

US Disinvestment from European Security since the Cold War

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GIOVANNI PINELLI, APR 1 2012

Arguably, the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of a new security era in international politics. In the aftermath of the war, in fact, the world found itself confronting a new security environment characterised by the rise of new threats alongside military ones, as well as by the emergence of non-state actors charged with the responsibility of dealing with them. This process of transformation produced very complex and ambiguous effects on the EU-US security relationship, which will be subject of analysis herein. What is more, it will be shown that 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq played a major role in reshaping the transatlantic relationship, by bringing to the surface not only the normative and strategic differences between the USA and the EU, but also the lack of a common strategic culture in Europe. In spite of this consideration, and despite the evidence suggesting that the US has become less committed to security in Europe, it will be concluded that the 'Old Continent' still remains strategically important within American security and defence policy as part of a wider plan by Washington to pursue more robust unilateralism.

The fifty-year period following the end of World War II saw the international system divided into two spheres of ideological, political, economic and military influence. The United States of America and the (former) Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, once allied in the war against Fascism and Nazism, were now respectively leading the Western and the Eastern 'blochs': a bipolar world was starting to take shape and Europe soon became the main geopolitical focus of this confrontation. The end of this confrontation, which George Orwell (1945) came to define as the "Cold War", represented a momentous change in security relations and, arguably, in the nature of the EU-US security relationship. As to its impact on the pre-war security system, the Cold War could be said to have heralded a security era characterized by a high degree of complexity, as regards both the nature of the security threats and the emergence of new actors responsible for dealing with them. As the 2004 *A More Secure World* report of the High-level Panel (UN 2004: 1) highlights, in fact, inter-state conflicts no longer constitute the threat *par excellence* to the world peace: major cross-boundary issues such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation, transnational organized crime, terrorism and WMD have arisen as the real challenges that today's world faces. The complexity of these issues has, among other things, meant a profound change in the traditional pre-Cold War collective security system to include new security actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), regional and transnational organizations, and private security companies. These developments, as Krahnemann (2005: 3) observes, suggest that a "shift from 'government' to 'governance' in security" has occurred since the end of the Cold War.

This shift to the idea of 'security governance' in international relations has had a considerable impact on the nature of the EU-US security relationship. During the Cold War, Europe was the main geopolitical focus of the confrontation between the USA and the USSR. Western Europe, allied with the USA, found itself to be highly dependent not only on American financial aids but also on its security guarantees. From an economic perspective, the Marshall Plan is generally hailed as the biggest manifestation of this financial dependency: with some US \$ 13 billion, in the form of loans and grants, transferred to Western European countries between 1948 and 1951 (Eichengreen & Uzan 1992: 1) in order to help them rebuild their economies after the end of WWII, it is not difficult to understand why. From a security perspective, under the 1949 *Mutual Defense Assistance Programme*, Washington agreed to grant military aid to Western European countries mainly in the form of military equipment and training-technical assistance (Connery & David 1951: 328). In 1951, the mentioned programme became part of the *Mutual Security Programme*, making the total request for military assistance to Europe rocket to US \$ 11.5 billion in less than two years (Douglas

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2008: 19). These developments show that during the Cold War the Euro-American security relationship was one of European security dependency as Western European states had no other choice but to rely on the US nuclear umbrella and on a US-dominated NATO.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 marked the end of the war and the beginning of a new era, one in which the EU-US security relationship had to be redesigned for at least two inter-twined reasons. On the one hand, the process of stabilizing the 'Old Continent' could be deemed as accomplished; Europe was now a safe continent, and this condition made it possible for the newly-born European Union to slowly assert itself as an economic superpower (Thurow 2000: 52) and develop new security ambitions. On the other hand, the rise of new economic powers, the changing security threat landscape and the multiplication of regional 'hotspots' has had a significant impact on Washington's foreign and security policy, whose main geo-strategic focus has – over the time – shifted away from Europe towards the Middle East and the Pacific (Cantalapiedra 2009: 121). In other words,

[...] the security of Europe seems to have turned into an accessory element in the transatlantic security agenda. (Alcaro & Jones 2011: 11)

As Marsh and Rees (2012: 66) suggest, the analysis of the redistribution of both military and diplomatic resources seems to confirm so. From a military perspective, Europe – once battleground of the ideological war between the USA and the USSR – in 2010 only hosted nearly 80,000 US troops, according to the data provided by the US Department of Defense (2010: 1). Diplomatic resources have also been object of reallocation since the end of the conflict. Noteworthy in this regard is the *Transformational Diplomacy* plan started in 2006 by former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, which resulted in the shift of hundreds of Foreign Service positions from Europe and America to the Middle East (Kessler & Graham 2006).

Notwithstanding the evidence suggesting that the USA has become less committed to European security *per se* and is now increasingly looking eastwards, "American Orientalism" (Douglas 2003) should not lead one to infer that Europe has become unimportant to Washington. Instead, as Marsh and Rees (2012: 66-72) point out, the 'Old Continent' remains strategically significant within American foreign and security policy as the main ally in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), as a source of military and normative capabilities, and as a crucial partner in American plan to reform international institutions.

The September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks constitute a momentous change in international relations, one which produced ambiguous effects on the EU-US security relationship. On the one hand, 9/11 fostered closer counter-terrorism and law enforcement cooperation between Brussels and Washington. Negotiated in the aftermath of the attacks and signed in 2003, for instance, were the bilateral agreements on *Mutual Legal Assistance* and *Extradition*, which aim to improve cooperation in criminal matters and data-sharing. In 2001 and 2002, two strategic cooperation agreements were signed between Europol and the USA, allowing for further sharing of intelligence and personal data. Also, as Archick (2011: 4) underlines, EU and US security agencies have established "reciprocal liaison relationships", with the goal of facilitating both investigation and prosecution tasks. On the other hand, 9/11 – but especially the 2003 invasion of Iraq – produced deep ruptures between Europe and America in the security field, which could help to explain why Washington "has embraced a new policy of 'disaggregation' of the EU" (Peterson 2004: 614). First, the Iraqi War revealed the absence of a common security and strategic position among EU countries *vis-à-vis* the pre-emptive military action against Iraq and the role of the US in the conflict. In the build-up to military action, for instance, whilst France and Germany called for a greater involvement of multilateral institutions, Tony Blair remained firmly in favour of a unipolar, US-led solution (Menon 2004: 638). If these internal divisions made Brussels lose credibility *vis-à-vis* Washington, the fact that the EU is over-represented in many international organisations has not surely helped it to foster a better security dialogue with the US. The creation of a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, has not succeeded in solving an issue which is primarily rooted in the difficulty of finding a compromise between EU member states and their differing security cultures (Calderoni & Oroschakoff 2011: 177).

September 11th and the Iraqi War also revealed the difference in the security languages adopted by Washington and Brussels. The compared analysis of the *National Security Strategy* (NSS; White House, 2002) and the *European*

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Security Strategy (ESS; European Council, 2003) shows that whilst Washington tends towards an adversarial security language – prioritizing terrorism, ‘rogue states’ and WMD as the main security threats –, Brussels prefers to adopt a more consensual security language which, because of the political divide between EU countries, does not give a clear prioritization of the threats. Interestingly, the study of the NSS and the ESS reveals another point of friction in the transatlantic relationship, as regards the means to tackle the aforementioned security challenges. Whilst Washington’s emphasis has – especially since the Bush administration – been on the use of force and military power, Brussels has made of the pre-eminence of soft power instruments its strong point. The effect of this strategic divide is twofold. Firstly, citing Longhurst and Zaborowski (2005: 202),

If this lack of new thinking about the role of military force as a valid instrument persists in Europe, it will hinder the emergence of effective European security strategies.

More importantly, however, it will hinder the construction of a stronger EU-US security dialogue. Despite the calls for more burden-sharing and military engagement, as reflected in the 2002 *Prague Capabilities Commitment* NATO initiative, the EU’s commitment to military expenditure remains disappointingly low in Washington’s view. In 2010, whilst Europe’s military expenditure fell by 2.8 per cent, the USA’s spending level rose to nearly \$ 700 billion, increasing by 2.8 per cent if compared to 2009 (data from: Perlo-Freeman et al. 2011).

In spite of this negative trend in military spending, EU countries feature among the world’s largest arms exporters. Research conducted by the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI 2009: 330-331), shows that in the period 2004–2008 seven of the ten biggest suppliers of conventional weapons came from the EU. Also, European countries can offer military and technological expertise which has helped The Pentagon in pursuing terrorists internally and across borders, as well as in peacekeeping operations. In addition to constituting a source of military and technological capabilities, Europe is traditionally recognized as being a truly global “normative power” (Manners 2002). As *The Economist* (20 September 2007) noted,

Brussels is becoming the world’s regulatory capital [...] usurping America’s role as a source of global standards.

The EU offers an attractive socio-political and economic model, based on the promotion of liberal-democratic values and principles, such as those embodied in art. 6(1) of the Treaty on European Union. As a result, Washington has increasingly looked to Brussels as the main source of moral standards, in the light of the consideration that these could confer legitimacy to US-led military operations, but especially to US-led GWOT. The terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid and London, in fact, could be interpreted as striking evidence for Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” paradigm (Neumayer & Plümpner 2009: 712). European promotion of typically Western values, such as democracy and human rights, has thus proved to be consistent with American main objective; the ideological and military war against radical Islamic terrorism.

Finally, EU cooperation is central to American drive to reform international institutions because EU countries are greatly represented in international fora. Examples abound: two of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council are also members of the EU, and four of the eight members of the G8 come from the EU. What is more, the Union has a significant voting power in many international institutions. In the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for instance, the EU-27 voting share was around 31 per cent in 2010, nearly double that of the USA (IMF 2012); in the World Bank (WB), three of the five countries with the largest numbers of shares were European in 2010 (WB 2010). Also, the EU is the USA’s main trading partner, as indicated by the data provided by the Directorate-General for Trade of the European Commission (2010). The pre-eminence of this commercial relationship makes the EU the main American interlocutor in the World Trade Organization (WTO), and as main players in the organization, the EU and the US could together change the norms and shape the policy directions of the body.

All these considerations help to explain why Europe remains strategically important to Washington, though in a radically different way than it did during the Cold War. During the war, Europe was the main geopolitical focus of the USA-USSR confrontation. The stabilization of the continent was hence central to the American plan to stem the spread of Communism. The end of this confrontation and the major international transformations which characterized the 21st Century redefined the centrality of the ‘Old Continent’ within US strategic priorities. Notwithstanding the

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evidence suggesting that the United States has become less committed to European security *per se* and increasingly interested in the Middle East and the Pacific, in fact, Europe remains strategically important within American foreign and security policy; it is the main American ally in the GWOT, a great source of normative power and a key economic-political partner. Conversely, the EU needs the USA and NATO to deal with modern-day security challenges within European borders. A new transatlantic bargain, combining American hard power might and EU normative power primacy, does not seem so Utopian.

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