



Guest Editorial

Devotion or Divorce?: The Future of Transatlantic Relations

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It has been six years since the relationship between the European Union and the United States stepped up a gear with the New Transatlantic Agenda (NTA). Six years of close cooperation and concrete results. Yet doom-mongers would have us believe that the passion is cooling; that the EU and the USA are drifting apart, with fundamentally different views of the world and how to tackle global challenges. For evidence, they point to recent high-profile differences over such questions as missile defence and climate change. Can this odd couple live happily ever after? Or are these early signs of the notorious seven-year itch, with divorce the inevitable conclusion?

There can be no doubt that the NTA has been a success. This achievement can be attributed partly to its clear focus, and partly to the accompanying Joint EU–US Action Plan, which has ensured that lofty ideals are translated into action within a strict timetable.

Nothing succeeds like success, and the NTA has in turn spawned other initiatives which have helped promote cooperation in specific areas. A good example is the Transatlantic Economic Partnership (TEP), launched at the London EU–US Summit in May 1998 and responsible for a series of bilateral agreements which have boosted trade, in particular by reducing technical barriers.

The NTA shows no sign of running out of steam yet. In the first six months of this year alone, the EU and the USA have cooperated to promote peace and stability in South East Europe, the Korean peninsula, the Middle East and Colombia. We are both involved in environmental projects in Russia, and we are working to coordinate those actions.

We jointly sponsored a resolution at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs to make it easier to monitor chemical products used to manufacture illegal synthetic drugs. We agreed to share information, research and best practices in the field of asylum and immigration, initialled a mutual recognition agreement on marine equipment, continued to strengthen our science and technology cooperation and signed an implementing arrangement on non-nuclear energy research.

In the meantime, of course, we continued to trade at record levels. At USD500 billion of trade in goods and services every year, the EU and the

USA have overwhelmingly the world's biggest trading relationship. Indeed we represent some 20 per cent of total world trade.

Not much of this is headline-grabbing stuff. Nevertheless, these small steps – and the list is not even exhaustive – do add up, making life safer, healthier and more prosperous for all our 650 million citizens.

Having said this, there are shortcomings in the NTA process, and these have become more obvious to me during my time as a European Commissioner.

First, the process cannot itself address certain structural deficiencies that complicate our relations. On the EU side we are constantly reminded of our Byzantine structures, with 15 Member States and contorted decision-making processes which sometimes lead us to adopt positions reflecting the lowest common denominator. But how often are we reminded of equivalent institutional limitations on the American side? Of the difficulties the executive has in containing a Congress whose legislative agenda is driven very largely by domestic considerations alone? Or of the Federal Administration's inability, in its dealings with the EU, to commit either regulatory agencies or any of the 50 States of the Union?

Let me be clear: diffusion of power and a vigorous legislature are healthy signs of mature democracies, in the EU as in the USA. They should be a source of pride, not criticism. But they mean that there will always be public squabbles and tensions, and we had better get used to it. This is why continual dialogue is so crucial to the health of the transatlantic relationship.

Another problem is that while the NTA has achieved its main objective of broadening and deepening the relationship, EU–US cooperation has sometimes been excessively bureaucratic and cumbersome.

That can be put right. In March this year the Commission published a Communication on the future of transatlantic relations that made a number of recommendations to 'fine tune' the NTA. Those ideas fell on fertile ground, and most were adopted. The Gothenburg Summit in June marked a new chapter in the EU–US relationship, characterised by clear and sustainable political priorities and more streamlined, political and results-oriented methods of cooperation.

First, the Summit returned to the format of a single plenary meeting followed by a working lunch, without separate gatherings of trade and foreign ministers. This allowed our leaders to focus on the big picture in an informal atmosphere, without getting bogged down in details.

Second, a single, global Summit statement was adopted which defined six strategic themes for cooperation over the next few years, and defined immediate priorities for the first five of these :

- *Addressing security challenges*: preventing conflict and managing crises, fighting terrorism, promoting non-proliferation;

- *Promoting growth and a multilateral trading system*: working together to make the WTO Ministerial in Doha a success;
- *Fighting crime*: cooperating in the fight against cybercrime, and against trafficking in human beings and drugs;
- *Protecting the environment*: promoting effective ways to address climate change;
- *Fighting against poverty in the developing countries*: combating communicable diseases, and notably HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis;
- *Promoting the digital economy*.

Statements and programmes for action, however well drafted, are just words. Now we must deliver on these priority issues, building on the outcome of the Gothenburg Summit, and the good working relationship established between the EU and the new US Administration.

That means devoting resources to the task. Too often in the past the European Commission has accepted new responsibilities without having the means to get the job done properly. Over the last ten years, for example, aid volumes have grown 2–3 times as fast as the Commission's administrative resources to manage them, and this inevitably had an impact on performance. We are making strenuous efforts to correct this – with success, I may say – but we must not be tempted back into short cuts and half measures.

Personal contacts are also crucial. Most of us in the European institutions have already met our new counterparts in Washington. But as President Bush puts the finishing touches to his Administration, these contacts should be intensified, to maintain momentum. It is especially important that the European Parliament and the US Congress should continue to build their links.

There are those who claim that the USA has new geopolitical priorities in the post-Cold War world, and that it will increasingly turn its gaze from Europe to Asia. I have never given much credence to that theory. The USA, like the EU, has global interests and responsibilities. In a speech at the Palacio de la Moncloa in Madrid during his first European tour, President Bush observed that 'the commitment to a united, prosperous, peaceful Europe is an American commitment as well'. That, he made clear, was not just a matter of sentiment but because : 'America benefits when Europe is united and peaceful and prosperous'. Palmerston famously said of Britain that she had no permanent friends or enemies: only her interests were eternal. It is hard-nosed pragmatism that matters in international relations, and the European-American partnership is indispensable to each of us. The final stage in the introduction of the single currency, enlargement of the EU and the further development of the European Security and Defence Policy all mean that Europe will stay at the centre of the American political radar.

For all this, some have perceived a growing difference of outlook between Europe and America which, if it took root, could lead to tensions that would

extend beyond the inevitable squabbles I mentioned earlier. The issue is sometimes presented as unilateralism versus multilateralism. I rather prefer an image suggested earlier this year by Tom Friedman: how far is foreign policy a matter of *walls* – protecting oneself, and isolating ones enemies; and how far it is a matter of *networks* of mutual benefit which need to be strengthened and extended?

Henry Kissinger, in a thoughtful article published in *The National Interest* this summer, argued that the post-Cold War generation of US leaders had been ‘embarrassed to elaborate an unapologetic concept of enlightened national interest’. Without such a concept, he suggested, policymakers would only achieve progressive paralysis. Kissinger himself, on an earlier occasion, castigated American engagement in Somalia in 1993 as particularly reprehensible because America was ‘trying to submerge the national interest in multilateral ventures’. That is perhaps the sort of unapologetic concept he had in mind.

Yet it seems to me that the problems we face today are less and less susceptible to solutions based on the classic analysis of national interests. Increasingly, the international agenda is dominated by problems like the drugs trade, environmental degradation, global epidemics, cybercrime, and the appalling division between the rich and the unimaginably poor. The phenomenon of globalisation reminds us constantly of the concerns and interests we share, as global citizens.

In America there is perhaps a tendency to analyse problems – whether climate change, missile defence, anti-personnel landmines, comprehensive nuclear test bans, or UN Conventions such as those concerning small arms or biological weapons – in terms of rather narrowly-defined domestic interests. The great insight of the EU has been that in an increasingly interdependent world working together and pooling sovereignty can actually *enhance* the ability of nations to act in their own interests. Even a nation as big and as powerful as the USA cannot combat what is sometimes called ‘the dark side of globalisation’ without accepting international obligations, and without a network of partners able to translate joint will into joint action.

The good news is that no two regions of the world share so many values – or so many interests – as do the United States and Europe. The relationship is cemented in NATO, but it really is the indispensable partnership. Times change, and outlooks change. But the importance of that partnership has only increased. Perhaps we should look at the positive new developments in transatlantic relations this year as representing a renewal of our marriage vows.