# Rivalry, Community, or Strained Partnership?

## Relations between the European Union and the United States

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[p. 136-156]



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With the United States now considering the Asia-Pacific region as the future strategic zone of interest, the European Union appears liable to vanish from the picture. This slide into irrelevance, however, presupposes that the EU will not become a significant rival to the US in a multipolar world. It also assumes that the EU is no longer an indispensable partner for the US in dealing with international issues. Yet rivalry and partnership, which more or less correspond to the conceptual approaches of "soft balancing" and "security community", are still widely used to describe the EU-US relationship. This contribution asks whether and to what extent these two opposing approaches are relevant. While the security community approach corresponds to current EU-US relations more than the idea of the EU acting as a soft balancing rival to the US, important tensions and contradictions are apparent in the partnership. This leads to the conclusion that the EU and the US being partners does not prevent a challenge to the former's ties with the latter.

## Rivalité, communauté ou partenariat sous tension ? : la relation entre l'Union européenne et les États-Unis

Alors que les États-Unis considèrent désormais la région de l'Asie-Pacifique comme la zone d'intérêt stratégique du futur, l'Union européenne apparaît susceptible de disparaître de leur point de vue. Envisager ce glissement vers la perte totale d'importance présuppose cependant que l'UE ne peut plus devenir un rival pour les États-Unis dans un monde multipolaire. Une telle perspective exige également de ne plus voir dans l'UE un partenaire indispensable aux États-Unis dans la gestion des enjeux internationaux. Pourtant, la plupart des descriptions relatives aux rapports UE-États-Unis continuent à utiliser les notions de rivalité et de partenariat, auxquelles correspondent les approches conceptuelles du « *soft balancing* » et de « communauté de sécurité ». Cette contribution étudie si ces deux approches divergentes sont encore pertinentes, et jusqu'à quel point. Alors qu'une approche en termes de « communauté de sécurité » semble correspondre à l'état actuel des relations entre l'UE et les États-Unis, des stratégies alternatives conduisent cependant l'UE à s'affirmer comme un rival des États-Unis introduisant des tensions et des contradictions dans le partenariat. Ainsi, si les rapports entre l'UE et les États-Unis sont marqués par le principe du partenariat cela n'empêche pas une possible détérioration à l'avenir de la relation transatlantique.

# Rivalry, Community, or Strained Partnership?

## *Relations between the European Union and the United States*[1]

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This article's starting point is the assumption that relations between the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) are bound to become less relevant in international politics. The EU Commissioner for Trade has acknowledged as much by stating that beyond the current crisis-provoked loss of importance of both the EU and the US, "developing economies are the new drivers of global trade, and that is why the relative weight of the EU-US commercial relationship will inevitably be diluted over time" (de Gucht, 2012, 3). In this perspective, the recent initiative of a EU-US free trade agreement does not intend to reverse the trend, but rather to maintain the possibility of leadership by the transatlantic partners (de Gucht, 2013, 2-3).

The EU appears to be more affected than the US by this development, as much of its leverage as an international actor is still grounded in the transatlantic relationship. For example, among the EU's ten "strategic partnerships", only the one with the US has a meaningful strategic content (Renard, 2011, 6). The EU acknowledges that international actors from outside the North Atlantic region are key players in world politics and attempts to emphasise relations with them, but so far its external action policy is widely portrayed as not being be up to the challenge.

The other party to the relationship, the US, has committed itself to a strategic outlook that will shift its focus to the Pacific. Since November 2011, President Barack H. Obama's Administration has repeatedly made clear that Asia is the priority of US external action. Outgoing Secretary of State Hillary

1 The author wishes to thank Frédéric Mérand, Antoine Mégie, two anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of Politique européenne. He also happily acknowledges the inspiration by discussions with his colleagues of the WOPO group, namely Sten Rynning, Annemarie Peen Rodt and Casper Sylvest.

R. Clinton has called this a "pivot" (Clinton, 2011, 63), while other officials, like Obama, have labelled it "rebalancing". In any case, the EU as Europe's outstanding and most powerful organisation has to confront the challenge that it represents a region that the US might become less and less interested in.

That the EU slides ever faster and out of its own doing towards irrelevance is the one point of agreement between those scholars, policy-makers or observers who find the EU either too much of a junior partner or not strong enough of a partner to the US. They share the opinion that EU institutions and member states are unable to get their act together and that, as a result, the EU punches below its weight on most international issues. Symbolising this problem was the picture of an annoyed President Obama having to sit down with not one representative of the EU's common position but several leaders from within the EU at the Climate Summit in Copenhagen late in 2009 – only to strike a deal without them.

This article assumes that the shift in the balance of power away from the North Atlantic relationship is diminishing the EU's relevance to the US. But the important question is whether this trend is slowed or speeded up by the specific dynamics of EU-US relations. The two main – and alternative – analytical notions in this context are "rivalry" and "partnership". A failed attempt by the EU to become a rival is more likely, it is argued, to have US indifference as an outcome than the EU "merely" struggling to be a strong partner to the US.

In the last decade, both the characterisation of the EU's relationship to the US as rivalry and its identification as a partnership have been presented in distinctive conceptual frameworks. Rivalry has been conceptualised through the idea of "soft balancing", emphasising regional security cooperation and diplomatic coalitions to oppose a hegemonic US without engaging in all-out confrontation (Paul, 2004; Pape, 2005). Conversely, the most clear-cut framework for partnership is the notion of a "North Atlantic security community". The main argument is that the EU and the US both take for granted that even divergences on essential security matters will not challenge peaceful relations between them (see Adler and Barnett, 1998; Wæver, 1998). The ties of community have to build on and be reflected in everyday practice (see Pouliot, 2010), with common ground on security challenges and institutionalisation of closer cooperation as their two most distinctive traits.

The key concern of both soft balancing and security community proponents is with security and diplomacy. Indeed, scholars have argued that

EU-US trade relations follow, rather than shape, political dynamics (see McNamara, 2008), so that the impact of "trade wars" is not driving in itself relations in one direction or the other. This article's emphasis on security and diplomacy also favours a view of EU-US relations as multifaceted and multilayered. As mapped out below, EU member states, multilateral organisations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or in the economic domain the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and Europe's place among US strategic priorities are also part of the picture if we are to grasp the dynamics and overall framework of EU-US relations. The next step is to confront issues of US-EU relations with the two different perspectives of rivalry and partnership by discussing the merits and limits of, first, the soft balancing approach and, second, the notion of security community. This discussion suggests that partnership is a more relevant perspective than considering the EU as a soft balancer against the US. But there also are several issues that question the strength of community dynamics. The picture of the EU-US partnership that emerges turns out to be more ambiguous, in part because US priorities shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but also because the EU's external action policy stresses its distinctiveness as an international actor.

## EU-US relations as "bilateral-plus" relationship

As mentioned, relations between the EU and the US take place in the specific framework of a bilateral "strategic partnership" that appears to be the most functional and meaningful among those that the EU has launched with international actors (Renard, 2011). According to the European Commissioner for Trade, "Europe has several major partners, but our partnership with the United States is the one we take most seriously" (de Gucht, 2012, 2). This special status of EU-US relations among strategic partnerships can be attributed in part to the fact that several initiatives launched since the end of the Cold War have paved the way for this partnership, like the 1990 Transatlantic Declaration, the 1995 New Transatlantic Agenda, and the 1998 Transatlantic Economic Partnership. Since the mid-2000s, further institutionalisation of the relationship has taken place amongst others through the Transatlantic Economic Council launched in 2007 or the EU-US Energy Council established in 2009. The most recent step is the start of negotiations for a free trade agreement, after support for the idea was expressed by President Obama and the highest-ranking representatives of the EU and its member states.

Bilateral EU-US security relations outside of NATO have become a substantial part of the picture in the 2000s, even though, to take one example, the data protection implications of anti-terrorism measures were controversial within the EU (see de Goede, 2012). At the same time, US personnel have now participated in or lent support to activities of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This is remarkable in light of the previous stress of US policy-makers that CSDP should not weaken NATO as the core framework of North Atlantic security cooperation. As this example shows, the bilateral EU-US framework is often connected to another, multilateral, actor. This is also the case of the intended EU-US free trade agreement, whose expected benefits include extending the common ground between the EU and the US at the WTO (de Gucht, 2013, 2-3). Thereby, bilateral EU-US relations are handled as a means to provide, on the one hand, stronger North Atlantic security cooperation with NATO at its core, and, on the other, an extension of free trade through the WTO that is reflecting the interests of the EU and the US. This common trait is relevant notwithstanding the obvious differences between CSDP as an intergovernmental framework – which brings in member states into the picture – and trade as an area where the EU is consistently "speaking with one voice" through the European Commission. Another case of EU-US relations involving a multilateral third player is the Middle East quartet. Both the EU and the US are a part of it, as are the United Nations (UN) that are in turn the main framework within which international actors – including the US, the EU and its member states – confront and at times agree their positions on the Middle East. The importance of multilateral international actors that are intrinsically linked to the settings of bilateral EU-US relations therefore has to be taken into account when taking stock of North Atlantic cooperation.

Especially in matters with a strong security and defence component, EU-US relations also play out through EU member states. This has been the case in the reaction of North Atlantic actors to the Iranian nuclear programme, as the "big three" – Germany, France and the United Kingdom – came to the forefront on behalf of the EU. These member states have become enactors of the EU's position, which is finding a solution through negotiations and if necessary sanctions, while successive US administrations have identified military action as an option. As the "EU-3" has become the "EU-3+3" by the involvement of the US along with China and Russia, dealings with Iran appear as a case of "indirect" bilateral EU-US relations. Beyond that, the bilateral relations of each EU member state with the US are of course impacted by its membership obligations – as well as by 21 and soon 22 EU members being NATO allies.

Finally, part of the EU's dilemma in relation to the US stems from it being the representative of Europe as a region. Even though the EU as such is not directly concerned by plans such as the Department of Defence's 2012 Strategic Guidance, which announced that the US "will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region", so that "our posture in Europe must also evolve" (Department of Defence, 2012, 2-3), its position in relation to the US is nonetheless affected by the US "pivoting" or "rebalancing" away from the North Atlantic.

## Rivalry through the EU soft balancing the US?

Realists use the "balance of power" to describe the structure of world politics. Nobody is arguing that, after defying the logic of capacity-based balancing for more than sixty years, the US and its European allies would now be heading towards arming against each other, or that the EU seeks to build an alliance with other powers that is clearly directed against the US. But some realists argue that there is growing rivalry between European countries and the US, and that this has an impact on the EU-US relationship.

The soft balancing approach offers a conceptual framework to probe whether the EU behaves as a rival to the US. It came to forefront of academic discussions about important states' and – indirectly – the EU's relations to the US in the mid-2000s (see for example Paul, 2004; Pape, 2005; Posen, 2006). Rooted in realist analysis (Rynning, 2011), it focuses on states and does not account for the EU as a multilateral actor, even though proponents have paid much attention to the development of CSDP, previously the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). This interest reflects that increasing regional security cooperation in order to gain autonomy from the US would be one symptomatic behaviour of "soft balancers", as would be temporary diplomatic coalitions to oppose US preferences, like France and Germany did with Russia and China at the UN during the Iraq crisis in 2002-2003, or – not relevant in the North Atlantic case – "a limited arms buildup" (Paul, 2004, 3).

Proponents of soft balancing consider that ESDP was launched as a pathway towards EU autonomy to deal with security issues both in Europe and outside "because Europeans do not trust the United States to always be there to address these problems and because many Europeans do not like the way the United States addresses these problems" (Posen, 2006, 151). Once an autonomous military framework in place at the EU, the balancing logic

could lead to military "hard balancing", a possibility that soft balancing does not rule out (Pape, 2005, 18; Paul, 2004). In the context of the mid-2000s feeling that the North Atlantic relationship no longer was certain to remain a security community partnership (see Cox, 2005), the soft balancing approach appeared to have considerable merit. For example, its proponents' representation of ESDP as a framework leading towards a decoupling of EU security from the US and the North Atlantic partnership matched concerns expressed in autumn 2003 by the then US ambassador to NATO when he described ESDP as "the most serious threat to the future of NATO" (quoted by Hofmann, 2011, 109). With regards to EU-US relations, weakened cooperation in NATO would indeed be a strongly probable outcome if the EU engaged in soft balancing through ESDP/CSDP. The alliance's weakening would amount to the significant loss of relevance of a main element supporting the North Atlantic partnership. At stake is whether the EU's regional security cooperation through ESDP/CSDP actually decouples from NATO and the US, as this would be the first step to use it against the US.

The other relevant element of soft balancing, forming diplomatic coalitions to counter US preferences on essential security issues, can be probed through the case of the reaction to the Iranian nuclear programme. In the mid-2000s, in the wake of the Iraq crisis, the divergences between the EU, where there was no support for military action against Iran, and the US, where the use of force has been consistently presented as an option of last resort, appeared to have "the capacity to do as much damage to the relationship in the future as Iraq has done in the past" (Cox, 2005, 222).

## NATO and CSDP: decoupling?

It is puzzling that the initial reaction by the US in the late 1990s and the early 2000s to the launching of ESDP was to express concern, if not reluctance (Hunter, 2002, 36). Rather than welcome this initiative within the EU to enhance defence capabilities that would relieve demands on the US to intervene in Europe, co-initiated moreover by a stalwart US ally, the United Kingdom, senior US officials worried about NATO and North Atlantic security cooperation. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, in 1998, pointed out "3 D's" that should not be allowed to happen: ESDP's de-linkage from NATO, duplication between ESDP and NATO, and discrimination by the EU against non-EU NATO allies (Albright, 1998). In the analytical perspective of soft balancing, these three aspects would certainly be in line with an attempt to oppose the US through fostering regional security cooperation.

Duplication certainly exists between NATO and CSDP. A striking example is that there are both a NATO and a CSDP naval anti-piracy operation at the Horn of Africa alongside each other. Such obvious cases of duplication are but the tip of the iceberg of a relationship that is often dysfunctional and thereby provokes frequent and almost chronic frustration in the process of building up and fostering cooperation.[2] Analysts of the EU-CSDP-NATO relationship thus have had a tendency to point out somehow disappointed that regardless of member state overlap and including geographic proximity of headquarters, there is no comprehensive complementarity (Duke, 2012) – as if it were so surprising that organisations working in the same domain compete to some extent and have to find their way towards working together.[3]

But CSDP no longer is a sensitive issue to the US, even though there has been a "silent decoupling" (Scheeck, 2008) of its activities from NATO. The growing importance of non-military missions in CSDP and its focus on Africa both apparently lessened the relevance of the alliance as a partner. But even more recent are steps taken within the EU to work concretely with NATO to streamline defence capabilities, while US personnel has become involved in non-military CSDP missions in Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Hence, de-linkage and discrimination have not materialised as elements of the EU decoupling its handling of security matters from the US and NATO.

It is also telling that the EU member state most criticised for undermining NATO is no longer France. France's return into the alliance's integrated military structure and acceptance that NATO would be the core actor during the intervention in Libya have for the time being discarded fears that it would use ESDP/CSDP against the alliance. Rather, criticism is directed foremost at Germany, as the one European ally incarnating a tendency to downgrade security commitments operationally – notably in Afghanistan – and jeopardise its reliability as an ally by cutting military expenses.

2 Accounts of the frustrating nature of relations between NATO and the EU and CSDP have been a pattern in the interviews conducted by the author with national, EU and NATO officials, June 2010 and Spring 2011.

3 On the complexities of overlap in the case of European security organisations, see Hofmann, 2011.

## The response to the Iranian nuclear programme: is the EU "equidistant"?

Another case that has not played out according to the soft balancing argument is how the EU and the US have dealt with the Iranian nuclear programme. Initially, there were questions whether the diplomatic steps of the "EU-3" of France, Germany and the United Kingdom were signs of EU "equidistance". They would aim to prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb and to oppose US reliance on the use of force, in line with the stress on the EU as peacemaker in its strategic culture, the particular relation to the use of force and the place of the military element in external action (Rynning, 2008).

While the US, on the one hand, has not abandoned the consideration of military action against Iran as a last-resort option, and the EU, on the other hand, still stresses the need for a peaceful solution, the latter has not adopted an "equidistant" behaviour regarding the Iranian nuclear programme since the mid-2000s. The common ground between the EU and the US rather has significantly extended. In the process of obtaining resolutions by the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran, the US, like China and Russia, associated with the "EU-3". Both the EU and the US have implemented more severe sanctions against Iranian personnel and groups than the measures decided by the Security Council. For example, in October 2012, EU member states agreed to impede financial transactions with Iranian banks, similarly to steps taken by the US Treasury Department, and the exportation of materials that could be used for ballistic missiles (Council of the EU, 2012, 14-15).

In both cases, even though relations between the EU and the US have hit some bumps, the EU has not acted as a "soft balancer". The absence of a clear trend of soft balancing raises questions about the approach itself, as the post-9/11 travails of the North Atlantic relationship have been one of the foremost cases made by proponents. There continues to be support among realist scholars for considering it relevant (see for example Walt, 2011). But ever since its emergence, this argument has been submitted to sometimes severe critiques by scholars also arguing from a realist viewpoint (Lieber and Alexander, 2005; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008, 60-97; Menon and Howorth, 2009). The most problematic trait of soft balancing in this context is that it has had difficulties to "reflect the world as it is" through "rationalist positions", as could be expected from an approach linked to structural realist balance-of-threat theory (Rynning, 2011, 27). Therefore, it is all the more telling, and in some views damning, that critics of a soft balancing approach to ESDP/CSDP have found that it proceeds by "inferring intentions not from

current but from predicted future outcomes" and in the process requiring no less then "two leaps of analytical faith – on the processes of the past and the outcomes of the future" to determine EU intentions and "turn" it into a soft balancer (Menon and Howorth, 2009, 732).

## A North Atlantic community as a setting for EU-US relations?

The study of EU-US relations through a soft balancing perspective does not support the idea that the EU's pattern is to act as a rival to the US. But can it be assumed to the contrary that there is a "West", as it is evoked by politicians, officials, pundits or scholars[4]: sharing common values while other powers behave differently and are rivals, if not threats?

What appears indisputable is that relations with the US are not only the foremost and most prioritised among the EU's strategic partnerships. Rather, along with relations with Canada, North Atlantic ties with the US remain a core component and key commitment of the EU's external action, "irreplaceable" according to the 2003 European Security Strategy (European Council, 2003, 13). In this sense, EU-US relations appear embedded in a community at the international level, where actors consider their cooperation as indispensable. Exploring them accordingly responds to the call "to focus more on the socially constructed, institutional aspects of the transatlantic relationship" (McNamara, 2008, 185).

Constructivist scholars, whose research agenda is closest to this approach, have conceptualised the North Atlantic relationship as a security community (Risse, 2008; Pouliot, 2010). The "dependable expectations of peaceful change" between participants in the community (Adler and Barnett, 1998, 30) are related to intensity of interaction. In security communities, actors take these expectations for granted and interact accordingly (Pouliot, 2010). As a result, their relationship is that of a "non-war community" where none

4 Observations during a study of the EU-CSDP-NATO relationship suggest that a significant number of practitioners, among whom senior officials, focus not on the progress of cooperation between members of the "West" in absolute terms, but on the unfulfilled need for a cooperation enabling the "Western" actors in relative terms to raise to the challenge that a shifting balance of power poses (interviews at NATO, the European External Action Service and a ministry of Defence of a EU and NATO member state, spring 2011).

of the participants can even imagine inflicting violence on another (Wæver, 1998). This community is thereby one of "the specific kinds of social and political institutions... that may subtly shape actors' calculations away from intense political conflict" (McNamara, 2008, 184), as it rules out the possibility of such a conflict escalating.

The conceptualisation of security communities has stressed relations between states, but in most of these cases, multilateralism has been a key element in the ties of community. As well, scholarship arguing for the existence of these communities has relied heavily on the study of relations between European and North American actors, starting with the team of researchers headed by Karl W. Deutsch who in the 1950s elaborated the notion of security community through the study of the North Atlantic case (Deutsch *et al.*, 1957). When after a long period of neglect, constructivist scholars reconceptualised the concept after the end of the Cold War (Adler and Barnett, 1998), most of their studies focused as well on the EU, NATO or even the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The apparent contradiction and reciprocal exclusion between a security community and a balance of power framework is debatable (see Adler and Greve, 2009). Fundamentally, neither has a tangible existence like alliances or organisations do. Both security communities and balance of power are institutions in the sense that they represent "a relatively stable collection of practices and rules defining appropriate behaviour for specific groups of actors in specific situations" (March and Olsen, 1998, 948; see also Adler and Greve, 2009, 73-75). Empirically, they do not rule each other out. In the case of the North Atlantic security community, Greece and Turkey maintain dependable expectations of peaceful changes with the bulk of participants, while relations among them do not follow this pattern (Adler and Greve, 2009, 79-80). Actors can behave according to a balance of power approach towards some of their peers and yet be a part of a security community. And similarly, as the idea of a tension between the West and other powers shows, that such communities exist is ruling out that participants' relations with essential actors of world politics follow a different pattern.

The North Atlantic security community composed by European and North American states and the multilateral organisations of the area – the EU, NATO and to some extent the OSCE – has been presented as the foremost example of security community. It is hence not surprising that in the mid-2000s, in the wake of the Iraq crisis, the alarm bells went off and scholars engaged in a debate about whether the state of North Atlantic relations could still be

described as a security community (Cox, 2005; Pouliot, 2006; Risse, 2008). This debate revealed that the scholarship on security communities had not stressed strongly one point enough: to argue that ties of community exist at the international level does not amount to assume that participants will not have important disagreements.

However, no pervasive challenge has risen to the core claim that divergences between participants in the North Atlantic security community, among which the US and the EU are most important, continue to be managed without violence against each other even considered a hypothetical possibility. Notably, the North Atlantic security community came out "well and alive" of the divergences about Iraq, as including at the worst of a crisis about a supposedly existential threat, none of the participants had acted as if it had become possible that the use of force would play even a remote part in relations among them (Pouliot, 2006). In security cooperation, no actor seems to have departed from the assumption that working together is self-evident. Practices reflect the fact that dependable expectations of peaceful change are taken for granted and the already close ties of community need to be strengthened.

While the security community continues to exist, there are ambiguous developments in EU-US relations that affect the dynamics of the North Atlantic relationship. The two main issues at stake in this context are the common ground between participants in dealing with security challenges, and the emergence of new frameworks supporting the ties of community.

## A precarious North Atlantic security culture?

In his last speech as Secretary of Defence, Robert M. Gates in late November 2011 talked about "the real possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance" were European allies to continue to show lack of commitment as military allies and were they to continue to downsize their defence capabilities as a manner of reducing spending (Gates, 2011). The idea that the US gets insufficient military support from within the EU is an old topic of the debate on North Atlantic burden-sharing (see Hallams and Schreer, 2012). It also raises questions about the ongoing strength of ties of community between the EU and the US.

The issue is problematic, since part of what characterises a security community is that participants share a "security culture", "a socially constructed

sense concerning international threats" that they identify in a similar way and with a similar notion of what to do about (Pouliot and Lachmann, 2004, 136). While it is not always the case that the shared security culture leads to similar action by all participants, neither should disagreements about threat identification or measures become a pattern.

In this sense, the uneven degree of commitment in Afghanistan from within the EU suggests that notwithstanding the premises of common threat identification in the post-9/11 era, the extent of common ground is not large enough as to create positive input for the ties of community overall. How much of a shared "antiterrorist" security culture there is can further be questioned in view of the divergences that affect non-military EU-US cooperation against terrorism. This has been raised regarding the way that terrorism-suspected detainees should be treated and US restrictions on free entry by EU citizens, but even more important is the opposition motivated by concern for data protection in the EU against information-sharing with the US (see Archick, 2012). EU and US different approaches to the balance between ensuring privacy and antiterrorist measures suggest that the common identification of a threat does not create common ground for action.

The discussion of the dynamics of North Atlantic security culture, however, needs to be nuanced by the reminder that in most sensitive cases, the EU and the US have concluded agreements – in the case of financial tracking through SWIFT and aircraft passenger data – or are working towards one, such as about a general data protection framework for antiterrorist cooperation. Neither should the difference between EU and US priorities for and approaches to an antiterrorist security culture be overrated or the EU considered to have lived up to the role of "normative power" by opposing an all-intrusive US (see de Goede, 2012).

Moreover, while bilateral EU-US security cooperation is rather new, it has started with considerable momentum (Scheeck, 2008, 100-101). New layers continue to be added, as the participation of US personnel to CSDP non-military missions – rule of law mission EULEX Kosovo, and police and security sector reform missions in the DRC – or US support to the EU's training mission in Uganda that provided support to the Somali National Armed Forces.

## The institutionalisation of EU-US relations: less input for a community?

Security communities, as institutions, rely on practice. Part of community practice is that institutional dynamics supportive of such ties continue or emerge. In the context of the North Atlantic security community, then, there has been a great deal of attention paid to NATO as both keystone and yardstick of the state of transatlantic relations. Much has been made of a supposedly imminent demise of this organisation, since it would mean that the political-military centrepiece of the North Atlantic relationship was waning, leaving a considerable and damaging vacuum (see for example Cox, 2005, 224-225). Yet while a security community may well have multilateralism as key part, ties among participants are not identical with membership patterns (Pouliot and Lachmann, 2004, 132). Following up on this argument, it would be misleading to consider problems affecting one organisation, as important as it may be, as the downfall of ties of community. After all, scholars have shown that between Scandinavian and Nordic countries, a security community emerged in the virtual absence of formal multilateral frameworks (Wæver, 1998, 72-74; Wiberg, 2000).

The extension of EU-US bilateral relations in the last decade is a significant sign that there are new processes of institutionalisation that support community ties. New types of actors have become involved in a cooperation embedded in lasting frameworks: policy-makers and business representatives that participate in the thematic dialogue frameworks of the relationship, US personnel participating in CSDP missions in Kosovo and DRC, and so on. The negotiations for a EU-US free trade agreement are supposed to move this process to yet another level. Another question remains however whether this increased cooperation substantially strengthens and intensifies community ties. The answer cannot be wholly affirmative, since dynamics do not form a pattern and remain patchy.

This patchiness reflects the fact that both the US and the EU, albeit to a different degree, have institutionalised "priority" relations with actors outside of the North Atlantic. This is clear in the case of the US "pivot" or "rebalancing" towards the Asia-Pacific region, but it also shows in the EU's attempt to bring strategic partnerships with China, South Korea, South Africa, Mexico, Brazil, India and prospectively Indonesia and Nigeria, to the level of the long-standing relations with the US, Canada, Russia and Japan. It is hard to imagine that these endeavours do not or will not lead both the US and the EU to invest more in relations outside of the North Atlantic and less in their bilateral relationship.

Couched in the "absolute" terms of whether there are security community ties or not, the answer for current EU-US relations is that there are. The next question is however more tricky as it concerns the relevance that the continued existence of a North Atlantic security community gives to the EU as an actor of world politics. After all, it cannot be assumed that by the mere fact of existing, peaceful relations become meaningful: the community narrative has to take into account that, for example "the stable peace between Nepal and Paraguay is trivial" (Wiberg, 2000, 289). The post-Iraq warnings that the ties of security community across the North Atlantic would no longer be the main framework of this relationship (Cox, 2005) were questionable with regards to the existence of the community. But they might actually have had a point about the loss of dynamics between the EU and the US, and the loss of meaning of this relationship in international politics that especially the EU is struggling with.

## "Legitimacy" soft balancing and the EU as a partner to the US

The question that remains after looking at the EU-US relationship as a part of the North Atlantic security community is how dynamic these relations are. Answering it requires us to consider that it is actually both the EU and the US that are increasingly looking elsewhere. How much the EU's strategic partnership with countries other than the US – and in this context Canada – mean is debatable (see Renard, 2011). But notwithstanding the lack of empirical support for the argument that the EU acts as a rival to the US by being a soft balancer against it, one particular take on soft balancing is important to take into account when conceptualising the state of EU-US relations: soft balancers' intentions can actually be to maintain a "viable hegemony" which the hegemon's behaviour threatens to unravel by adopting a "strategy of legitimacy denial" (Clark, 2011, 281-282). By emphasising legitimacy, this argument parts ways with the realist views of proponents and critics of soft balancing.

In the case of the Iranian nuclear programme, the EU can be found to have succeeded for the time being in delegitimising the use of force that the US has threatened Iran with. Thereby, it has brought the hegemonic US to a position that is more in line with the EU's preferences for an international order. To put it paradoxically, part of the EU being a partner to the US would be to oppose it on certain issues, in order to preserve the interests of both

parties to the EU-US partnership. Such soft balancing is not the behaviour of a rival, especially since it is only effective if there is a partnership. If not, the hegemon would be less concerned about getting the soft balancer on board and the latter would lack leverage. Partnership does in fact not rule out important divergences, but it is a mindset that leads the partners to either sort out or downgrade conflicts in order to preserve an overall positive relationship. The notion does imply intense interaction and a shared aim for lasting cooperation.

Conflict is thus not absent among partners, but certain forms of conflictive behaviour are at least temporarily beyond consideration. Moreover, the partnership can take different forms, as in EU external action. The EU's strategic partnerships, on the one hand, reflect the instrumental perspective of mutually advantageous cooperation about certain domains over time in a formal framework. On the other hand, with "effective multilateralism" constructed as being at the heart of EU external action (European Council, 2003, 9), relations with multilateral organisations are supposed to involve more than reciprocal benefits, even if in the case of the African Union, the relationship is nominally embedded in a "Europe-Africa Strategic Partnership". While strategic partnerships nominally comprise the EU's relationship with the US, it is worthwhile to consider it as a special case.

How the EU handles effective multilateralism as a core commitment throughout the entire range of its external action, however, raises a question: is the EU adopting a pattern in the development of its external action that is conducive to rivalry with the US, even though there is no aim to balance or even threaten it? Since the principle of effective multilateralism prioritises the multilateral governance of international issues, it supports EU behaviour that not only diverges from US policy about multilateral frameworks, but may even seem to deny legitimacy to the latter. In the aftermath of Iraq, US opposition to the International Criminal Court, the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel mines or the Kyoto Protocol was held to be emblematic for an antimultilateralist turn that the EU had to challenge in order to reconcile multipolarity and the partnership with the US. The EU's record on effective multilateralism might not be very consistent for now (see for example Koops, 2011). Nonetheless, its way of dealing with multilateral organisations is at odds with the US applying measures that threaten multilateral organisations, such as in the fall of 2011 when it cut off funding to the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in reaction to Palestinian membership.

If such divergences repeat themselves to the point where they become a pattern, then a framework of rivalry might emerge. Claims such as those about effective multilateralism being at the heart of EU external action establish an implicit distinction with other international actors. But this quest for European protagonism through singularity does not stem from an intention to become a rival. To the EU, some international actors are partners and among them, the US has actually a special standing, as do multilateral organisations such as the UN or NATO. However, partnerships with the EU, regardless of their aim to achieve deep and trustful cooperation, can become the stage for EU attempts to assert itself, in line with the ambitions to become a globally influential actor measuring up to the standard – but not the kind – of worldwide presence that the US shows. The issue is then not intentional balancing but the growing gap between partners' practices (Adler and Greve, 2009, 81).

Seen from this perspective, the main challenge to the relationship is that it is caught between different expectations on how it should work as a partnership. From the US point of view, it is no longer sustainable that the EU mostly acts as a junior partner. EU external action is developed to bring this junior partner status to an end. The problem is that this conception is most developed as a way to engage other international actors in a fashion that sets the EU apart, notably by attempts to follow up on the claim of effective multilateralism. Notwithstanding that this also comprises cooperation with multilateral organisations about international crisis management, notably through CSDP (see Koops, 2011), EU aspirations to leave behind a junior partner status have not led to an increase of capabilities and commitment in support of the US.

Three forms of partnership can be found in EU-US relations: a junior partnership that seems to sum up much of the present situation, especially in the field of security, but that is not considered desirable; the US preference for allies becoming equal partners in security; and the EU ambition to prove an equal partner to the US and other great powers by asserting itself on the international scene, mainly in the realm of diplomacy. It is the tension between these three forms of partnership that makes a rivalry narrative plausible. That the EU is still acting as a junior partner in security but seeks to assert itself as a protagonist by emphasising diplomacy and multilateralism can pit it against US expectations. When EU and US positions are handled as alternatives, this can push the two North Atlantic partners towards acting as rivals in the domains where their ways of dealing with international challenges

differ: not only security, but also the environment, human rights – e.g. their divergences about the International Criminal Court – and so on.

This discussion leads to the conclusion that the perspective of rivalry is relevant to identify important fault lines in the relationship between the EU and the US, but that these actors are currently not rivals engaging in balancing. It is then necessary to raise the question around which pattern EU-US relations evolve at present. Reading them as a partnership suggests that they currently represent a form of cooperative international order, but that among the partners, the cooperation is not considered to have the expected comprehensiveness and range.

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