

# Reinventing transatlantic relations

## The United States and Europe since 1989

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### ABSTRACT

The Cold War (1947-1991) was a structuring framework for transatlantic relations for over four decades. On the one hand it prompted the United States to pursue massive political, economic, and military commitment in Europe, and on the other it made NATO the core of its members' defence strategy in the face of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact. The end of the East-West conflict consequently raised questions regarding the future of transatlantic relations. In reaffirming the US strategy of engagement in Europe, George Bush and later Bill Clinton silenced isolationist voices in the United States, and moreover opened new possibilities for transatlantic relations: beyond NATO and the security of the Atlantic space, these relations would impose themselves as a motor for the political and economic integration of all European states. Diverging economic interests have nevertheless prevented the conclusion of a genuine agreement in this area. The emergence of new competing powers could lead to the conclusion of these negotiations in the coming years.



European and american's flags

In 1997, during a debate on NATO, Madeleine Albright declared to US senators: "Let us not deceive ourselves. We are a European power." Bill Clinton's Secretary of State thus emphasized the importance of the cultural construction of the transatlantic bond in the European policy of the US. The end of the Cold War nevertheless raised questions regarding the foundations and evolution of transatlantic relations in a rapidly changing international order.

The Cold War (1947-1991) was a structuring element in transatlantic relations for over four decades, creating two blocks centred around the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, which resulted in two distinct Europes relatively isolated from one another. During the course of 1989, the liberalization of Poland and Hungary, along with the fall of the Berlin Wall, called this logic into question, and brought about the dismemberment of the Eastern block, along with the dissolution of the USSR, which was already politically and economically weakened. The Cold War thus ended without major combat, a victory for the West and its values.

The disappearance of what George Bush called the “former Nemesis,” in the *National Security Strategy* of early 1993, tempted some of the conservatives and realists in administration and Congress to disengage from the European continent, after more than a half century of intervention in Europe. While the president had already indicated his desire to stay engaged in Europe—notably through the mechanisms of political and economic aid in the *SEED Act* (1989) and the *FREEDOM Support Act* (1992)—the confrontations in the former Yugoslavia demonstrated the need for an American presence in order to preserve the recently acquired peace. Taking advantage of the change in administration, the United States perpetuated its European engagement, and gave new impetus to NATO.

NATO therefore has a role to play in the post-Cold War world, all the more so given that a certain number of Eastern European states indicated their desire to align with it more closely after the organization’s enlargement to including East Germany in 1990. NATO thus launched in 1994 a bilateral cooperation program with states in the Euro-Atlantic space, called Partnership for Peace (PfP). The immediate membership of former Warsaw Pact members raised the question of a new enlargement of the organization, despite Russian concerns. From 1997, the Allies provided a clear response: all democracies likely to strengthen Euro-Atlantic security could apply for membership. This policy of openness led to three successive enlargements in 1999, 2004, and 2009, with NATO now counting 28 member states.

The enlargement made even clearer the need to define a new policy for NATO. The *New Strategic Concept* (1991) indeed quickly revealed its limits. While NATO intervened for the first time beyond its borders in the Balkans beginning in 1993, the notion of collective defence had to be reevaluated. The *Strategic Concept* adopted in 1999 thus confirmed the new mission of prevention, in addition to crisis and conflict management. Later, the invocation of article 5 in reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001 led to a new distinction regarding the notion of collective defence, and provided NATO with a new mission, that of combatting terrorism. This new phase in the definition of NATO’s role led the organization to take command over the international coalition in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014.

This change was made, to a certain extent, in connection with the strengthening of European structures. First, all member states of the European Union (EU) are members of NATO or the PfP. Second, the “Berlin Plus agreement” concluded in 2003 gave the EU access to some of NATO’s resources for its own crisis management missions. Finally, attempts to establish closer economic ties between the United States and the European Economic Community—and later the EU—would consolidate transatlantic bonds through the defence of common interests. From 1990, the United States and Europe made a declaration to that effect and in 1998 work began toward establishing a Transatlantic Economic Partnership. After numerous years of negotiations, the Transatlantic Economic Council was created in 2007 to coordinate the harmonization of Atlantic rules and norms, and to provide a framework for negotiations on economic integration. It was on the basis of the Council’s work that the president of the United States proposed in 2013 the creation of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which is still being negotiated.

The difficulties in concluding this agreement reveal the fundamental economic differences on both sides of the Atlantic. While European institutions experienced a substantial reinforcement beginning in the late 1980s, with the Single European Act (1986) and then the Maastricht Treaty (1992), the economic and normative rivalry with the

United States intensified. Agriculture has been a recurring point of difference since the Uruguay Round of negotiations (1986-1994) for the GATT. Although the situation was unblocked in 1992 by a modification to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which made possible the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, agricultural subsidies remain central to Atlantic relations. For instance, during the WTO Doha Round (2001-2008), the United States and Europe were only able to come to partial agreements, with new tensions arising over access to Latin American markets. The economic success of the United States in Latin America since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992 has in fact been limited by transatlantic rivalries. The project for a Free Trade Area of the Americas proposed by Washington in 1994 was suspended in 2005 when the EU maintained its CAP—forcing the United States to keep the agricultural subsidies which had been denounced by their regional partners—and increased its partnership propositions for Latin America.

Nevertheless, this rivalry progressively became a secondary matter in the face of evolving international economic relations and the emergence of China. Although the latter's joining of the WTO in 2001 should have allowed for its managed integration within the global economic system, the strategy subsequently implemented by Beijing—notably in matters of monetary and customs policy—made the protection of common economic interests through transatlantic rapprochement all the more necessary, thus giving the TTIP a global dimension. The prosperity of the Atlantic space should, moreover, reinforce its security. The economic weakening of the United States or Europe indeed compromises their capacity to respond to threats to this new international order, within which their normative, diplomatic, and security role is contested. From the September 11 attacks to the Ukrainian crisis which began in 2013, the Atlantic Community—despite the tensions surrounding Iraq in 2003 or the pivoting towards Asia sought by Barack Obama—has breathed new life into NATO's mechanisms of solidarity.

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