Strategic Insight

Confronting Euro-Atlantic Security Challenges

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On 1-4 June 2003, the Mountbatten Centre of the University of South Hampton sponsored a gathering of academics and government officials from Europe, North America, and Asia for a broad-ranging discussion of the interaction between emerging missile and space technologies and today's security concerns.[1] Undertaken against the backdrop of crisis and controversy in the Euro-Atlantic community over the liberation of Iraq, Wiston House, nestled in the quiet of the Sussex countryside, offered a setting for some calm reflection on the state of relations among members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although these side conversations over dinner or during walks in the English countryside were not part of the official program, they did offer the opportunity for some honest exchanges about what amounted to a pretty dismal spring for the Euro-Atlantic community. Some participants voiced a series of observations about current policies and perceptions that were at odds with much of the media commentary that animates political debate on both sides of the Atlantic. Several themes emerged during these casual conversations.

First, there was a consensus that in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the global security environment had changed significantly, but that no common framework has yet emerged to describe the nature of the threat. There is no common approach to today's security challenges. Several participants believed that the current transatlantic dialogue is insufficient to meet the demand for strategic cooperation in the fields of terrorism, nonproliferation and counterproliferation. There was agreement that much-needed security concepts were either ill defined or nonexistent, that military strategies need to be devised, and that an overarching political concept (e.g., the role served by the policy of containment during the Cold War) needs to be created.

Instead of a dialogue to create and explore new concepts and strategies, it seemed to several participants that security issues are becoming increasingly politicized on both sides of the Atlantic as politicians stake out positions that are popular domestically, but do little to advance a common and effective approach to contemporary threats. This situation stands in stark contrast to the state of affairs during much of the 1990s, a time when international security policy had little traction in electoral politics, especially in the United States. European participants were quick to draw attention to the link between U.S. foreign policy and electoral politics, but also were willing to acknowledge that many European leaders often appeared more interested in wooing voters at home than in hammering out a consensus about today's threats and a common response to emerging problems. Several also stated their dismay about protestors against the war who, whether they admitted it or not, ended up offering de facto support to a savage kleptocracy in Iraq.

Second, there is a divergence in European and American views not about today's security challenges (terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction), but about the severity and proximity of the threat and about what constitutes an appropriate military and diplomatic

response. Europeans are now enjoying a rare moment in their common history: the continent is at peace, cooperation has replaced conflict in their relations, and the threat of war has virtually disappeared from their strategic horizon. After nearly a century of world and cold war, fascism, vicious balance of power politics, arms racing and genocide, Europeans now see diplomacy, cooperation, and multilateralism as the only way forward on the continent. War, once viewed as a necessary evil, is now seen as a uncivilized throwback to far more dangerous times, a period which is still very much within living memory. Europeans desperately want to believe that they have banished war forever from their home, and they do not want to adopt policies that might somehow allow it to reenter through the back door. Many American observers see this European attitude as naïve, if not downright irresponsible (after all, it was a European who told us that "you might not have an interest in war, but war has an interest in you"), but they fail to realize that it is based in a sense of relief about trends on the continent, not in the emotions evoked by a skyline that will never be the same.

By contrast, Europeans are disorientated by the sense of alarm Americans exhibit in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks. Although they acknowledge the tragedy that has befallen all of us, they tend to place the al-Qaeda attacks in a broader context. The way they express this context ("we have terrorism here too"), however, is considered by most Americans to be an inexplicable reaction to 11 September, given the severity of the loss of life and treasure suffered by the United States. Europeans wonder what has gotten into the Americans, who always appeared to have nerves of steel when facing the prospect of Armageddon during the Cold War.[2] Europeans take terrorism very seriously; they speak about it in almost hushed tones. But they are resigned to the fact that terrorism is a long-term problem that will take decades of concerted effort to wipe out. Although they do not say so directly, they seem to think that the United States cannot sustain the level of emotional and political effort currently expended in the war against terrorism in the long battle that lies ahead. This probably is the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis that Europeans have noticed that Americans are more concerned about their own security than their European allies are concerned about the threats they face. Europeans see this as somewhat ironic, but they do not seem to know what to do in response to the current divergence in threat perceptions, especially because they acknowledge that Europe and the United States both face *the same* terrorist threat.

Third, when Europeans are critical of American policy, they focus on the failure of the Bush administration to tackle difficult common issues. In their view, these issues are at the heart of the war on terrorism, but receive little attention because they are not politically noteworthy. They wonder how well the integration of police, public health and domestic surveillance activities across the Euro-Atlantic community is proceeding. They note the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and Northern Command, but wonder how their governments plan to reorganize to face the terrorist challenge. Europeans, along with some Americans, also wonder if the Bush administration, in its rush to deploy missile defenses, is developing too many systems at once. They would prefer to see efforts concentrated on a few systems to speed the deployment of credible defenses. They also are interested in playing a greater role in the development and construction of missile defenses to prepare for the possible deployment of defense systems in Europe.

Impact on Policy

This perceptual divergence leads Europeans and Americans to champion different solutions to the problems at hand. Europeans believe, like Americans, that al-Qaeda must be destroyed. But they also suggest that an approach based on negotiation, consensus and a strict adherence to international law is the best long-term solution to the problems that go by the names of Iran, North Korea, and, until recently, Iraq. They wonder why the Bush administration did not state its reasons for war more in terms of international law, which was clearly on its side, and less on the presence of a clandestine Iraqi program to manufacture and stockpile weapons of mass destruction. They are especially concerned about what they conceive to be a lack of constructive

policies and resources when it comes to nation building and they wonder when European governments will start to play a greater role in the reconstruction of Iraq. They fear that operations like Enduring Freedom simply kick over anthills that would in the end succumb to natural causes. The most honest of them acknowledge that Europe is a lot closer to the Middle East than the United States and that there is going to be hell to pay for stirring things up.

American policy is based on the perception that immediate action is needed to change a Middle East status quo that is generating little else than poverty, misery, extremism, violence, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the potential for additional mass causality terrorist attacks. Bush administration officials believe that matters have reached a point where the possibility for negotiation has been exhausted and military action is necessary to head off disaster. The status quo is so unacceptable to the administration that they are determined to give the Middle East a good shock to send it off on hopefully a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic trajectory.

Conclusion

The divergence of threat perceptions and policy preferences across the Euro-Atlantic community is not over ultimate goals or a fundamental disagreement over the security challenges faced today. Instead, it is about the urgency of the problems at hand. What has not been recognized, however, is that the American and European approaches to security are complementary. Prompt action is necessary to defeat al-Qaeda, to stop human rights abuses, and to stop weapons of mass destruction from falling into the wrong hands. Over the long term, however, only a policy of engagement, dialogue and measures to create economic and human security can integrate troubled societies into the growing community of democratic and free market states.

Those who gratuitously fan the flames of Euro-Atlantic discord also would do well to remember an important point. If democracies fail to develop a common and effective security policy now, or permanently damage their relationships in the battle against terrorism, then bin Laden and all those who embrace terrorism as political and revolutionary instruments win.

> *For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our Strategic Insights section.*
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> *For related links, see our Homeland Security Resources and Europe Resources*

References

1. "Space Security, Missile Proliferation, and Missile Defenses: Managing New Challenges," Wiston House, Sussex, United Kingdom 1-4 June 2003. The conference was sponsored by the Mountbatten Centre for International Studies, the Center of Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, the Simons Centre for Peace and Disarmament Studies, and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research.

2. I suggested that Americans probably had hoped that World War III might be more or less confined to Europe, leading to a somewhat less alarmed response to what would have indeed been an alarming set of circumstances.