recent crises

On the occasion of his speech on January 20th 1997, as he took office after being easily re-elected at the White House, Bill Clinton called the United States as an "essential ally". A few weeks later, Madeleine Albright, of Czechoslovakian origin and recently appointed at the head of the State Department, considered that the United States was a European power. This estimation of the importance of the link uniting Americans and Europeans can be found in the Republican side. Indeed, George W. Bush finds in Silvio Berlusconi, José Maria Aznar, and Alexander Kwasniewski, three European statesmen, his best allies. Besides, the American president, vividly criticized after his re-election, for his lack of expertise in international relations, made his first trip to the "Old Continent", passing through Poland and Italy, but not France or Germany.

More generally, it seems that the American Executive branch is marked by the importance of the transatlantic link to such an extent that it is possible to speak of "atlantist politics" at the White House. Nevertheless, this optimistic statement of fact masks other much more worrying realities. At the Congress, debates on foreign policy, less marginal than they were in the past,

had been marked, since the end of the Cold War, by the rising of a feeling of diffidence, or even hostility, towards the European allies. It has to do with the advances as regards the implementation of a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), often considered as unrealistic on Capitol Hill. It has also to do with the capacity means at the Europeans' disposal, which are totally unbalanced in comparison with those of the Americans. Eventually, it has to do with the transatlantic partnership and the existing structures of alliance, more and more vividly criticized for their constraining character.

Moreover, it is obvious that America has changed, and this in spite of the reassuring words of its leaders as regards the priority given to the transatlantic link. After the Second World War, while the outlines of a partnership, whose structures still exist nowadays, were emerging, the population of the United States was mainly composed of citizens of European origin, which led Washington to look in the direction of the "Old Continent". Since fifty years, and even more sharply within the past twenty years, the successive immigration waves in the US have markedly made the population's composition change. It is now composed of important Asian and Hispanic communities. This is particularly true in some Western or Southern States of the country, which now have to take into account a more distant electorate from European considerations. This had progressively the effect of diversifying American foreign politics, to the detriment of Europe, which is less and less considered as a priority .

Origin of American citizens (1980-2050)				
Année	Europe	Africa	Asia	Latin America
1980	80%	11%	2%	6%
2000	72%	12%	4%	11%
2020	64%	12%	7%	16%
2050	56%	14%	9%	22%

Source:
US Bureau of Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1994 (Washington DC, 1994), p.18.

Therefore, when Bill Clinton recalls the narrow link uniting American and Europeans, he furthermore suggests that Washington has to stay aware of other regions of the world, notably as regards trade. At the Congress, the most representative organ of the American population's diversity , these tendencies were getting clearer as the number of elected representatives of Asian or Hispanic origin kept growing.

On the mid-term elections of November 1994, the Republicans won the majority on both Houses of the Congress, thus imposing a gridlock to Democrat Bill Clinton, which went on until the American President's second term of office in 2000. This period of political opposition was rich in confrontations -- the Monica Lewinski affair being the most significant and media-centered -- and progressively, the Conservative side became more radical around a few central characters such as Jesse Helms, John Warner and William Roth at the Senate, and Newt Gingrich at the House of Representatives. Through the Congress reports and the issues on the agenda of the different commissions in charge of international affairs, the American conservatives gradually introduced a feeling of hostility towards ESDP and NATO at the Congress. According to the different crises putting forward the problems of these two institutions, their echo was getting larger, to the point of rallying traditional adversaries around parliamentary initiatives, called "bipartisan", that is to say sponsored by Democrat and Republican elected representatives. This was the case on the occasion of different crises of ex- Yugoslavia, in which the Europeans had shown the limits of their management capacity of conflicts. The Kosovo campaign was as such, the most significant example.

After Kosovo: NATO exposed to the neo-conservatives critics

The lessons of the military campaign, characterized by the numerous criticisms as regards the course of operations, exclusively orchestrated by air strikes, were not only of humanitarian nature, but also confirmed the evolution of the transatlantic relations in the realm of security. In this new environment, the Atlantic Alliance had to face the pressure of the Europeans, who expected a better balance in the decision-making, and of a growing number of conservatives at the Congress, who either showed their hostility to any reform of NATO, or pleaded in favor of the redefinition of alliances, in which the US could more easily assume its leadership.

Since the Kosovo crisis, which was the occasion of testing the American reaction in front of external interventions, the situation has markedly changed, and a certain number of experts or Congressmen, traditionally atlantists, have revised their opinion and denounced an alliance, which would curb the American interests to the Europeans' profit. Unilateralism or multilateralism, which way will be the one chosen by Washington, for what reasons, and for what purpose?

On the other hand, the operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, in which the US has assumed its leaderships, reassured the ones who feared that in the future, Washington wouldn't want to get involved in the management of European crises, and resigned the ones, who had hopefully seen in it the possibility to accelerate the construction of a Europe of defense. In these conditions, the Atlantic Alliance constitutes the principal defense organization, allowing the Americans to maintain a strong presence on the continent, on the contrary of the different European institutions from which they are excluded, and which are as such, often criticized in times of crisis. The Europeans themselves, all the more usually hostile for some of them -- like France -- to the role of NATO in continental defense, had to come round to the idea that the Alliance remained a necessary organization for their security, and now consider to build a European Security and Defense Identity, which would not compete with the American ally.

Eventually, the Yugoslavian tragedy, and the implications of NATO in the operations in Bosnia and then Kosovo revealed the weaknesses of the European allies, both on the decision level and on the one of military capacities. Be it budgetary, technical or structural, the imbalance turns systematically on the advantage of the Americans. The "super ally" is paradoxically the one whose vital interests are the less exposed in the different crises, and however, once more, Washington assumed most of the operations during the conflict.

Therefore, the Balkan wars showed the inability of the Europeans to assume a leadership on the continent and to unite their forces in order to voice one stance. Whether in Bosnia or in Kosovo, the American intervention, which was however little envisaged at first, revealed itself determining and decisive. This partly explains the budgetary insufficiencies of the European allies as regards defense, compared to the US, where the funding granted is largely superior. Indeed, if France and Great-Britain, with more than 2.5 % of their GDP dedicated to the defense budgets, keep a decent rate, most of the European countries of NATO, of which are Germany and Spain, with less than 1.5% of their GDP, only participate a little to the defense of the continent. Furthermore, these sums don't show the use, which is made of them, and here again, it turns clearly at the advantage of the United States. The sums dedicated to the research and development budget are largely insufficient, which makes the European armies obsolete, compared to their allies at the other side of the Atlantic. These budgetary imbalances express themselves by discrepancies on the technological level, the American army being considerably better equipped than the ones of the European allies. In these conditions, deep structural reforms are essential within the European armed forces to enable the forces to be balanced in the future. The American authorities approve these transformations, which could allow them either in the end to intervene, or to let the Europeans take the initiative, according

to the threat to the vital interests of Washington. Therefore, the European forces have to modernize their forces, and to adapt them to the necessities of external operations, in order to impose Europe as a more balanced partner of the United States, and possibly to benefit from bigger responsibilities inside the Atlantic Alliance.

The most vivid criticisms coming from the US Congress about the operations in Kosovo had to do with the weight of the European allies on the military decisions, legitimated by the veto right of the Alliance members. Some of them, France the first, made a use of it that limited the number of air interventions, above all since April 3rd 1999, through the discussion of the important number of targets. President Chirac himself got directly involved in these choices, refusing some missions, which he considered unjustified. However, this was legitimately justified, because France was the second nation participating in the operations, in number of planes involved, behind the United States. But the Americans did not share the same point of view, as they organized some missions outside the Alliance to avoid the Allies' target control.

However, it is interesting to notice that the French reserves had not been totally isolated, as some criticisms were also voiced in Rome, Athens, and even in London in some cases. The Europeans showed above all more diffidence as regards the choice to resort exclusively to air strikes, freeing themselves considerably from the American observations, that mostly came from Congress. Although they acknowledged the legitimacy of such initiatives, the American authorities stated the limitation effects of their prerogatives, similar to what they would have been in a coalition under the UN control. William Cohen, then Secretary of Defense, noticed the difficulties to manage an operation implying 19 nations, with diverging interests for each of them. However, he added, this was a positive evolution for the Alliance.

Nevertheless, although the European Allies criticize openly the American leadership within the Alliance, they are satisfied with this headway, which allows them to express themselves more efficiently as regards the choice of strategy and targets. However some Americans accept with difficulty this UN drift of an alliance in which they have taken all the decisions since fifty years. Benefiting from their advantage in terms of military capacity, the American authorities could easily turn to an Atlantic unilateralism, justified by the participation costs to the operations, including the ones in which the American interests are not directly exposed, in order to answer the Congress' and the public opinion's expectations. Indeed, the conclusion essentially American participation / multilateral decisions was badly perceived by the Americans, who did not understand according to which right, the Europeans, who participated in a lesser extent to the operations, could consider themselves equal to the United States as regards the decisions.

Like the United Nations, where the important consultations at the General Assembly and the veto right of the Security Council permanent members limits the American leadership, NATO, according to the Washington Treaty, imposes itself as a 'forum' of allies, in which the American voice keeps a particular political weight, but has lost its supremacy. In these conditions, NATO would curb the US foreign policy leading to either a deep reform, or more drastically, a retreat of Washington, which the Europeans Allies would understand as a return to isolationism. As NATO is getting away the American interests, and even though it still needs the active participation of the "essential" ally, it is changing to come closer to the UN functioning, so severely criticized in the United States.

The use of veto right on February 10th 2003 by France, Germany and Belgium, in answer to a silence procedure on Turkey's protection, exacerbated the gap between both sides of the Atlantic. NATO is going through an existential crisis, bigger than the ones it underwent several times as regards its functioning, because the Allies do not agree on the objectives to pursue. In its military structure, the Alliance, dating back from the Cold War, could very well not get

over it, as, in the future, the United States could favor ad hoc coalitions, without consulting some disturbing members. Moreover, Donald Rumsfeld announced it, arguing that in the future, the missions had to determine the coalitions, and not the opposite. How could the viewpoint of the American neo-conservatives, according to which NATO has become obsolete and curbs the American power more than it helps it, be expressed more clearly ?

Contrary to a period in which the Europeans were directly threatened, today, they cannot complain about a military structure that is not very costly, which guarantees them a total defense, and in which they have a right of decision at their disposal, whatever their participation at the campaigns. Since 1995, France has even begun negotiations in order to get back to the integrated command, which it left in 1966, which proves indisputably that the anti-NATO are not at this side. Therefore, are Paris, Berlin and Brussels to blame, for not having cautioned a text they considered not adapted, or is it Washington by proposing this text, for having intentionally provoked a crisis to defend the unilateral actions principle? In the light of the Kosovo campaign, it is on the American side that voices can be heard against NATO in its current structure. Three points constitute the core of the criticisms coming from Washington as regards the Alliance's functioning :

1. Because of NATO, the US must intervene when the Alliance's interests are threatened, even when the national interests are not directly threatened. This was the case during the Kosovo crisis, when Washington refused at first to take part in a military campaign, by relying on a European initiative, and under the French and British pressure, it was finally compelled to take on most of the burden.
2. NATO curbs American initiatives. Kosovo offers a significant example as the different Heads of State of the Alliance (Jacques Chirac in particular) made a frequent use of their right of veto on some targets, hence limiting the military missions. At that time, Washington had already committed unilateral operations to divert the jam, which led to two wars in one.
3. NATO costs a lot to the American tax-payer, whereas the Europeans do not contribute enough. This argument is defended by many Congressmen in Washington, who consider that the Atlantic Alliance is a luxury, a little like the United Nations, that the US could avoid.

The American stance towards NATO is not the same, and because of it, Washington's support towards the enlargement clearly indicates a will to transform the military alliance in a political organization, in which "the essential ally" weighs a lot.

Without being exaggerated, do we really have to consider that the enlargement to the Baltic States, or to some Balkan countries is an asset for the integrated military structures? No, it is not, notably as regards the modernization of the armed forces, which will have to be put in. On the contrary, Washington can, by pleading in favor of the enlargement, attract the favors of what Donald Rumsfeld called the "new Europe", who could benefit in many ways from an allegiance to Washington in order not to be "small" in an enlarged Europe, hushed by States, such as France, Germany, or even the United-Kingdom. Tony Blair understood it, as can be seen from the fact that he gave the candidate countries a hand, not without second thoughts.

Preventive strikes and coalitions of the willing

The new national strategy of security adopted by Washington brings answers to the questions we have been asking since 9/11 regarding US foreign policy. The Afghan campaign, and then the allusion to the Axis of Evil by George W. Bush, on the occasion of the State of Union ad-

dress on January 20th 2002 have confirmed the ambitions of the Bush administration, which give a new turn to the US strategy and introduce two new concepts: pre-emptive use of force and coalitions of the willing.

The pre-emptive strikes consist in reducing the risks coming from countries considered as hostile, and striving to get means to reinforce their capacity of harm. Among the most sensitive means, are the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and the support to terrorist groups. Working on the assumption that some regimes are absolutely hostile to the United States, and would not hesitate to resort to all means to attack the US interests, the Bush administration considers that the best way to reduce the risk is to fight against these regimes before they really become threatening.

These notions are not developed in the United States as a consequence of the September 11th attacks, but seems to be a former strategic orientation, whose most evident face was Donald Rumsfeld report to the Congress in 1998, in which the future Secretary of Defense invited the Congressmen to study the case of high-risk countries such as Iraq, Iran and North Korea, but also Syria, Libya and Sudan. Donald Rumsfeld made the conclusion that these States are Washington's enemies and are potentially likely to get WMD before long. From then on, it is necessary for the United States to develop an anti-missile shield in order to stave off these new threats and to reconsider the struggle against proliferation, in front of the international system's failure. Unilateral considerations, the only guarantee to the proper course of disarmament, were put forward among the means of struggle. If Donald Rumsfeld's text was perceived at his publication as a plea in favor of the Missile Defense, which is undeniable, it also puts the bases of the debate on the pre-emptive strikes, which are the only ones able to prevent Rogue States from reaching extreme harm capacities. Therefore, in order to guarantee that Iraq and Iran will never be in possession of a nuclear arsenal, it would be necessary to privilege unilateral actions, in places where the international institutions prove to be inefficient.

The Iraqi crisis has clearly shown Washington's will to follow the recommendations of the Secretary of Defense, and to privilege the pre-emptive strikes in order to reduce the emerging threats. However, even more than this novelty, the principle of coalitions of the willing seems to change the nature of the relationship between Washington and the allies, in particular the Europeans. The Secretary of Defense has expressed several times in spring 2002 his wish to privilege in the future coalitions of the willing. Therefore, the quest for multilateralism can be associated to the idea that the United States is looking for sharing the political, financial and human costs of its external interventions with the more appropriated allies, who would defend their own interests. The Gulf War in 1991 led to ad hoc coalitions, in which the United States take in the leadership, surrounded by a certain number of nations, which can bring particular abilities and share the burden! The Iraqi campaign in spring 2003 took place on similar bases, with however, it is important to stress, bigger difficulties for Washington in the search for partners accepting, in the way Germany, Japan and Saudi Arabia did in 1991, to partly finance the military operations. No doubt that this configuration is convenient. In the future, Washington could be highly tempted by this type of configuration in the case of its military operations, because it would allow to conceal a real hegemonic position behind interest coalitions.

The principal advantage of these coalitions of the willing has to do with the choice offered to the countries to decide or not to join Washington. Therefore, contrary to alliances, whose harshness imposes intervention, even when it is not intended, coalitions are open cells, which you can enter and leave as you wish. But do we really have to consider that the choice to join or not the coalition is totally free? The will to sanction the hindering States has clearly shown the fact that Washington will not accept that some "friends" refuse to follow its leadership.

Through political and economic pressure, the United States is able to compel most of the States to adopt its principle, at the risk of being totally excluded from any forms of discussion. This is exactly the situation in which France finds itself in the context of post-Iraqi war, for having had the insolence not to have joined the coalition, which all the more was to be based on the freedom of access principle. Consequently, the difference between the alliance and the coalition relies on the clarity of the relationships. On the one hand, they are regulated by a text to which the Allies have subscribed and of which they respect the terms. On the other, they are submitted to diverse forms of pressure, similar to the relationships between strong and weak nations in the 19th century.

What reactions in Europe?

Since Washington orients itself towards an abandon of alliance structures, by choosing individually its partners, the Europeans, whose security relied almost exclusively -- and maybe wrongly -- on NATO, have to bring solutions of substitution. Increasing the defense expenses, and thus hoping a friendly gesture from Washington is absurd, not only because the gap took such proportions that it cannot be bridged, but also because many European countries are not ready to sacrifice other budgets at the profit of defense for too vague a project, and eventually because the redefinition wanted by the United States largely exceeds the mere capacity criterion. Even at an equal level, do we have to hope for a sharing of responsibilities? Let's not be naive! The coalition of the willing is a concept, which eliminates alliances, and lures a part of the European countries, for an array of different reasons including economic advantages as well as strategic partnership. Europe, more divided than ever, has to react, and from that moment, every attempt of apparent discussion seems to repel the day of an inevitable debate.

The Saint-Malo meeting in 1998 boosted the construction of a Europe of defense under the initiative of the French and British couple, the most significant military powers of the European Union, and also of the countries having interests in different regions of the world. This initiative gave birth to the principle of a flexible geography directory, gathering many European States to carry out the crisis management, according to the representation of their interests. Then the East-Timor crisis was taken as an example of what these directories would look like. Portugal was undisputedly represented there, as well as the Netherlands, because of the colonial legacy. To these two States, France and the United Kingdom, with territories in the region and a "global" foreign policy called, whereas the other States were little interested in the issue of East-Timor, added themselves. Efficiency had to be favored over discussion, which led to the delay of reaction and the thwarting of initiatives. More recently, on spring 2002, the crisis of the small Persil island between Spain and Morocco showed again the Europeans' inability to get united under the banner of a common cause, as the United States eventually came to solve the problem as a last resort. The French and British efforts precisely aimed at limiting this kind of situations, by conferring to some States, according to the circumstances, particular powers of crisis management.

At the Nice summit in December 2000, these propositions really took shape, and found themselves facing the appreciation of other State members, particularly the "small States", whose interests are so limited in comparison with the ones of "big States", such as France and the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent Spain, Germany and Italy. They considered that they would never be part of these directories. In front of this impossibility to find an agreement, in particular between France and Belgium, the project finally failed.

The initiatives adopted on January 2003 by Paris and Berlin on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the treaty of the Elysée, even though they remain highly symbolic, have had a great impact on the relationship between the European partners. During this celebration, France and

Germany have reminded their major role in the European construction and pleaded in favor of the acceleration of an integration all the more essential since it would be the only democratic alternative to a unipolar order. Some States, such as the United Kingdom and Italy, have accepted with difficulty this initiative considered as unilateral. Therefore, Silvio Berlusconi severely denounced an initiative which does not concern all the European governments, but only two of them.

The letter of the eight, published on January 30th 2003, followed by the letter of the ten confirmed the gap between two conceptions of Europe, one deeply atlantist and faithful to the American ally, the other more skeptical as regards the principle they qualify as blind support to Washington.

Today, two tendencies emerge in Europe. The first, embodied by London, accepts the principle of a unipolar world, and tries to take profit of it. The other, embodied by Paris, places itself in the heart of the resistance, and the defense of multipolarity, or as some pragmatic experts view it, "oligopolarity". Only the convergence of the two solutions can bring a substantial and coherent alternative. The idea evoked during the Saint-Malo meeting, which then shocked the "small States", who felt automatically marginalized, could come up again, as soon as Paris and London realize that their interests are in the end very close, and that no credible proposition could be formulated without one of them. Besides, what was difficult in 1998, because NATO was in good shape, seems more possible in the future, as Washington decided to do without an obsolete and constraining military alliance. The European partners, until then hostile, could also be tempted by these coalitions aiming at eventually reinvigorating a European Security and Defense Policy.

Conclusion

Understanding a gap, which is getting more and more marked between Washington and the European partners, and consequently to this strategic reorientation at the expense of the Allies, it is necessary to rethink the European defense, in order to make it more coherent, and above all more efficient. In this purpose, three essential questions have to be answered, because they constitute the challenges that the European Union will have to face:

1. Does Europe have authority to become the "third way"?
In front of the power of the USA, the line followed by the European Union as regards security and defense could consist in proposing an alternative, without, for all that, positioning itself as Washington's rival. It is the way proposed by some States, such as France, Germany and Belgium. But if this option wasn't approved unanimously in Europe, it's mostly due to a lack of clarity as regards the objectives set. Therefore, this "third way" remains vague, and does not bring "a plan" to the crisis management, on the contrary of the options defended by the American neo-conservatives, criticized for their unilateralism, but who have the merit to have a project. In these conditions, instead of making a Europe that defines itself in reaction to the US, it would be necessary to define realistic common objectives.
2. Is Europe willing to become a soft power?
If Europe decides to position itself as an alternative to the unipolar world, one has to question the means of this counter-power, and the objectives it has to set. The European capacities would not allow, even in the long-term, to have similar ambitions to Washington's. From then on, more by default than by conviction, Europe has no other solution than to be a "soft power", which privileges dialogue and discussion more than force, in order to convince and not impose.

3. Is there a need of a driving force for the European headway as regards security and defense, and if there is one, what is it?

Recent events showed the deep discrepancies within the European Union, notably as regards the distribution of tasks, and more precisely, the fact of bandwagoning behind an engine playing a special part in the decision process. One of the major issues at stake in the European construction as regards security and defense in the years to come, will firstly consist in questioning the necessity of a directory, or even a group of States with special prerogatives, and then to define which States could guarantee the European security in its projection in external scenes.

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