15 Transatlantic relations and US foreign policy

David Hastings Dunn and Benjamin Zala

Structure and agency in transatlantic relations

Despite being elected for a second term of office the Obama administration’s foreign policy agenda is still heavily affected by the legacy of the previous administration. While the most notable area where this remains true is the Middle East, the same can also be said for transatlantic relations. George W. Bush’s tenure will long be remembered as one of the most tumultuous in transatlantic relations. Never before in the post-war period had the Atlantic community been so comprehensively split and so actively opposed diplomatically as they were over the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The extent of the legacy of the Bush years for the Obama administration poses a series of questions for the analyst of US foreign policy. Not least of these is the extent to which Obama has been constrained by the problems and commitments which Bush left behind. While the retirement of Bush and his senior advisors in January 2009 marked a distinct end point to his administration, the opportunity for a fresh start for his successor was severely limited by American commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, and ongoing challenges in dealing with Iran, North Korea, and the Middle East Peace Process. The notion that America had neglected the major structural changes occurring in the Asia-Pacific region, including but not limited to China’s growing international status as a major force in world politics, resulted in a strategic ‘pivot’ towards that part of the world in Obama’s first term. Such a move could have serious implications for the transatlantic link.

The potential for change in transatlantic relations in part depends on how much scope there is for ‘agency’ in the ‘structure–agency’ debate. There has been much speculation since the low point of 2003 as to how much relations across the Atlantic between the United States and its erstwhile European opponents have improved. While 2003 marked the low point, relations were strained across the Atlantic before this, due to disagreement over climate change, the ABM Treaty, the International Criminal Court, the CTBT, and a whole host of other issues. These issues provided the backdrop to the diplomatic confrontations which occurred in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. Since then, however, and particularly since the election of Barack Obama, there has been a marked improvement in the tone of the transatlantic dialogue. Substantially, from the Iranian nuclear negotiations to the intervention in Libya in 2011 to the renewed attempts to create an EU-US free-trade agreement, the shift from Bush to Obama appears crucial to the nature of transatlantic relations. However, structural factors seem set to intervene once more as the American turn towards the Asia-Pacific (and therefore, to some extent, away from Europe) is set to create new challenges in the years ahead. How much of this is superficial and how much of it is substantive remains the subject of debate. A related question is how much of it is due to changes in the political actors on both sides of the Atlantic and how much is it to do with changes of substantive
policy. In other words how much has agency changed and rejuvenated transatlantic relations and how much have these changes in political actor mitigated the structural factors which others see as sources of divergence between Europe and America? Analysing the recent history of the transatlantic relationship, and in particular its major crises, provides an important avenue for answering some of these questions as we face the coming years of internal crisis in Europe and an America attempting to turnaround a growing narrative of relative decline and retrenchment. A close examination of the driving forces behind the 2003 crisis to the restoration of transatlantic ties from the Bush second term through to Obama’s ‘pivot’ towards Asia highlights the complexity of structure and agency in this most critical of international relationships.

To Iraq and back? The nature of the dispute

The debate over how much was permanently changed in transatlantic relations and how much has been restored subsequent to the Iraq episode must be set in historical context. Transatlantic relations have been marked by a series of crises with each successive episode being presented as uniquely different from the previous crisis in this troubled relationship. Michael Howard, referring to this long and troubled history remarked that the relationship was like a ‘successful but unhappy marriage’. The point being that it was somehow inevitable that this odd couple should and would be together but that did not mean that they were always entirely happy about the relationship. This of course does not foreclose the possibility that any new crisis could be the straw that broke the camel’s back. And for many observers the depth and nature of the transatlantic dispute over Iraq signified just that, something quite different from previous disputes and therefore a radical departure from this traditional way of thinking about this relationship. For Ivo Daalder and Mick Cox, for example, it represents the ‘tipping point’ in a relationship which was already badly fractured in the wake of diverging trends since the end of the Cold War. For this school of thought Iraq demonstrated that within the transatlantic relationship at least two conceptions of what the alliance meant were in operation. For the Bush administration and its allies the existence of the alliance ought to have ensured European support for America’s intervention in Iraq. The failure of many NATO allies to actively support the war and the efforts of some to politically oppose it were seen as disloyalty to the point of betrayal of both the United States as leader of that alliance and of the transatlantic spirit more broadly. For the opponents of this view, Atlanticism had an entirely different meaning. For this school the transatlantic relationship was premised less on a notion of follow my leader than on a set of shared rules and values, among them being a recognition of the importance of the institutions of the international system including the United Nations, international law, and collective decision-making among the major transatlantic powers over matters that materially affected their interests and security and indeed the stability of the international system as a whole.

What the conflict in Iraq did, according to many observers, was to illustrate starkly these two conceptions of what Transatlanticism was supposed to represent. From both perspectives the split over the invasion of Iraq was seen as an infidelity from the spirit of Transatlanticism which could not easily be forgiven or forgotten by either side because of what that infidelity was seen to represent. Like most extra-marital dalliances, while the act itself (the invasion/political opposition to the invasion) was seen as repulsive, more damaging still was what this was seen to represent of how one viewed the other. At the risk of taking this analogy too far the relationship between Europe and America has historically operated like the traditional 1940s marriage that it was, not only in terms of its division of labour but also to the fidelity
Transatlantic relations and how each successive episode contributed to their disintegration is set in historical context. Analysing the recent history of transatlantic relations, provides an important lesson for the future. The most recent years of internal crisis have not been without precedent, and the 2003 crisis to the transatlantic relationship in Iraq demonstrates considerable differences, the overall trend is one of convergence of interests in the context of an external threat rather than divergence of the affiliations of the ideas which the relationship enshrined. Historically it was like a courtly marriage, a political deal conducted with affection rather than love for mutual benefit. For its critics, however, Iraq brought into question the basis of that political deal.

For others, however, there is a danger in extrapolating too much from this single event. For these observers while Iraq demonstrates considerable differences, the overall trend is one of convergence of interests in the context of an external threat rather than divergence of the affiliations of the ideas which the relationship enshrined. Historically it was like a courtly marriage, a political deal conducted with affection rather than love for mutual benefit. For its critics, however, Iraq brought into question the basis of that political deal.

For others, however, there is a danger in extrapolating too much from this single event. For these observers while Iraq demonstrates considerable differences, the overall trend is one of convergence of interests in the context of an external threat rather than divergence of the affiliations of the ideas which the relationship enshrined. Historically it was like a courtly marriage, a political deal conducted with affection rather than love for mutual benefit. For its critics, however, Iraq brought into question the basis of that political deal.

For others, however, there is a danger in extrapolating too much from this single event. For these observers while Iraq demonstrates considerable differences, the overall trend is one of convergence of interests in the context of an external threat rather than divergence of the affiliations of the ideas which the relationship enshrined. Historically it was like a courtly marriage, a political deal conducted with affection rather than love for mutual benefit. For its critics, however, Iraq brought into question the basis of that political deal.
extent that this is true it has largely been attributed to changes in political actors at the elite level on both sides of the Atlantic: to changes in agency as the instigators of new policy and in mitigation of diverging structural trends. In relation to the second Bush term these changes have been attributed in part to the elevation of Condoleezza Rice to Secretary of State and the accompanying reduction in role for the combative Vice President Dick Cheney. Along with these changes came a series of replacement appointments in the top echelon of foreign policy advisors. In came Robert Zoellick, Robert Kimmitt, and Robert Gates and out went Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith, personalities most associated with the failed ideological approach of the first term. The neo-conservative hubris which saw American primacy without limit and which culminated in the invasion of Iraq had, by the second term, it was argued, run aground on the rocks of its own over-ambition. The Bush doctrine, which had been presented as a policy for widespread application was thwarted by the multiple failures of the policy in Iraq.

Transatlantic relations and therefore US foreign policy towards its principal European allies have also undergone a remarkable turnaround largely as a result of changes in leadership on the continent. Initially this trend exacerbated the tensions across the Atlantic with those leaders who had supported Bush’s Iraq policy losing the confidence of their populations. Thus Jose Maria Aznar of Spain and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy lost office to opposition rivals in elections while Tony Blair lost the confidence of his party and the British population and was eventually replaced as Prime Minister. By contrast, however, elections in France and Germany brought in two new leaders who were much more Atlanticist in their outlook. The departure from the political scene of President Chirac of France and Chancellor Schroder of Germany, the principal opponents of the Iraq war and everything it represented, removed a considerable obstacle to better transatlantic relations. That they were replaced by leaders in the form of President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel, elected despite their intentions to improve relations with America, was a further boost to better relations. Sarkozy’s re-election in April 2008 reinforced this trend. The subsequent replacements of Sarkozy and Berlusconi were also free of first-hand experience of the Bush years debacle.

Sarkozy’s election in particular was a major boost to the tone of relations across the Atlantic. With his easy bonhomie and accommodating rhetoric Sarkozy quickly became the ‘new Blair’ in American affections. As a result in his farewell tour of Europe Bush spent two nights in Paris, compared to one in London, and used the French capital to deliver the centrepiece speech of the tour – calling France ‘America’s first friend’. For Washington, according to a US diplomat, Sarkozy had become ‘the axis on which our relations with Europe will turn’. This is all rather different from the ‘axis of weasel’ of 2003. For France too ‘the frost is over’ according to an Elysee Palace spokesman, ‘We want to show the warmth that now exists between the two countries after the friction of the recent past’. In a similar way the new German Chancellor demonstrated her credentials in transatlantic relations as far as Washington was concerned by showing her ability to ‘identify problems, take initiatives, craft agreements other countries can support, and then turn to the United States for the contribution needed to close or enforce the deal’. The re-election of the Atlanticist Silvio Berlusconi reinforced this trend. The only exception to this rule was the rather curious position of the UK government under the short tenure of Gordon Brown which took steps to distance itself from Washington in a number of ways in a rather belated reaction to the excesses of the Bush administration in its first term, on the apparent assumption that it could simultaneously signal its disapproval of the Bush administration while remaining pro-American. Although personal relations have cooled at the highest level between the UK and United States, however, on substantive policy issues the UK remains firmly Atlanticist and
Transatlantic relations and US foreign policy

is the most robust supporter in material terms to American operations in Iraq and NATO and US operations in Afghanistan. Indeed in terms of the structure-agency debate, although counter to the prevailing trend, the actions of the Brown government reinforced the argument that transatlantic relations are susceptible to the influence of changes in agency as much as they are to the underlying structural components of their bilateral relationships.

Improvements in transatlantic relations were evident not only at the level of leadership atmospherics, however. There were real improvements on substantial issues as well as in the mood music. On the American side the combination of the failure of US policy in Iraq and the subsequent embroilment of the US Army in a major counter insurgency war there meant that the anticipated extension of the Bush doctrine to other ‘rogue’ states never materialised. Instead a more nuanced form of diplomacy developed in Bush’s second term with the United States supporting the EU led diplomacy towards Iran and the six party talks towards North Korea.

A similar consensus was achieved in European and American efforts towards the restoration of the Middle East peace process between Israel and Palestine and the emerging statehood of Kosovo. Despite initial inclinations to the contrary Europe and America have also maintained a common approach towards the prohibition of arms sales to China and the non-recognition of Hamas in the Gaza strip. The Bush administration also abandoned its position of denial with regard to global climate change and signed up, along with its European and Asian allies, to global targets for carbon reduction. The Obama administration, although rhetorically more supportive of the need to take action to address climate change, has found this difficult to achieve politically due to Republican Party opposition in Congress. In Afghanistan too all 24 NATO allies became involved in the alliance’s operations against the Taliban in what is for the alliance its first military engagement of any scale and its first military venture outside of Europe. The 2008 Bucharest NATO summit also made substantial progress, according to NATO’s Michael Ruehle, on ‘the need to move from a geographical understanding of security to a more functional approach…There is broad agreement on the direction of NATO’s military transformation, namely toward expeditionary capabilities for operations beyond Europe’. Under President Sarkozy France also announced the deployment of a further 750 French troops to Afghanistan and published the first major strategic review of its armed forces in 14 years. Among its recommendations was an increase in defence spending, further professionalization of the Armed Forces and the announcement of the intention to rejoin the integrated military command structure of NATO. America’s acceptance of the quid pro quo requested by France in return for this, that the United States accept a distinct EU security dimension within NATO, also represented new ground in transatlantic relations.

The year 2008 also saw a substantial shift in European attitudes on two issues which had long plagued transatlantic relations, the related issues of ballistic missile proliferation – and how much of a threat this constitutes, and the appropriateness of missile defence as a strategy to deal with this. Up until this point the European NATO allies were reluctant to identify ballistic missile proliferation as an imminent threat to European security; to name the source of that likely threat in a NATO context, or to embrace ballistic missile defence as the best way of addressing that threat. All these positions have recently shifted, however, and the declaration following the Bucharest NATO Summit in April 2008 a significant shift in position towards the American approach on all three issues, stating that

Ballistic missile proliferation poses an increased threat to Allies forces, territory and populations. Missile defence forms part of a broader response to counter this threat.
We therefore recognize the substantial contribution to the protection of Allies from long
range ballistic missiles to be provided by the planned deployment of European based
United States missile defence assets. We are exploring ways to link this capacity with
current missile defence efforts as a way to ensure that it would be an integral part of any
future NATO wide missile defence architecture.\textsuperscript{20}

While the Bucharest summit failed to reach agreement on the time scale by which Ukraine
and Georgia should be invited to apply for NATO membership, even on this issue more
progress was made than was expected before the meeting. Indeed given the range of issues
and the growing number of negotiating partners involved the 2008 summit represented a
significant set of achievements on a number of issues. While differences remain, including
on which agreement has been reached, the level of unanimity on important security issues
found among the transatlantic partners was unprecedented given the recent events. Whether
this consensus represents a significant repair in transatlantic relations or even a recovery in
the underlying trust between the United States and its allies remains hotly contested. Where
there is room for agreement is that changes in agency have already been responsible for what
improvement in relations have taken place.

**New US president, new multilateralism?**

Although there are many points of similarity in the operational aspects of US foreign policy
between President Obama and his predecessor for which the Obama administration has been
criticized, there are also significant differences in their strategic outlook. While Bush
approached the world as if the United States was the pre-eminent power in an international
system that was essentially unipolar, Obama has a much more sceptical view of the global
environment and America’s role within it. In 2002 the Bush administration set out its world
view in a document called the National Security Strategy of the United States of America
(updated in 2006), which spelled out the Bush administration view that

> The United States possesses unprecedented – and unequalled – strength and influence in
the world. Sustained by faith in the principles of liberty, and the value of a free society,
this position comes with unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity. The
great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favours
freedom

and as a consequence that

> This is also a time of opportunity for America. We will work to translate this moment
of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty... the aim of this strategy is to
help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear:
political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for
human dignity.\textsuperscript{21}

This highly expansive foreign policy was rooted in the twin beliefs that American power in
the international system was “unprecedented and unequalled” and that the United States had
an obligation to use that influence to promote and instil what it believed were universal
values. Using these premises as the foundation of its foreign policy the Bush administration
tested these assumptions to destruction in the invasion of Iraq. Largely as a consequence of
the United States is capable of in an increasingly demanding international environment. Thus in talking about his opposition to the Iraq war in January 2007 Obama exclaimed that "I don't want to just end the war, but I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place." A month later he expanded on this with regards to Iraq by stating that "it’s time to admit that no amount of American lives can resolve the political disagreements that lie at the heart of someone else’s civil war." In these remarks Obama was signalling both the limits of American power and the need to limit the ambition of American foreign policy goals in order to avoid testing the limits of US power and influence. In office Obama has come to a similar conclusion about the limits of American power to transform Afghanistan. According to Woodward, Obama was clear that the strategy he wanted to adopt was 

about how we’re going to hand it off and get out of Afghanistan... Everything we’re doing has to be focused on how we’re going to get to the point where we can reduce our footprint. It’s in our national security interest. There cannot be any wiggle room... I’m not doing 10 years... I’m not doing long-term nation-building. I am not spending a trillion dollars."

The parallel with détente is instructive in that President Kennedy’s inaugural pledge to ‘pay any price, and to bear any burden’ had established too expansive a commitment and the realism of Nixon and Kissinger was a necessary corrective following the withdrawal from Vietnam. Where détente differed to the present international environment, however, was that in the late 1960s and early 1970s America faced the emergence of a single rising superpower in the form of the Soviet Union, whereas today America faces no single challenger for the position of dominant power within the international system. Instead it faces a series of issues, states, non-state actors, and situations where its ability to influence events in favour of its interests and values is limited and potentially diminishing. It is a situation where there is less a prospect of loss of control in certain areas to another rising power or powers but more a loss of control to anyone or anything within an increasingly anarchic international system. In this respect his worldview is closer to that of many European powers than previous American administrations, which has meant that his approach is largely met with approval across the Atlantic.

Given this strategic assessment the Obama administration has tried to construct an inclusive diplomatic approach which tries to utilize what power America has in the international system towards the creation of a multilateral approach for what is viewed as an increasingly multipolar world. Henry Kissinger has described this approach as a return to

some sort of concert diplomacy... in which groupings of great powers work together to enforce international norms. In that view, American leadership results from the willingness to listen and to provide inspirational affirmations. Common action grows out of shared convictions. Power emerges from a sense of community and is exercised by an allocation of responsibilities related to a country’s resources. It is a kind of world order either without a dominating power or in which the potentially dominating power leads through self-restraint.

An important aspect of that self-restraint is the recognition that America can’t have it all and correspondingly needs to prioritize cooperation in its relations with other great powers. What this means in practice is several things. For Obama and in direct contrast with Bush,
resort to the use or threat of use of military force has been conspicuously downplayed. Thus in his May 2010 National Security Strategy document Obama states that ‘We will draw on diplomacy, development, and international norms and institutions to help resolve disagreements, prevent conflict, and maintain peace, mitigating where possible the need for the use of force’. Obama also stressed the need for an equal partnership, and in doing so was controversially critical of the previous US foreign policy record. In Trinidad and Tobago, part of what critics called ‘Obama’s apology tour’ he made this contrast explicit, stating that I know that promises of partnership have gone unfulfilled in the past, and that trust has to be earned over time. While the United States has done much to promote peace and prosperity in the hemisphere, we have at times been disengaged, and at times we sought to dictate our terms. But I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership. There is no senior partner and junior partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect and common interests and shared values.

Another aspect of this new approach is the need to prioritize its foreign policy goals in relations with the major powers and act accordingly. It needs not to antagonize those states unnecessarily by criticizing them over issues such as their domestic human rights records or their democratic credentials. The most notable example of this new approach in operation was Hillary Clinton’s first visit to China as Secretary of State where the issue of human rights was downplayed in bilateral talks, and indeed was relegated to a meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, while other more substantive issues were discussed in meetings with the Chinese President and prime minister. As Clinton herself explained, ‘Successive administrations and Chinese governments have been poised back and forth on these issues [human rights], and we have to continue to press them. But our pressing on those issues can’t interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis, and the security crisis.’

This more pragmatic approach was also on display in Hillary Clinton’s confirmation hearing before the Senate where what she didn’t say was as much a subject of subsequent debate as what she did. Outlining the administration’s new diplomatic approach Clinton talked about the importance of the three ‘D’s, defence, diplomacy, and development. The absence of the fourth D, democracy, was for many observers a clear departure from the ‘freedom agenda’ of the Bush administration. As Peter Baker observed in The New York Times:

Since taking office, neither Mr Obama nor his advisors have made much mention of democracy-building as a goal. While not directly repudiating Mr Bush’s grand, even grandiose vision, Mr Obama appears poised to return to a more traditional American policy of dealing with the world as it is rather than as it might be.

Supporting this analysis, rather interestingly, Obama’s National Security Council does not replicate the high profile democracy promotion post that his predecessor had, an indication of reduced priority. That is not to say, however, that Obama has abandoned the promotion of democracy as a US foreign policy goal, or that he does not believe in the articulation of American values in the foreign policy realm. Instead, however, it is clear that for Obama, regime type is no obstacle to necessary dialogue. This was evident in his inaugural address where he stated that ‘To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist’. Clearly the prospect of better relations with Iran in this case trumps concern about regime type, or even domestic behaviour. The Obama
downplayed. Thus it is clear that ‘We will draw on history to help resolve disagreements, resolve the need for the use of force in doing so was considered’ in Trinidad and Tobago, part explicit, stating that

past, and that trust has been to promote peace and at times we sought partnership. There is no

 engagement based on

engagement in relation to antagonize those states and human rights records or approach in operation was sue of human rights was with the Chinese Foreign discussed in meetings with stated, ‘Successive administrations on these issues [human issues can’t interfere the security crisis.”]

nton’s confirmation hearing of subsequent debate approach Clinton talked development. The absence of on the ‘freedom agenda’

made much mention of; Mr Bush’s grand, even more traditional American be.31

security Council does not successor had, an indication abandoned the promotion in the articulation of; it is clear that for Obama, in his inaugural address and deceit and the; but that we will extend act of better relations with the behaviour. The Obama administration’s refusal to take a strong stand on the stolen Presidential elections in Iran in June 2009 was a clear example of this. The importance of the wider relationship and the fear of being seen to endorse the opposition movement, which would have been unhelpful to them, was guiding consideration of the Obama administration. Obama himself has also indicated that he is less concerned with democracy in the abstract and would prefer an approach to good governance which approached the subject ‘through a lens that is actually delivering a better life for people on the ground and less obsessed with form, more concerned with substance’.33 This rejection of the previous administration’s focus on elections was echoed in Obama’s Cairo speech where his outreach to the Muslim world was accompanied by a statement about the importance of good governance and civil society, stating that ‘no matter where it takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who would hold power; you must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy.’ 34 It is an approach which seeks to be less divisive — no more ‘with us or against us’, and more an attempt to lead by example. As Secretary Clinton has argued — the administration intends to achieve its ‘goals using our power not to dominate or divide but to solve problems’ and to do so by capitalizing on America’s unique strengths

we must advance those interests through partnership and promote universal values through the power of our example and the empowerment of people. In this way we can forge the global consensus required to defeat the threats, manage the dangers, and seize the opportunities of the 21st century... we will exercise American leadership to build partnerships and solve problems that no nation can solve on its own, and we will pursue policies to mobilize more partners and deliver results.35 The themes of cooperation and engagement permeate every foreign policy statement of the new administration and Secretary Clinton has called for a new ‘architecture of global cooperation’, because ‘no nation can meet the world’s challenges alone’. For Clinton the administration’s goal of enlisting more partners to help solve the world problems is necessary both because ‘no nation can meet the world’s challenges alone. The issues are too complex. Too many players are competing for influence, from rising powers to corporations to criminal cartels, from NGOs to al-Qaeda, from state-controlled media to individuals using Twitter’ and because most nations faced the ‘same global threats — from non-proliferation to fighting disease to counter-terrorism’. In this vision it is the US role to lead in

turning commonality of interest into common action... [by using] our power to convene, our ability to connect countries around the world, and sound foreign policy strategies to create partnerships aimed at solving problems. We’ll go beyond states to create opportunities for non-state actors and individuals to contribute to solutions. We believe this approach will advance our interests by uniting diverse partners around common concerns

and

make it more difficult for others to abdicate their responsibilities or abuse their power, but will offer a place at the table to any nation, group or citizen willing to shoulder a fair

Transatlantic relations and US foreign policy

205
share of the burden. In short, we will lead by inducing greater cooperation among a greater number of actors and reducing competition, tilting the balance away from a multi-polar world and toward a multi-partner world.36

In its bi-lateral relations with every other state the United States is the dominant power. It now seeks to mobilize those relationships to build global coalitions on the challenging issues of the era.

Clinton also had a warning to those who would seek to undermine this leadership role and multi-partner approach, arguing that

our partnerships can [also] become power coalitions to constrain or deter those negative actions. And to these foes and would-be foes let me say our focus in diplomacy and development is not an alternative to our national security arsenal. Our willingness to talk is not a sign of weakness to be exploited. We will not hesitate to defend our friends, our interests and above all our people, vigorously and when necessary with the world’s strongest military.37

In its search for this multi-partner approach the Obama administration is responding to the diffusion of power within the international system. The previously privileged relationship which existed within the West with America’s traditional allies in Europe and Asia is of necessity being supplanted and augmented by an approach which seeks to harness the engagement, influence, and leverage of new players in the realm of international politics. Rather like in the period of detente the United States under Obama seeks to use diplomacy to divide American’s antagonists and persuade new partners to act in ways that further the US agenda. For Obama himself, according to Fareed Zakaria, ‘His interest in diplomacy seems driven by the sense that one can probe, learn, and possibly divide and influence countries and movements precisely because they are not monoliths’ and in talking about Islamic extremists he repeatedly emphasised the diversity within the Islamic world, speaking of Arabs, Persians, Africans, Southeast Asians, Shiites and Sunnis, all of whom have their own interest and agendas’ which need to be addressed separately.38 In accepting that the influence of the United States in the international system is not what it might be, the Obama administration has shown no sign of being daunted by the international agenda. Instead it has embarked on a vigorous series of diplomatic engagements in order to galvanize disparate coalitions of interests and parties towards addressing the main foreign policy challenges of the day. Recognising the classic difficulty of addressing collective action problems - that common issues usually result in an unequal willingness to bear burdens and run risks - the administration has also set out what is describes as a strategy of ‘smart power’ to help it to achieve these goals. What is meant by this term, according to Secretary Clinton, is the mobilization of

our ability to convene and connect. It means our economic and military strength, our capacity for entrepreneurship and innovation and the ability and credibility of our new president and his team... Smart power translates into specific policy approaches in five areas: First, we intend to update and create vehicles for cooperation with our partners; second, we will pursue principled engagement with those who disagree with us; third, we will elevate development as a core pillar of American power; fourth, we will integrate civilian and military action in conflict areas; and fifth, we will leverage key sources of American power, including our economic strength and the power of our example.39
The main paradox of this more ‘European’ approach to foreign policy is the relative neglect of transatlantic relations. Europe is no longer the site of political attention; rather the Europeans are seen as supporting actors in the unfolding drama of 21st century politics. However, in a few key areas, European actors have become central to the Obama administration’s foreign policy strategy. On Iran in particular, the transatlantic relationship has been at its strongest since before the Iraq split of 2003. The negotiations over the Iranian nuclear programme have been dominated, despite attempts by a number of so-called ‘rising’ or ‘middle’ powers such as Turkey and Brazil to create their own role, by the joint efforts of the United States, Britain, France, and Germany usually led by the EU’s foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton. While China and Russia have also taken part in the talks with Iran as part of a six-country negotiating coalition, it has been the transatlantic powers that have played the most dominant role and presented a united front. While divisions existed among these states, even as late as Bush’s second term, over the prospect of a military ‘solution’ to Iran’s nuclear activities, recent years have seen a large degree of unity among the United States and Europe and its European allies with the phrase ‘western’ (i.e. transatlantic) negotiators becoming widely used in public discourse.

Structural changes in the transatlantic relationship

While most commentators recognize and welcome the improvement in relations across the Atlantic during the Obama administration, others continue to argue that structural changes in the international political system have resulted in patterns of divergence in relations between the United States and Europe of a fundamentally transformative nature. Amongst these trends two changes in particular are often identified: those which have taken place in Germany and the other in the foreign policy of the United States itself.

The Berlin Republic

Although provoked by the particular circumstances of the Iraqi crisis itself, the transatlantic dispute of 2003 signalled the operation of something much more profound than the future of Iraq itself. Coming as it did fourteen years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and two years after 9/11, the Iraqi crisis represented the culmination of several long-running processes. Although the French-led opposition to the invasion of Iraq was the most obvious demonstration of the rift within the Atlantic alliance, in some regards this was the least radical policy change of the decade. President Chirac’s opposition to the Bush administration, passing a new milestone in actively trying to thwart the strategic intentions of American foreign policy, was at least within the traditions of Paris’s historical opposition to what it sees as American hegemony. The same could not be said, however, in relation to the stance adopted by the Federal Republic of Germany. Historically Germany’s role within the transatlantic alliance was central to the linkage between Europe and the United States. Germany’s defiance towards Washington in matters of security policy was a balancing counterpart to its partnership with France in the construction of the European project. Germany’s reliance on America for security was a restraining influence on European opposition to US foreign policy. As a quid pro quo for this restraint Washington was always careful to accommodate Germany’s concerns in recognition of the importance of the Federal Republic’s role within Europe and Europe’s role within the Cold War stand-off. With the end of the Cold War the foundations of this grand bargain were nullified but its effects went unnoticed as a result of the benign international environment of the Clinton years combined with the process of
German unification which absorbed much of Bonn’s attentions and resources throughout the 1990s. Throughout this period, however, at a time when Germany’s sense of its new identity was rising, the strategic importance of Germany to the United States, and thus the need to accommodate its concerns, was in decline. Where there was a coincidence of interests such as German participation in the Kosovo campaign in 1999, the structural changes in the nature of this relationship remained dormant. Quite what a turning point for German foreign policy the Kosovo war was, however, was masked by the shared objective of the allied participants. What at the time was seen as a demonstration of transatlantic solidarity, however, was in reality an indication of other forces at work. In fact the decision to take part in this military action was a marker more of a desire to pursue an independent foreign policy than it was a demonstration of alliance solidarity. Thus when the United States indicated its plans to conduct operations in Afghanistan through coalitions of the willing rather than through NATO and then promulgated its doctrine of pre-emptive warfare, and applied that to Iraq despite no clear UN mandate to do so, the stage was set for Germany to break ranks with Washington and in so doing to break with its post-war tradition of limited sovereignty expressed as a constrained foreign policy. Thus as Buras and Longhurst explain, Germany’s opposition to the Iraq war was an expression of ‘normalization’ which for the ‘Berlin Republic relates to a changed perception of sovereignty and the licence this gives Germany to pursue a foreign policy line steered by conceptions of German interests... it was Germany’s freedom of action that counted’ now ‘and not the coherence of the Western alliance’. The significance of this change for transatlantic relations cannot be overestimated. As Andrews argues, ‘from a structural perspective, the key change in postwar European politics is Germany’s newfound capacity for policy manoeuvre... a new era of “permissiveness” for Germany’ has been ushered in which ‘represents a fundamental change in transatlantic relations’. This is primarily the case not because of the disagreement over Iraq but because of structural changes in the international system. The Iraqi crisis merely demonstrated that such disagreements were possible and set the ‘Schroder precedent’ for future repetitions. Absent the previously existing imperative of alliance cohesion the scope for future disagreements is now considerable since not only have the structural conditions changed but so have the German electorate’s awareness of those changes. Thus the German government is much more willing to criticize US policy, as it did in 2007 over Washington’s planned deployment of ballistic missile system components in Poland without fully consulting Russia. As a result, and rather ironically given the Berlin Republic’s newfound willingness to contemplate the use of force beyond the confines of narrowly defined self-defence, the ability of the United States to rely on Germany as an Atlanticist partner in matters of security policy has been diminished as a result of the changes in foreign policy outlook which the Iraq crisis brought to the fore. It is for this reason that the United States has failed to convince Germany to lift the restrictions on the deployment and operations of its forces in Afghanistan despite a sustained effort to do so. In this sense, despite the new mood created by the election of Chancellor Merkel, relations with Europe’s largest economy and America’s formerly staunchest ally remain in a different place to the Cold War period. The decision of Germany to vote against any participation in the NATO-led operation over Libya in 2013 was a further indicator of the willingness of the Berlin Parliament to express its growing pacifist trend. The fact that the Libya operation was a humanitarian mission with UN and Arab League support and was supported by the majority of the Libyan people made this decision all the more surprising. Taken together with the limited parameters of German operations in Afghanistan, from Washington’s point of view the validity of Germany as a reliable ally within the NATO context must be further questioned.
Having fewer cooperative allies also feeds other aspects of the structural changes in transatlantic relations. With the end of the Cold War, the security of Europe secured, America is less interested in Europe as the cockpit of international politics, and the support of European states in its international relations is also correspondingly less vital than it was. It is perhaps these structural changes in US foreign policy in the post 9/11 period which may be most influential to transatlantic relations in the long term.

US foreign policy – the implications of the Bush doctrine

Despite the end of the Cold War American foreign policy remained focused on Europe throughout the 1990s due in large part to the politics of NATO and EU enlargement and the Balkan wars. Even during the Clinton administration, however, America’s new and distinctive position within the international system began to be expressed through an increased tendency to pursue its interests unilaterally, rather than in concert with its traditional transatlantic allies. Absent the Soviet threat America increasingly found no continuing need to trim its foreign policy inclinations in light of the sensitivities of its European allies. Alliance harmony was no longer a strategic imperative of the post-Cold War period and thus ceased to be a guiding principle of US foreign policy. Not until the arrival of the Bush administration in 2001, however, did this become abundantly clear to America’s transatlantic partners. From the outset the tone and substance of the new Republican administration marked a disjuncture with the Clinton administration which it had replaced. Bush’s inclination to pursue an ‘America first’ agenda was accelerated in response to the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the strategic reassessment that followed was nothing less than revolutionary.

Advocates of this argument point to the adoption of a new strategic doctrine by the Bush administration and to the fact that in doing so it abandoned the tenets of America’s post-war approach to grand strategy. Although it made headlines by its advocacy of pre-emptive military action, the new strategic doctrine’s implications are much broader and more significant than this. For over 50 years the United States relied on a combination of containment and deterrence as the guiding principle of its geopolitical approach. It was this strategy that successfully won the Cold War and it was this approach that was applied to Iraq after the Gulf conflict in 1991 by successive administrations, including, initially, that of George W. Bush. Containment, however, was a reactive and multilateral strategy that was framed in circumstances, and in the context of the global war on terrorism, that this new doctrine was forged. It could be distinguished from previous US strategies in three important ways: its focus on pre-emption, its hegemonic aspirations, and its unilateralism. While all three elements had an enhanced prominence in the new doctrine, they all had their antecedents in previous policy debates, and for this reason, it is argued, have become entrenched in US policy.

Pre-emption

Although the adoption of a policy that actively espoused pre-emptive military action to remove capabilities or regimes that threaten the United States was a significant change in policy, it was also one which had followed a clear evolutionary path. Throughout the Cold War there were various attempts made to break away from the constraints and risks that the
containment doctrine involved. In the post-Cold War era the Clinton administration took a small step towards a pre-emption policy in 1993 with the announcement of the Counter-proliferation Initiative. Importantly, however, this initiative aimed to provide a military capability. It did not propose the elevation of pre-emption to the forefront of US foreign policy as a declaratory strategy.

The rationale of the policy under Bush was the perceived inability to deter the new type of adversary. 'In the Cold War', the NSS 2002 states, 'weapons of mass destruction were considered weapons of last resort whose use risked the destruction of those who used them. Today, our enemies see weapons of mass destruction as weapons of choice', with the result that the 'United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past... We cannot let our enemies strike first.' The way in which the United States viewed its own nuclear weapons was also revised in light of this new doctrine; the Nuclear Posture Review added 'rogue' states to the list of potential targets and removed the pledge not to attack non-nuclear states.

Support for pre-emption was bolstered by the successful use of military force in both Kosovo and the initial success in Afghanistan. For Washington, these missions developed 'a profound optimism that we can do it – we can invade a country halfway round the world and bring about a reasonable settlement'. It was also a strategy that was developed with a target state in mind: Iraq. It was partly in that context that the strategy was initially judged favourably by members of Congress and the public alike. For many observers, however, there remained serious concerns about its implications both in general terms and with regard to Iraq in particular. For many of the European allies this policy also raised concerns with regard to the wider implications of the strategy and the distance that it created between them, if pre-emption was legitimate for the United States then why not for India against Pakistan, or vice versa, or Israel against Iran or any other number of possible scenarios. Concern was also expressed as to the limits of this policy. If Iraq followed on from Afghanistan then which state would be next after Iraq and where would the policy end given Washington’s long list of ‘rogue’ states? The development of this strategy posed a serious problem for the continuity of transatlantic relations as they had previously been understood. Despite the recent improvement in relation many European allies remain opposed to pre-emption as a strategic doctrine and saw little prospect of the United States renouncing its shift to this new strategic outlook.

Much more of the thinking in relation to pre-emption has remained from the Bush administration into the Obama administration's approach than was expected by most. While the muscular rhetoric has changed, the basic principle of 'striking before being struck' has remained albeit with less emphasis on regime change and full-scale intervention and more on the increased reliance on unmanned aerial vehicles (or 'drones') and Special Forces. Both have allowed the Obama administration to pre-emptively strike against groups and individuals seen to be a threat to US personnel and interests but at a distance (drones) and in the shadows (Special Forces). The result has been far less criticism from across the Atlantic than that faced by the Bush administration in its first term.

Pre-eminence

Though less widely reported, an equally important aspect of the new Bush doctrine was its statement that the United States would not permit any state to close the military lead that it established after the collapse of the USSR. 'Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in the hope of surpassing or equaling,
the power of the USA.' Given that US military spending accounts for 40 per cent of global military expenditure, more than the next 20 largest spenders combined, as a statement of fact this was unremarkable. As a political aspiration, however, it illustrates how the United States viewed the world and its place in it. The NSS 2002 set out a world role that was proactive in its advocacy of what it called

a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human rights.

It was a strategy that committed the United States to champion free markets, free trade, democracy, and human rights. The mechanisms it identified for this purpose were supportive allies, increased but conditional foreign aid and unrestrained military might.

**Unilateralism**

The third and related aspect of the new strategy was its insistence that 'While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense'. In many respects this was the most troubling aspect of US foreign policy, particularly in the post-9/11 environment. Even the election of the decidedly multilateralist Obama administration was not enough to totally shift the perception of a superpower willing to 'go it alone'. America's opposition to the International Criminal Court, to the Landmine Treaty, to the ban on Cluster Weapons, and the verification protocol of the Biological Weapons Convention has remained largely unchanged. Even the United States' recent acceptance of the need to address climate change has not resulted in any major concessions in the international negotiations. What has changed, however, is the reluctance of the United States to initiate any additional military actions. Thus in March 2011 the Obama administration was slow to endorse British and French calls for action in regard to Libya. When NATO finally did engage in this conflict through a no-fly zone it was the Europeans who flew most of the missions and dropped most of the ordinance. While the United States was involved, it largely played a facilitating role, what an administration official dubbed 'leading from behind'. Similarly during the external military intervention against Tuareg and Islamist rebels in Mali in 2013, Washington has been content to let the French take the lead, a particularly interesting development given the substantial amounts of money the United States had previously invested in training Mali's military and intelligence services.9 In relation to Syria, the United States has shown great reluctance to become embroiled in what has become a bloody and protracted civil war. However, in the latter case, European powers such as Britain, France, and Germany have mimicked Washington's position by adding their diplomatic support for the rebels opposing President Bashar al-Assad's regime but refusing to offer anything other than very limited military support and certainly nothing approximating direct intervention.

In relation to all three cases what is particularly striking is the lack of public debate about the transatlantic relationship. In stark contrast to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the difference between the United States and its NATO allies' positions on both Libya and Mali have been limited to how involved Washington is willing to be in the specific military operation, rather than whether the intervention is justified in the first place. In relation to Syria, the positions of the major European powers (who were all at the heart of the transatlantic split over
Iraq, whether joining or opposing the United States) have been almost indistinguishable from that of the United States. While many have predicted that on-going cuts in European defence budgets (generally as part of wider attempts to cut deficits in response to the global financial crisis) would significantly strain transatlantic relations, the reality seems to be that unease in Washington has been mitigated by a lack of appetite for military intervention generally. Added to this is a growing realization in Washington that significant cuts to the US military budget are unlikely to be avoided in the coming years, making criticism of similar choices in European capitals difficult to maintain.

The ‘pivot’ towards Asia and the view from Europe

The most significant shift in transatlantic relations in recent years would appear to have been driven by agency more than structure with the election of Barack Obama in the United States being centrally important to how the relationship was viewed from both sides of the Atlantic. However, by the time the Obama administration was halfway through its first term, the debate about structural power in the international political system had shifted quite dramatically. Rather than a world in which America would remain pre-eminent for the foreseeable future, many were speculating about Washington’s relative decline and a shift in the centre of global power from West to East. In particular, the impressive growth rates of a number of countries, and in particular the two ‘Asian giants’ of China and India was beginning to be translated into political clout. This gave the impression of a major trend that Washington had failed to grasp while it had been preoccupied with the War on Terror, the Iraq crisis and its impact on the transatlantic relationship, and the policies outlined above. As one observer noted, ‘In short, Asia is being reborn and remade. Yet the United States is badly prepared for this momentous rebirth, which is at once stitching Asia back together and making the United States less relevant in each of Asia’s constituent parts.’

By the second half of 2011, the Obama administration had announced a ‘rebalancing’ of its strategic outlook to take greater account of what was happening in the Asia-Pacific region. The rationale behind what quickly became known as the US ‘pivot’ towards Asia was outlined in a 2012 US Department of Defense document that stated:

US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the US military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.

Such a re-focusing in national security assessments would inevitably take account of China’s military modernization programmes as well as important developments such as the building of a series of port facilities along the eastern and southern coasts of Asia aimed at increasing China’s naval presence in the region.

Despite the improvement in transatlantic relations following the election of Barack Obama, this shift in US foreign policy has threatened to reignite tensions once more as European allies felt distinctly neglected in this rush to focus on the Asia-Pacific region. Allies such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia appeared to be set to take up the mantle of Washington’s nearest and dearest. Australia, for example, became the recipient of a new US marine base in Darwin while two combat brigades would be brought home from Germany after having been based there for decades. This despite the fact that
havest indistinguishable
cuts in European
cutbacks in the United States
faced on both sides of the Atlantic. Following the end of the Cold War, the economic power and military intervention in the regional and global contexts has shifted quite dramatically, giving way to a more significant focus on the Asia-Pacific region. The effects of the structural changes in the international system brought about by the end of the Cold War, which mostly lay latent and suppressed throughout the Cold War period and latent but contained throughout the 1990s, have now brought into question both the basis and the core of transatlanticism as it had previously been conceived. For many European observers, the policies and positions adopted by the Bush administration were seen as a culmination of a series of trends in American foreign and security policy which had been present but repressed throughout the Cold War period and latent but contained throughout the 1990s. The triumphalism of the National Security Strategy Document and the strategic aspirations which it advanced and the worldview that this betrayed seemed to represent for many Europeans their conception of transatlanticism was the pulling together of sovereign powers towards common ends in support and furtherance of their common values. This was set of ideas that they had taken forward with the construction of the European Union and the establishment of the European Security Strategy, which the EU Union's foreign policy
High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the EU
began to draft a security strategy document of its own. In this document, A Secure Europe in a Better World, drafted by Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the EU offered a response to the US strategy statement in a number of ways. Most immediately it widened the horizons of European security concerns by recognizing that Europe’s security interest and the threats which are posed to them are global rather than purely regional in their nature. It also set out three pillars of the common strategy. The first pillar called for the extension of the security zone around Europe and recognized the strategic priority of bringing stability to areas on the continent’s periphery. The second pillar concerned the mechanisms of global governance and called for the reaffirmation of the United Nations as the principal institution of international security. And thirdly, the EU called for new policies to respond to the twin threats of terrorism and WMD proliferation. The main differences between the American and European strategy papers was the complete absence in the latter of any discussion of

Transatlantic consequences

The effects of the structural changes in the international system brought about by the end of the Cold War which mostly lay latent and suppressed throughout 1990s have now become the subject of political as well as academic discourse. Major events such as the end of the Cold War, German unification, 9/11, the reaction to the terrorist attacks and the invasion of Iraq, and finally the pivot towards Asia have now brought into question both the basis and the continued operation of the transatlantic community as it had previously been conceived. For many European observers the policies and positions adopted by the Bush administration were seen as a culmination of a series of trends in American foreign and security policy which had been present but repressed throughout the Cold War period and latent but contained throughout the 1990s. The triumphalism of the National Security Strategy Document and the strategic aspirations which it advanced and the worldview that this betrayed seemed to represent for many Europeans their conception of transatlanticism was the pulling together of sovereign powers towards common ends in support and furtherance of their common values. This was set of ideas that they had taken forward with the construction of the European Union and the establishment of the European Security Strategy, which the EU Union's foreign policy
High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the EU
began to draft a security strategy document of its own. In this document, A Secure Europe in a Better World, drafted by Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the EU offered a response to the US strategy statement in a number of ways. Most immediately it widened the horizons of European security concerns by recognizing that Europe’s security interest and the threats which are posed to them are global rather than purely regional in their nature. It also set out three pillars of the common strategy. The first pillar called for the extension of the security zone around Europe and recognized the strategic priority of bringing stability to areas on the continent’s periphery. The second pillar concerned the mechanisms of global governance and called for the reaffirmation of the United Nations as the principal institution of international security. And thirdly, the EU called for new policies to respond to the twin threats of terrorism and WMD proliferation. The main differences between the American and European strategy papers was the complete absence in the latter of any discussion of

Transatlantic relations and US foreign policy

in an op-ed piece in The New York Times in 2010, Obama claimed that "our relationship with our European allies and partners is the cornerstone of our engagement with the world." Such has been the level of concern in European capitals, that the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, felt the need to use a major speech at the end of 2012 to reassure transatlantic allies that "Our pivot to Asia is not a pivot away from Europe. On the contrary, we want Europe to engage more in Asia, along with us to see the region not only as a market, but as a focus of common strategic engagement." The fact that Clinton felt the need to state this publicly and so directly speaks volumes about the concern in Europe. Despite the fact that most European leaders feel more comfortable with the less unilateralist and hawkish Obama administration than they did with its predecessor, the relationship for now appears beholden to larger structural trends and processes.
military pre-emption and the repeated calls to strengthen both international law and the institutions and norms of international order. While agreeing more or less on the nature of the security threats presented in the post 9/11 environment there were significant differences remaining over the appropriate means. Perhaps the most important aspect of the European Security Strategy document, however, was that it was written at all. That this was the case is indicative of the fact that the Europeanization process has been spurred on by the Iraq crisis itself. The lessons learned from the division in Europe over the Iraq crisis, which left the continent’s response to Washington divided and ineffective, was that such a division within Europe is best avoided in the future and that the best way for this to be achieved is through the development of common European approaches to foreign and security policy issues.

However, as Europe becomes increasingly embroiled in its own financial and political crisis and Washington attempts to reverse its fortunes in terms of the global power structure it would appear that the transatlantic relationship now faces a new set of challenges. Whether the lessons from the Iraq crisis of 2003 can be translated into a new approach by both sides in the coming decades as America’s Asia pivot increases will, to some extent, determine the future character of the relationship. If Charles Kupchan is right that ‘if the Atlantic democracies hang together, they have a far better chance of anchoring the transition to multipolarity and ensuring that it happens by design rather by default’, then this has become central for both sides of the Atlantic.

One of the most interesting developments in the second term of the Obama administration has been that despite the centrality of the ‘pivot’ towards Asia in US foreign and defence policy, the administration has reignited serious discussion of a US–EU free trade agreement. The fact that, despite the global financial crisis, the United States and EU together make up 25 per cent of exports and 32 per cent of imports globally, led President Obama to call for a renewed effort to create a transatlantic free-trade area in his 2013 State of the Union address. While many barriers will need to be addressed in the negotiations (not least reconciling the differences in American and European agricultural subsidies), there appears to be strong public support in the United States with a recent Pew survey showing that the majority believe that increased trade with the EU would be good for the United States.

In the end what the free trade agreement discussion may actually signal is the importance of structural factors for both sides of the Atlantic – both the United States and Europe spent the first decade of the twenty-first century focused on transnational terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the latter’s effect on their own transatlantic relationship. Just as the election of a new American president appeared to herald a shift in priorities away from these issues (for both sides), the financial crisis struck and consumed time, energy, and political capital. All the while the two Asian giants of China and India, and other more far-flung contenders like Brazil and Turkey, continued to rise both as economic powerhouses and increasingly as important centres of geopolitical power. The US–EU free trade agreement talks are perhaps the most potent symbol of the extent to which both sides of the transatlantic alliance are coming to recognize that their axis is not one in which the major developments in international politics will turn indefinitely. Therefore coming even closer together may be the only option to hold on to their structural power in a multipolar world.

**Conclusions**

Transatlantic relations have improved significantly since the low point of 2003 in large part as a result of a concerted effort to do so on both sides of the Atlantic. The Iraq crisis of 2003
presented a glimpse of a world in which the West was split and the transatlantic community was divided against itself in a state of political stalemate. It was an unappealing vision and one which new leaderships on both sides of the Atlantic have strenuously sought to avoid in their subsequent international relations. In their diplomacy since then over Iran, North Korea, the Middle East, and also Afghanistan and Iraq, the transatlantic allies have shown the positive benefits of working together rather than the pit falls and paralysis of oppositional politics. The current challenges in Syria, the Sahel, and elsewhere demonstrate the continued importance of the relationship.

How much of this can be attributed to changes of agency, new leaders with new policies, and how much it reflects the cyclical pattern of transatlantic relations where structural tensions rise to crisis point before being mitigated, remains open to question. Although changes in both Germany and in the EU itself as an international actor provide significant and novel structural changes to the international system affecting the operation of the traditional pattern of relations across the Atlantic, it is changes in the United States itself and its subsequent effect on its relations with its European allies that perhaps presents the biggest challenge to the continued conception of transatlantic relations in the twenty-first century.

Changes in the structure of world politics with the end of the Cold War have undoubtedly changed the context of transatlantic relations but how fundamentally these affect the ability of Europe and America to work in concert to deal with the new challenges which this new environment presents is in large part dependent on the nature of changes within the United States itself. Whether the ‘pivot’ towards Asia represents Washington’s attempt to ‘catch up’ with the ‘rising rest’ or instead the next chapter of its assertive post-Cold War global dominance will depend on Obama’s global ambitions in his second term and the ambitions of his subsequent successor. This decision is set to define whether the transatlantic relationship remains the most important partnership in international politics or whether it will become an artefact from a bygone age.

Notes
4 Ibid., p. 6.
5 Ibid., p. 8.
7 Tom Baldwin and Charles Bremner, ‘After years of the special relationship, is France America’s next best friend?’, The Times, 14 June 2008.
9 The most immediate impediment to the further application of this strategy was the failure to discover the WMD on which the case for the immediate invasion of Iraq was justified. The lack of any evidence of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons or even of any on-going programmes to produce them was widely seen as undermining the American case for war. What was true for the worst-case assumptions was also true for the best-case analysis. While the Iraqis might have been glad to be rid of Saddam Hussein they were not impressed with the inability of the American occupiers to provide security, civil amenities, and a semblance of order. The faulty assumptions on which Operation Iraq Freedom were built and justified were a setback for the Bush administration in both practice and in principle.
Transatlantic relations and US foreign policy

September 2007 (available online at www.cia.gov/blairpleasdk).

'nuclear disarmament' expectations', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 17 January 2009. (available online at www.thenational.ae/papers/2009030801492.html).

32 ‘Avoid them’ (available online at www.cia.gov/blairpleasdk).


34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.


37 ‘Clinton: Chinese human rights.’

38 See, for example, Jumia Parak, ‘EU’s Ashton to meet Iran’s nuclear negotiator on May 15′, Reuters, 2 May 2013.


42 In 1954 President Eisenhower announced his ‘Rollback Doctrine’ (which sought to ‘roll back’ the ‘Iron Curtain’ – that is, overawop communist regimes in Eastern Europe), only to abandon Hungary to its fate in 1956 when that country put this policy to the test. Faced with the risk of confrontation with the USSR, which had invaded Hungary, the Eisenhower administration retreated to the safety and security of containment. In the 1980s the Reagan administration sought in its nuclear policies options pre-emptive contingencies for fighting a limited nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Similarly Reagan’s enthusiasm for both his Strategic Defence Initiative and, later, for radical arms control proposals reflected his desire to escape US reliance on nuclear deterrence. Despite his support for these policies, however, deterrence remained US strategy.

43 Interestingly, the adoption of the pre-emption strategy was not the immediate response of the Bush administration to the September 2001 terrorist attacks. In his congressional address on 20 September 2001, President Bush declared that the new grand purpose for US policy was ‘ending terrorism’. The switch to preventing the accumulation of weapons of mass destruction (‘in the hands of irresponsible states’) was a policy developed gradually during 2002 (Lambert, N. ‘The next world order’, The New Yorker, 25 August 2002; see also David Hastings Dunn, ‘Bush, 9/11 and the conflicting strategies of the “War on Terrorism”’, Irish Studies in International Affairs, 16: 11–33 (October 2005)).


65 Despite the fact that some such as Michael Cox have rightly expressed some scepticism about the material basis of the inevitable ‘rise’ of some of these powers, nonetheless a narrative of a shift to a multipolar world has become all pervasive over the last five years or so. See Michael Cox, ‘Power shifts, economic change and the decline of the West?’, *International Relations*, 26 (4): 369–88.