

## Tales of the Transatlantic

By Anders Stephanson

Countless conferences and op-ed pieces have been devoted over the years to the 'Atlantic relationship' and its ups and downs, providing ample room for pundits and policy experts to declare what was to be done to secure this supposedly crucial aspect of international politics. It has been a very dependable worry.

Merely to dismiss the topic, however, would be too cynical and substantially wrong. Important problems were involved, even when the 'relationship' seemed mainly to be nourishment for organic intellectuals of the Atlantic establishment. What, for instance, was it precisely that was actually being 'related' and for what purposes? What interests, in particular, came to stand for 'America' and 'Europe' (the more diffuse of the two entities)? Moreover, as the contradictions over the U.S. thrust into Iraqi revealed, geopolitical shifts of the greatest significance are now taking place.

The loquacious and undiplomatic Mr Donald Rumsfeld was thus right in sensing some kind of basic change in what, from the standpoint of the United States, constitutes 'Europe' and therefore, too, what the relationship might be about. He was also right, in pointing, if only inadvertently, to the fact that at the very moment when this name is being claimed exclusively by the confederation known as the European Union, Europe is at its most contradictory. The rattled response to Rumsfeld's typically tactless remarks indicated just how great is the difference between the claims that are routinely made in the name of 'Europe' and the underlying realities of that ideological sign. It is quite another matter that none of this has much to do with any 'old' and 'new' Europe. 'New' for Rumsfeld seemed chiefly to mean such regimes as happened to support the Iraqi policy of his own Republican Administration.

It is well to remember in these circumstances just how pleased, on the whole, had been the 'Europe' assembled inside the quarrelsome borders of the EU with the grand policy of the Clinton years. To call it a grand policy may surprise, given that Clinton often appeared haphazard and aimless in foreign affairs. Yet this was largely on the surface. Clinton's basic policy, largely a continuation of the policy of Bush the Elder as it emerged after the nearly instantaneous collapse of his New World Order, was in fact quite coherent: more and better trade liberalization along the lines of NAFTA, the centerpiece being the US economy and an overvalued dollar. The umbrella under which all of this was being peddled was, it will be recalled, 'globalization' and 'interdependence.' A vital but less visible aspect here was the proliferation of the principle of law in private and public affairs alike, what one might refer to as the process of juridification.

'The Europeans' liked this because it generated growth courtesy of the imbalanced US economy along with, Bosnia notwithstanding, international order and predictability in the capitalist heartland. Thus the US posture involved a good deal of consent rather than coercion. It was a classic case of hegemonic rule. Talk of the 'indispensable nation' notwithstanding, there was no attempt at messianic redemption of

the world, no insistence on any absolute difference between the United States and the rest of the world. The United States was in the world, "leading" the world chiefly by market liberalization.

September 11 shot this pleasant arrangement to pieces, though it had already been undermined by the sharp economic contraction in 2000. But the terrorist attack opened up for an astonishingly radical change in the grand policy of the United States, allowing a group of highly articulate rightwing strategists, who had been profoundly alienated from the 'economistic' policies of the 1990s, to lay out a vision in which, to put it crudely, US hegemony was to be replaced by US supremacism.

The Bush project (as one might think of it) looked to the historical eye at first as a global version of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, that is, the extension of a sort of protectorate over the entire world. In 1904, Teddy Roosevelt proclaimed what amounted to a U.S. protectorate over the Caribbean. "Chronic wrongdoing" by Caribbean states would be punished in suitable ways by the United States (as embodied by the Commander-in-Chief in the White House). Much discipline and punishment did indeed follow. In return for order and obedience, the Caribbean states would enjoy protection from domestic disorder (here the system failed) and from external, chiefly European, interference.

As the Iraqi operation revealed, however, obedience and protection was not at all what the Bush Administration was up to. There was no desire to cover the world with protection in return for obedience. On the contrary, there was a will to command and recast such parts of the world as the White House saw fit. Obedience was not the issue. Far from protection for everyone, then, the order of the day entailed "regime changes," all depending on the decisional vagaries of the White House.

What permitted this open-ended license at the outset was the 'war on terrorism,' which was never itself a war but served to legitimate any number of wars, any kind of action across state borders that the President might wish to take. If terrorism is not everywhere, it is enough that it is potentially everywhere. The White House, then, declared that the United States would act accordingly, go wherever the threat might lead and do whatever it took to wipe it out. And so on. This will to command was in fact the Roman imperium writ large, command in the sense of military supremacy. It was ordering about rather than order.

To a good number of Europeans (including ordinary Spaniards and Italians), this appeared to be a scenario for instability and lawlessness: a crushing war machine at the imperious disposal of the Commander-in-Chief, an Iraqi operation that was essentially manufactured with little initial clamouring amongst the American public, a White House never chiefly interested in disarming Iraq or ridding it of weapons of mass destruction but in "changing" the regime and supposedly the rest of the Middle East along with it. Against this and in the name of international law, critical Europeans consequently opposed attacking Iraq without UN sanction.

Much to the chagrin (one assumes) of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, that view now looks pretty good. The extraordinarily rosy vision of Iraqis hailing Anglo-Saxon liberators and inspiring Syrians, Iranians and others to throw out their anti-western rulers has been replaced by a rather more sober one of extended occupation amidst sullen and sometimes lethal hostility. The monumental military supremacy enjoyed by the United States is not easily translated, some have realized, into the kind of massive occupation one would need for proper pacification. At the same time, the legal justification for the invasion has been shown embarrassingly flimsy. The architects of US supremacy are still clinging to their longterm aims, the ultimate prize of which is the unalterable subordination of the Chinese regime, explicitly singled out as the one potentially serious threat on the strategic horizon. However, even if the US and its British subalterns manage to fob off responsibility for maintaining 'peace' in Iraq to the UN, the fact remains that the grand Bush project is currently stalled. Covert support for oppositional elements in Iran is surely taking place but one cannot imagine any too risky moves in the domain of regime change for quite some time. Whither then the 'European' or 'Atlantic' relationship'?

The old system was of course preconditioned on the existence of the Soviet Union and the concomitant division of Europe. Real and imagined, the Soviet threat provided unlimited justification for US interventionism, a system in which the frozen status quo in Europe and the menace it embodied enabled the United States to act anywhere else. NATO, the central western feature of the European deadlock, expressed the desire among dominant interests on both sides of the Atlantic to keep the United States militarily and politically in western Europe, though, interestingly, the 'North Atlantic' here came ideologically and strategically to reach the Turkish-Iranian border. Serious problems and even crises certainly occurred within the 'western' camp (Suez, Gaullism and Ostpolitik to mention three obvious episodes); but the polarity between Moscow and Washington overdetermined European geopolitics and set its limits. No military conflict across the borderline between NATO and the Warsaw Pact ever happened but the always present threat of one was the pivot of world politics.

The subsequent implosion of the Soviet Union thus meant the implosion of the logic of NATO too. No serious strategist in the United States believes that Washington would unleash suicidal war for the sake of, say, Lithuania. NATO is now an apparatus without a clear and proper mission. At the same time, as Rumsfeld intimated, the whole concept of 'Europe' is also up for grabs. Marking its boundaries has always been an ideological move infused with a strong dose of civilizational thinking. Making civilizational sense of Europe was partly the effect of the discovery that it was in fact a fake continent, that it lacked oceanic demarcation: thus the possibility and need explore other ways of deciding its location. Russia, often in fact the defining factor involved, was deemed to be outside Europe until 1721; then, albeit uncertainly and not in its entirety, inside until 1917, when the advent of Bolshevism supposedly removed it; then inside again after 1990. The cold war had indeed resurrected an old orientalist distinction between East and West Europe, semantically expressed even now in the distinction in Latin languages between Oriental and Occidental Europe.

Residual conflicts along such lines, however, are now preoccupations of Europeans themselves, conflicts centered around the question who is to be a member of that erstwhile coal and steel union, the European Union, and thus putatively come to qualify as a true or at least normal European. For the dominant US strategists, by contrast, if not for the trade negotiators, 'Europe' has become an abstraction, a variegated map of sometimes useful, sometimes irksome subalterns, a series of virtual constellations as it were, including NATO. In the larger scheme of things, 'Europe' is simply not where the geopolitical action is. Though extremely irritating at times, it is no longer a worry. Short of Blair-like abnegation and eloquent support for Washington, the best Europe from the new perspective is again a divided one, divided not in two but multiple, contradictory and overlapping parts.

The one moment of real anxiety on that score during the Iraqi controversies was probably the sudden mirage of a Dreikeiserbund between Paris, Berlin and Moscow. Such a formation of power which would give even the most ardent supremacist reason to pause. Yet it was immediately apparent that the move was chiefly a gesture, involving as it did the central historical question mark of and for 'Europe,' namely, Russia. Moscow's policy, prudent and cautious in a moment of protracted weakness, has successfully preserved maximum room for manoeuvre. The 'Europeans,' meanwhile, have yet to resolve the civilizational question of how much of Oriental Europe is to be included in the Real Europe and whether Islamic Turkey belongs at all. The European Union, the pretensions of its bureaucrats notwithstanding, is not a geopolitical entity proper. Its present head is Silvio Berlusconi.

The actual ground for the coalescence of three was in any case not the idea of a traditional geopolitical counterformation but the realization, quite rightly, that amidst juridification and the sanctification of law on the one hand and US military supremacy on the other, the only way to put a damper on Washington's aspirations to command is to insist on proceduralism, as encapsulated, above all, in the United Nations. This is an explicitly universalist position. Though it has a European lineage, it is in principle neither 'Atlantic' nor 'European.' And so, amidst the belated dissolution of the postwar order in Europe, it also signals the end of the 'Atlantic relationship' as we know it.