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Indice

I Quaderni del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche
dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.....5

PARTE I

ATTI DEL CONVEGNO

L'evoluzione militare della NATO alla luce del nuovo Concetto Strategico

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore – 7 aprile 2011

Presentazione del Direttore del Dipartimento
di Scienze Politiche.....11

Discorso introduttivo dell'Ambasciatore Claudio Bisogniero,
Segretario Generale Delegato della NATO15

L'evoluzione storica dei Concetti Strategici della NATO23
DI MASSIMO DE LEONARDIS

Le problematiche del nuovo Concetto Strategico47
DI GIANCARLO ARAGONA

I rapporti tra NATO e Russia dal confronto al dialogo53
DI ANTONGIULIO DE' ROBERTIS

La riforma dei comandi militari della NATO63
DI FERDINANDO SANFELICE DI MONTEFORTE

Le forze terrestri della NATO.....69
DI ANTONIO LI GOBBI

Le forze navali della NATO81
DI PIER PAOLO RAMOINO

Le forze aeree della NATO.....91
DI MAURIZIO LODOVISI

Il ruolo dell'Arma dei Carabinieri nelle operazioni all'estero	105
DI FABRIZIO PARRULLI	
La NATO: i suoi punti di forza e i suoi problemi.....	113
DI CARLO CABIGIOSU	
L'Alleanza Atlantica: le ragioni geopolitiche, il nuovo Concetto Strategico, l'intervento in Libia	121
DI CARLO JEAN	

PARTE II
MISCELLANEA

NATO: The Management of Diversity.....	139
DI FEDERICO ROMERO	
L'immigrazione clandestina via mare: problematiche giuridiche e operative	151
DI RAIMONDO POLLASTRINI	
The State and the Churches in Germany: A Story of Competition and Conciliation	167
DI MICHAEL GERMANN	
<i>Gli Autori</i>	185
<i>Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Membri di prima afferenza</i>	189

NATO: The Management of Diversity

di FEDERICO ROMERO

Four years ago, while planning a collection of essays on the history of transatlantic crises, my colleague Mario Del Pero and I soon came to the conclusion that we could not devote a chapter to each crisis: there had been simply too many, or too few, depending on the definition. More importantly, separating moments of crisis from periods of uneventful agreement in the history of the Atlantic alliance appeared virtually impossible. A plain, linear pattern of peaceful continuity punctuated by occasional crises does not really represent the dynamic of the Atlantic alliance. When you travel through its sixty years' history, what you see instead is a more complex fabric, a never-ending story of big and small clashes, negotiated differences, divergences, convergences. Thus we opted for decades, each one with its own chapter. If you read them you find out that each author portrays a complex dynamic of differences and mediations, disagreements and accords¹.

The point I want to make here is that the most appropriate term is not so much crisis but challenges, and mutual adjustments. Crisis, however, was the term often voiced in anguish by commentators and by the Alliance's leaders and officers, who had to patch up their disagreements without knowing if they could really preserve or restore unity. If the overall, shared mission of containing and deterring Soviet power was never in doubt, everything else – policies, organization, tactics, budgeting, and the internal balance of influence – was in constant flux, subject to permanent renegotiation. This is, I believe, the keyword. Although stable in their overall framework, transatlantic relations never stood still, and they amounted to a permanent process of renegotiation.

¹ M. Del Pero-F. Romero (eds.), *Le crisi transatlantiche. Continuità e trasformazioni*, Roma, 2007.

Let me go through a concise overview. In its very first years, when the Alliance's basic strategy and structure were being devised in an atmosphere of emergency, the thorny issue of German rearmament cut through each and every debate, from 1949 to the solution eventually adopted in 1955. It affected strategy as well as identity, the internal balance of national interests and the multilateral functioning of the Alliance. It could easily have ripped NATO apart. Instead, the very process of searching for a complex solution gave NATO partners a habit for mutual concessions, procedures to handle differences, and ultimately a durable architecture that integrated national, European and American interests. On this and other issues, Europeans learnt to adjust to harsh post-war realities, to cooperate while also competing for influence. While the Americans acquired the ability to lead the Alliance not only by their sheer preponderance but also by means of accommodating European interests and sensibilities². Precious resources, both of them, for the solidity and functioning of a multilateral alliance.

Just a year after the solution of the German issue, in 1956, the three leading nations of the Atlantic alliance went to a head-on collision on Suez, and Washington forced its best allies to abandon, once and for all, the imperial pretensions that had defined their very identity as nations and international powers³.

NATO as such was not involved, but from the lessons of Suez originated the next, major challenge to its unity. Britain opted for a closer, permanent alignment with Washington. De Gaulle instead imagined a French-led European coalition aimed at reducing US preponderance and rebalancing the uneven distribution of

² See A. Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem. The United States and the Cold War Choices in France and Italy, 1944-1958*, Westport, CT, 2002; M. Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace. The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963*, Princeton, NJ, 1999; M. Creswell, *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe*, Cambridge, MA, 2006; D. Junker (ed.), *The US and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945-1990*, Cambridge, 2004; J. McAllister, *No Exit. America and the German Problem, 1943-1954*, Ithaca, NY, 2002; M. Creswell-M. Trachtenberg, *France and the German Question, 1945-1955*, in "Journal of Cold War Studies", vol. V (2003), n. 3; D.C. Large, *Germans to the Front: West German Rearmament in the Adenauer Era*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1996.

³ See D. Tal (ed.), *The 1956 War*, London, 2001; F. Gerges, *The Superpowers and the Middle East*, Boulder, CO, 1994; D. Kunz, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1991.

power within the Western alliance. The instruments of choice for his strategy were close cooperation with Germany, an independent nuclear deterrent and a closely-knit European community without Britain⁴. Step by step, and all the way to France's exit from NATO in 1966, the alliance was rocked by increasing tensions that concerned not only the role of France, but strategy towards the USSR, the potential proliferation of national deterrents, burden-sharing and monetary policies, US policies in Indochina.

Lifted by the tide of its economic "miracle", Western Europe was growing confident and assertive in those years. It often challenged the US on commercial and financial issues, and was surely interested at some rebalancing within NATO. But De Gaulle's nationalism and the persistent need for American security guarantees eventually isolated France. President Johnson did not retaliate against French defiance; Germany and other European governments did not join in the challenge to US leadership; policy issues were successfully mediated in the Harmel report of 1967. In short, NATO not only survived the challenge, but gained in cohesion, resilience and strategic accord⁵.

By the late 1960s the Alliance was morphing into a less unequal coalition, and not just because the US had trapped itself in an exhausting war in Vietnam that few allies deemed wise or necessary. The long post-war boom had turned Western Europe from the epitome of fragmented weakness – as it used to be in 1945 – into a prosperous, modernized, self-confident coalition of states, whose solidity was only momentarily shaken by the tremors of 1968. On monetary and commercial affairs, they were challenging the US to fiscal self-discipline and closer transatlantic coordination. They wanted the US to remain committed to European security, but they were also beginning to redefine the very notion of continental security. Led by the pioneering efforts of Willy Brandt's Germany,

⁴ F. Bozo, *Deux stratégies pour l'Europe: de Gaulle, les Etats-Unis et l'Alliance atlantiques 1958-1969*, Paris, 1996; M. Vaïsse, *La Grandeur: politique étrangère du général De Gaulle, 1958-1969*, Paris, 1998.

⁵ A. Wenger-C. Nünlist-A. Locher, *Transforming NATO in the Cold War: Challenges Beyond Deterrence in the 1960s*, New York, 2007; R.J. Granieri, *The Ambivalent Alliance: Konrad Adenauer, the CDU/CSU and the West, 1949-1966*, Oxford, 2003; W. Loth (ed.), *Europe, Cold War and Coexistence, 1953-1965*, London, 2004; G. Lundestad, *"Empire" by Integration: The United States and European Integration, 1945-1997*, Oxford, 1997.

most European governments got involved in one sort or another of an *Ostpolitik* premised on the idea that an intra-European détente could not only stabilize the continent and strengthen peace, but induce a gradual relaxation of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe⁶.

Thus, throughout the 1970s the management of the Atlantic alliance became dicey, as a complex set of interlocking negotiations – with open clashes and bitter disagreements – multiplied uncertainty and unpredictability. The Atlantic alliance grew contentious and fractious, its voices strident. Monetary affairs were a source of constant tension, as Nixon's decision to sink the Bretton Woods system signalled an attempt to re-establish American hegemony in a far less accommodating fashion. The Europeans broke ranks with the US during the Yom Kippur war, and thereafter adopted a noticeably more pro-Arab stance, as a well as a different oil policy. On the North-South axis, they developed trade and aid programs that projected Europe's own interests and influence, and often contested US policies in the Third World, especially in Latin America. Kissinger's attempt at re-disciplining NATO under American leadership was noticeably less successful than his triangular diplomacy.

As the emerging American neoconservatives denounced a creeping "finlandization" of Western Europe, Europeans decided that a distinct identity and a more independent attitude in foreign affairs were now possible and necessary. Under the umbrella of bipolar détente, Europe was actually organizing its first foreign policy coordination and played a central role in injecting human rights and cultural openness in the Helsinki agreements. Transitions to democracy in Southern Europe – Greece, Portugal, Spain – were channelled and managed not by the US but by the increasing pull of the European Community. And as soon as détente began to fray, European and American priorities openly diverged. Washington groped for new leverage to compel

⁶ F.J. Gavin, *Gold Dollars and Power. The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971*, Chapel Hill, NC, 2003; P. Ludlow (ed.), *European Integration and the Cold War: Ostpolitik-Westpolitik, 1965-1973*, London, 2007; W. Loth, *Overcoming the Cold War: A History of Détente, 1950-1991*, New York, 2001.

the Soviets, but European governments refused to halt or even to downgrade intra-European détente⁷.

Crisis, mistrust, divergence were the most common definitions of the transatlantic relationship during the 1970s. And yet NATO did not break apart, cooperation did not stop, and at the end of the decade important agreements – most noticeably on the deployment of Pershing and Cruise missiles – signalled a restored, and perhaps strengthened compact across the Atlantic. Europe's search for autonomy did not extend to security issues, and renewed Soviet military pressures in Europe – as well as assertiveness in Africa and elsewhere – called for refurbished Atlantic unity under US strategic leadership. As bipolar détente gave way to confrontation, the transatlantic alliance ended a stormy phase ... and immediately entered another one! Solid realignment on military issues lasted through the 1980s, but it was accompanied by open conflicts on economic matters, explicit mistrust on many policy issues and an increasingly diversified attitude on relations with the Soviet bloc.

Ronald Reagan's ideological offensive against communism, his counter-attacks on the periphery of the Soviet empire and his strategy of intense rearmament enjoyed some support in Western Europe, but they also raised widespread concern. Not so much for fear that we might stumble into war – even though governments felt the pressure of peace movements and an anxious public opinion – but for a distinctly European preference for détente. It was not so much a matter of principles as of established practices. Increasing trade, continuous credit and expanding contacts with the East were seen in Bonn, but also in many other West European capitals, as assets that should not be sacrificed. There were material interests at stake, of course, but there was more than that.

⁷ J. Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect. Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, New York, 2004; M. Del Pero, *Henry Kissinger e l'ascesa dei neoconservatori*, Roma-Bari, 2006; D. Basosi, *Il governo del dollaro*, Firenze, 2006; M. Schulz-T. Schwartz (eds.), *The Strained Alliance: Conflict and Cooperation in U.S.-European Relations from Nixon to Carter*, New York, 2009; A. Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente: How the West Shaped the Helsinki CSCE*, Bruxelles, 2009; M.E. Smith, *Europe's Foreign and Security Policy: The Institutionalization of Cooperation*, New York, 2004; D.C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*, Princeton, NJ, 2001; G. Bossuat (ed.), *L'Europe et la mondialisation*, Paris, 2007.

Furthering intra-European détente was a strategic choice. Offering inducements and incentives as well as constraints; developing contacts, travelling, cultural exchanges; establishing common standards, these were all viewed as means to mellow down the rigidities of Communist rule, raise the price of self-imposed isolation and, ultimately, draw the East closer to the West. If the West had to rearm to face down Soviet pressure – and Europeans went along with the US on this – no less important appeared the attempt to gradually foster the political, psychological and even ideological disarmament – so to speak – of the Eastern regimes⁸.

Thus, West Europeans did not join in the post-Afghanistan boycott of the USSR promoted by the Carter administration, opted for moderating rather than ostracizing the military regime imposed by general Jaruzelski in Poland, and openly defied Washington by collaborating with the Soviets in building a gas pipeline from Siberia. Although strained, NATO unity was maintained, and its military effectiveness increased, but the Atlantic alliance of the 1980s appeared less a unitary bloc than a contentious coalition between two uneasy partners with diverging views. As conservative America took to emphasizing its superior power and distinctive neo-liberal ideology, Europeans increasingly valued multilateral collaboration – within and without the Alliance – and responded by portraying themselves as the successful embodiment of a more regulated and cooperative model of market economy⁹.

In the final, hectic years that brought the Cold War to its end, it was the Americans who drove the hard bargaining with Gorbachev for the factual, ideological and moral disarmament (and eventually the dismemberment) of Soviet power. But it was West Germany and the European community that literally bought off the Eastern regimes, channelling Poland and Hungary into

⁸ M.J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy*, Chapel Hill, NC, 2003; O. Njølstad (ed.), *The Last Decade of the Cold War*, London, 2004; D.H. Allin, *Cold War Illusions. America, Europe and Soviet Power, 1969-1989*, New York, 1995.

⁹ A. Deighton-G. Bossuat (eds.), *The EC/EU: A World Security Actor?*, Paris, 2007; S. Pons-F. Romero (eds.), *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War*, London, 2005; W. Loth, *Moscow, Prague, and Warsaw: Overcoming the Brezhnev Doctrine*, in “Cold War History”, vol. I (2001), n. 2, pp. 103-18; J. Hanhimäki, *Conservative Goals, Revolutionary Outcomes: The Paradox of Détente*, in “Cold War History”, vol. VIII (2008), n. 4, pp. 503-12.

the “negotiated revolutions” that started the peaceful upheaval of 1989, and making clear to the hard-liners in Berlin and Prague that the cost of resistance would have been unsustainable. The decisive, crucial cooperation between President Bush and Chancellor Kohl on German reunification once again epitomized this two-pronged action – pressure and inducements, compulsion and subsidies – by allies who used different means, and extolled different philosophies, only to converge on a common goal¹⁰.

Then came the post-Soviet era, and each partner had to reconceive what the Atlantic alliance was all about. Each one brought its specific reading of the Cold War experience to bear. The US emphasized the transformative agency of American power, and its role as the indispensable guarantor of security in Europe and worldwide, a view corroborated by the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. Europeans, on the other hand, stressed the stabilizing effects of integration and multilateral cooperation, the constraining power of international norms and shared procedures¹¹.

NATO retained a useful function in both visions, respectively as a multiplier of US influence and a “security community” that epitomized cooperation. Besides, abandoning a functioning arrangement for the unknown would have been unnecessarily expensive, risky and uncertain. But throughout the Nineties it was becoming apparent that even within shared institutions and habits, the Atlantic alliance was not so much a unitary body as the juxtaposition of different attitudes and philosophies. They could coexist, no doubt. Policies could converge, major initiatives could

¹⁰ M.P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, New York, 2007, pp. 338-450; C.S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*, Princeton, NJ, 1997; A.S. Grachev, *Gorbachev's Gamble: Soviet Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*, Cambridge, 2008; F. Bozo (et al.), *Europe and the End of the Cold War: A Reappraisal*, London, 2008; J. Levesque, 1989, *la fin d'un empire: l'URSS et la libération de l'Europe de l'Est*, Paris, 1996; M. Kramer, *The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part I)*, in “Journal of Cold War Studies”, vol. V (2003), n. 4, pp. 178-256; R.L. Tokes, *Hungary's Negotiated Revolution, 1987-1990*, Cambridge, 1996; K.H. Jarasch, *The Rush to German Unity*, New York, 1994; P. Zelikow-C. Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, Cambridge, MA, 1995.

¹¹ H.M. Cox, *Another Transatlantic Split? American and European Narratives and the End of the Cold War*, in “Cold War History”, vol. VII (2007), n. 2, pp. 121-46; E. Schrecker (ed.), *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, New York, 2004.

occasionally unite, but outlooks and expectations were growing diverse. Perhaps more than anything else, Americans and Europeans no longer shared the early-Cold War assumption of convergence, of a shared future as a common, indistinct West. We still acted as one West vis-à-vis some external challenges. We were perceived as a compact by third parties, especially alienated and hostile ones. But we were conceiving of ourselves as Americans and Europeans: with similarities, of course, but also different histories, aspirations and projects¹².

It was at this moment that the Alliance precipitated in its most profound crisis. The first and only one, I believe, that truly threatened its existence, because the response to 9/11 catalyzed, and above all polarized all those elements of diverse self-representation that had been brewing for some time across the Atlantic. “Venus” versus “Mars”, according to Robert Kagan; unilateralism versus multilateralism, in academic lingo; a clash of civilization or multicultural coexistence, in the media. The disruptive clash on Iraq, and on broader assumptions about the “war on the terror” and the Middle East, concerned strategy as well as visions of the past and the future, and a good deal of beliefs and delusions about America’s and Europe’s role in the world. Conservative America felt betrayed by pusillanimous Europeans in the moment of need, while broad sections of European opinion, and a few of its most important governments, felt that we should move to an independent role for peace in a multi-polar world¹³. Formal NATO unity

¹² R.D. Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, New York, 2002; J.P. Kaufman, *NATO and the Former Yugoslavia: Crisis, Conflict, and the Atlantic Alliance*, Lanham, MD, 2002; J.M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO*, Washington, D.C., 1999; A. Verdun-O. Croci, *The European Union in the Wake of Eastern Enlargement: Institutional and Policy-Making Challenges*, Manchester, 2005; F. Romero, *The Twilight of American Cultural Hegemony. A Historical Perspective on Western Europe’s Distancing from America*, in D. Farber (ed.), *What They Think of Us. International Perceptions of the United States since 9/11*, Princeton, 2007, pp. 153-76.

¹³ R. Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power*, New York, 2003; I.H. Daalder-J. Lindsay, *America Unbound. The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C., 2003; C.V. Balis-S. Serfaty (eds.), *Visions of America and Europe. September 11, Iraq, and Transatlantic Relations*, Washington, D.C., 2004; J. Gaddis, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*, Cambridge, MA, 2004; T. Lindberg (ed.), *Beyond Paradise and Power. Europe, America and the Future of a Troubled Partnership*, London, 2005; S. Fabbrini (ed.), *America Contested*, London, 2006.

remained frozen in place, but for a couple of years – between late 2002 and 2004 – transatlantic cooperation hung on the verge of collapse.

Then diplomats got down to their job of patching things up. Supporters of radical options for a post-Atlantic polarization were forced to a reality check, whether in the streets of Iraq or in the halls of Brussels, and backtracked. Sensible evaluations of the multitude of interests, similarities and connections that we share came once again to the foreground. We began, tentatively but effectively, to cooperate where we could, and where we could not, at least we stopped hitting and offending each other. At present, we seem to have adopted a pattern of cautious moderation; we do what we can to minimize actual or potential trans-Atlantic frictions, and we strive to realize collaborative synergies when possible. We recognize our conspicuous disagreements on many issues – from Afghanistan to Russia, from Palestine to Iran – but we do not exasperate them, and actively try to work a way out of our differences, or to hush them up.

Is this anything new? Or is it once again the traditional trans-Atlantic pattern of negotiated cooperation, with the careful management of differences? I believe we can I draw a couple of conclusions from the story I sketched out.

The first one is that trans-Atlantic differences – whether within NATO or around it – were constant, deep and often tense. They were the norm, not the exception. At the time they were always experienced as a drag, if not a danger, for Western effectiveness. But when we assess them in broad historical terms, we can now come – I believe – to the opposite conclusion. Overall, they were an asset, not a burden. Sure, at times they prevented the optimal conclusion, they imposed complex detours, they raised costs, and they forced officials to painstaking work, with frustrating delays. But differences gave the alliance a broader reach. They imposed more refined analyses of each problem, with precious distinctions between the unnecessary and the bottom-line. They multiplied the approaches the alliance could take on each issue, with more latitude to bring different nuances and policies to bear on the same subject matter. They drew the best resources out of each partner and deployed them in multisided approaches and interventions. Besides, they endowed the West with a powerful image

of inclusiveness and accommodating flexibility that made it much more attractive. In short, they multiplied rather than limit the resources the West could deploy.

The best example, certainly the most decisive one, concerns the management of bipolar relations in the final decade of the Cold War. President Reagan's confrontational mobilization of US power forced the Soviets to realize that they could not sustain an endless competitive escalation. At the same time, intra-European détente deepened the Eastern regimes' structural dependence on Western loans and imports, exposed those societies to corrosive Western cultural influences, facilitated the emergence of reformist attitudes, and eventually brought the Socialist elites themselves to lose faith in their own ideological project. Thus, what the West at the time perceived as a perilous lack of unity, turned out to be an unintended but highly effective double-play – the political equivalent of a pincer movement, to borrow a military metaphor – that drove the Cold War to its unpredictably peaceful ending¹⁴.

Compare this flexible, adaptable, plural nature of the Atlantic coalition with the dismal management of their alliances by the Soviets. From Yugoslavia to China, from Hungary to Czechoslovakia, the Kremlin's inability to accommodate differences meant that the Communist one could only be a brittle bloc, hierarchical and yet cumbersome, prone to fissures, unfit for innovation and adaptation, quite unattractive to potential new friends¹⁵.

My second and final conclusion is this. Throughout its history, NATO withstood open, even acrimonious differences. They were contained, carefully managed and eventually overcome because no one saw them as a spring-board to move beyond the Alliance. But in the crisis over Iraq a different spectre emerged. For a few brief months, differences were magnified and exasperated by radical voices across the Atlantic, who seemed to exploit those differences

¹⁴ I develop this argument more extensively in F. Romero, *Storia della Guerra Fredda. L'ultimo conflitto per l'Europa*, Torino, 2009.

¹⁵ The importance of this difference between the two alliances is now a ground for consensus even among historians with different views of Cold War history. See for example V. Mastny-S.G. Holtzmark-A. Wenger, *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West*, New York, 2006; O.A. Westad, *The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century*, in M. Leffler-O.A. Westad (eds.), *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. I, Cambridge, 2009; J. Gaddis, *We Now Know*, New York, 1997.

in order to outline alternative projects. Either an impossibly hierarchical submission to Washington's unilateral strategy or a final break-up towards Europe's solitary autonomy in a multi-polar architecture. This is what no alliance can withstand. If different policy options become tools to forge contrasting identities, if independence is valued over and above coalition, then even the best tradition of alliance management is powerless.

The Atlantic alliance stepped back from that brink, and its accumulated experience at conflict management reasserted itself. But we had a glimpse of the dynamic that could break it apart, or paralyse it into irrelevance. It is a lesson that should be kept in mind. We are undergoing a turbulent reshaping of the world economy that will no doubt redraw the map of many international relations and attitudes, if not of power resources. We are also experiencing gradual but portentous shifts in the geometry of world power which seem to be accelerated by the current crisis. The transatlantic relationship will inevitably be less central, although I believe still very important, and will have to be reconceived and repositioned. In such a changing environment even the most established and successful traditions cannot be taken for granted.

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