



POLICY ROUNDTABLE:

COMPETING VISIONS FOR THE GLOBAL ORDER

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3. Global Ordering and Organizational Alternatives for Europe: NATO vs. the European Union?

By Stephanie C. Hofmann

During the Cold War, the “West” was understood to be ordered according to liberal principles, and in the 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the global order has similarly been called “liberal.” The United States, the most capable and powerful economic and military actor for the last three decades, has been described as a major proponent of this liberal order.¹³ With President Donald Trump in power, many pundits and scholars question whether we are now observing the U.S.-sponsored creation of an illiberal order. Whether the current global order is understood as liberal or as transitioning from liberal to illiberal, order is too often understood as an intentional and uniform structuring of political relationships by the most powerful actor in the system — the United States — with NATO often cited as representative of this order.

However, although the U.S. government still commands the strongest existing military and is still a so-called global power (no matter how power is defined), it is not the only actor that defines the global order. I argue that focusing on a single, static order creates political blind spots. Instead, scholars and policymakers should look at international actors’ ordering attempts, some of which are formulated on the global scale while others stem from regional dynamics. Various actors present and try to impose their visions for ordering the world

¹³ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Robert Gilpin, “The Theory of Hegemonic War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 591–613, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/204816>.

and/or their region with varying degrees of success.¹⁴ In terms of their visions' substance, some have been formulated in juxtaposition to the U.S. understanding of liberal order. These different ordering visions might result in something resembling a global order — but an order by default rather than design. Even the transatlantic relationship is not immune to these dynamics.¹⁵ In its relative decline, the United States arguably needs Europe more than ever. However, instead of stressing the common liberal aspects of the transatlantic relationship, the current U.S. administration has focused on contentious issues that antagonize some of America's European allies and bring their alternative ordering visions to the fore.

Liberal Global Order(ing)?

Actors have different strategic and normative prerogatives, or what I call “ordering visions.” International organizations provide a forum where actors can push for their ordering visions to be heard. Many of these existing organizations are dubbed “liberal,” because they are supposedly open, rule-based, consensus-seeking, multilateral and, according to scholars such as Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry,¹⁶ very resilient as a consequence. While the international system's open and rule-based features have taught some states restraint and accommodation, they have also led to contestations with implications for the so-called global liberal order.

The principles attached to that liberal order have been called into question many times. But now that these protestations are coming from rising or reemerging non-Western powers such as Russia or China (as well as the United States), they are heard more clearly. Meanwhile, multilateral action — taken through organizations such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund — has been criticized for lacking accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness, for example, in the form of asymmetries and inequalities.¹⁷ Scholars have

¹⁴ Hayward R. Alker and Thomas J. Biersteker, “The Dialectics of World Order: Notes for a Future Archeologist of International Savoir Faire,” *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1984): 121–42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600692>.

¹⁵ Stephanie C. Hofmann and Andrew I. Yeo, “Business As Usual: The Role of Norms in Alliance Management,” *European Journal of International Relations* 21, no. 2 (2015): 377–401, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1354066114533978>.

¹⁶ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “Liberal World: The Resilient Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August, 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/liberal-world?cid=soc-tw-rdr>.

¹⁷ Phillip Y. Lipsky, *Renegotiating the World Order: Institutional Change in International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

thus pointed to the limited ability of the liberal order to accommodate other voices and put them on equal footing.¹⁸

The proliferation of international organizations — which has prompted today’s international organizational environment to often be qualified with the adjective “complex”¹⁹ — has arguably exposed many fundamental shortcomings of the so-called global liberal order. Given that many such organizations work on similar issues and address similar policy challenges and problems, international actors have created a system that needs *less consent* to decide on taking multilateral action, while providing more opportunities for countries to voice dissent, e.g., the Chinese-sponsored Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Consequently, there is not, and never has been, a “pure” global liberal order — only an approximation of it that might arguably have produced a liberal moment in the 1990s. What is often called the global liberal order is really a process of alternative ordering propositions that is built and rebuilt on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion — in itself not a very liberal activity.

Transatlantic ordering dynamics and European organizational alternatives

Within the transatlantic security relationship, different attempts at political ordering have taken place since the end of World War II. E.U. member states have repeatedly tried to create security structures within the European Union since the 1950s. They finally succeeded at the end of the 1990s when they created the European Security and Defense Policy, which was renamed the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Perhaps ironically, if viewed from today’s perspective, the United Kingdom was one of the two architects of integrating security into the European Union during the Franco-British summit in Saint Malo in 1998.²⁰ The European Union has since built up its military, civilian, and civil-military security structures, formulated two security strategies, and intervened abroad in over 25 civil and

¹⁸ Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice* (New York: Springer, 2013); Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

¹⁹ Karen J. Alter and Kal Raustiala, “The Rise of International Regime Complexity,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 14, no. 1 (2018): 329–49, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-101317-030830>.

²⁰ Stephanie C. Hofmann, *European Security in NATO’s Shadow: Party Ideologies and Institution Building* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

military operations, including in Kosovo, the Aegean Sea, Congo, the Gulf of Aden, and Afghanistan. This raises the questions of whether the CSDP could ever be considered an alternative to NATO or not, and what that would mean for re-ordering the transatlantic space. There are typically two narratives of how the CSDP and NATO relate to one another, each built on different understandings of order that relate to different theoretical traditions.

According to the first narrative, a liberal foundation unites the United States and the E.U. member states,²¹ and NATO is one expression of this shared outlook (though many would also point to geopolitical security concerns that at times can trump liberal values). This ideational foundation is able to accommodate dissatisfactions and tensions with an emphasis on compromises and consensus-building. For example, Baltic and other Eastern European NATO member states have asked NATO for a strong military commitment to their borders. To this end, the Trump administration — perhaps surprisingly to some — has continued President Barack Obama’s commitment to NATO’s Eastern members with a small military presence in the region both in form of the Enhanced Forward Presence (in particular in Poland) as well as the U.S. military operation Atlantic Resolve. According to this first narrative, striving for efficient, multilateral policy-making and consensus ought to lead multiple, autonomous institutions and initiatives, such as NATO and the European Union’s CSDP, to accommodate — and even strengthen — each other.

The second narrative emphasizes military power and disregards the ideational elements that might bring states and international organizations closer together or drive them further apart. Some scholars see the establishment of the CSDP not as a way to strengthen NATO but as a tool for (soft) balancing the United States.²² They understand the CSDP as an act of counterbalancing U.S. foreign and security policy, with some even trumpeting the ascendancy of a united European Union as the new global superpower. In this narrative, liberal values are secondary to geopolitical concerns. Therefore, the United States, if it does not want to lose its position as a global hegemon, should either make sure that the CSDP is

²¹ Ikenberry, *After Victory*; Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation Among Democracies: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

²² Barry R. Posen, “European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?” *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 149–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600829356>; Robert J. Art, “Europe Hedges Its Security Bets,” in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 179–213.

subordinate to NATO, or disengage from Europe and let the European Union conduct its own security business.

I suggest a third narrative: The ordering of the transatlantic space via the CSDP and NATO is a process in which allegiances shift over time, depending not only on existing geopolitical pressures or shared (il)liberal values, but also on domestic politics at a given moment. To better understand how CSDP and NATO relate to one another, it is therefore necessary to look at who governs, i.e., which leaders and parties run a particular country at a particular point in time.²³

When looking at the current U.S. administration under Trump, we observe a political leader who challenges the liberal ordering from within. Trump has questioned some of the core values of the transatlantic relationship: He questions multilateralism for multilateralism's sake and challenges the practice of consensus-seeking — which reflects the view of much of Trump's base.²⁴ This extends to his approach to NATO, whose destiny Trump portrays as being in his hands, demanding that European NATO allies acquiesce to his requests, including by increasing their defense budgets (sometimes Trump mentions the agreed upon 2 percent of GDP goal, other times he demands 4 percent).²⁵ He has also left it vague as to whether the United States, under his leadership, would fulfill its Article 5 commitment of mutual defense. Thus, the shift in domestic U.S. politics and Americans' views of foreign involvement are playing a major role in the (re)ordering of the transatlantic relationship. What Trump's demands overlook, however, is that NATO's E.U. members have created a security institution outside of NATO that will not only benefit from increased European defense spending,²⁶ but will provide a platform from which they can organize their own security — and not necessarily in coordination with NATO.

²³ Hofmann, *European Security in NATO's Shadow*.

²⁴ For example, Trump renegotiated NAFTA though some observers argue that not much has changed between NAFTA and the USMCA, see Sheelah Kolhatkar, "Trump's Rebrand of NAFTA," *New Yorker*, Oct. 3, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trumps-rebrand-of-nafta>.

²⁵ Uri Friedman, "Trump vs. NATO: It's Not Just About the Money," *Atlantic*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/trump-nato-allies/564881/>.

²⁶ Jordan Becker and Edmund J. Malesky, "Yes, NATO Is Sharing the Defense Burden. Here's What We Found," *Washington Post*, Dec. 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/09/yes-nato-is-sharing-the-defense-burden-heres-what-we-found/?utm_term=.c495bofed14d.

Some political actors in the European Union, such as the British Conservative Party, agree with Trump that multilateralism in and of itself ought to be questioned — others not so much. Since Trump came to power and the British government, under the Tories, has started their country's exit from the European Union after British voters narrowly approved the measure in 2016, the French and German governments in particular, as well as the European Commission, have pushed for strengthening the CSDP. This should come as no surprise. For years, the British Conservative government successfully delayed several E.U. security initiatives, fearing that they would compete with NATO. For example, the British government has resisted an increase in the European Defense Agency's budget for six years, and in 2011, vetoed the creation of an E.U. military headquarters.²⁷ Ultimately, however, by leaving the European Union, the United Kingdom is surrendering its ability to shape E.U. security policy from within.

With Brexit looming, the European Union has increased the European Defense Agency's budget, created an admittedly small military headquarters as well as mechanisms to increase investment and cooperation in military capabilities based on the principle of institutional flexibility (i.e., not all E.U. member states have to participate), established a European Defense Fund, and increased consultation and review mechanisms.²⁸ The current U.S. administration is not at all amused about these developments, even though it has pushed Europeans to contribute more financially to their own security. Katie Wheelbarger, U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, has said in response to some of these developments, "We don't want to see E.U. efforts pulling requirements or forces away from NATO and into the E.U."²⁹

Even a possible threat from Russia does not necessarily have the potential to unite actors on both sides of the Atlantic. The current discussion about hybrid threats in both the European Union and NATO, in light of Russia's revisionist policies, provides an opportunity for the

²⁷ Stephanie C. Hofmann, "Brexit Will Weigh Heavily on European Security. Here's Why," *Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/18/brexit-will-weigh-heavily-on-european-security-heres-why/?utm_term=.49a8ae63e0e0.

²⁸ Ronja Kempin and Barbara Kunz, "Washington Should Help Europe Achieve 'Strategic Autonomy,' not Fight It," *War on the Rocks*, April 12, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/washington-should-help-europe-achieve-strategic-autonomy-not-fight-it/>.

²⁹ Cited in Steven Erlanger, "U.S. Revives Concerns About European Defense Plans, Rattling NATO Allies," *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/world/europe/nato-europe-us-.html>.

European Union to present itself as more suitable than NATO for providing security on the continent as it combines both civilian and military security instruments and policies. Even political leaders in Central and Eastern Europe who have understood NATO as the bastion of collective defense, are now also turning to the European Union to ensure their security.

We are at a juncture where both European Union and NATO member states are presenting their ordering visions for the European and transatlantic realms. One major driver of these visions is domestic politics — that is, political parties and leaders and their domestic support. A focus on domestic politics contributes to a better understanding of how these ordering visions will relate to one another and to what effect. At this particular moment, nationalist and populist parties are driving a wedge between transatlantic and European partners. This has resulted in a search for more flexible institutional structures that can accommodate more homogenous sub-groups of governments, some of which can potentially contest U.S. leadership.

Conclusion

The transatlantic relationship is neither static nor is it built on a single foundation, whether shared ideas, as outlined in the first narrative, or power, as outlined in the second narrative. Instead, domestically elected actors on both sides of the Atlantic continuously articulate their respective visions of the most appropriate way to order the transatlantic and European spaces, which informs their calls for institutional reform. Sometimes, this leads to negotiated compromises, and at other times to more open-ended dynamics.

In questioning multilateral institutions, NATO included, Trump questions whether the United States shares common interests — and a liberal “creed” — in managing current and future challenges with its allies across the pond. American values are multiple and Trump often cherry picks those that lend themselves to powerful slogans.³⁰ This has brought alternative European visions for how to organize the European security space to the fore, with European allies turning to institutional alternatives. While these institutions have the potential to strengthen and reform NATO, they could also lead to inter-institutional competition. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg observed that the European Union’s security investments “are an opportunity to further strengthen the European pillar within NATO and contribute to better burden-sharing. But with opportunity comes risk. The risk of

³⁰ Martin Seymour Lipset, *American Exceptionalism. A double-edged sword* (New York: Norton, 1996).

weakening the transatlantic bond.”³¹ If both sides do not strive for a consensus, the current U.S. administration might find itself increasingly isolated from its transatlantic partners — not only because it chose to distance itself, but also because they did. The ordering continues.

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4. The Persistence of Great Power Politics

By David M. Edelstein

The next decade is likely to bring an intensification of great power competition. This is not a new or recent development, although Donald Trump’s approach to national security has drawn attention to it:³² Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea was evident during the

³¹ Cited in Erlanger, “[U.S. Revives Concerns About European Defense Plans.](#)”

³² *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.