Redefining the Transatlantic Partnership

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The second half of the twentieth century was dominated by a competition between two forms of the modern state as well as between two ideologies: it was won by liberal-capitalist parliamentary democracies, acting together through the NATO alliance against the Communist Soviet bloc.

Ironically, the underlying logic of openness, pluralism and individual freedom, which helped win the Cold War by making command economies unsustainable, has now created a crisis of legitimacy for the forms of strategy needed to make peaceful, twenty-first-century societies safe.

Meanwhile, globalization has created new forms of interdependence and vulnerability so that even the most powerful nations cannot escape economic recessions, environmental damage or networked violence originating elsewhere. We are locked together in a century when the globe’s own sustainability as a human habitat will be fully tested.

International legitimacy is a defining problem for the twenty-first century. Europe can make common cause with the US, and achieve positive strategic influence, by embodying and projecting new forms of democratic legitimacy rather than preaching about them.

Why have Europe and America diverged?

One reason for the insecurity is that the US is applying the rational, self-interested logic of a single modern nation onto an unstable world. Because a balance of power is not possible, the doctrine has become one of aggressive pre-emption. This will not change until Americans can see respect for others’ perspectives and rights, even beyond US borders, as part of what it means to be American. In turn, this will not
happen while the US sees itself as shouldering the burden of policing the world.

The fuzzy threat of rogue states and terrorism is being used to reinforce domestic American identity; the Republicans currently have little else in the way of a domestic agenda that could unite a critical majority.

American sovereignty is manifested by proclamations that American interests must not be encumbered by the claims of others: ‘We really don’t need anyone’s permission’. Therefore, simply appealing to them to respect international rules will achieve little; it actually provides an opportunity for the US to show that it is different.

And some aspects of the threat are real and serious; the influence of domestic politics does not discount the need for a strategic response to weapons of mass destruction, failed states, or new forms of terror.

Is there an alternative? Should Europeans cluster under the wing of this strategy?

Ironically, America’s Cold War strategy of ‘extended deterrence’ and containment created the conditions under which Western Europe could develop a unique innovation in governance – the EU – which goes beyond the security provided by the nation-state, however dominant. This now represents an irreversible form of positive interdependence between nations. European powers have made themselves safe from each other by allowing far higher levels of transparency and mutual domestic interference than classical military strategy would ever allow.

Many European citizens, cushioned by the modern welfare state and rising living standards, have developed new priorities, such as their quality of life, diverse ethical commitments, and social pluralism, as long as their basic security and living standards are maintained. This makes them increasingly sensitive to issues of international legitimacy.

But this historical achievement rests on two compromises: an EU of ‘hybrid’ status whose legitimacy rests on the sovereignty and democratic mandate of member states; and dependence via NATO on American military force to counter any direct threat. The result is that on issues of international strategy, collective action is incredibly difficult. Both need reshaping.

Enlargement should provide a new sense of regional identity and make all Europeans more conscious of their place in a wider world. The question is whether that place can be developed into a role which projects positive influence in legitimate ways. Unless Europe makes a concerted effort to do this, it has little chance of influencing US worldview or behaviour.