

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO LIBYA

AN ASSESSMENT OF US-EUROPEAN MILITARY COOPERATION

BY NARINTOHN LUANGRATH



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The United States' and Europe's readiness to use military force in support of US-European foreign policy objectives has considerably shifted in the past 20 years. Shared values like free market principles and liberal democracy remain largely unchanged, and intelligence cooperation in counterterrorism has increased. However, the US and Europe have historically diverged on issues concerning defining terrorism, engaging politically with "terrorist groups", and encouraging liberal democratic systems. Thus, this article argues that despite similar ideological values, the United States' and Europe's differing military histories, experiences with terrorism, and approach to nation-building influence both sides' willingness to use military force in achieving shared foreign policy objectives. Successful military interventions in the First Gulf War and in Kosovo, the growing prominence of the neoconservative movement in the 1990s, and the sense of shock and injustice in the aftermath of 9/11 have heightened American readiness to use military force. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are clear examples of this, as well as of American inexperience with nation building. On the contrary, Europe's difficult experiences with nation building in their former colonies, combined with their starkly different view of terrorism, have decreased European readiness to use military force. European military leadership during the Arab Spring, however, is a noteworthy exception, and reflected

Europe's key interests in North Africa.

To better understand the shift in military involvement when comparing the Bush and Obama administrations, this article examines earlier American military victories in the First Gulf War and the Kosovo conflict, and assesses their implications on America's perception of its military capacity.

Although the First Gulf War was considered a foreign policy victory, a growing neoconservative movement in the late 1990s criticized President George H.W. Bush for not taking Saddam Hussein out of power. Years later, despite the United States' critical involvement in Kosovo, neoconservatives categorized President Clinton's foreign policy as "social work", and believed his military campaigns were motivated by human rights concerns rather than strategic interests. After George W. Bush assumed the presidency in 2001, the United States was the prominent global military power, arguably still savoring the affirmation of its military might from victories in the First Gulf War and Kosovo. Justin Vaïsse noted in "Why Neoconservatism Still Matters" that most people started paying attention to the influence of neoconservatives after the US pushed for the invasion of Iraq in 2002-2003.

However, neoconservatives like Robert Kagan and William Kristol voiced desire for the removal of Hussein since the late 1990s. In 1997, Kagan and Kristol founded a think tank called Project for a New American Century (PNAC), whose members argued that Hussein was a tyrant, a threat to his own people, and a threat to US allies like Israel. Notable members, including Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Robert Zoellick, even drafted an open letter to President Clinton arguing that Hussein's removal be a policy priority. Although PNAC was fixated on Iraq, it broadened its set of goals during the post-Cold War period, arguing for an increase in US defense spending, ties with fellow democracies, promotion of liberal democracy abroad, and acceptance by the political leadership of the unique role that the US played in preserving the international order. Giles Adréani argued in his article, "The War on Terror: Good Cause, Wrong Concept", that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were seen as possible "national energizers" which could give the US, still reeling from the 9/11 attacks, a sense of unified direction and purpose. Psychologically, America found itself at war after suffering an unprovoked and unjustifiable attack. A sense of vulnerability, grief, and anger, combined with patriotic outrage, led many Americans to demand an immediate military response.

Although this article does not argue that PNAC members who later joined the Bush administration took advantage of public sentiment to justify the Iraq War, it does argue that long-held desire to take Hussein out of power combined with the shock of 9/11 and public outrage over the attacks likely “clouded the vision” of administration leaders; they did not foresee all of the potential problems that could be encountered in an invasion of Iraq. In a larger sense, all of these factors may have contributed to the United States’ heightened readiness to use military force.

The US received initial support from European allies after the September 11, 2001 attacks. The Afghan War aimed to topple the Taliban, seen as “proven perpetrators”. Afghanistan was justified as a “defensive war” by Europeans, in reaction to an attack on US soil, as countries like Germany, France, and Italy (among others) contributed military forces from the start. However, numerous European allies decried the unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003, largely due to scant evidence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in the country. Given some European countries’ colonial histories and failures with nation-building, there were also reservations about Vice President Dick Cheney’s proclamation that the US would be “treated as liberators”. For example, the complexity and guerrilla nature of the Algerian War (1954-1962) taught France that establishing and maintaining a colonial holding was difficult, particularly in countries with different cultures. Thus, France and other European countries likely deemed that the US was making the same “mistakes” as European colonial powers did decades ago.

Europe’s threat perception and consequently, inclination towards military force, differed and continues to differ from its American allies. The 2003 Transatlantic Trends poll stated that 70% of Americans and Europeans viewed international terrorism as an “extremely important threat”. However, it went on to show that only 64% of Europeans saw terrorism as a “critical threat”, compared to 91% of Americans. According to the poll, Europeans were also more likely to distinguish among terrorist groups seeking clear political objectives while Americans were more likely to homogeneously group all terrorists together to “eliminate” by force. For years, European governments viewed Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas in a political context, which explained their initial reluctance to place the political wing of Hamas on the EU terrorist list. Moreover, European governments were less likely to view terrorist attacks (e.g. the London and Madrid train bombings) as “acts of war” that necessitated military retaliation. The Middle East is considered less pertinent to European security interests when compared to North Africa, which fed US frustration with the lack of sustained and abundant military assistance from European powers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, although both European and American macro views of terrorism are generally on par, European caution in “categorizing” terrorist groups as well as their differing evaluation of threat levels makes them less inclined to resort to military force in supporting anti-terrorism objectives shared with the US, particularly during the Bush administration.

The European Union was also maturing as an institution during the Bush era. The Euro officially entered into circulation in 2002, and the process of “uniting” Europe, which started in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, was close to completion. EU countries grew increasingly

wealthy, while stability and peace seemed long-term. Given social and economic conditions in the EU, Europeans found pursuing military operations to achieve transatlantic foreign policy objectives undesirable, likely believing they had finally escaped the “great power politics” which they had engaged in just a few decades ago. For example, despite initially pledging “unlimited solidarity” with the US, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder refused to involve Germany in the Iraq War. Schroeder and other European leaders questioned whether Iraq had WMDs. Schroeder was also facing an election, and German military involvement in the war would be politically unpopular. Eventually, France and Germany formed the heart of European opposition to the United States’ involvement in Iraq.

On January 30, 2002, however, the Wall Street Journal released the so-called “Letter of Eight”, signed by Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Portugal, and the Czech Republic. The signatories expressed solidarity with the US in its invasion of Iraq, breaking with the Franco-German bloc. Despite this solidarity, few of those countries actually contributed troops to the military effort, or did so disproportionately; Great Britain ended up suffering the heaviest casualties, particularly in Basra. Perhaps some newer EU members, whose economies were less-developed and less well-connected, expressed solidarity on Iraq to establish stronger relations with the US and gain advantages that could come with a display of “loyalty”. More generally, European countries found indirect ways to cooperate with American anti-terrorism measures by supporting American extraordinary renditions in their countries or maintaining surveillance on suspected “radicals” rather than contributing a substantial military force.

Despite assisting the US with counterterrorism efforts at that time, European countries were more focused on curbing domestic terrorism. Rather than viewing national security through a “military lens”, Germany viewed security in broader political and economic terms, using multilateral police forces to combat terrorism. Moreover, virtually all of the terrorism they dealt with for decades was homegrown, including attacks from the Red Army Faction (RAF) and the Revolutionary Cells (RZ). Although the largely Turkish and Kurdish membership of the Grey Tigers and the PKK of the 1980s and 1990s engaged in conflicts which killed bystanders, the German government saw these deaths as “unfortunate collateral damage” rather than innocents specifically targeted by foreign terrorism - a

stark contrast to the United States' interpretation of the 9/11 attacks.

Despite promising greater cooperation on foreign policy objectives, President Obama has pursued his fair share of unilateral military operations. The Abbottabad raid, which killed Osama Bin Laden, embarrassed the Pakistani military and was seen by some allies as a violation of the country's sovereignty. Although rising tensions mainly affected America's relationship with Pakistan, Thomas Donnelly notes in "Transforming America's Alliances", that Obama's actions were reminiscent of the mantra "multilateral when we can, unilateral when we must". The Abbottabad raid was illustrative of Obama's readiness to use unilateral force if necessary, in spite of campaign rhetoric suggesting greater collaboration with allies, both European and non-European. Despite the controversy of the raid however, American intelligence officials believed that active or retired Pakistani military officials likely provided some measure of cover for Bin Laden, given that he remained undetected just one mile from an elite military academy.

Notwithstanding instances of unilateralism by the US, US-European cooperation during the Obama administration was likely at its highest point in a decade, and perhaps most prominently illustrated, during the Arab Spring. Unlike the preceding decade, Europe showed its military leadership in an effort spearheaded by British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Obama took a noticeable step back from the conflicts in North Africa. Ruth Santini argued that for Europe, the importance of North Africa is comparable to the importance of the Middle East to the US. North Africa is Europe's "backyard" and promoting prosperity and security in the region has been a foreign policy priority for decades, particularly in response to increased illegal immigration and terrorism. During the Arab Spring, America worked through international organizations like NATO and the European Union. However, Obama was initially reluctant to contribute militarily, prompting criticism from Sarkozy and other European allies. Ryan Lizza argues in "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy" that one reaction among Democrats to the Bush era was a shift from "idealism" towards "realism". The unpopular nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan made the US act more cautiously and according to national interests (rather than moral imperatives) in global conflicts. Even as early as his 2009 speech in Cairo, Obama gave a hesitant endorsement of democracy in the region. Obama's decreased use of pro-democracy rhetoric likely reflects the sentiment that such rhetoric was tainted by Bush's so-called "freedom agenda" in the Middle East.

However, both Europeans and Americans saw the outbreak of protests in North Africa as a possible "democratic opening" for countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, all of which had been governed by despots for decades. Although both Americans and Europeans were unsure of how the Arab Spring would unfold, the limitations of Western liberal democracy's appeal were acknowledged, most evidently when President Obama downplayed the importance of democratic reform during his Cairo speech. Although liberal democratic principles are often argued by the West to be "inherently good", the perception that a democracy is being "set up" or worse, coerced, by outside powers undermines the establishment of that system. Both the US and Europe hold similar views about liberal democracy and free market principles and

likely both preferred that these revolutions ended in the establishment of those systems and an acceptance of those values. However, American and European approaches to supporting the emergence of liberal institutions have historically differed. Europe's long colonial history taught it tough lessons on nation-building and consequently, Europe tends to focus on establishing the institutions needed to support democracy; "symbolic" acts of democracy (e.g. voting) do not equate to a fully functioning, mature democracy and should not be treated as an end in itself. Conversely, America tends to view democracy as organically conceivable after the toppling of a despot, and tends to put more symbolic weight on the act of voting. The Bush administration's handling of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are an especially clear example of this, as there were few well-developed plans to handle nation-building.

The United States' and Europe's readiness to use military force to pursue common foreign policy objectives have largely depended on the security, economic or historical significance of a region, which differs greatly between the two allies. The US took the lead in the "global war on terror" in the Middle East, while Europeans took the lead in military intervention during the Arab Spring in North Africa.

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