

## MADRID SUMMIT 2022 · NATO FACES A CHANGE OF ERA



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### The future of transatlantic relations

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#### Introducción

The creation of the Atlantic Alliance in 1949 is essentially based on the maintenance of the so-called transatlantic link. That is; of the relationship between the two North American members – the United States and Canada – and the rest of the European allies.

It is interesting to note that, while the American allies have remained stable in the 73 years of the Alliance's existence, the Europeans have significantly altered its composition during this time, going from the initial ten allies to the current twenty-eight. On the other hand, it is obvious that the US, as a military power and leader of the Western world in this period of time, plays a fundamental role in defining the objectives of the Alliance, how they are to be met and adapted to the strategic context.

Therefore, the Atlantic Alliance cannot be fully understood without the political will of the US to commit itself to the defense of Europe. This has been the case throughout the more than seventy years of history of the longest-lived military alliance in human history and will remain so in the future. Accordingly, one could assert that the Atlantic Alliance would lose all meaning if the transatlantic link were to be broken.

It goes without saying that over the past few decades, the transatlantic relationship has experienced a variety of vicissitudes, overcome difficulties and crises, altered equilibrium, and brought together contrasting interests. So far, common principles and values have been sufficient for the bond to remain solidly stable, but will it remain so in the future?

### **The U.S. retreat**

The two internationalist currents that take turns in the vision that the Americans have of the world and that condition their foreign relations are well explained by Kissinger in his classic work "Diplomacy". If, since the end of World War II, the United States has not hesitated to promote and lead the containment against the Soviet Union, after the fall of the Berlin Wall it became a hegemonic power with a clear tendency to intervene in world affairs. This reached its peak during the Clinton Administration, which did not hesitate to act militarily, sometimes without its own public opinion, in places like Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia, even participating in the bombing of Serbia, without a United Nations mandate, during the Kosovo crisis. However, despite its attempts, the fact remains that the US was unable to use its unipolar moment to establish a liberal world order, leading to frustration and unease.

When George W. Bush came to the White House in 2001, after winning a disputed election against Al Gore, he did so with a distinctly isolationist program, with economic and national issues at the heart of his agenda. It appeared that the US was entering a phase of withdrawal, and that interventionist fatigue might be having an effect. However, the September 11 attacks changed the strategic scenario and the Bush Administration embarked on two difficult wars in very remote and inhospitable territories: first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. If the deployment in Afghanistan was largely forced after the shock of 9/11, the intervention in Iraq was aimed at changing the geopolitics of the Middle East. Both interventions were lengthy, costly, deserved more criticism than applause, and paid off disenchantment at a unipolar world that would quickly cease to be so without succeeding in imposing its rules.

When Obama became president in 2009, the withdrawal was already evident, as U.S. troops were returning from Iraq. Obama never referred to a withdrawal, but spoke of shifting the center of gravity of the foreign effort and pivoting to the Asia Pacific in the face of China's rise. However, he barely acted during the Arab Springs, spoke of "leading from behind" during the Libyan crisis, failed to deliver on Assad's ultimatum following the use of chemical weapons in Syria, announced the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and stalled several of America's traditional allies in various parts of the world.

Trump was always clear in his statements. Under the "America first" there was a clear intention not to go into foreign adventures of uncertain result and that did not yield a clear benefit for the U.S. He promoted a quick exit strategy in Afghanistan, negotiating with the Taliban without the Afghan government, announced massive troop departures from the European continent, closed military bases abroad and went so far as to say that NATO had become obsolete.

Last August, under Biden's presidency, we were able to witness the shameful and humiliating departure from Afghanistan, with Saigon moment included, after twenty years of Western occupation. The failed experience was an obvious political and international discredit, questioned the cohesion of the Alliance, ended the *raison d'être* of military efforts and ended attempts to reshape post-conflict societies. At the global level, it closed a strategic cycle, which began after the Cold War, of crisis management operations and nation building, which began in the Balkans and spread across Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. For the US, a cycle of foreign retrenchment that began in Iraq, continued in Libya, and then in Syria, reveals that strategic fatigue has taken hold in American society.

For the transatlantic relationship, the withdrawal from Afghanistan was the most critical moment of its long existence; even more so than Suez, France's withdrawal from NATO's military structure, the deployment of Euro-missiles or the fracture due to the intervention in Iraq, and highlighted the deep crisis in which the Alliance was plunged after its first military failure, and that President Macron had already defined a year earlier as "brain dead."

### **The Atlantic Alliance Crisis**

There have been serious disagreements in recent years between the allies that have undermined the transatlantic link. At the heart of all of them is the dispute between unilateralism frequently carried out by the US and EU-sponsored multilateralism. Added to this is the strategic retreat initiated by the US with little consultation, which motivates the emergence of new confrontations to fill the gap left by the superpower.

At the Wales summit in 2014, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates, in what was his farewell speech, was already unusually harsh on European allies as a whole, arguing that burden-sharing was unfair and that there was a chronic deficit of budgetary effort and military capabilities on the European side. The background to the reproach was that the Europeans contributed little compared to how much they protested and argued.

Another substantial aspect that hinders the cohesion of the Alliance is the different perception of threat that member countries have. If during the Cold War there was no doubt about what the Soviet threat meant, after the collapse of the USSR many uncertainties opened up that called into question the role of NATO. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the spread of jihadist terrorism, the Alliance stared sharply south, though the US was beginning to see a potential adversary in China. Following Russia's interventions in Georgia, but especially in Crimea in 2014, many countries in eastern Europe saw a Russia reborn and ready to regain its role as a regional power as a clear danger. This meant that in recent years there was no common threat. As Mediterranean countries continued to turn their efforts south and worried about instability on the African continent and in the Middle East, many countries in central and Eastern Europe felt an existential threat in Russia. At the same time, the US was primarily concerned about what was happening in Asia.

President Trump's ways, away from diplomatic language and institutional courtesy, also did not help create a good climate of transatlantic collaboration. In the end, the withdrawal from Afghanistan revealed a reality: Europeans had little influence in Washington and the Americans considered the Europeans ineffective and disunited. Common positions were increasingly difficult to agree on, as the long shadow of burden-sharing extended over the Alliance, despite the commitment to reach 2% of GDP by 2024, which many countries – including Spain – seemed unable to fulfil. All of this has led the US to question the extent to which it is worth continuing to maintain an expensive link with Europe, which Europeans seem unwilling to pay for, and do not even appreciate.

In view of all the above, we can establish that the US is in a phase of strategic retreat, with a population mostly focused on resolving domestic issues and away from the temptation to intervene militarily in international affairs that are not closely linked to its own national security and are thus perceived by its citizenry.

### **Russia's invasion of Ukraine**

The possibility of Ukraine joining the Atlantic Alliance has always been one of Moscow's reasons for justifying the invasion that began on February 24. Although some claim that NATO's summit in Bucharest (2008) precipitated by inviting Kiev to join the Alliance, in reality what lies behind the Russian aggression is the fear that Ukraine will westernize, embrace European structures and way of life, and become a reference and an example for other countries in the Russian orbit of influence, and for Russia as well. At the heart of these fears is the traditional feeling of insecurity of the Russian people in the face of freer, better organized and more competitive societies. The fact that Ukraine, traditionally the Slavic people most culturally and historically

linked to Russia, could leave the Russian cosmos to settle in the European one could cause a domino effect and put an end to a unique authoritarian system that has been in force since the end of the Soviet Union in the world's largest country.

Paradoxically, once the invasion has taken place, Russia's inability so far to subdue Ukraine and achieve its strategic objectives has produced effects contrary to those pursued. Regardless of the final outcome of military operations, Ukraine is hopelessly moving away from the Russian orbit, and traditionally neutral countries are approaching the Atlantic Alliance in the face of fear stirred by the Kremlin's approach. Likewise, the existence of a war conflict in Eastern Europe has urged many countries of the Alliance to prioritize new investments in Defense, there have been significant announcements of budget increases, the Russian threat has become apparent, and, in short, a military organization that was going through the worst moments of its history after Afghanistan's failure has been revitalized.

Perhaps the most significant change has been that experienced by Germany. Since Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik in the 70s, Germany's relations with Russia were based on détente, favoring dialogue and cooperation with Moscow. However, in his February 27 speech to the Bundestag – three days after the invasion of Ukraine – Chancellor Scholz announced, along with a dramatic increase in the national defense budget, the importance of deterrence as a fundamental strategic principle of German security.

In conclusion, Russia's intervention in Ukraine has had effects contrary to what it intended: it has increased the cohesion of the Alliance, has silenced internal disputes for the time being, will cause the adoption of the new strategic concept to be Russia the main threat facing NATO on European territory and has encouraged the accession of new members.

### **The decoupling in the transatlantic relationship**

Along with the already stated reasons that plunged the Atlantic Alliance into a serious crisis in recent years and whose peak was the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is worth noting the progressive divergences that have occurred in the two blocs - European and North American - over the last two decades in what has been called "the decoupling".

In this regard, it should be noted that these divergences occur in different areas:

- Economic divergence: if, in 2008, before the financial crisis, the GDP of the US and the EU were practically equivalent, in 2021 the US has more than 30% higher GDP than the EU. This gap continues to widen, making it difficult for economic efforts to

converge and equalize the so-called burden-sharing on both sides of the Atlantic, which will continue to produce a continuous source of friction.

- **Military divergence:** The existing trend that the US spends a larger share of its GDP on Defense than European countries continues to grow and, in addition, it does so in a much more efficient way, by carrying out centralized planning and taking advantage of economies of scale. As a result, the superiority of US military forces over European ones is increasing steadily.
- **Technological divergence:** The US is dangerously detached from EU countries in the developments of disruptive technologies. If this divergence continues to increase, it could affect military interoperability, hindering the joint use of units from different countries and weakening the necessary cohesion of the Alliance.
- **Demographic divergence:** While the U.S. is growing at a steady rate from 310 million to 332 million in the last 10 years, Europeans have increased only from 440 to 446 million in the same period. This is reflected in the average age of the populations, being 38 years in the US and 44 in the bloc of European countries. Likewise, the integration of immigration into American society occurs in a more harmonious than in European countries, being the American army a factor of assimilation, which does not happen in the old continent.
- **Divergence of perceptions:** During the first years of the twenty-first century, it is increasingly evident that from both sides of the Atlantic, the facts that affect international relations are perceived differently, the analyses of research and thought centers differ in their assessments and this causes public opinions to distance themselves. An example of this divergence is given with regard to the war in Ukraine and the desired final situation. While the Anglo-Saxon world would favor a clear defeat of Russia, implying that for at least a generation Moscow would no longer pose a threat to neighboring countries, many European chancelleries consider that Russia should face sanctions and penalties for its approach, but without this entailing unnecessary humiliation. Europe is aware that Russia will always remain an uncomfortable neighbor, so there are those seeking a successful exit to Moscow.

In addition to all these differences, there is a certain decoupling in military interventions, often lavishing the use of ad hoc coalitions instead of using the military structures of the Atlantic Alliance. This trend may have emerged during NATO's intervention in Kosovo, when forces deployed on the ground showed national discrepancies in carrying out orders issued by the Allied chain of command, led by an American, General Wesley Clark. The situation could then be resolved, but that would soon lead to the establishment of the Rumsfeld doctrine, which preferred coalitions of the willing, under American command. This may have resulted in operational efficiency in the short term, but at the same time increased mistrust among allies.

All these divergences have an impact on widening the differences between the European and North American blocs and, what is worse, they cause political discrepancies when it comes to making decisions. Therefore, at least apparently, the future of the transatlantic relationship looks bleak, with two blocs gradually distancing themselves.

### **Solutions for the future: Strengthening Europe**

If transatlantic relations are to remain the fundamental link of the Atlantic Alliance and remain the US' commitment to the security of the European continent, the European bloc must acquire its own dimension in the area of security and defense around the EU. Importantly, it is no longer enough to share a common history and fundamental values and principles or to have a free market economy or to promote international trade. Political, economic and cultural interdependence, together with the close institutional relations existing on both sides of the Atlantic, do not by themselves succeed in the twenty-first century as guarantors of the transatlantic link.

Nor does memory create a future. There are already few citizens who have internalized the decisive American intervention in the two world wars or are aware of the security umbrella deployed by Washington in Europe during the Cold War. Something else is needed today. The European Union's firm will to equip itself with the military capabilities and the institutional framework is necessary to be a reliable, appreciated and consolidated ally in the face of the threats and risks that lie ahead. It is not a question of complementing or legitimizing the action of the US, but of having the capacity to act independently and autonomously when needed and as an ally worthy of consideration when necessary. It is no longer enough to elaborate meritorious speeches of solidarity or to be willing to put in place instruments of soft power or influence or to promise once again the elevation of defense budgets.

However, we now need to have our own military capabilities at the level of the political entity that represents us Europeans, which will guarantee European security in its entirety and can also contribute to deal with threats to international security and those that struggle to combat the model of life that has taken so long to consolidate, which we share in Europe and in America and which we are deeply proud of.

The current situation involves promoting in Europe the objective of a genuine union in the field of defense, pooling our resources and articulating common security and defense policies. Only by achieving a European Union with a common defense will we bring sufficient added value to the rest of the allied countries. The road has begun. The launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), provided for in the Lisbon

Treaty; the approval of the European Defense Action Plan and access to the European Defense Funds to finance the R&D of projects of interest to more than three member states; the approval of the Strategic Compass and, most importantly, the conviction in European capitals that the time has come for community deepening in an area that has always been alien to the great political project that the EU represents since the failure of the European Defense Community in 1954, in the very origins of Community building.

The road is urgent, but it will not be easy. In addition to a notable increase in the defense effort by nations, industrial policies directed from the European Commission will be needed to put an end to the historical fragmentation of the European defense industry, to advance in the definition of common operational requirements and deepen the institutionalization of structures and procedures leading to a common security and defense policy. There will be many obstacles to overcome, historical reluctance to save, and conflicting interests to align. But if we are unable to achieve this Europe strong in defense, the EU will be doomed to geopolitical irrelevance in the bipolar world that is already here, and the transatlantic relationship will eventually resent and question the Atlantic Alliance. There is a lot at stake and even more to be done.