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P A P E R



Alliances in the 21st Century

Implications for the US-European
partnership

Jeremy Ghez

Supported by the French Ministry of Defence

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Summary

Determining what makes a 21st-century alliance strategic is the source of much confusion and many disagreements and misunderstandings between transatlantic partners. As a result, over the past two decades the latter have experienced difficulties in finding a clear consensus about the features of a strategic alliance. The subsequent tensions and frustrations among transatlantic partners suggest that the US-European relationship is undergoing a significant identity crisis in spite of the specific features that make it a unique and unprecedented relationship. Some observers go as far as to claim that excessive focus on these supposed commonalities in political culture and shared values have prevented European allies of the US from acting pragmatically in defence of well-defined and concrete interests. Like-mindedness may be nothing more than declaratory according to this view.

This paper offers a different perspective. It argues that a pragmatic approach to international affairs is not one that is necessarily and exclusively inspired by power considerations, economic ties and *realpolitik*. In fact, commonalities in political culture and in constructed identity can constitute a strategic asset for better coordination and greater predictability among allies. Enhanced awareness of these commonalities in political culture can help allies to maintain a high degree of cohesiveness and allow them to better coordinate their reactions – therefore leading to the formation of “natural alliances”. Finding a new blueprint for the alliance does not only entail focusing on tactical considerations. It should also lead transatlantic partners to consider the value-added nature of this common strategic narrative. This does not mean that traditional alliances, based on tactics and whose strategic usefulness has been widely documented and is intuitively straightforward, are outdated. But it does suggest that another dynamic, based on identities and which may have been muted by the Cold War, has the potential to play a more fundamental role in an uncertain landscape, in particular in redefining the purpose of the transatlantic alliance. There may therefore be more than one dynamic shaping alignments among states.

A categorization for alliances

As a result, a more rigorous categorization of alliances could be particularly helpful to better understand the major thrusts bringing allies closer together or driving them further apart, and to shed light on the growing diversity of strategic partnerships and the purposes they fulfil. Understanding the differences between the driving forces of alliances also has policy implications for the United States and European powers in the new strategic

landscape: rather than being a source of confusion, this diversity can potentially offer greater leverage to these countries, through an appropriate mix of alliances fulfilling different purposes within a broader strategy. But in order to reach these objectives, the concepts of “alliance” and “partnership” must be unpacked. The categorization that this paper offers draws a distinction between tactical, historical and natural alliances.

Tactical alliances are perhaps the most straightforward form of state alignments and the kind most students of international relations would think of initially. The primary purpose of a tactical alliance is to counter an immediate threat or adversary that has the potential to challenge a state’s most vital interests. Tactical alliances are instrumental and often opportunistic in nature as they allow states to address a pressing and urgent issue. Leaders usually justify them on the basis of conditions on the ground and by the imperatives of *realpolitik*. Historical instances include alliances in 19th-century Europe, the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of nonaggression signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, as well as the relationships that Israel maintains with its Sunni neighbours and the United States with China.

The notion that some alliances are more resilient than others because they capitalize on a long historical tradition of cooperation is very intuitive. There is, therefore, a useful distinction to make between tactical and historical alliances. Historical alliances are enduring partnerships that sustain in spite of significant ruptures or changes in the international system. The structural features of such an alliance, which outlast time- or threat-specific contingencies, empower allies to sustain cooperation, relying on past successes as focal points to justify additional partnerships. The “shadow of the future” weighs in on a historical alliance because uncertainty about international prospects makes the partnership an attractive tool to hedge against a wide variety of scenarios. Historical allies tend to accept short-term compromise that may not be fully congruent with national interests, in the hope that they will obtain some benefits in the longer run. Such a trade-off is impossible within the framework of a tactical alliance. In fact, historical alliances constitute a heterogeneous set of partnerships by nature but offer state actors the possibility of guarding against a wide set of historical contingencies, as ruptures may weaken some of these partnerships and strengthen others. They differ from tactical alliances because of their ability to redefine their purpose in spite of a significant structural change in the international landscape that would have rendered a tactical alliance moot. An instance of a historical partnership that this paper discusses is the lasting relationship between Riyadh and Washington.

The concept of natural alliances goes beyond partners’ shared sense of history by additionally hypothesizing commonalities in political culture and in narratives about how the world works or *should* work. These commonalities adapt to the new landscape through a constant reconstruction of the identities of natural allies who seek to tell or retell history to better face the present and to adjust to the future. Existing ties and institutions that formalized the relationship allow the alliance to self-sustain and to strengthen over time. A natural alliance is therefore resilient and is likely to better resist exogenous shocks, though these may affect it in the short run. It does not exclude disagreements and tensions, but reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings in the long run. The US-European partnership offers an interesting case study that this paper analyzes at length.

Identifying natural allies

Commonalities do not only play a significant role in providing partners with a shared strategic blueprint for the future. They also have the potential to be a coordination device for natural allies who are then better able to coordinate their reactions to current international affairs and crises. As a result, in practice, if a set of countries are natural allies, one would expect: a) greater commonalities in terms of political culture relative to the rest of the world, and b) greater commonalities in terms of reactions to international crises relative to the rest of the world. Identifying natural allies therefore means measuring these commonalities between a set of potential partners and relative to a broad range of countries.

Two datasets and a statistical tool can help this measurement. The World Values Survey database offers an attractive operational tool in that regard by providing the answers to a wide range of questions that all relate to a country's political culture. The PEW Global Attitudes project offers various cross-country polls covering reactions to international crises across a wide set of nations since 2001. The aggregation of this project's data is indicative of commonalities in terms of the reaction of countries to current international affairs. Multidimensional scaling is a useful tool that provides a visual representation of differences and similarities between all countries sampled in a two-dimensional plot. The closer two countries appear to one another on the plot, the greater the correlation between the responses of their respective populations to the poll questions. Populations in countries appearing further apart gave responses that were dissimilar relative to the rest of the world. As a result, clusters of countries on the graphs would suggest greater commonalities in terms of political culture and in terms of reactions to international crises relative to the rest of the world.

When this approach is applied to transatlantic countries in comparison to other nations of the world, it is found that the US-European partnership has been a natural alliance since at least 1991, although there are four noteworthy caveats: (1) it is inaccurate to exclude New Zealand and Australia from this natural alliance, although they do not belong to the transatlantic community; (2) apparent societal shifts in Japan and South Korea since 2000 could further challenge the geographic denomination of the transatlantic community in time; (3) Turkey, a historical ally of fellow NATO partners, consistently displays greater commonalities with Muslim countries relative to Western countries; and (4) the extent to which Eastern European countries are part of this natural alliance is still unclear.

Policy implications

This paper argues that if strategists understand the different natures and drivers of alliances, they can gain greater leverage by finding an appropriate mix of alliances, each fulfilling a different purpose within a broader strategy. Evidence suggests that is not yet the case. For instance, a US-Chinese condominium may very well have replaced the transatlantic community in the psyche of some US policymakers, in spite of other objective economic indicators that point to the significant integration of the transatlantic economy. Yet, in the long run, calls for a "Bretton Woods II" proposal suggest that while there are ways for China and the United States to manage this interdependence bilaterally, the long-term and sustainable solution lies in the establishment of a multilateral system that would

provide the international economy with a new organizing framework. The United States would strongly increase its leverage and the credibility of its bargaining position towards Beijing if it included its natural European allies in the negotiations.

Evidence presented in this paper also suggests that Turkey is an undeniable outlier in the description of the international landscape. Ankara certainly fits the description of a historical partner of the United States and of Western Europe, yet it does not appear to be a natural ally of its transatlantic partners, according to the definition and the framework that this paper provides. Independent of the explanation that one favours to explain this paradox, this paper argues that the inability of Ankara and the European Union to reach a deal regarding Turkey's EU membership relates to a large extent to Europe's current institutional and identity crisis. The United States, Turkey and some European states such as the United Kingdom tend to consider the European Union as a historical endeavour uniting a set of historical partners. Other nations, especially continental powers such as France and Germany, tend to consider the European Union as an enterprise going beyond a shared sense of history and relying on a common – perhaps Christian – culture. These conflicting views on what the European project is – or should be – explain to a large extent the disagreements regarding Turkey's legitimate claims. In this sense, both Turkey and the European Union question each other on their respective identities and regional and global roles.

Finally, this paper argues that common values are not merely a political tool used by state leaders in need of consistency among allies. They are also a fundamental characteristic of the US-European partnership. However, the evidence also suggests that it would be artificial to limit this partnership and the standards, norms and values that it stands for to a regional reality, linking both sides of the Atlantic. This suggests that the debate over NATO becoming global should not only be about the increasingly international nature of the organization's missions, but also about the involvement of international partners, or even the NATO membership of Asian countries, given these proximities and the potential for a common strategic blueprint. This analysis provides the missing roadmap to start NATO's globalization process. In addition, institutional broadening of the alliance, beyond NATO's traditional concerns, and further political integration of the transatlantic countries would allow the latter to address the wide set of challenges that they face today, in particular those that relate to the management of the global commons.

An institutionalized EU-US partnership need not be an exclusive club seeking to balance non-Western countries, and it need not be formal either. A decentralized network could suffice in generating a strategic vision that would make the existence of a common blueprint among transatlantic partners official. Such an open-ended, non-exclusive club offers the most robust framework to preserve the model of cooperation and consultation at a time when there is significant temptation to revert to the 19th-century system of organized rivalries. In this sense, discussion of natural allies should not be understood as a confirmation of the potential for the “clash of civilizations” that Samuel Huntington described, but rather as a call to recognize the existing similarities between transatlantic partners that make this alliance undeniably different and that could be the foundation of a shared strategic blueprint. The current confusion about what makes an alliance strategic or “special” suggests that transatlantic allies have not yet recognized this difference, let alone taken action to draw all the benefits from the opportunity.