

United States and Europe Experience Continental Drift

By Peter Howard | May 22, 2003

The distance between the United States and Europe is slowly growing wider—about an inch each year, geologists estimate, due to the expansion of the Atlantic Ocean. Politically, the Atlantic Ocean has been a much less stable barrier between the United States and Europe.

The first U.S. president, George Washington, viewed the Atlantic's vast distance as America's ultimate protection from the power politics of European monarchs and warned future presidents to avoid entangling alliances. Following World War II, U.S. leaders such as President Harry S. Truman and Secretaries of State George Marshall and Dean Acheson saw Europe and America as part of the same region, the compact North Atlantic, giving rise to the NATO and the Marshall Plan. Most recently, in the diplomacy prior to the Iraq war, a new rift developed between the United States and its European allies, culminating in U.S. recriminations against France and Germany, members of "Old Europe," effectively blocking any UN authorization for the U.S.- and U.K.-led war. Now that the war is over, how much distance is there between the United States and Europe?

The answer is decidedly mixed: The geopolitical landscape is much less stable and much more difficult to measure than the plate tectonics of the earth's crust. On the one hand, the present post-war environment is not nearly as bad as many had feared it would be:

- The combat phase of the war defied all but the most optimistic expectations. U.S. troops moved with lightning speed and incurred minimal casualties. No instances of horrific mass casualties among Iraqi civilians occurred. Most Iraqis welcomed the U.S. overthrow of President Saddam Hussein's repressive regime. Hussein did not use weapons of mass destruction. To date, no retaliatory terrorist attacks have taken place. In short, the pre-war nightmare scenarios, some of which played a role in opposition at the UN, did not come to pass.
- The UN did not completely collapse after the frustrating and ultimately failed Security Council diplomacy to prevent or authorize the war. The United States has returned to the UN for assistance in the post-war reconstruction and recently won unanimous approval of a resolution to remove sanctions and transform the oil-for-food program into needed humanitarian assis-

tance. The diplomacy over this new resolution has been more cooperative and included some notable compromises to address U.S., German, and French concerns.

- There was no consequential eruption of anti-U.S. politics in the world. While there were large demonstrations against the war, no governments have fallen as a result of the war.
- The United States and Europe are continuing to work to improve their relationship in other critical areas. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder is trying to repair relations with the United States and move beyond the two countries' differences over Iraq. Two specific areas merit note: trade and NATO expansion. U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick is working hard to promote trade as perhaps the most pro-European member of U.S. President George W. Bush's administration, and with good reason. Trans-Atlantic trade is a vital part of both the European and U.S. economies, which are experiencing similarly slow growth. Progress on the trade agenda is seen as important to avoid further economic difficulties. Second, the U.S. Senate voted to ratify the treaty on NATO expansion, admitting seven new members to the alliance that has become the bedrock of the U.S.-European relationship. NATO is moving on to assist its newest members. With the expansion vote and corresponding diplomacy, the United States is reaffirming the importance of NATO.

Given these trends, it is possible to see the Atlantic Ocean as an easily traversed body of water: A mere plane ride or phone call can overcome the distance and permit the normal flow of solid U.S.-European relations. On the other hand, substantial policy differences remain, and they are slowly dividing the United States and Europe. Like the movement of the earth's crust, these subtle separations hold the potential for future earthquakes:

- While the immediate trans-Atlantic tiff has receded, the recriminations are far from over. France has



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achieved a new status in pop culture as the ultimate antithesis to the United States. Aside from regular jokes by U.S. broadcast icons Jay Leno and David Letterman, recent political ads portrayed U.S. Republican Party senators with the French flag to pressure them to support Bush's tax plan. The Defense Department has cut U.S. participation at the Paris Air Show 2003. U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was recently in Turkey to criticize its lack of support in the war. Payback will probably continue in a number of low-profile but significant venues.

- The Old Europe distinction remains alive and well in the White House and Pentagon, where it counts. The United States is looking to shift significant trans-Atlantic security cooperation to the more pro-U.S. members of New Europe. Two instances are telling. The top U.S. general in Europe, Gen. James Jones, floated a proposal to shift U.S. bases east. For many years, the U.S. bases in Germany were key elements of the strong U.S.-German alliance. New bases in New Europe—including the likes of Poland and Hungary—are more than just a cost-saving device or logistical shift. They also constitute a political move to areas that are much more reliably pro-U.S. Additionally, one member of the coalition that will supervise its own section in the occupation of Iraq is Poland, the vanguard of New Europe.
- Europe is taking the first steps in the long process of developing the military capability to act independently of the United States in international security affairs. Europeans lack the heavy lift, mid-air refueling, stealth, and precision-guided munitions capabilities that make

the U.S. military so powerful, as evidenced by the U.S. dominance in NATO military missions during the Kosovo campaign. The recent meeting of France, Germany, Belgium, and Luxemburg to form some sort of joint military structure reflects a desire to build capacity for robust action outside of the U.S.-dominated NATO.

In the short run, trans-Atlantic relations are likely to return to some semblance of normalcy, with the United States and Europe bouncing from disagreement in one area to cooperation in another. Despite Javier Solana's best efforts, Europe still does not speak with one voice in international affairs. European countries most certainly will not merge their defense capabilities into a united army of Europe any time soon, and as a result, Europe will continue to lack the wherewithal to effectively challenge the United States on global security issues. NATO will expand and survive, but its identity remains in post-cold war flux.

Yet these long-term trends can slowly separate historic allies who now see the world in fundamentally different terms. While the physical distance between the United States and Europe continues to grow at the steady and predictable inch per year, the political distance between them is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Absent some political tectonics, though, Europe and the United States are slowly drifting apart.

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