

America, Europe, and the Crescent of Crisis

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The broader Middle Eastern region has become the central focus of U.S.-European diplomatic relations. Talks between senior European policymakers and U.S. officials are now often dominated by issues that arise from the threats to peace and stability that emanate from this troubled region. The Middle East looms equally large in public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic. Many Americans were furious with France and Germany when they refused to support the U.S.-led war in Iraq. Similarly, many Europeans have been very critical of what they perceive to be U.S. bias in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some Americans are as angry over Europe's refusal to "get tough" with Iran as the Europeans are with America's refusal to join in negotiations with Tehran.

For all the increased talk and attention, however, America and Europe have been unsuccessful in forging a common approach to the region. Both sides agree that the Middle East is important, and recognition is growing that the lack of democracy and modernization throughout this part of the world poses grave problems for regional stability and international security. For this reason, the Group of Eight (G-8) leading industrialized countries, including the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the European Commission, together launched a Broader Middle East and North Africa initiative in June 2004, which was designed to promote the political and economic transformation of the region. Yet,

while unquestionably important, the transformation of the Middle East is at best a generations-long project. And although cooperation toward that objective might provide some glue to hold the transatlantic partners together, the goal of transforming the Middle East will never be reached if the more immediate and dangerous crises that have bedeviled the region are not addressed and resolved.

The greater Middle East region is beset by a crescent of crises, ranging from Israel to Lebanon and Syria to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. While each of these cases is obviously unique, the region as a whole is beset by many similar problems and challenges—like weapons proliferation, the lack of democracy, rampant population growth, terrorism, strategic threats, and economic stagnation. And while Americans and Europeans tend to agree that these issues are important, there is little transatlantic agreement on how to approach, let alone resolve, any of them. Nor is there agreement on the degree to which the United States and European Union should work together.

Transatlantic differences over the Middle East crescent of crisis are regrettable—potentially even tragic—for at least three reasons. First, this region, always strategically important, is now central to the basic security of both Europe and the United States. No region in the world is remotely as relevant to some of the most important strategic issues of our time—from terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and energy supplies to immigration, narcotics trafficking, and religious conflict or peace. Even if the United States and European Union were somehow to succeed in achieving all their other goals elsewhere in the world, no American or European will be safe so long as the conflicts of the Middle East remain unresolved.

U.S.-EU differences over the Middle East are also unfortunate because transatlantic cooperation is often necessary (if not sufficient) to reach common goals in the region. The problems of the region are challenging enough with the international community working together; they are nearly impossible to solve when the world's two greatest repositories of military power, economic resources, and democratic legitimacy work at cross purposes. While the authors and editors of this volume disagree on many aspects of how to approach the various challenges the region presents, all agree that, when possible, joint U.S.-EU strategies improve the prospects for success in pursuing common interests.

Finally—and more than incidentally—the ability of America and Europe to agree on the Middle East will, more than anything else, determine the future course of transatlantic relations. The transatlantic alliance has been a pillar of world order for more than a half a century. But it was forged for a very different purpose—winning the cold war—and it has yet to demonstrate convincingly that it can work beyond Europe's borders. If the partnership cannot work effectively in addressing the most pressing challenges of the current era, then people on both sides will question its value and refuse to support it. The compelling need for joint U.S.-European action in the Balkans underscored the enduring value of NATO for at least a decade, and the joint goal of consolidating the European peace has yet to be completely achieved. But it would be an illusion to pretend that the transatlantic alliance can remain healthy if Americans and Europeans are feuding over the issues that matter most to their security. If the alliance does not demonstrably meet the needs of citizens on both sides, it simply will not survive.

In 2005 the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution joined forces with four leading European organizations—the European Union Institute for Security Studies, King's College in London, the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin, and the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique in Paris—to launch an effort to help develop common analyses and complementary strategies for the crescent of crisis in the Middle East. The focus of this effort was on some of the most immediate and important crises facing the West today: Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon-Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. We began by commissioning papers by some of the top experts on these issues on both sides of the Atlantic, asking them to analyze the problems, discuss European and American commonalities and differences, and look for ways to bridge some key gaps. In April 2005, most of these papers were then presented, discussed, and debated by the authors and a wider group of experts for two days and nights at a workshop hosted by the EU Institute for Security Studies in Paris. The papers were subsequently revised and constitute the chapters that follow. In the concluding chapter, the editors of this volume discuss how some of these ideas might be drawn upon to forge a more integrated transatlantic strategy for the entire region.

No one should overlook the enormous obstacles that make transatlantic cooperation on the crescent of crisis difficult. Nor should anyone

underestimate what is at stake. If the United States and European Union together can put their considerable resources behind common strategies for dealing with this region, they might just be able to resolve some of the crises that threaten their security, their alliance, and their many friends and deserving partners in the region. If they fail to do so, it is virtually certain that the crescent of crisis will endure, to the detriment not only of the West but the entire world. Under such circumstances, however challenging, developing a common U.S.-European approach seems worth the effort.