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The America We Need

by Michael Rühle

“America-bashing” and the theory that Europe and the United States are incompatible in terms of security policy continue to be common. These attitudes obscure what has been achieved, however, and fail to recognise that, for the foreseeable future, Europe will retain its position as the preferred strategic partner of the US. In order to preserve transatlantic security cooperation, and to spare itself surprises and disappointments, Europe needs to better understand the unique characteristics that shape US security policy.

In early October 2015, the Swiss newspaper “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” published a lecture on transatlantic relations by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, which was quite controversial.¹ Sloterdijk accused the United States of having started a 70-years war after World War II over the course of which the effective “killing output” of US troops and CIA agencies reached between 10 and 13 million victims in approximately 100 wars and “operations”. Those organising this war and profiting from it, he claimed, considered ending it to be less possible today than ever before. With the new “bogeyman” of terrorism that emerged in 2001, the United States had “chosen” a new enemy so that the continuation of this war was ensured. Europe, on the other hand, was revelling in its peacefulness, protected by the violent United States. The factor violence had largely been erased from the Western European world view. Sloterdijk concluded that whatever the nature of the transatlantic relationship, it was “ultimately always about the fundamental differences in temperament and values between a military culture – unresigned, operational day-by-day, attacking on an hourly basis – and a coalition of pacifist leisure populations that had assembled in a club named EU in order to optimise their consumer demands”.

Sloterdijk’s verbal rampage could easily be dismissed as a perfect example of how little philosophers understand of the world they are pretending to explain. Europe of all places, the continent that fought wars for centuries and whose colonial policy is at the root of many of the current problems in Africa and in the Middle East, is turned by Sloterdijk into a bunch of phoney pacifists who are using the United States as their hired gun so as to keep their hands clean. And Germany of all countries, the nation responsible for the two largest wars of the 20th century as well as the holocaust, can apparently finally feel less guilty in the face of American transgressions. If it were not for the narcissistic language, you could mistake this for a rant by a local pub philosopher in provincial Germany.²

It is, however, worthwhile to take a closer look at Sloterdijk’s central argument. For, in the final analysis, his criticism of the “dependency of the peaceful on the militant” (“Abhängigkeit des Friedfertigen vom Schlagfertigen”) is only the exaggeration of a view taken by many Europeans at least since the George W. Bush

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, “Die USA führen einen hundertjährigen Krieg – und Europa schaut zu”, NZZ Online, 5 October 2015

² In his anti-American tirade, in which he even tries to blame the United States for the Volkswagen emissions scandal, Sloterdijk also uses a language with clearly right-wing, nationalist undertones. Playing down World War II, criticising the EU for being “submissive”, and quoting the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt – these are definitely classic tactics used by German nationalist conspiracy theorists.

Administration: a view that ultimately culminates in the assessment that America and Europe are not compatible anymore – neither in terms of ideology nor regarding culture or politics. Even Barack Obama, on whom many Europeans had pinned their hopes of a more conciliatory foreign and security policy, was not able to refute this impression: his drone war, the still unfulfilled promise to close Guantanamo, the NSA spying scandal and the de facto failure of his much-trumpeted nuclear disarmament agenda have even led some observers to demand that Obama should give back the Nobel Peace Prize he received as if as a credit of trust in 2009. Will America and Europe thus choose different paths in the future? A “culture of law” juxtaposed by a “culture of power”? Or, as an astute British diplomat put it, Grotius versus Hobbes? Is a cultural divide with America thus unavoidable, even in the area of security policy?

As so often, this criticism tells us more about the critics than about America’s policies. European hopes that a Nobel Prize would help speed up global nuclear disarmament or that the Obama Administration would stop military interventions demonstrate first and foremost a considerable degree of political naivety. Most importantly, however, they show that the kind of America that some people would like to see is not the kind of America that the world needs. In an international security environment in which Russian militarism is re-emerging, countless states in the Middle East and North Africa are facing violence and disintegration, and a new arms race has begun in Asia, the United States remains an irreplaceable guardian of order. And it is precisely the American “exceptionalism” – which Sloterdijk reduces to a primitive killing reflex – that allows the United States to sustain this function of a global guardian. Whoever wants to shape transatlantic security policy must thus first and foremost understand America’s self-perception. Only then will Europeans be safe from disappointment – and not give in to the temptation of accusing America of being incapable of cooperation.³

Specific differences between US and European foreign and security policy

Geography remains the key to understanding American foreign and security policy. On account of its isolated position, the United States has been able for a long time to cultivate its self-image of a “city upon a hill”, turned away from European *realpolitik*. In contrast to Europe, where security has always been a relative concept, the United States has never required large standing armies nor complicated foreign policy to ensure its physical security. In the age of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the United States is no longer invulnerable, yet its long-standing geographical remoteness still echoes. To this day, American elites are having a hard time conveying complex foreign policy matters to a largely uninterested Congress and an even less interested public. They therefore tend to resort to moralising their own goals and demonising opponents (“rogue states”, “axis of evil”).

This approach, which causes discomfort among Europeans and leads them to criticise Americans for embracing a simplistic world view, is, however, quite deliberate. Even if foreign policy is subject to controversial debate, a robust national defence backed by a high defence budget is sure to be appreciated by the public. It should therefore not be surprising that foreign policy matters are being labelled security issues in order to achieve political consensus.

Not only does this type of foreign and security policy reflect the self-image of a superpower, it is also based on a fundamentally positive self-perception. Of course the United States has had its share of historical trauma. Not even the Vietnam War, however, seriously affected American exceptionalism. The myths of American history still promote a sense of identity. The European self-image, in contrast, is completely different. A latent fear of Europe’s self-destructive past leads many Europeans to perceive even historic accomplishments such as the monetary union as a conscious act of self-regulation to prevent a relapse into old patterns of behaviour. In other words, the United States is proud of its history whereas Europe’s atti-

³ See Michael Rühle, “Amerika und Europa: Von der Notwendigkeit, einander gelegentlich zu enttäuschen”, *Die Politische Meinung*, No. 394 (September 2002); idem, “Die Luftbrücke trägt nicht mehr. Wegweiser zu einem neuen Atlantizismus in der Sicherheitspolitik”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 September 2004; idem, “Mehr Einsatz, bitte”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 28 September 2015.

tude towards its own history is ambivalent at best. These differences have a serious impact, particularly on the levels of European and American self-confidence with regard to foreign and security policy.

For the United States, security policy traditionally equals global policy. For Europe, by contrast, leaving aside some post-colonial entanglements, security policy remains focused on the European continent. Even military missions far away from Europe, such as in Afghanistan, have hardly changed this. Different assessments of global developments are therefore inevitable. This becomes particularly apparent with regard to Asia. The United States is both an Atlantic and a Pacific power, with numerous allies in both regions. Consequently, China is both an economic partner and a potential military rival. For Europe, in contrast, which does not have any security policy interests in Asia, China is merely a promising market. It is thus not surprising that American warnings of a Chinese quest for supremacy are incomprehensible to many Europeans.

What is more, unlike Europe which frequently – and prematurely – boasts of being a modern, post-national project, the United States remains a traditional nation-state with a distinct national identity. And while many European societies perceive themselves as “post-heroic”, despite the growing number of European military operations, the United States basically continues to be a “heroic” community willing to employ military force and make sacrifices to achieve higher moral goals. Finally, the United States is also strongly determined to fulfil its role as an organiser of the global system, which sets it apart from other major national states such as China, India or Russia. In contrast to other powerful nations – that are primarily interested in defending their own security and economic interests, that do not feature extensive debates on values, morals and foreign policy, and whose ambitions for organising the global system are mostly concentrated on rejecting American and Western values – the United States feels it has a global responsibility to ensure security as a “public good”. National myths, *realpolitik* interests and global expectations of American leadership create a unique symbiosis.

Differences between the United States and Europe also become apparent in the way specific military issues are dealt with. In the United States there is an extremely frank – and occasionally undiplomatic – debate about future conflict scenarios and about which kind of forces are required to promote certain national interests. Europe is not yet ready for such a debate. It focuses more on procedural questions regarding the development of European military capabilities and of associated political and military institutions. This approach is all the more compelling since the United States’ constant request for considerably higher European defence budgets is unlikely to be met. Unlike in the United States, where mistrust in the authorities has long cultural roots and Washington’s responsibilities are therefore largely limited to foreign and security policy, the governments of Europe’s welfare states are expected to deliver across a wide spectrum of issues that concern their citizens’ lives. Hence, the competition for funds between defence and social budgets is much stronger in Europe than in the United States, with defence usually losing that battle.

The United States will remain the strongest military power for the foreseeable future. Moreover, given its system of alliances with like-minded states, it has also achieved a level of military cooperation and political trust that no other nation or group of nations will achieve during the next decades. These days, we can again see that “Pax Americana” continues to be an indispensable factor of stability not only in Asia. The military reassurance requested by Central-Eastern European NATO states made nervous by Russia’s undeclared war against Ukraine is, first and foremost, a call for an increased military presence of the United States. In the Middle East, the situation is similar. Faced with major problems in Iraq, the Obama administration initially tried to reduce its commitments in this country, but has never really succeeded. The same applies for Afghanistan. Moreover, Russia’s intervention in the conflict in Syria shows what happens if the United States does not want to assume its constabulary role to the full: a power vacuum emerges that others attempt to fill. In the end, however, this case will demonstrate once more that the United States is the sole external guardian that is commonly accepted in this region. Ultimately, no other major power is trusted by others to lead the way – in line with the enlightened self-interests of those who are being led.

Implications for the transatlantic relationship

It becomes apparent from all these differences why transatlantic security policy will continue to be the management of asymmetry. The United States' self-perception as a global leader, their willingness to spend large amounts on defence and – despite occasional periods of self-doubt – their great optimism with regard to the future suggest an exceptional dynamic that only the United States can create. The idea that a European Union with 28 nation-states would be able to get on an equal footing with the United States by establishing a “European Army” or similar projects is one of those European illusions that can only end in disappointment. An equal partnership between the United States and Europe, which has already started to develop in the field of economic relations, will not be achieved in the field of security policy in the foreseeable future.

It would, however, be completely wrong to conclude from this that European and American security policies are no longer compatible. This assumption is not only contradicted by seven decades of successful security policy cooperation within NATO, but also by the fact that Europe remains the United States' preferred strategic partner. Notwithstanding announcements of an “Asian pivot”, Europe is the only continent where the United States can find a political environment that is geared – almost without any reservations – towards cooperation with it, whereas in other parts of the world, Washington is dealing with bilateral relations that are difficult and unpredictable. The combination of liberal democracy and market economy also suggests that these two continents will remain closer to each other than others.

Conclusion: The transatlantic divorce that Sloterdijk openly advocates (and that others may quietly hope for) will not happen. Because irrespective of whether Europe stops dithering over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), Europe and the United States will remain interconnected far more closely than all other continents. Still, transatlantic cooperation will only be immune to disappointment, especially in the field of security policy, if one remains aware of the differences between the United States and Europe. At any rate, ritualistic references to CARE Packages, the Berlin Airlift or German-American cooperation during German reunification are no foundation for security cooperation in the 21st century.

A genuinely “enlightened Atlanticism” in security policy neither needs to wallow in Cold War nostalgia, nor should it stubbornly demand an alternative to the American model of security policy. Enlightened Atlanticism in fact means taking a sober and unemotional view of the realities that will characterise future transatlantic cooperation. Specifically, this means that the military capability to cooperate with America must remain a priority for Europe, even if the mighty cousin across the Atlantic is likely to baffle his European relatives every now and then.

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