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“After Atlanticism”?

Defend the institutions of the post-1945 era

Ruud van Dijk

The international order and institutions, and more specifically the transatlantic relationship, face great pressure. This article argues that in a globalized world, there is no alternative to defending the institutions of the post-1945 era. We should not abandon Atlanticism, we need to renew it.

This January's *Transatlantic Scorecard*, assembled by the Brookings Institution's polling of a number of experts, displayed some dismal numbers indicating the state of transatlantic relations today. As one of Brookings' experts put it:

“President Trump continues his apparent disdain for the European Union and NATO, has difficult relations with key European leaders such as Chancellor Merkel, and makes policy missteps such as announcing that the United States would leave the INF Treaty without first consulting with allies. Key believers in the trans-Atlantic link (H.R. McMaster and Jim Mattis) have left the administration. All that is causing Europe to reevaluate the trans-Atlantic relationship, but Europe is confronting its own problems and none of the major European leaders — Merkel, President Macron, or Prime Minister May — have the ability to influence Trump in any meaningful way.”¹

Rather than a surprise, assessments such as this one primarily confirm what we already know and what top officials on both sides of the Atlantic have confirmed publicly, for example in the circus surrounding last July's NATO summit in Brussels. Since that sad spectacle, the transatlantic gap has continued to widen, for example the following month, when German foreign minister Heiko Maas and French president Emanuel Macron both argued for European self-reliance, admitting that the United States has become something less than a reliable partner.² On Washington's part, we have

reports that the president has proposed for the United States to withdraw from NATO, prompting the House of Representatives to pass a resolution promising to block such action. More ominous probably was the address by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Brussels last December, in which he ridiculed European adherence to a rules-based international order. These and other developments since Donald Trump's inauguration in 2016 have led commentators to conclude that the transatlantic relationship as it has existed since 1945 has eroded beyond recognition, that “normal is over”, and that Europe really ought to see itself as existing in the world “after Atlanticism”.³

Transatlantic relations are about more than NATO, and the convergence of values and interests between the countries of the Northern Atlantic region predates the Cold War. This convergence persists in our own time. But there is nothing automatic about it, let alone about an effective shared stance in a globalized world. The NATO alliance originated in very specific circumstances — the onset of the Cold War against the background of two recent world wars — that had not existed prior and since 1990 have changed to a very large extent. The allies and the alliance have tried to adapt, but for both the Europeans and the US the world of the early 21st century is a very different one from that of the mid-20th, or even the 1990s, and so it is not surprising that the significance of the transatlantic partnership has changed.



Today's acrimony between Washington and Europe, however, is more than merely the latest confrontation in a long history of transatlantic crises. The primary reason we are witnessing something more structural, and worrying, in today's transatlantic tensions than in earlier crises goes well beyond Trump and his antics, although the president symbolizes what is going on better than any other leader today. Today's tensions are so worrying because they are just one example of how the post- World War II international institutional architecture is eroding on almost every front.

The international institutional architecture

The partnership and the institutions through which the Atlantic alliance acquired a degree of permanence are just one element of a global order that has emerged since the Second World War. It is made up of international organizations such as the United Nations and its numerous agencies, treaties such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty, a diverse array of NGOs playing their part — all of it undergirded in an admittedly ambiguous but nonetheless significant way by so called “international norms”. One of the most important of these is internationalism, or the commitment — by sovereign states, to be sure — to try to work with others in keeping the peace and addressing other shared challenges, be they global or regional.

Given this order's identification with the part of the world (ours) usually referred to as “the West”, its erosion equals a decline of respect for the ideas that are at the core of what this West purports to stand for: basic human and civil rights, equality before the law, representative government. There are many causes for this deterioration — communist China's rise to globalism, Putin's subversion, the election of authoritarian types all over the world. But to a large extent, Westerners lamenting the troubles of the “rules-based order” should look at their own politics and societies first. Rather than exempt, the West is square in the middle of global trends toward political extremism, religious fundamentalism, economic nationalism, ethnic hatred. Due to the West's influence, indeed, predominance in the past two centuries and especially the last half-century, one might ask if past Western policies are not also part of the cause of our current crisis.

An international network of organizations, treaties, and norms did not exist prior to 1945. The instruments are far from perfect, but they did not emerge accidentally. Instead, between the end of the 19th century and the end of the Second World War the world learned the hard way that in an era of multiplying global interactions and increasing interdependence, conflict and even war becomes likely

[NATO forces during Trident Juncture 2018, a large exercise. the reality of NATO's recent work in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe is that it is largely thanks to the American contribution that there is now a more credible deterrent in place \(photo: Flickr/ NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization\)](#)

without such tools. Particularly the era of the Great Depression, when collaboration broke down on most fronts, showed that when countries follow the simplistic axiom of first and foremost looking out for their own interests, eventually they are apt to pursue their goals against others, often aggressively. Without international institutions and the commitment of nations to make them work, the relationship between globalization, on the one hand, and peace, on the other, is at best unstable — the way a society's peace is precarious without good governance.⁴

It is crucial to emphasize the importance of this word “good.” No order can endure if the people or entities that belong to it perceive it as unjust, and so the constituents of an order have to develop a stake in it. This can happen when the institutions are effective and give constituents the feeling their interests are being respected and their voices being heard. But just as important are an order's aspirations, its underlying values. These two justifications — effectiveness and values — do not always overlap, even though in the end the former cannot really exist without the latter.

The United States, for better and for worse

Crucially, the order that emerged after 1945 depended to a large extent on the involvement of the United States — the country having stated, for example through the 1941 *Atlantic Charter*, its support for several core liberal-democratic principles. Franklin Roosevelt's “Four Freedoms” served as another programmatic promulgation, albeit a very general one. The United States was also the country pursuing, in Paul Nitze's phrase, “preponderant power”. Or as president Harry Truman put it on the cusp of the new era, “we could not, of course, expect to get 100 percent of what we wanted but [...] on important matters he felt that we should be able to get 85 percent.”⁵ Truman spoke these words when US power stood unrivalled in the world while at the same time it appeared that after Nazism and Japanese militarism (not yet defeated), a new ruthless autocracy was poised to expand its influence. At this time, Washington was also in the process of implementing, in the founding of the UN, another part of Roosevelt's vision, combining internationalism (through the UN General Assembly and various UN agencies) and great power cooperation (through the Security Council with its five permanent members).

The world of the early twentieth century lacked an aspiring global hegemon; after 1945 United States leadership played a central role, directly or indirectly, in erecting and developing the new order. What emerged was the “Pax Ameri-

cana”, especially in the first two postwar decades, when United States economic and military power towered over a world preoccupied with recovery from an era of world wars and economic depression — not to mention the challenges of decolonization. Because recovery on Western terms, as opposed to the communist alternative, was very much in the United States interest, it was possible for American leaders to find enough domestic support for an activist stance. By helping others, the argument ran, Washington was advancing its own interests; by opposing real and imagined enemies overseas, and by supporting and gaining new friends, the country and its way of life would be kept safe. Support varied and could never be taken for granted, hence the frequent use of the fear of enemies seeking to harm the country. Skepticism toward (and vast misconceptions about) foreign aid or rejection of a “world policeman” role were never absent from the public debate. Still, by and large between 1945 and the end of the century, the country followed its political elites as they placed the United States at the center of a new era of globalization, accepting the implicit rationale that a world that looked more like the United States would not only be more peaceful, but also benefit the country in material ways.

However, the central American role in the system, the explicit as well as implicit United States motives, and the way United States policy was justified domestically, all were vulnerabilities also. For how likely was it that the rest of the world would accept that, on important matters, Washington would get 85% of what it wanted; that it shared America's vision for a just order? For 45 years in Cold War Europe, the Soviet Union was able to prevent the US from getting much more than 50%; in Vietnam by 1975, the Americans ended up with zero. Furthermore, when the ultimate justification for the system is that it espouses — indeed, promotes — principles usually identified as Western, is resistance from forces for whom those principles are alien, even threatening, not a given? How credible is the system anyway when Westerners themselves regularly violate (or apply selectively) the principles (*their* principles) for which they purport to stand? Finally, how likely was it that the Americans would settle for much less than 85%?

With Europe's and Japan's recovery from the Second World War, the rise of the global south, the subsequent transformation of communist China, and self-inflicted wounds of which the war in Vietnam was only the most glaring example, the “Pax Americana” came under pressure in the 1970s. From the perspective of many Americans, it has rapidly gotten worse in the new century on all fronts. The unease with



globalization and the real economic pain the 2008 financial crisis has produced, in 2016 contributed to a volatile political climate, unsettled further by long-running polarization and partisanship driven by well-organized campaigns, especially on the right.⁶ There was nothing preordained about the outcome of the presidential election that year. Rather, a combination of a singularly unpopular Democratic candidate; a Republican candidate-cum-con man brilliantly able to, in Kurt Schumacher's words, ring "a continuous appeal to the inner son-of-a-bitch in human beings"⁷; and a disinformation campaign aided, if not driven, by interests connected to the Russian government⁸, seem to have tipped the balance. As a result, we are forced to live with an American president who seems to believe that his country's alliances are burdens rather than assets, who is a self-professed "disruptor" of the status quo — uninterested in good governance, at home or abroad; one who admires political strongmen while disparaging liberal democrats, and whose secretary of state ridicules the post-1945 liberal-democratic international order in formal, public addresses. The president's ambassador to the United States' most important European ally has made it his mission to extend the disruptive mission of his boss into the heart of the European Union.⁹

Choices

In spite of American predominance, for better or for worse, however, Europeans should not think they do not share in the responsibility for the erosion of the post-war international order. Their recent sins of omission (take the EU's failure to come up with a credible immigration policy) and commission (Brexit comes to mind) against what the West ought to represent, in their own way are just as destructive as those committed by the United States. Challenges such as migration have been difficult to deal with, to say the least. But rather than recognizing their inevitability, the inescapable need for shared approaches, and the fact that outcomes are always going to be imperfect, too many people have supported political frauds blaming traditional political elites and offering easy ways out.

Elites have unquestionably been part of the problem.¹⁰ While no entity controls the primary forces driving globalization, it is not as if governments individually and jointly have not had to make choices about it in recent decades. Given the economic and political predominance of the West in the postwar world, the governments making many crucial

[Franklin Roosevelt at the Tehran Conference in 1943. The global order that emerged after 1945 depended to a large extent on the involvement of the United States, for example through Roosevelt's vision for the United Nations \(photo: U.S. Army\)](#)

choices since the 1960s often have been Western governments. As an example, since the late 1960s, advances in communications technology have helped make integrated global financial markets a reality, and they are difficult to regulate by anyone. In hindsight, however, by embracing deregulation, governments have placed themselves too far on the sidelines too quickly. They have allowed the financial services industry to become a vast, powerful money-making machine for a small group of insiders. Something similar has occurred for globally-operating corporations. Underlying these choices appears to have been a shift from an appreciation of, and commitment to, the common good — guarded by governments — to the embrace of freedom for individuals, and for individual entities such as corporations. The Cold War contest between a collectivist East and freedom-loving West may have contributed as well, along with a longer-running resistance in especially the United States against the kind of government intervention espoused by New and Fair Dealers and Great Society proponents. The distribution of wealth and political influence has become so uneven as to be a threat to the Western project itself.

And so where in the wake of the Cold War we tended to see our glass as more than half-full (and counting), now a great number of citizens of Western countries appear to see a half-empty glass that is leaking. The conclusion too many are drawing is that some ill-defined radical change centering on national approaches is not only possible but desirable. And let's just say that Vladimir Putin is doing nothing to dissuade them. Recent experiences with radical, disruptive change — the removal of Saddam Hussein; the Chavez/Maduro revolution; Brexit; Trump — underline the shortsightedness of believing that it can work, but this is where we are.

A historical perspective such as this brings up one additional uncomfortable aspect of our current predicament: while the decline of the world's ability to face shared problems effectively and equitably has been underway for some time, it is not clear that we have reached the low point yet. The collapse of the INF Treaty is only one recent example of how what has been built in the past three-quarters-of-a-century continues to unravel. But also the normalization of the disruptor-in-chief in the White House, both by many ordinary people and by folks occupying themselves with politics for professional reasons is, at best, dangerously naïve. The same could be said for those on the opposite side of the political spectrum who continue to treat this pestilential individual as a kind of clown.

It is possible that, looking back ten or twenty years from

now, one could conclude that the forces still committed to the structures built since World War II, and the values underlying them, were equally strong in 2019. And perhaps it will also be clear that political currents around the world were shifting in their favor. While unlikely, it still seems possible. Whether it will happen depends on our choices today.

The future

Most of the international institutional architecture built since 1945 still stands, including NATO. Most of the underlying principles have not been abandoned, at least not formally. Many people on both sides of the Atlantic, and in the world at large, still subscribe to parts or all of the system. Nobody has a credible alternative. Those who suggest they do, are only agents of a slow-moving train-wreck. The alternative to working things out together, to seeking political solutions for international problems, is increasing unilateralism, little meaningful diplomatic (or other) contact, and eventually conflict — by design or by accident. This has happened before, and it could happen again. History suggests we ought to take this seriously, instead of just putting our faith in more benign scenarios.

So in our part of the world, we should talk less about life "after Atlanticism". Instead, we should focus on how what is left of transatlantic cooperation can remain functional. There are quite a few people left in Washington who would like to do the same. There is nothing against greater European military collaboration, but the reality of NATO's recent work in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe is that it is largely thanks to the American contribution that there is now a more credible deterrent in place. If more of these joined plans get implemented, perhaps Vladimir Putin will recognize, just like his Kremlin predecessors in the 1980s, that he cannot split the Europeans from their North American allies.

As to that other great power, it is legitimate to question the way the Trump administration goes about confronting China on trade and on security issues. However, the bigger picture suggests limits to the extent to which the United States and its allies should operate independently from each other vis-a-vis Beijing, and also to the level of confrontation required. The Communist Party of China does not underwrite the principles upon which we have based our societies, but it, too, has a stake in the current international system, if only because it has no permanent friends, plenty of problems at home, and thus no great interest in conflict. So as we go forward, trying to shape an international system that will continue to evolve, it would certainly be better if the Atlan-

tic partners, and like-minded countries, were able to develop common positions to counter China's growing weight, while keeping it on board.

As always, international politics is about finding the right balance between pragmatism and principle, about accepting imperfect outcomes rather than insisting on "winning". It is also about the home front, or giving voters a realistic picture of the messy nature of international politics in a complex world; about getting voters to appreciate the inevitability — and great value — of political processes of give-and-take, to get them to reject the ugly alternative of "every country for itself". And it's about more voters taking more responsibility themselves.

As to ultimate purposes, in the interest of our own credibility, we should be more restrained in judging others by our own best principles than in recent decades, at least until we manage to live up to them consistently ourselves. But let's not be shy in defending what has been built. When we review the past century-and-a-half in international politics, we should be able to admit the importance of the structures that have been built since 1945, recognize that most of them still stand, and agree that they are worth preserving, even if they will also have to be adapted to the requirements of a new era. We should not abandon Atlanticism, we need to renew it.

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Would you like to react? Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.



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The United Nations building in New York. The UN is one of the pillars of the post-1945 era (photo: Wikimedia Commons)