The Effects of September 11
A Rift between Europe and America?

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A TRANS-ATLANTIC SPLIT?

During the 1990s, beliefs about a growing rift between the United States and Western Europe on issues of national security gained increasing acceptance on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1999, the Brookings Institution published a volume arguing that the disappearance of the Soviet Union, weakening economic ties, and dissimilar international roles were combining to push America and its European allies apart. Likewise, the editor of Germany's influential weekly Die Zeit remarked that Europe was beginning to engage in "unconscious" strategic balancing against the United States. Although a common Cold War threat generated parallel American and European interests, he argued, the dissolution of that threat revealed divergent and often competing worldviews.

This view intensified after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC. Initial sentiments of unity (notably, a declaration from the French newspaper Le Monde that "We are all Americans") quickly dissipated as commentators... asserted that the attacks had caused Americans and Europeans to view international security problems in fundamentally different ways. Polls suggested that after September 11, Europeans and Americans began to diverge sharply in their opinions about American foreign policy (Figure 18.1). When France, Germany, and others refused to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it seemed that the western alliance's epitaph had been written.

The "trans-Atlantic split" thesis contained at least four specific claims:

1. After September 11, Americans were more prone than Europeans to favor the use of force as a solution to foreign policy problems. Europeans, on the other hand, preferred to rely on negotiation and diplomacy to resolve conflicts.
2. Americans and Europeans disagreed about the nature and importance of international threats.
3. Having been victimized by terrorism, Americans harbored less patience for international law and international institutions. As a consequence, they tended to favor unilateral action, while Europeans relied on multilateral cooperation to accomplish foreign policy objectives.

Figure 18.1 Public Disapproval of President Bush's International Policies

Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press
4. Americans tended to favor an active international role for themselves, while Europeans were less willing to assume the burdens of global leadership.

Did the 2001 terrorist attacks instigate (or exacerbate) these conditions? What follows is a review of polling records on each of these four issues in the year following September 11. . . [Each section marshals a variety of publicly available data in an effort to paint a broad picture of American and Western European public opinion on national security issues during this period.

**THE USE OF FORCE**

Europeans widely condemned President Bush's September 2002 National Security Strategy, which endorsed military action to "forestall or prevent" the emergence of threatening adversaries. Newspapers throughout the region urged European leaders to implement counterbalancing initiatives that would suppress the "dangerous" and "arrogant" proposals contained in the document. These reactions reinforced for many observers the conclusion that September 11 had rendered Americans less timorous than Europeans about advocating military force as a solution to foreign policy problems. The following section examines this claim.

Cross-national surveys conducted in June 2002 offer an initial test of the assertion that American citizens had become more prone to favor military action. These surveys, conducted for the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) in six European countries and the United States, asked individuals whether or not they would approve of the use of force to achieve particular foreign policy objectives.

In both Europe and the United States, significant majorities supported the use of force to advance a variety of objectives (Figure 18.2). Over 70% of respondents in both surveys supported military action to destroy terrorist camps, uphold international law, assist famine-struck populations, and liberate hostages. Americans were more willing to use force for only two objectives (to destroy terrorist camps and to ensure the supply of oil); for the other four goals, Europeans supported military action more willingly than did Americans.

Questions about general preferences, of course, offer only limited insight into the nature of public opinion. . . For this reason, it is useful to compare public opinion regarding the use of force in individual cases. Two recent and highly debated cases (Serbia in 1999 and Iraq in 2002 and 2003) are considered below.

NATO's airstrikes against Serbia in 1999 provoked intense controversy in official circles, but poll data suggest that this debate obscured broad public support for the decision (Figure 18.3). In France, Germany, and Italy, support for the attacks exceeded 60% a few weeks after the operation began. Surveys conducted at the same time in the United States also revealed well over 50% approval. August 2001 surveys regarding President Bush's decision to keep troops in Bosnia and Kosovo displayed a similar pattern: a majority of European respondents approved of the announcement, while slightly fewer Americans supported it. If anything, Europeans appeared more enthusiastic than Americans about military action in the former Yugoslavia. This observation is consistent with the results in Figure 18.2 that illustrated a greater willingness among Europeans to use force to end civil wars.
Did the September 11 terrorist attacks reverse this pattern? If so, one would expect to find signs of comparative American aggressiveness in the prelude to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Indeed, Americans initially appeared to be more inclined to support military action against Iraq: an April 2002 survey by the Pew Center reported that 69% of Americans supported “military action” to remove Saddam Hussein from power (as opposed to not supporting it), while European support for an attack was concurrently much lower (46% in France and 34% in both Germany and Italy).

When respondents were given more than a dichotomous choice, however, alternative interpretations emerged. A September 2002 questionnaire by the Pew Center revealed that Americans preferred a diplomatic approach to Iraq over immediate invasion by a wide margin. While 36% of respondents indicated a preference for an immediate invasion, 62% held that the United Nations (U.N.) should first be given the opportunity to disarm Iraq peacefully. CBS News polls as late as February 2003 affirmed these results, although the numbers supporting swift military action jumped in the weeks prior to the war’s onset (Figure 18.4). This observation counters the September 11 hypothesis, which would seem to predict high levels of aggressiveness in the months after the attacks but expect this posture to diminish as the memory of the terrorist attacks grew fainter over time.

When presented with the prospect of U.N. weapons inspections (prior to their resumption in November 2002), many supporters of military action turned skeptical. Seventy-seven percent of respondents to a September 14, 2002 ABC News poll agreed that the United States should hold off attacking Iraq if it agreed to allow weapons inspectors into the country. Similarly, although pre-war polls showed widespread support for military action (as opposed to no action) in the event that Iraq did not cooperate with U.N. weapons inspectors, a November 24, 2002 CNN/Gallup/USA Today survey showed that only a third of respondents preferred immediate military action over returning to the U.N. for authorization.

The performance of the September 11 hypothesis with respect to the use of force is therefore mixed. On the whole, Americans appeared more willing than Europeans to use force in Iraq, but they retained patience for intermediate diplomatic measures rather than insisting on war. Indeed, the Washington Post and ABC News reported on September 26, 2002 that a majority of
Americans were more concerned that the Bush administration was moving too quickly toward military action against Iraq. Even after September 11, the moral legitimacy of military action seems to have been an important consideration for most Americans: when the New York Times inquired about defensible reasons for attacking other nations, only 41% of Americans held the view that the United States should be able to attack another country without being attacked first, while 47% disagreed. The Europeans that protested President Bush’s National Security Strategy so strongly might thus have more sympathizers in the United States than the editorial pages may have led them to believe.

THREAT PERCEPTION

Shortly after the September 11 attacks, foreign affairs commentator Robert Kagan argued in an influential article that “Europeans and Americans differ most these days in their evaluation of what constitutes a tolerable versus an intolerable threat.” Is it the case that threat perceptions differ across the Atlantic, and did September 11 impact these perceptions? Both cross-national and time-series survey data can help answer this question.

The 2002 CCFR survey revealed striking similarities between Americans’ and Europeans’ views of serious threats (Figure 18.5). On both continents, international terrorism ranked as the threat most often identified as “critical” (very important) in the European survey). The importance of terrorism was also reflected in the results of an April 2002 Pew Center survey, which reported that 67% of Americans and 61% of Europeans were either “very worried” or “somewhat worried” about the possibility of Islamic terrorism in their country. Problems in the Middle East also ranked highly on both continents: Iraqi weapons of mass destruction placed second in both surveys, while the Israeli-Arab conflict and Islamic fundamentalism claimed the next two spots (albeit in different order).

To be sure, comparable threat rankings coincided with important differences in threat perceptions. Most notably, the intensity of threat perception was significantly greater in the United States: in seven of the eight international issue categories covered by the survey, more Americans than Europeans felt threatened by the problem. For example, although Europeans and Americans appeared to agree that international terrorism constituted the greatest threat to their security, over 90% of Americans saw it as a critical threat, while less than two-thirds of Europeans did. . . . Most striking was the gap in perceptions regarding China: more than three times as many Americans rated China as a critical geopolitical threat.

Differences in the intensity of threat perceptions had important ramifications for policy preferences. For example, although Iraq’s development of weapons of mass destruction ranked as the second most important threat for both Americans and Europeans, the Pew Center reported that 81% of Americans considered this a “very important” reason to justify attacking Iraq, as opposed to only 53% in Europe. In addition, European reaction to President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address, in which he termed Iraq,
MULTILATERALISM AND INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

President Bush’s announcement of the country’s withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in December 2001 suggested to many that September 11 had ushered in a new era of American unilateralism. Such sentiments were bolstered by President Bush’s apparent disregard for U.N. authority while considering and conducting the invasion of Iraq. Yet, the data below suggest that September 11 did not persuade the American public that the country must act alone more often. Rather, Americans remained supportive—even insistent—on obtaining international support first.

In 1998, the CCPR reported that 72% of Americans believed that, in general, the United States should not take action in responding to international crises without the support of its allies. By 2002, this figure had dropped to 61%, but those opposing unilateral action remained firmly in the majority. The same percentage of respondents believed the lesson of September 11 was that the U.S. must work more closely with other nations to fight terrorism.

Skepticism about acting unilaterally was apparent in polls regarding U.S. action against Iraq (Figure 18.7). A CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll in late

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**Figure 18.6** Changes in American Threat Perceptions after September 11

Note: Data for 1998 instability in Russia not available.
Sources: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press

Iran, and North Korea an “axis of evil,” was sharply negative in comparison to the reaction of Americans.

Consistent with the September 11 hypothesis, American perceptions of terrorist threats appeared to have become comparatively more acute since the attacks (Figure 18.6). In 1998, 84% of Americans saw international terrorism as a critical threat to the United States, but by mid-2001 this figure had dropped to 64% before shooting to 91% nine months after September 11. At the same time, fears of weapons of mass destruction increased slightly, while fears regarding China and Russia both remained stable.

**Figure 18.7** Should the U.S. Wait for Allies before Taking Action against Iraq?

Sources: CBS News, New York Times
September 2002 indicated that only 38% of the country would support an invasion of Iraq without allied support, with allied participation, however, this figure jumped to 78%. Concurrent *Newsweek* polls suggested that about 60% of the country believed it was “very important” to obtain allied support before attacking.

Americans’ desire to obtain U.N. support for attacking Iraq was similarly strong. The *Newsweek* surveys noted above registered nearly identical numbers regarding the importance of U.N. approval, and CNN reported in September 2002 that 68% believed it was necessary for the Bush administration to obtain a U.N. resolution before attacking Iraq. An August 2002 *Los Angeles Times* poll confirmed that about two-thirds of the nation agreed that the U.S. should attack only with the support of the “international community.” Even more striking, a September 23, 2002 poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes suggested that 64% of Americans believed the U.S. should only invade Iraq if it was able to obtain both allied support and U.N. approval.

Surveys regarding general support for the U.N. confirmed that it continues to enjoy broad public support in the United States. Sixty-eight percent of Americans surveyed by Gallup in early 2001 believed that the U.N. should play a “leading” or “major” role in world affairs, and according to the Pew Research Center, 46% viewed strengthening the U.N. as a “top priority” for the United States. The 2002 CCFR poll reported that 77% of Americans supported strengthening the U.N.—a level of support even higher than that in western Europe (75%).

Attitudes toward withdrawal from the ABM Treaty also illustrated American support for multilateralism, albeit less convincingly. While the Bush administration’s decision to withdraw from treaty was vehemently opposed in Europe (74% disapproved, according to the Pew Research Center), Americans did not appear to widely support this move. A CBS News*/New York Times* poll showed in March 2001 that support for missile defense dropped from 67% to 33% when respondents were informed that the U.S. would need to break the ABM Treaty in order to build such a system (a comparable poll a year earlier recorded a drop from 58% to 28%). Following President Bush’s withdrawal announcement (which occurred after September 11), CNN/Gallup/USA Today recorded a higher—but nevertheless sub-majority—44% approval rating of the decision. Notably, however, 26% expressed “no opinion” about the decision, suggesting that missile defense provoked more public opposition in Europe than in the United States, even though outright support was low in both places.

**INTERNATIONAL ROLES**

A final question is whether the American public preferred a more active international role for itself than the European public as a result of September

11. Public opinion data from 2002 provide solid disconfirming evidence for this claim. The CCFR found that 82% of Americans wanted the U.S. to exert “strong leadership” in world affairs, while 85% of Europeans desired the same role for the European Union (E.U.). Indeed, 72% of Western Europeans took the view that the E.U. should become a superpower like the United States.

Public opinion data thus suggest that claims of a trans-Atlantic divide on national security issues are accurate in some respects but exaggerated in others. First, even after September 11, strong support remained in both the United States and Europe for diplomacy, multilateralism, and international institutions, although Americans were less likely to require these intermediate steps before using military force. Second, Americans and Europeans prioritized threats in similar ways, although Americans tended to perceive those threats more intensely. Finally, publics on both continents firmly backed international activism. Assertions about a widening gap between America and Europe thus appear to be overstated—as the invasion of Iraq illustrated, important differences exist, but too many fundamental similarities remain to speak of an inherent disunity between America and its allies.
PARADOXES OF POWER

U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changing World

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David Skidmore
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