

## The rationale and contours of an amicable Transatlantic security divorce

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French President Emmanuel Macron created a huge stir on both sides of the Atlantic in early November when he stated that NATO was experiencing “brain death.” This was not a casual, off-hand comment on his part. When reporters asked Macron whether he still believed in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, under which an attack on one member is considered an attack on all, he answered: “I don’t know.” Indeed, Macron has been in the vanguard of efforts for several years to create an independent “Europeans only” defense capability through the European Union, a move that would, at a minimum, greatly dilute NATO’s primacy regarding transatlantic security issues. The drive to give the EU a military dimension reflects declining French confidence in NATO’s unity and the reliability of Washington’s continued willingness to be democratic Europe’s security shield.

Other European leaders, most notably German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, criticized Macron’s comment and disputed his assessment. “When France talks about more European cooperation in defense, they’re talking about strategic autonomy. The French are seeking strong European cooperation to replace NATO,” Kramp-Karrenbauer said. She asserted that instead of replacing the Alliance, Germany wanted to strengthen “NATO’s European pillar.”

It is highly probable that statements emerging from future NATO gatherings will echo the German government’s position, rather than French views. However, Macron is correct. US and European perspectives and interests on a variety of important strategic issues continue to drift apart, and no quantity of the usual upbeat clichés about “enduring Alliance solidarity” at the summit will alter that reality. Members must abandon the obsolete notion that American and European interests are compatible to the point of being nearly congruent. Such a belief was exaggerated even during the Cold War when America and its European allies faced a mutual existential threat in the form of the totalitarian Soviet Union. It is an absurd fiction today in a much more diverse and less dire security environment.

European publics, even more than their American counterparts, are implicitly recognizing the new reality. A September 2019 report from the European Council on Foreign Relations, surveying 60,000 people in 14 European Union countries, confirmed that point. The desire for independence and neutrality was evident even with respect to policy toward Russia. When asked “Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and Russia?” the majority of respondents in all 14 EU countries said “neither.” Moreover, the pro-neutralist majority was massive – usually exceeding 70%.

Attitudes were no better regarding other foreign policy controversies involving the United States. When asked “Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the United States and China?” the results were lopsided against backing America – even among Washington’s longstanding NATO partners. Only 18% of French respondents, 20% of Italians and 10% of Germans chose solidarity with the United States.

Pro-NATO types need to avoid the temptation to explain the existence of such sentiments as merely a reaction to President Donald Trump’s abrasive demands for greater “burden-sharing” on the part of the European allies and his ominous comments that Washington’s commitment to the Alliance is not unconditional. The surge of neutralist attitudes in Europe was well underway before Trump emerged on the scene, and it applied even to NATO’s core mission of collective defense. A 2015 Pew Research Center survey of eight NATO countries showed that a median of 49 % of respondents in those countries thought their military should not defend an ally, despite the Article 5 obligation. Indeed, France, Italy and Germany all had majorities *opposed* to fulfilling their country’s treaty commitment.

The bottom line is that the concept of transatlantic solidarity, even on core security issues, is now largely confined to out-of-touch political elites. Such elites may be able to ignore public opinion for a time, but it will be increasingly difficult to sustain policies that run counter to the wishes of large popular majorities. Even on the governmental level, growing transatlantic disunity is evident on a number of major issues – including policy toward Russia, and especially policy toward Iran and the rest of the Middle East.

A death knell is sounding for NATO, and the pertinent task now should be how best to restructure the transatlantic relationship following a (hopefully amicable) strategic divorce. One key change must be Washington’s willingness to terminate its long-standing hostility to an independent European security entity. The motives for that animosity were not hard to discern. Through its NATO leadership role, US dominance in transatlantic affairs was assured so long as NATO remained the exclusive security vehicle. An independent EU security capability inherently threatened that dominance. Whether Washington’s policy made sense during the bipolar era of the Cold War is a moot point; that world no longer exists. The EU needs to take its place on the world stage as a serious security player as well as an economic one. Therefore, the United States should now embrace Macron’s approach rather than oppose it.

Not only should a more robust European Union assume responsibility for the security of democratic Europe, it should undertake primary responsibility for managing relations with the turbulent Middle East. Because of geographic proximity, economic links, and population flows, what happens in the Middle East matters – and should matter – far more to Europe than to the United States. Conversely, there is little rationale for the nations of the European Union to assume an obligation to assist Washington in dealing with political disorders in such places as Bolivia, Chile and Venezuela, Mexico’s drug violence, or the disruptive refugee flows into the United States from Central America. Those matters impact the United States far more than they do Europe. Likewise, there is little justification for the EU to be drawn into Washington’s mounting concerns about North Korea or other issues in East Asia.

Yet just as a couple may still have some important mutual interests and responsibilities following the dissolution of their marriage, the United States and democratic Europe would have some significant mutual security interests in a post-NATO world. Although most disruptive events do not create anything approaching an existential threat, a reasonable degree of stability in the

transatlantic region should be a priority for both parties. Likewise, both America and the EU have an obvious interest in thwarting the rise of a malignantly expansionist great power, akin to Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, anywhere in the international system.

Trying to maintain NATO, especially with its rigid Article 5 obligation and a large US military presence in Europe, no longer serves the best interest of countries on either side of the Atlantic.

Replacing NATO with a new US-EU Security Coordination Council having more limited obligations, is a better option. Such a mechanism would facilitate regular consultations regarding international developments of mutual concern, and even authorize and coordinate joint military operations, in the unlikely event that step became necessary.

The new Council would embody a more flexible security relationship between equals instead of the current de facto relationship within NATO between a security patron and its dependents. Instead of spouting increasingly empty clichés about alleged Alliance solidarity, participants at the upcoming NATO summit should begin the multi-year process leading to the withdrawal of US forces from Europe, an amicable security divorce, and the transition to a new, more limited transatlantic strategic relationship.

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