



---

# Setting the table: More than half a century of US-EU relations

---

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

---



**EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service**

Guest author: Bruce Stokes  
PE 739.278 – December 2022

EN

EPRS invites leading experts and commentators to share their thinking and insights on important topics of relevance to debate in the European institutions. In this paper, Bruce Stokes, visiting senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and associate fellow at Chatham House, offers an overview of the development of U.S.-EU relations since 1957, with a strong emphasis on ties in the last 30-40 years, largely based on the author's interviews with former officials who lived that relationship. The past 65 years has seen the pace and depth of official transatlantic interaction increase as the powers of the European Union grew, something the United States belatedly and reluctantly came to recognise, as transatlantic economic integration deepened, and shared challenges – China, technological change, global warming, pandemics, and global economic disparities – became more important to governments on both sides of the Atlantic.

The paper does not attempt a comprehensive chronology of U.S.-EU relations, but discusses several longstanding challenges that have preoccupied the relationship: differences in values between Europeans and Americans and the contrasting perceptions they have of each other and of the European Union, their respective roles in the world, and their positions on given issues at hand.

## **AUTHOR**

Bruce Stokes, visiting senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and associate fellow at Chatham House.

This paper has been drafted at the request of the Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services (EPRS) of the Secretariat of the European Parliament.

To contact the author, please email: [eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu).

## **LINGUISTIC VERSIONS**

Original: EN

Manuscript completed in November 2022.

## **DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT**

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

Brussels © European Union, 2022.

PE 739.278  
ISBN: 978-92-848-0111-4  
DOI:10.2861/097165  
CAT: QA-03-22-297-EN-N

[eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu)

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu/> (intranet)

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank> (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

## Preface

*Your accomplishment, more than 500 million people speaking 24 languages in 28 countries, 19 with a common currency, in one European Union -- remains one of the greatest political and economic achievements of modern times.*

[U.S. President Barack Obama](#)

Hannover, Germany

April 25, 2016

In 1992, I was a journalist covering international economics and trade for the *National Journal*, a public policy magazine in Washington D.C. I was assigned to write a cover story on the European Community's 1992 project.

As the magazine prepared to go to the printer, the art designer shared with me the cover illustration: a map of what was to be the new European Union. Sheepishly I went to the editor to point out to him that the map was an attractive cover, but it left out Greece. He was an experienced journalist who had once had my beat. But, without batting an eye, his response was: 'It doesn't fit!'

He meant, of course, that Greece, far off to the south-east, did not fit on the limited space on the cover. But it was also a telling commentary on the doubt even well-informed Americans felt about the European single market project that would include economic powerhouses such as Germany and weaker economies, such as Greece. The 2008-2009 financial crisis and the risk that Greece would have to leave the European Union came close to making my editor a prophet. But Greece, and the integrity of the European Union, survived. Most important, the resilience of the European project was again affirmed, something Americans have had to learn and relearn over the years.

Later in my career, as a senior fellow at the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, I published one of the first books—[Open for Business: Creating a Transatlantic Marketplace](#)--calling for a U.S.-EU free trade agreement. Later, as a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund, I wrote two task force reports that, in part, again championed a transatlantic free trade agreement.

Subsequently, I had the privilege of conducting two of the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Trends surveys, I helped design the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Survey and, for seven years, acted as the director of global economic attitudes at Pew. In that work, I participated in the fielding of multiple public opinion surveys in Europe and in the United States that yielded extensive data on the views of average Europeans and Americans about each other, their shared and divergent values, and their opinions about the issues they both faced, ranging from trade to China to climate change.

This experience disabused me of my idealistic view of transatlantic relations, while reaffirming my belief that Americans and Europeans, for all their differences, share more in common than they do with people in other parts of the world. More important, my time as a pollster convinced me of the gap between the sentiments of transatlantic elites and their respective publics. And, while U.S.-EU relations are largely conducted by elites, if deepening economic and strategic integration of the European Union and the United States is to continue, it requires the understanding and support of publics on both sides of the Atlantic. This backing cannot be taken for granted. Obtaining that support requires European and American elites to listen to their publics, if only to learn how to talk with them about their self-interest in transatlantic relations. (Even in the immediate aftermath of World War II, it took an unprecedented public engagement effort on the part of the Truman Administration to rally American support for the Marshall Plan. But it worked. In July 1947, [51 %](#) of Americans had never heard of the Marshall Plan. By February 1948, 56 % supported it.)

Despite ups and downs in the U.S.-EU relationship, and both scepticism and frustration over the years, Americans have increasingly worked with first the six nations of the European Economic Community, then the European Community, and now the 27 members of the European Union.

As Robert Zoellick, the former deputy U.S. Secretary of State and U.S. Trade Representative, and author of the book *America in the World: a History of US Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, observed in an interview with the author, looking at the sweep of the post-war period: 'What one sees is the inevitable pulls and tensions in transatlantic relations'.

But, as experience has shown both in dealing with shared problems and in the pursuit of common ambitions, the United States and the European Union have never had better or more necessary partners.

*Bruce Stokes is a visiting senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, based in Washington, and an associate fellow at Chatham House in London. He is the former director of global economic attitudes at the Pew Research Center. For most of his career he was the international economics correspondent for the National Journal. He has been a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, an editor at National Public Radio and a research fellow at Worldwatch Institute. He writes from many years personal experience observing public opinion in the U.S. and Europe, in particular through his work for Pew and GMF, and frequent interviews conducted with politicians and policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic.*

## Table of contents

1. Overview	1
2. The early years	2
3. The changing economic relationship	5
4. Differences in values	7
5. Public attitudes towards each other	11
6. Elite attitudes towards each other	15
7. The changing institutional relationship	17
8. Highlights and lowlights of the last four decades	23
8.1. The Reagan years	23
8.2. The George H.W. Bush Presidency	24
8.3. The Clinton Honeymoon	25
8.4. The George W. Bush Rollercoaster	26
8.5. Obama's Soured Love Affair	27
8.6. The Trump Disaster	29
8.7. A Biden New Beginning	29
9. Conclusion	30



## 1. Overview

The following is a non-exhaustive overview of U.S.-EU relations since 1957, with a strong emphasis on ties in the last 30-40 years, largely based on interviews with former officials who lived that relationship. Subsequent papers will address the current state of U.S.-EU relations, including a focus on particular issues that have long bedevilled the relationship, and a separate paper on where this transatlantic relationship can/should go in the years ahead.

The last 65 years have been a time when the pace and depth of official transatlantic interaction increased as the powers of the European Union grew, something the United States belatedly and reluctantly came to recognize, as transatlantic economic integration deepened, and shared challenges—China, technological change, global warming, pandemics, global economic disparities—became more important to governments on both sides of the Atlantic.

This study is in no way a comprehensive chronology of U.S.-EU relations nor an in-depth appraisal of the ins and outs of every issue and controversy over the years. To be sure, no overview of the relationship would be complete without mention of some salient subjects. But, for the most part, these are discussed to highlight the longstanding challenges that have preoccupied the relationship: values differences between Europeans and Americans and the contrasting perceptions they have of each other and of the European Union, their respective roles in the world, and their positions on the issue at hand.

As Stormy Mildner, Executive Director of Aspen Institute Germany in Berlin, observed to the author in an interview: 'The variables that explain changes in the transatlantic relationship are not about economic interests and institutional setup. They influence the room for cooperation, to be sure. But it is narratives that shape our perceptions and these narratives do not necessarily depend on reality. But they have power and they have changed over time.'

And the course of U.S.-EU relations has largely been driven by developments in Europe. 'The U.S. relationship with the European Union is a relationship with an experiment and not a nation state,' observed Daniel Hamilton, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins University SAIS Foreign Policy Institute, in an interview with the author. 'And that relationship has evolved as the experiment has evolved. The dynamic is the EU, not the U.S. We react to that experiment as it evolves and that is not completely understood in Europe.'

'The American perspective was to be broadly supportive of integration,' observed David O'Sullivan, EU ambassador to the United States from 2014 to 2019, in an interview. 'But I don't think they ever understood it. Americans are attached to the concept of nation. A collective was alien to them.'

'There was always a sort of difference and sometimes disconnect, between the narrative in the U.S. about EU integration being a good thing and the reality of this relationship,' recalled Pascal Lamy, chef de cabinet for European Commission President Jacques Delors from 1984 to 1994, in an interview.

Over time, it was changes in Brussels that created a different institution from that launched in 1957 and that have subsequently reframed American perspectives on the EU. 'What was necessary,' said James Elles, a British Conservative member of the European Parliament from 1984 to 2014, in an interview, 'was that Europe become an adult partner. And that is what has happened. Things have been done in the EU. The EU has now been through the Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice, and Lisbon treaties, four changes since the New Transatlantic Agenda was announced (in 1992 by Brussels and

Washington). When you compare where Europe is now compared with 1992, the EU is now the adult partner who can deliver things the U.S. wants.'

But, argued Jeremy Shapiro, research director at the European Council on Foreign Relations, in an interview, 'If you want to see the increased role of U.S.-EU relations, it's not in big bang EU treaties, it's in the day-to-day. The increasing salience of the EU and increasing respect for it, not coming from any reorganizations of the EU, but from the expanding regulatory and trade capacity-- privacy, sanctions--and these becoming more geopolitically important.'

'I arrived at my post unaware and surprised at the powers in Europe,' agreed Anthony Gardner, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union from 2014 to 2017, and author of the book [Stars With Stripes](#), an account of his time in Brussels, in an interview. 'This body has growing power. And, as the powers of this unique grouping have changed, so too has our view.'

'The relationship has changed,' observed Fran Burwell, a distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council, in an interview, 'because for many in U.S. policy circles and the think tank community, the EU was very much underestimated for the longest time. No one expected it would become the regulatory behemoth it has become.'

And the power of that behemoth has become ever more apparent on the U.S. side of the Atlantic. 'Few Americans are aware,' Anu Bradford notes in her book [The Brussels Effect](#), 'that EU regulations determine the default privacy settings on their iPhones or the type of speech that Twitter will delete as unacceptable.' But Apple and Twitter, and their regulators in Washington do. And that is a difference from 1957.

## 2. The early years

In the wake of World War II, faced with the devastation of the European economies, convinced that the mistakes made after World War I should not be repeated, and fearful of the rise of Communism in western Europe and the new strategic threat posed by the Soviet Union, the United States was an early supporter of European unity long before creation of the European Economic Community in 1957.

U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall, in proposing an American economic relief and rebuilding aid for war-torn Europe, what became known as the Marshall Plan, made it clear in a 1947 [speech](#) at Harvard University that 'before the United States Government can proceed much further in its efforts to alleviate the situation and help start the European world on its way to recovery, there must be some agreement among the countries of Europe.' Americans needed Europeans to overcome their squabbles and work together if the United States was to help them.

American aims were not selfless. In a memo to Marshall before the speech, Will Clayton, a millionaire businessman then working at the State Department, warned that because the European economy was on the verge of imploding such a development could in turn lead to an economic depression in America. 'Let us admit right off,' he [wrote](#), 'that our objective has as its background the needs and interests of the people of the United States. We need markets--big markets--in which to buy and sell.' Clayton continued that the recovery plan 'should be based on a European economic federation.'

U.S. aid for Europe's recovery 'helped to set the Europeans on a road that led from the economic autarky of the 1930s to the Common Market of the 1960s,' Marshall Plan scholar Michael Hogan has [written](#).



And, little appreciated, wrote David Reynolds in 1997 in *Foreign Affairs*, is that: 'The primary impact of Marshall aid was not economic or institutional but political. Europe's economies would have recovered from the war regardless....The Marshall Plan was...vital politically because it promoted growth without depressing wages.' [American leaders](#), such as Dean Acheson, first as Undersecretary of State, later as Secretary of State, George Kennan, diplomat and later director of policy planning for the State Department, Marshall, and President Harry Truman all feared that parties and organizations backed by the Soviet Union could ascend to power in the vulnerable European nations. Acheson in his memoir *Present at the Creation* explained that Undersecretary of State William Clayton had the most influence on the final iteration of the Marshall Plan. As a former businessman, Clayton was concerned about trade relations between the United States and European nations and how those might be disrupted by the political dangers and threats from communism that could be found in the ruins of World War II. Ultimately, the political revival of democratic governments in Europe laid the groundwork for the eventual creation of the European Economic Community.

In the post-World War II period, Jean Monnet, who is widely considered the father of the European project, was the Commissioner-General of the French National Planning Board. As a French businessman and official, with extensive experience in coordinating economic cooperation during both World Wars plus banking experience and connections in the United States, he had long advocated various forms of European economic integration. In 1950 he proposed putting European coal and steel production under international control to, in part, make another European war far more difficult. In this effort Monnet had the support of the U.S. High Commissioner in Germany, [John McCloy](#), who also called for closer Franco-German ties.

As economic historian Adam Tooze has [written](#): 'the Marshall Plan was a tool for driving European integration. American influence was crucial in cajoling the French into abandoning the original anti-German vision of the first drafts of the Monnet Plan in favour, in 1950, of the proposal for the European Coal and Steel Community.'

In fact, the United States was the first non-member country to officially voice support for the European Coal and Steel Community founded in 1951. 'All Americans will join me in welcoming this new institution,' U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson [wrote](#) to Monnet, by then the first President of the Community's High Authority.

As a complement to NATO, the French and others, including the United States, proposed in 1951 the creation of a [European Defence Community](#) (EDC), a European army to counterbalance the Soviet Union. When efforts to create the EDC floundered, thanks to rejection by the French parliament, Washington was not pleased. 'The United States stands ready to support the many in Western Europe who despite their valiant efforts are left in grave anxiety,' [said](#) U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, at the time, in a thinly veiled American vexation with the French, a foreboding of the irritation with Paris that has long plagued subsequent U.S.-EU relations. 'We need not feel that the European idea is dead merely because, in one of the six countries, a present majority seems against one of its manifestations,' he continued. 'There is still much on which to build and those foundations should not be shaken by any abrupt or any ill-considered action of our own.'

Yet, in 1954 the nations of western Europe persevered and created, instead, the Western European Union ([WEU](#)) comprised of France, West Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. The agreement permitted the limited rearmament of West Germany and the creation of the Bundeswehr. In so doing, the WEU was Europe's first organization responsible for European defence outside of NATO. In addition, among other things, the new Treaty created a consultative parliamentary assembly, an early precursor of the European Parliament. U.S. President

Dwight Eisenhower welcomed the move and [expressed](#) the American hope that the WEU: 'Will promote progress toward unity in Western Europe.'

In 1957, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands did just that, signing the Treaty of Rome, creating the European Economic Community (EEC). This was not the [European Political Community](#), the ambitious federalist proposal to create a parallel political organization to the EDC. The EPC (not to be confused with a proposal with a similar name in 2022) would have included a bicameral parliament and an Executive Council, both forerunners of some of the current setups in the European Union. However, the plan died with the EDU. Nor was the EEC the United States of Europe that former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had [called](#) for in 1946, Nevertheless, Washington welcomed creation of the EEC.

America could hardly fail to recognize the economic success wrought first by the Marshall Plan and then by creation of a common European market. As historian Carroll Quigley wrote in [Tragedy and Hope](#): 'for the six of the EEC, whose general economic growth rate was considerably over 6 percent a year during the 1950s, this was more than double the rate of growth in the United States.... [And] in 1960, the United States unemployment rate was 5.4 percent...while that of France was 1.3 percent and of West Germany only 0.9 percent.'

'The United States looks on this vast new enterprise with hope and admiration,' [said](#) President John F. Kennedy, in a July 4, 1962 speech in Philadelphia. 'We do not regard a strong and united Europe as a rival, but a partner.... We see in such a Europe a partner with whom we can deal on a basis of full equality in all the great and burdensome tasks of building and defending a community of free nations....I will say here and now, on this Day of Independence, that the United States will be ready for a declaration of interdependence, that we will be prepared to discuss with a United Europe the ways and means of forming a concrete Atlantic partnership, a mutually beneficial partnership between the new union now emerging in Europe and the old American union founded here 175 years ago. All this will not be completed in a year, but let the world know it is our goal.'

This is not to say that the transatlantic relationship did not experience periods of tension. In 1956, Washington opposed the Anglo-French invasion of Suez. In the late 1960s and early 1970s thousands of Europeans took to the streets to protest the U.S. role in the Vietnam war.

Meanwhile, by the 1970s, the economic dynamic between Europe and the United States was changing. Between 1965 and 1970, while [U.S. exports](#) to Western Europe grew by 50%, American imports from western Europe rose 81%. America was no longer running its strong post-war trade surpluses with Europe and the American trade deficit was fuelling growing pressure on the dollar, then still pegged to the price of gold.

As Hamilton notes: 'A point lost in Europe, is that our support for Europe has always been conditional. It is not unconditional. By April 1973, after [then National Security Advisor Henry] Kissinger confided that he was 'no longer so sure that European integration is all that much in our interest,' and that 'the United States should seek to keep [Europe] divided.' [President Richard] Nixon replied, 'Oh, I am not so sure of it at all.' He expressed his 'opposition to any solution that brought the Common Market countries closer together.' Otherwise, Nixon exclaimed, 'we will create in Europe, a Frankenstein monster, which could be highly detrimental to our interests in the years ahead!'

One manifestation of Nixon's disgruntlement with Europe, if not directly the European Community, was his decision in 1971 to end dollar convertibility into gold. Since the 1944 Bretton-Woods Agreement, Washington had been willing to convert dollars into gold at a fixed exchange rate of

\$35 an ounce. But, as European (and Japanese) exports became more competitive as their economies recovered, and the demand for U.S. exports decreased, the United States faced its first post-World War II balance of payments problem. With more dollars being held abroad than the U.S. had gold to cover, [Nixon acted](#). To support the move, he also imposed a 10% surcharge on all dutiable imports.

As then U.S. Treasury Secretary John Connally [told](#) European finance ministers, the dollar 'is our currency, but it is your problem.'

'America's partners are shocked and stunned,' wrote Ralf Dahrendorf, the Common Market Commission official responsible for trade, in the [New York Times](#) at the time. He argued that Nixon's decision would alter debates about trade and monetary matters in the ministerial Council of the EEC.

### 3. The changing economic relationship

Washington's growing awareness that the economic integration of Europe is both an opportunity and a challenge has been driven over the years, at least in part, by the changing nature of the transatlantic economic relationship.

The United States and the European Union have been each other's biggest trade and investment partners for some time. The two markets are deeply integrated, and their degree of interdependence has only grown. Nearly [nine-in-ten](#) U.S. pharmaceutical exports currently go to the national markets in the European Union, as do more than a third of American organic chemical exports.

Nevertheless, imbalances have emerged in the trading relationship that have fed friction—over agriculture, steel, aircraft, among other products—even as the nature of transatlantic commerce has changed because of the growing role of services trade, the digital economy, and the deepening of the investment relationship.

Throughout the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s the U.S. had a small merchandise trade surplus with the European Community.

In 1957, for example, America ran a [\\$2.4 billion](#) surplus in goods trade with Western Europe. Through the [1960s](#), that trade surplus continued. And while a deficit emerged in 1972, one reason for the Nixon administration's concerns, the surplus quickly returned.

However, thanks, in part, to the growing competitiveness of European products, attributable in part to the continent's economic integration and the expansion of the European project, by [1997](#) the U.S. was running nearly a \$17 billion annual merchandise trade deficit with the European Union. By 2005 that deficit had increased more than ten-fold, likely due to the economic slowdown in Europe in the wake of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, before ebbing a bit for four years and then inexorably rising again to almost \$220 billion in 2021, the largest bilateral merchandise trade imbalance ever.

Of course, the number of nations in the European market had increased over that period, accounting for some of the increased deficit. But the U.S. goods deficit with [France](#) increased almost five-fold from 1997 to 2021. And the imbalance with [Germany](#) grew more than three-fold. From the perspective of some Americans, transatlantic trade in goods had become increasingly unbalanced and, for some, unfair.

But trade in goods is only one aspect of the profound transatlantic economic relationship: one that overall is decidedly in America's interest. The United States has consistently maintained a surplus with Europe in the trade in services. In 2021 that services surplus totalled [\\$61.5](#) billion, another record. The [components](#) of such transatlantic services trade include transport, travel and business services, such as legal, accounting and management consulting services.

Increasingly, the transatlantic market has also gone digital. Facebook has more customers in the EU than in the United States, accounting for a [quarter](#) of the company's advertising revenue. Google's share of the search market in the EU is over 90 %. And such dominance has led to increasing squabbles.

In [2020](#), the EU imported €204.7 billion worth of digitally enabled services from the United States. The United States was the largest supplier of these services, accounting for 20 % of total EU imports of such services. And America purchased €122.1 billion of digitally enabled services from EU nations, accounting for 22 % of the EU's digitally enabled services exports.

Moreover, when American earnings from investments in Europe and European earnings from investments in the United States are added to the mix, the transatlantic economic balance is even more complex. Nearly [two-thirds](#) of the stock of U.S. foreign investment is in Europe and a strong majority of the stock of European overseas investment is in the United States. As a result of this investment, 4.8 million Europeans work for American companies in Europe and 4.6 million Americans work for European firms in the United States. And U.S. foreign affiliate income earned in Europe reached an estimated [\\$300](#) billion in 2021, a record high. And European affiliates in the United States earned an unprecedented \$162 billion.

U.S.-EU flows of research and development (R&D), the source of future innovation, are the most intense between any two international partners. In [2019](#), the vast majority of U.S. affiliates' overseas R&D spending took place in Europe: \$11 billion in Germany alone, \$4.2 billion in Ireland, \$2 billion each in France and Belgium. At the same time, European companies accounted for two-thirds of majority-owned foreign affiliates' R&D spending in the United States, including \$11 billion by German firms.

But, despite the growing importance of services trade, digital commerce, investment, and R&D spending, trade in goods is tangible, both physically and politically. Services and investment income is not. In the minds of politicians and their voters, trade is about goods and commodities, not sales of digitally delivered accounting services or earnings on an investment that, in many Americans' minds, should have rightly been made in Pennsylvania or California.

More profoundly, for many Americans of a certain age who formed their world view in the post-World War II era, when the United States produced the lion's share of all the world's goods, and Europe's factories were bombed-out wrecks, it is the natural order of things that America exports goods and Europe imports them. Of course, it was the policy of the United States to rebuild European industrial capacity and the logical extension of that was that Americans would then begin to buy German cars and Italian textiles. But in the plaintive words to the author by one older United Auto Workers shop steward in the 1980s: 'I don't understand it. How can they be doing this to us? We beat them in World War II.'

That sense, that the United States is ordained to run a trade surplus, has lingered far longer than the economic reality that gave birth to that surplus. And while Americans' recent concern about their trade imbalance has largely been focused on first Japan and now China, the growing U.S. goods trade deficit with Europe has kept alive Americans' frustration with alleged European protectionism,

industrial policy, and other fears of the European Union. And such fears have manifested themselves in U.S. tariffs on European steel and aluminium during the Trump administration, and President Trump's [threat](#) to impose tariffs on imported European cars. And such actions evoked [reactions](#) by Europeans, which, among other things, launched WTO cases against Washington.

## 4. Differences in values

American and European officials frequently contend that the transatlantic relationship—and by extension the U.S.-EU relationship—has been, from its beginning, a values-based one. They offer up peons to shared transatlantic values and how they transcend the policy differences of the day. They contend that shared values both cement U.S.-EU ties and distinguish America and Europe from the rest of the world.

There is a great deal of truth in this. Americans and Europeans agree on many of the core elements of democracy, for example. A median of [79%](#) of EU residents and 86% of Americans believe representative democracy is a good way to govern, according to a 2017 Pew Research Center survey. A median of [86%](#) of EU members and 93% of Americans say that a fair judiciary is very important in their country, according to a 2019 poll. Similarly, 84% in the EU and 77% in the U.S. say that freedom of speech is very important. And 84% of Europeans and 91% of Americans say gender equality is very important.

People on both sides of the Atlantic hold a common belief in the benefits of competition and hard work. 'We share high levels of tolerance of 'out groups,' belief in gender equity, and a sense of political activism,' [wrote](#) Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan, who headed the World Values Survey.

But, as with so many things, the devil is the details. Differences in core European and American values have shaped their respective societies and how the European Union and the United States have structured their respective economies and societies, how they view their problems, and what they do about them.

Many of the struggles between Washington and Brussels since 1957 can, at least in part, be attributed to differences in these economic, political, social, and ethical values. 'There is a long-standing illusion that we share core values,' wrote Mary McIntosh, then vice-president of Princeton Survey Research Associates, in the *National Journal* in 2002. 'But in actuality, much of our current miscommunication reflects the fact that while we use the same words, they mean different things to us.'

'In principle we share certain very important values,' agreed John Richardson, the former EU ambassador to the United Nations, in an interview. 'But in terms of how our societies and international relations function, we don't share values.'

'Trust doesn't just depend on who's the president,' asserted a Social Democrat party (SPD) member of the German Bundestag in an interview before the 2020 U.S. election. 'We have to talk about the hearts and minds of citizens. Especially, do Americans agree with our points of view on fighting climate change and the ways of regulating things?' He has his doubts.

And, the public perception of shared values, whether real or idealistic, which has long acted as a glue in the relationship, may be generational. 'The attitude that has shaped my perception of the United States in my formative years is what Reagan described as the [the United States being the] shining city on the hill,' said Reinhard Bütikofer, a Green party member of the European Parliament

in an interview. 'I am not sure the younger generation of Europeans today is seeing what I saw. And I am not sure they can build the same kind of allegiance to those shared values and the understanding that they are shared values that I developed.'

Such differences belie the assumptions long implicit in U.S.-EU relations: that growing trade and investment ties will harmonize worldviews, for example. They highlight the often-intractable nature of many disagreements between America and Europe. For example, Europeans are more likely than Americans to [say](#) trade is good for their country and that it creates jobs.

Transatlantic differences in their respective publics' tolerance for risk is another value disparity that has repeatedly plagued U.S.-EU trade disputes and is echoed in much of the European public's recent opposition to trade deals with the United States, such as the proposed but ultimately abandoned Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Ironically, as much as these supposed differences are believed by the public, willingness to accept risk exists on both sides of the Atlantic, depending on the issue.

Jonathan Wiener of Duke University and Michael Rogers of the European Commission, in a comprehensive 2002 [review](#) of case studies including hormones in beef and milk production and mad cow disease in beef and in blood donations, found that: 'Sometimes the EU is more precautionary than the US (such as regarding hormones in beef), while sometimes the US is more precautionary than the EU (such as regarding mad cow disease in blood). Thus, neither the EU nor the US can claim to be categorically "more precautionary" than the other.'

Differences in the role of government and the social safety net have also often framed many past transatlantic trade debates.

Americans are more sceptical of government than are many Europeans: just [46 %](#) of Americans say the state is run for the benefit of all the people, according to a 2020 Pew Research Center poll, compared with 83 % of Swedes, 79 % of the Czechs, 70 % of the Dutch, 56 % of the Poles and 54 % of the Spanish.

As Andrew Kohut and I pointed out in our book [America Against the World](#), Americans are less supportive of a government social safety net than are peoples of the social democracies of Europe. Americans want government help in the form of unemployment insurance, Social Security, and some medical care for the poor. But they voice little support for those who lose their jobs from trade and may need retraining, which has contributed to public anxiety about globalization in the United States.

One reason for these differences is that a majority of Americans value individual freedom more than government welfare. Majorities in Europe believe it is more important for government to ensure that no-one is in need than it is for individuals to be free to pursue goals without government interference. When asked simply if government has a responsibility to care for the poor, [73 %](#) of Americans agree, but this proportion is smaller than in any European nation. When the intensity with which Americans held this view was probed, these differences were even sharper. Merely three-in-ten Americans 'completely agree' that the government should help the poor, half the level of support that exists in much of Europe.

At the core of these differences in the role of government in society are divergent views of the individual's relationship with society. Europeans don't buy the primacy that Americans place on the individual. While seven-in-ten Americans would choose individual freedom over social and economic equality, only five-in-ten French and Italians and only four-in-ten Spaniards would make the same choice. This divergence in views reflects what one EU official called in an interview with

the author: 'the moral responsibility of the marketplace'. Nearly nine-in-ten Europeans think that the government should ensure that no one lives in poverty. Only six-in-ten Americans see such a governmental role, according to a [Princeton Survey Research survey](#).

Unlike most Europeans, Americans believe that individuals themselves, not the larger forces of society, determine whether a person can be successful in life. Two-thirds of Americans reject the notion that outside forces determine success in life. They believe that an individual's fate is in his or her own hands. By comparison, two-thirds of Germans and Italians, six-in-ten Poles, a majority of the French and Bulgarians and nearly half the British, Slovaks, and Czechs believe that success in life is determined by forces outside a person's control.

Americans' belief in personal agency has profound practical economic consequences. Going bankrupt in the United States is almost a badge of honour in some business circles. If someone hasn't failed, possibly multiple times, he or she was too cautious and not willing to take risks to build a business or innovate a new technology. (Americans even elected as their president Donald Trump, who had gone bankrupt six times.) In many European countries [bankruptcy carries an opprobrium](#) and is seen as an abject failure which prevents entrepreneurs from raising capital to try again.

These highly visible values differences that play a role in transatlantic business relations exist against a backdrop of other differences in values that European publics often cite in their wariness of American society, fuelling alienation while undermining support for closer cooperation.

The importance of religion in people's lives is one such difference in shared values. Nearly half of Americans ([47 %](#)) say religion plays a 'very important' part in their lives. Just 25 % of Poles, 24 % of Germans, Spaniards and Italians, 11 % of the French and 7 % of Swedes agree. Moreover, a median of only [57 %](#) of EU residents say freedom of religion is important in their nation, whereas 86 % of Americans say it is.

'We conflate the sacred and the secular,' said McIntosh, an American. 'Europeans don't.' Half of Americans have told the World Values Survey that they see a clear distinction between good and evil. But only one-in-four French and Germans and one-in-three British and Spanish see the world in such Manichaeian terms.

These differences contribute to divergences in views of abortion, gay rights, the death penalty, and whether society should be driven by secular or religious beliefs, which, while not issues of direct transatlantic contention, are highly visible distinctions between American sentiment and European views that have led many Europeans to believe that America is a brutal society. A self-image most Americans don't share.

For example, the prevalence of gun ownership in the United States and the number of gun-related deaths is a recurrent alienating theme in much European discourse about America. Matthew Barzon, the former U.S. ambassador to the Court of St James, recounted to the author his experience talking with students in the United Kingdom, who overwhelmingly told him that the first word that comes to their mind when they think of the United States is 'guns'. (What these students do not realize: the UK [exports](#) more than 10 000 hand guns to the U.S. every year.)

Another difference that is of growing significance in the wake of Americans' election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 is Europeans' lack of trust in American democracy, which, in turn, has undermined the European public's faith in the U.S. government as a trustworthy negotiating partner. 'I trust America,' said a sceptical Green Party Bundestag member in an interview with the author. 'But I don't trust the political system.'

Europeans are divided over whether the U.S. political system works well: a median of [48 %](#) say it does not, 50 % say it does. As a result, the soft power influence of the United States in dealing with Europe has weakened. A 2021 median of [54 %](#) of the public in EU nations said that the United States used to be a good example of democracy, but that it has not been one in recent years.

Finally, there is a functional values difference that directly affects U.S.-EU relations, one that has its roots in both history and national character. Europeans, especially those associated with the European Union, believe in the value of process. Americans are more likely to focus on outcomes.

'Europeans believe in outcomes too,' said Richardson, 'but it's how you get there. In America it's like in a courtroom, it's an adversarial process. The EU is not like that. We build things up to a conclusion that all can accept.'

Europeans, especially because of their post-war experience with the slow but inexorable building of the European Community, have a profound commitment to process. This entails countless meetings and position papers and the elaboration of rules and regulations that are a product of myriad compromises. Once a position has been arrived at, it is difficult, and sometimes almost impossible, for European negotiators with the United States to make fundamental changes to the EU position. Compromise would require an unravelling of months of deliberation and countless internal trade-offs between the European Commission, the European Parliament and, at times, the Council of the EU.

'The EU cannot function without process,' admitted Cecilia Malmström, the former EU trade Commissioner. 'It's part of its DNA.'

As a result, American officials often complain that Brussels can present Washington with non-negotiable policies pre-cooked among the EU members. In so doing, American officials charge, Brussels is unilaterally defining the terms of the transatlantic relationship regarding climate change, product safety, privacy, health and safety measures, without Washington's agreement.

But Americans have little patience for process. They want outcomes. 'One of our many defects,' acknowledged the former deputy director general of the World Trade Organization, Alan Wolff, in an interview, speaking about the U.S. approach within the context of the World Trade Organization, but also from the perspective of having been general counsel at the U.S. Trade Representative's office: 'We arrive and say we thought of all the problems and here is our final text.' Europeans see negotiation as a way of working through differences. It is process versus outcome.

American frustration with Europeans' commitment to process once led Henry Kissinger to infamously, and possibly apocryphally, quip: 'If I want to reach Europe, whom do I call?'

But today, Europeans are quick to note, they too can, at times, be frustrated with American process: who do they call in Washington today: is it the White House, the State Department, USTR, the Commerce Department, Congress?

'The interagency process in DC drives us mad,' complained former EU trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson in an interview. 'You think our process is bad. You try dealing with the Washington interagency process as an outsider. It's a battle royal.'

Nevertheless, that does not preclude transatlantic compromise. 'We have to be very patient in dealing with the EU,' advised Earl Anthony Wayne, who in the 1990s served as Director for Western European Affairs in the White House National Security Council, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Mission to the EU and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe and Canada, in an interview. 'Europeans



really believe in process and if you invest in the process you can work through divisive issues and get the outcome you want.'

And, acknowledged a Polish Member of the European Parliament Danuta Hübner, in an interview: 'We [Europeans] have to be more outcome oriented not process oriented.'

Despite these not insignificant differences in some foundational values, the reality is that European and American values are frequently closer than the values they share with the Chinese, the Japanese and other non-Western cultures. And, as Peter Chase, a senior fellow in the German Marshall Fund's Brussels office, pointed out in an interview: 'There is a difference between the values in California and Mississippi,' and yet the United States has remained unified.

Unfortunately, as economically inefficient, or diplomatically frustrating, as values differences may be, and despite the relative closeness in transatlantic values, in the affairs of state, values often trump policy. And one of the challenges over the years in U.S.-EU relations is learning how to live with these differences.

## 5. Public attitudes towards each other

American and European public opinion about each other shapes the environment in which Washington and Brussels have operated for more than six decades. It has, at least in part, framed both the possibilities and the constraints in the U.S.-EU relationship.

The American and European publics' overall views of each other, writ large, have largely been driven by transcendent issues: the Cold War, the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Views of U.S.-EU relations have largely been shaped by Brussels' authority over trade, regulatory, and economic issues and, most recently, some foreign policy concerns. And progress, or lack of progress, in these areas has, in turn, influenced public sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic.

Assessing the role public opinion plays in U.S.-EU relations is not straightforward. Europeans have an intimate knowledge of, experience with, and views on the European Union. American knowledge about the EU has been scant at best.

More broadly, Europeans have very strong opinions about the United States and sentiment about how the U.S. acts in world affairs, which can colour their views about specific U.S.-EU issues at any given moment. Americans have views about individual European nations and opinions about how the rest of the world, including the Europeans, treat the United States. Americans have firm views about how they feel they should be treated.

As might be expected, European Union publics share a relatively favourable view of the Brussels-based institution. In Spring 2021, a median of [65%](#) of respondents in eight EU Member States told Pew Research Center interviewers they had a favourable view of the EU.

In the Winter 2021-2022 Eurobarometer [survey](#) 44 % of EU respondents had a positive image of the EU, significantly lower than the Pew findings, which may have to do with the questions' wording differences and other survey disparities. Notably, however, only 17 % held a negative opinion of the EU. Moreover, on issues that might directly affect EU relations with the United States, 77 % favoured a common EU defence and security policy, 74 % a common trade policy, and 71 % a common foreign policy.

Americans' views of the EU, and almost any other international issue, are refracted through a prism of their sense that the United States is a victim in world affairs. [Half](#) of registered voters believe other countries' take unfair advantage of the United States.

More specifically, Americans' knowledge of the Brussels-based institutions is limited. A 2004 Gallup [survey](#) tested Americans' familiarity with the EU and found that three-quarters (77 %) of the public admitted they knew very little or nothing about the organization. Only 3 % of respondents claimed to know a great deal about it. Nevertheless, Americans were divided over whether the EU would ever become a superpower like the U.S.: 44 % opined yes, 44 % no.

And this American knowledge of the European Union is driven by how much attention an individual pays to international affairs. A 2022 Pew [survey](#) found that 70 % of Americans with a high knowledge of international affairs (having answered at least 9 of 12 knowledge questions correctly) have a favourable view of the EU. Only 53 % of those with low knowledge (having answered four or less questions accurately) see the EU positively.

The Pew Research Center has asked Americans different questions over time about the favourability of the European Union. In [2002](#), roughly half (53 %) of Americans held a favourable view of the Brussels-based organization. That support initially declined in the first term of the administration of George W. Bush and recovered a bit in his second term. Nevertheless, a 2005 Pew [survey](#) found that the American public was not very enthusiastic about a strong EU: only 47 % believed this would be a good thing. Positive sentiment continued to rebound during the administration of Barack Obama.

EU favourability among Americans remained slightly above 50 % in the Trump administration despite his disdain for the institution. EU support among Americans reached [62 %](#) in 2021 in the first year of the Biden administration, the strongest public backing for the EU in the United States in the last two decades, possibly a reflection of the new President's commitment to strengthening relations with European allies.

Moreover, in 2021 there was a generational divide favourable to the EU: 62 % of Americans aged 18-29 held a positive view of the Brussels-based organization, compared with 48 % of those aged 50 and older. It is unclear why older Americans were less disposed towards the EU: it may be frustration over past transatlantic differences or disappointment that the EU has not lived up to expectations. But the most likely explanation is that older Americans, especially white Americans, are disproportionately Republican and Trump voters. So, this generational divide may simply be another manifestation of American political partisanship.

Americans' views of the EU have always been partisan. And that partisanship had gotten worse, suggesting President Trump's antagonism has influenced the views of his Republican voters. A [Pew survey](#) in 2022 found that Americans who self-identified as being on the left were 27 points more favourable towards the EU than Americans on the right.

Americans have always been more comfortable thinking about Europe through the lens of individual nations. And the public consistently has a more favourable view of specific European nations than it has ever had of the European Union. In 2022 [84 %](#) of Americans in a Gallup poll had a favourable view of France and 78 % held a positive opinion of Germany. But these quite favourable numbers mask yet another partisan divide: 91 % of Democrats but only 76 % of Republicans hold a favourable view of France, 80 % of Democrats and just 71 % of Republicans see Germany in a positive light.

American sentiment has fluctuated over the first two decades of the 21st century thanks to disagreements over the Iraq war in particular. Views of France fell to 34 % in 2003 and of Germany

to 49 % in that year, in response to those nations' perceived lack of support for the American invasion of Iraq.

But when asked who is America's most important foreign policy partner only [13 %](#) say Germany, 6 % France and none say Italy or Poland. Notably only 6 % cite the EU. Nevertheless, roughly seven-in-ten Americans think Washington should cooperate more with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

As can be seen by the partisan division in American views of the European Union, U.S.-EU relations play out within the context of other issues: Europeans' views of the United States (and how that is influenced by their impression of American presidents), Europeans' and Americans' sentiment about their respective roles in the world, and Americans' view of Europe in general.

Ill will toward United States spiked during the Vietnam War and then again in the early 1980s during the allied debate over the Reagan administration's desire to station intermediate-range missiles in western Europe, which led to massive anti-American demonstrations across Europe. In-depth public opinion analysis is not readily available for these periods. But comprehensive and reliable public opinion data about European views of the United States is available for the last two decades.

At the end of the Clinton administration, U.S. State Department [surveys](#) found strong support for the United States in much of Europe: 86 % in Poland, 83 % in Britain, 78 % in Germany, 76 % in Italy, 62 % in France and 50 % in Spain. After an upwelling of sympathy for the United States in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, pro America sentiment quickly eroded. By 2003, U.S. favourability in these EU nations had collapsed: down 53 percentage points in Germany, 42 points in Italy, 36 points in Spain and Poland, 35 points in Britain and 31 points in France. So began dramatic swings in European perception of the United States over the next two decades.

By the end of the Bush administration there was a slight improvement in [views](#) of the U.S. in France, Germany and Spain (still well below 50 % favourability) and a deterioration in support in the United Kingdom.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama as America's president dramatically boosted Europeans' opinion about Uncle Sam. In 2009, U.S. approval rose 33 points in France (to 75 %) and Germany (to 64 %) and 25 points in Spain (to 58 %). In several European nations, such sentiment tailed off a bit over the eight years of the Obama administration, according to Pew surveys. But in Obama's last year an EU median of 63 % still saw the U.S. favourably.

That all changed with the Trump administration. By his last year in office, European favourability towards the United States had halved to a median of [31 %](#). Then Joe Biden was elected. And in 2021 median European backing for the U.S. bounced back to 59 %.

Much of this rollercoaster ride has to do with Europeans' approval of the American president. When Europeans like the man in the White House—Clinton, Obama, Biden—favourability of the U.S. improves. When they don't like him—Bush and Trump—approval tanks. This suggests that the political environment in which U.S.-EU relations plays out is largely driven, in Europe, by public perceptions of the American president's policies and his attitude towards and about the issues that Europeans' hold dear.

Notably, what Europeans like and dislike changes both over time and depending on who is in the White House. In 2011, the [Pew Research Center](#) found that it was President Obama's personality more than his policies that Europeans found most attractive. And, in 2017, according to a separate

Pew Research Center [survey](#), a median of 90 % of Europeans characterized U.S. President Donald Trump as arrogant, 79 % saw him as intolerant, and 73 % thought he was dangerous. At the same time, 55 % said he was a strong leader.

But Europeans' attitudes toward the United States are not simply personality driven. Over the years, Europeans have not been shy in expressing their frustration with American unilateralism and their desire for greater European independence of action. Such sentiment has fuelled a more assertive European Union in its dealings with Washington.

Many Europeans are wary that U.S.-EU relations lack mutual respect. Europeans strongly believe—a median of [67 % in a Pew survey](#)--that the United States does not take into consideration the interests of their country when making international policy decisions. Notably, there has been little change in such wariness in the last two decades. In 2001 a median of [77 %](#) of Europeans in a Pew survey thought President Bush made decisions based only on U.S. interests and did not take Europe into account.

'From a European perspective,' observed Mandelson, 'the United States behaves as if it wants a strong ally to do America's bidding, rather than one that can challenge the United States.'

'The United States has always been slightly ambivalent toward Europe,' he continued. 'It likes the unity and joined up thinking and coordinated action as long as it's in step with U.S. thinking and outlook.'

When it is not, he noted: 'the EU is seen as over-forceful and a bit above its station, at which point the U.S. instinct is to divide and rule. "We will go straight to Berlin and Paris and London and the national capitals to overturn the Commission's position".'

Nevertheless, noted Mandelson: 'the Europeans want leadership from America. They complain about it but are terrified of America choosing not to lead.'

So, despite their concern that the United States acts largely in its own interests, Europeans are willing to work with the United States. They see Washington as a partner, just not a very reliable partner. An average of [69 %](#) in a 2022 German Marshall Fund survey say America is 'somewhat or very reliable', but only 27 % believe the U.S. is 'very reliable'.

The European public's wariness of Uncle Sam's unilateralism and the sense that the United States is only somewhat reliable certainly creates a political environment in Europe that shapes and constrains European negotiators ambitions and public support for their actions.

There is no doubt that the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York rallied European support for U.S. leadership in world affairs. Approval of the Bush administration's international policy rose from 16 % in France in August 2001 to 32 % in the spring of [2002](#), it increased from 23 % to 35 % in Germany and from 29 % to 44 % in Italy.

However, the Iraq war dealt a serious blow to Europeans' views of the United States, complicating efforts by Brussels to deepen transatlantic cooperation with Washington. A Pew Research Center [survey](#) conducted immediately before the invasion found that two-thirds of Americans favoured military action, but less than half the British and French and only a third of Germans and Italians did so.

Europeans' opposition to what they saw as reckless American aggression in the Middle East stoked European support for a more independent stance on the world stage. Such sentiments were echoed in a 2005 German Marshall Fund [survey](#) in which half the British, three-in-five Germans and three-

in-four French thought that Europe should take a more independent approach to security and diplomatic affairs.

And support among Europeans for more distance from the U.S. has been linked both to opposition to American foreign policy as well as to the perception that U.S. policymakers ignore European interests. In a 2002 Pew [survey](#), by nearly three-to-one (71 %–25 %), European respondents who disapproved of Bush's international policies and thought America behaved unilaterally (a plurality in every nation surveyed shared these views) wanted to see European nations act more independently in foreign affairs.

This public yearning for greater foreign policy autonomy has long found its expression in France. In 1962, French President Charles de Gaulle [observed](#) to Alain Peyrefitte, his Minister of Information: 'What is the purpose of Europe? It should be to allow us to escape the domination of the Americans and the Russians.' More recently this desire for greater European independence of action in world affairs has been echoed in statements by French President Emmanuel Macron's calls for 'strategic autonomy' and [comments](#) by [Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission](#) and statements by the European Council

## 6. Elite attitudes towards each other

In assessing the context in which U.S.-EU relations have been conducted over the past six and a half decades, public opinion is important, but as the statements of these two French presidents attest, they are often not the determining factor. 'We do it [public opinion assessment] at such an aggregate level that it loses all meaning,' argued GMF's Chase. It is Washington and Brussels officialdom that conducts the relationship on a day-to-day basis, and it is their opinions of each other and of the U.S.-EU relationship that drives day-to-day relations.

Sampling of transatlantic elite opinion is far less common than public opinion surveys, but the author has conducted several such surveys for the German Marshall Fund that have highlighted some differences.

In 2017, American officials, business leaders, and academics were twice as worried about China's rising power and influence as were their European counterparts ([47 %](#) to 23 %). And Americans (79 %), surprisingly, were more worried than Europeans (66 %) about climate change. Notably, three years after Russia's seizing of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, thought leaders on both sides of the Atlantic were twice as worried about Russian power and influence than that of China.

Moreover, the Trump era was not a good time for transatlantic elite opinion about U.S.-European relations. In 2018, [91 %](#) of Americans surveyed and 80 % of Europeans thought that diplomatic relations had gotten worse over the previous year, the first year of the Trump presidency. And 66 % of the Americans and 58 % of the Europeans voiced the view that economic relations had gotten worse. Notably, a plurality of Europeans (28 %) but only 15 % of Americans thought that the economy and trade were the biggest challenge facing transatlantic relations. Americans (29 %) thought it was the Trump administration.

In a GMF 2019 elite survey, two-thirds of both European and Americans thought transatlantic relations were bad. Notably, this included 79 % of western European respondents, 70 % of those from North America, but only 46 % of elites from eastern Europe, highlighting the difference in elite opinion between the European Union's older and newer members.

Interestingly, there were no meaningful values differences between these relatively successful transatlantic elites. As individuals who have thrived both professionally and economically in the European-American space, more than two-thirds on both sides of the Atlantic believed that success in life is determined by forces within their control (thus agreeing with the American public but not their fellow European).

Nevertheless, these elites have their differences. 'The governing elites in the U.S. are to the right of centre and in the EU they are to the left of centre,' Chase observed, a perception that is not always reflected in the governance of some European nations.

Compounding such sentiment, American officials have never fully embraced the EU as an institution and interlocutor in transatlantic affairs.

'Since the 1960s,' said Ivo Daalder, President of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and former U.S. ambassador to NATO, in an interview, 'the U.S. has had a deeply schizophrenic view of Europe. We have expressed a desire for Europe to act on its own, but in concert with the United States.'

'When I went to the EU,' recalled Richard Morningstar, the U.S. ambassador to the EU from 1999 to 2001, in an interview, 'it was before expansion. There were only 15 countries. Even then the EU was perceived to be a sprawling bureaucracy in which nobody was particularly in charge and too many people thought it was a waste of time.'

Jeremy Shapiro, who worked on European affairs in the Obama administration's State Department, felt elite opinion did not change much over the years. 'When I entered government, there was a serious disregard for the EU,' he said in an interview. 'They thought about the EU like Gandhi thought about Western civilization. It would be a good idea,' if it ever happened, but it still did not exist in a meaningful way. 'I don't think we have ever seen the EU as a necessary partner,' he continued. 'For us, the EU is a forum in the way that NATO is a forum, and the partners remain the main countries.'

'[U.S. officials] were not against it,' he added. 'But they weren't about to help make it happen, because we didn't think it would be very useful. The U.S. was in the mode to accept the EU, but not in the mode to accept it when it could not deliver. And despite being for it, that would not limit an assistant secretary (of State or his or her equivalent in other Cabinet departments) from trying to divide Europe on any given issue. So, they were for it in general and against it on specifics.'

'Because we don't pay attention,' lamented Johns Hopkins' Hamilton, 'and so much of the building of the EU is inner, we wake up a bit late. You can almost anticipate it with any initiative. We hear about it. We say (the Europeans) are not serious, they will never do it. And then they look serious and there is a cottage industry on why this—the single market, the euro—will be a disaster. Then they don't achieve what their rhetoric said and then we learn to live with it, and we shape the relationship with U.S. conditions.'

'Successive generations of U.S. policymakers have the idea that they can isolate parts of the EU that cause trouble,' observed Charles Ries, an adjunct senior fellow at the Rand Corporation and the former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, in an interview. 'And over and over again you see Washington wanting to roll the French. It's in the muscle memory. And we do it over and over again without much success.'

American elites' frustration has often been thinly veiled. In 2014, a frustrated U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland, remarked: 'Fuck the EU' in an intercepted conversation with the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine while discussing proposed U.S. sanctions against

Russia, action that Brussels opposed. Nuland's undiplomatic comment graphically captured the sentiment of many American officials who had wrestled with the EU over the years.

And EU officials ruefully acknowledge individual European states' complicity in Washington's continued focus on national capitals when Americans perceive such action to be in their interest. 'Most European countries think they have a special relationship with the U.S.,' admitted a high-ranking European Council official in an interview.

'Europeans were always happy to hide behind the skirts of Brussels,' noted Seamus O'Cleireacain, an adjunct professor at Columbia University, in an interview, 'unless they could get some particular advantage and do side deals. They would try to do side deals, but if the Americans were difficult, they could always rely on Brussels.'

'A large part of our frustration was that Europe was not important enough for Americans,' said Hugo Paeman, EU ambassador to the United States from 1995 to 1999, in an interview, 'because [the Americans] felt that we would never be able to achieve these great statements about integration.'

## 7. The changing institutional relationship

One under-estimated and little assessed aspect of the U.S.-EU relationship has been the evolving, deepening, and yet arguably still inadequately fleshed out transatlantic institutional relationship between Washington and Brussels.

Institutions are the skeleton for transatlantic strategic, diplomatic, and economic cooperation. They are the repositories of a reservoir of experience, they facilitate follow-through, and they ensure continuity given the notoriously short attention span of both politicians and publics.

The United States first established diplomatic relations with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1953, which transitioned into relations with the European Economic Community (EEC) after its founding in 1957.

Initially the job of U.S. ambassador to the EEC was largely reserved for career diplomats, many of them highly respected, but not the political heavyweights Washington has often sent to more important foreign posts. Of the first 11 U.S. ambassadors, 9 were career diplomats.

The 1993 appointment by President Clinton of Stuart Eizenstat as EU ambassador was seen on both sides of the Atlantic as a significant development in U.S.-EU relations. He was the former chief domestic policy adviser in the Carter White House. As such, Eizenstat had impeccable connections in the White House, Capitol Hill, and the policy establishment in Washington.

Eizenstat saw his role in a broad European context. 'The mission in Brussels began coordinating with other missions in Europe,' remembered Wayne, who was Eizenstat's deputy chief of mission. 'We became a hub for other U.S. missions in Europe for anything that was supranational.'

But it wasn't easy, especially in coordinating with U.S. officials back in Washington. 'One of the problems was to get USTR [the U.S. Trade Representative's office] to talk to anyone else,' he said. 'But the hardest thing was to get the regulatory agencies to sit down around the table. They wanted to do their own thing.'

Yet, as relations have deepened and become more complex, the U.S. mission in Brussels has grown dramatically.

Only about half of the employees of the U.S. Mission to the European Union come from the State Department. The rest represent other federal agencies. This was not always the case. For many years Washington-based bureaucracies saw no need to detail career officials to Brussels. But, over time, the growing role of the European Union and the dawning realization within the U.S. government that actions were being taken in Brussels that affected American interests compelled these here-to-fore inward-looking U.S. regulatory bodies to station personnel at the U.S. Mission to monitor EU activities.

'In an age where embassy staffs were being cut back,' remembered Gardner reflecting on his tenure as U.S. ambassador to the EU, 'the U.S. mission was growing. The National Science Foundation opened an office, the Food and Drug Administration added people, the Federal Aviation Administration was there. A lot of specialist agencies sent people.'

In the early days, despite trade and farm issues dominating the relationship, neither the U.S. Trade Representative's office nor the Department of Agriculture had an official permanently stationed in Brussels. But, as the range of Washington's bureaucratic interests grew, the diversity of U.S. government officials based in Brussels mushroomed, testimony to the breadth of economic and other concerns—from aviation and food safety to trade and agricultural issues—that are the current substance of U.S.-EU economic relations.

By the most recent count, beyond representatives of the various State Department bureaus, there are at least 15 different U.S. government agencies represented in the EU mission, everything from the Treasury Department and the Department of Justice to the Patent and Trademark Office.

The European Union, then the European Coal and Steel Community, first established a diplomatic presence in Washington in 1954, the organization's first overseas representation.

Reflecting the complicated relationship with the U.S. government that the EU has had to manage and given the fact that every EU Member State has its own embassy in Washington with its own ambassador and staff, the early EU mission to the U.S. was small and did not have an ambassador until 1971. It was not until 2016 that the EU representative in Washington was formally recognized by the United States as an ambassador.

Moreover, the EU mission has always had to contend with EU member governments that have longer-standing ties with the U.S. government, including a security relationship through NATO, their own set of national issue priorities and that, for the longest time, the EU's main interaction with the U.S. government was limited to the EU's main responsibilities: trade and agriculture. Only, over time, have Brussels' responsibilities grown within Europe and, as a result, the role of its mission in Washington has expanded.

There were originally only three staff in the mission. Today that number has grown to 94, representing 19 different departments of the European Union, including trade, climate, health, and competition policy. As a sign of the growing interconnectedness of Brussels and Washington, as recently as 2012 there were representatives of only nine EU departments.

A second transatlantic institutional link has been regular, high-level U.S.-EU summits. These began in 1993, were held at least annually (twice in 1994 and 1995) through 2011 (with the exception of 1996). Since then, they have been held sporadically, only in 2014, 2017, and 2021.

The [1993](#) leaders' meeting, in part, focused on the need to finish the prolonged Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations. The second 1994 meeting finalized transatlantic agreement on the



Uruguay Round. The 1995 gathering launched the ambitious U.S.-EU New Transatlantic Agenda (NTA) and Action Plan and launched the Transatlantic Business Dialogue (TABD).

But American presidents came to strongly dislike the summits. They disdained much of the substantive discussions and were frustrated by the multiple voices on the EU side.

President Clinton once reportedly complained that the EU-US summits were like going to the dentist. And, in the midst of a transatlantic spat over bananas, which neither region produced, he supposedly quipped to an aide before one summit: 'Do I really have to talk about bananas?' Then, recalled Morningstar, 'at the summit Clinton turned to Sir Leon Brittan [then the EU trade Commissioner] and said: 'I want you to know that our bananas are so much bigger than your bananas.'

President Obama lost his patience with summits after the 2009 Prague gathering when he had to listen to 27 European leaders.

'The US simply don't know who they're meant to be dealing with,' a Brussels diplomat told the [Guardian](#): 'The U.S. is mightily pissed off. They thought the Lisbon Treaty was meant to solve all these problems.'

'One thing we need to address is the mind-numbing dullness of summits,' admitted former ambassador O'Sullivan, who has attended many of them.

The Biden administration renewed the U.S. commitment to an annual summit as part of its efforts to rebuild transatlantic relations only to not have one in 2022

The third institutional pillar of U.S.-EU relations is legislative ties.

The European Parliament was created in 1957 to ensure greater democratic accountability for the European Community. Parliamentarians' initial aspirations of influence far exceeded their grasp. They were appointed by national legislatures and many rarely showed up for sessions.

But, beginning in 1979, direct election of parliamentarians infused the body with new blood, and these new members succeeded in raising its stature. In the late 1980s, parliament began to accrue real power. It shaped the directives that created the single European market. In 1986, parliament was given the power to reject nominees to be European Commissioners.

'It's only since 2010 that the powers of the parliament have expanded,' said Stephen Woolcock, an Associate Professor in international relations at the London School of Economics in an interview. 'After the Lisbon Treaty the powers of the parliament were enhanced *de jure* and *de facto*. Now parliament has to give agreement to any trade and investment agreement. It's meant a wholly different way the EU goes about trade and investment agreements. In the past it was the Commission and the Council. Everyone knew the rules of the game. And now that you have thrown the parliament into it, it's added a new degree of complication—ACTA [the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement] was rejected—CETA [the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement] wasn't ratified.'

'When they dig in on an issue,' said Lisa Schroeter, Global Director of Trade and Investment Policy for Dow Chemical Company, 'like they have on China, there have been consequences in Brussels.'

'Anyone who thinks they can ignore the European Parliament is just plain wrong,' Ivan Hodac, then senior vice-president of Time Warner Europe, told the author twenty years ago. That advice is even more accurate today.

American and European business interests increasingly understand that it's in Brussels, not in Berlin or Paris, where the legislative action is. Because, as one Brussels lobbyist told the author: 'The European Parliament sets the strategy, and (member nations) now simply deal with the implementation.' While this is an exaggeration, the point he was trying to make is that the European Parliament has a growing role in the decisions that affect the everyday lives of Europeans at the national level.

U.S. ambassadors to the EU finally came to recognize the Parliament's role as well. William Kennard, America's envoy from 2009 to 2013 is credited by some Brussels observers as the first to systematically work the Parliament, like a European ambassador in Washington works Congress, patrolling the corridors, initiating meetings with key members.

But relations with the European Parliament have never been a White House priority. 'I spent more time in Congress,' wryly observed Lamy, 'than any U.S. president spent in the European Parliament.'

And many members of the U.S. Congress have never seen their counterparts in the European Parliament as their equals. 'NATO is more comprehensible than the EU for an American congressman,' observed James Dobbins, a former U.S. ambassador to the EU, in an interview, although this may be slowly changing as more and more members of Congress begin to see the impact of European Parliamentary action on issues affecting America, such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation.

The Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue was created in 1999, as a legislative complement to the U.S.-EU summits and the Transatlantic Business Dialogue. It is meant to enhance the discourse between members of the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress through twice-yearly discussions on a range of economic issues in the transatlantic relationship, an agenda that has broadened and deepened from traditional trade issues, such as tariffs, to include data privacy, climate change, and regulatory convergence.

But the Dialogue has always been taken more seriously by Members of the European Parliament than by members of Congress. 'Often when MEPs go to Washington there are more MEPs in the room than Members of Congress,' lamented a long-time European Commission official in an interview.

'We have grappled with the issue of Congress and Parliament,' admitted Gardner. 'The Legislators' Dialogue often had the wrong people in the room talking about the wrong stuff.'

In 2010, to better coordinate interaction between European Parliamentarians and members of Congress, the Parliament opened a liaison office in Washington. Initially, the European Commission objected. But its usefulness to the broader mandate of the EU delegation rapidly became apparent and the initial three-person contingent has grown to 16 and now hosts up to 150 visits by EU parliamentarians every year. The liaison office tracks legislation on Capitol Hill, facilitates meetings between Members of the European Parliament and members of Congress and their staff, and works with the EU delegation in Washington in support of European Union interests.

Notably, the U.S. Congress has never opened its own office in Brussels. An estimated 50-60 members of Congress visit Brussels each year on legislative business. In the past, a Congressional outpost in Brussels has been privately endorsed by both Republican and Democratic Speakers of the House of Representatives. And legislation to create such an office was introduced a decade ago. But Congress has never seen it in its interest to establish a presence in Brussels.

So American scepticism about the European Parliament remains. 'I have difficulty picking out independent parliamentary action in the foreign and security areas,' said a dubious Shapiro in an interview, who is now based in Berlin at the European Council on Foreign Relations. 'There is the feeling that the Parliament can take a pound of flesh [it blocked the 2020 Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the EU and China] but what difference does it make? If the Chinese hadn't become so strangely incompetent and arrogant, would the Parliament have stopped it? You can't compare the European Parliament with the German Bundestag.' Although, as more and more previously national or intra-European issues, such as climate change, become international concerns, the role of the European Parliament is growing.

A fourth, indirect institutional link between the European Union and the United States is through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The EU lacks a military arm. And NATO includes nations that are not part of the EU, including the United States. As a result, EU-U.S. cooperation on strategic issues has been limited. (It took years before European national ambassadors to NATO and their counterpart ambassadors to the EU ever formally met, even though they all lived and worked in Brussels.)

Nevertheless, in the last few decades the two Brussels-based organizations have deepened their ties. They have complemented each other's efforts in the Western Balkans and Afghanistan, and cooperated in combatting terrorism, piracy, illegal trafficking, and hybrid threats, among other things. And 81 % of European have come to see the importance of the EU to their national security, according to the 2022 GMF Transatlantic Trends [survey](#).

American officials have been of two minds about enhanced EU security capabilities, always wanting them to exist within the context of NATO remaining the principle transatlantic security institution. As then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright [said](#) in 1998, the United States opposed 'de-linking' any EU member military capability from that of NATO (foreshadowing current American wariness of French President Emmanuel Macron's desire for 'strategic autonomy'). She also said Washington opposed 'decoupling' of U.S. and European security interests. And no 'discrimination' against non-EU members.

The speech became a de facto American doctrine. As a result, Washington's reaction to any EU effort to develop an EU military capability has often been treated by Washington as undermining NATO.

During the Bush administration, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld [warned](#) that: 'Actions that could reduce NATO's effectiveness by confusing duplications or by perturbing the transatlantic link would not be positive.'

And Europeans complain that Americans don't necessarily want the EU to play in the security realm. 'The Americans have been telling us that we don't do enough for defence,' reflected a senior member of the European Council staff. 'And my experience was whenever we tried to do this through the EU the Americans said you are undermining NATO.'

And, admitted Daalder: 'I am a national security guy. I have never taken the EU seriously. It's always been more important what Paris or London say than Brussels.' But, he acknowledged, 'as security perceptions have broadened, the EU's security role has broadened.'

The European Union has had a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) for more than two decades. The goal of this effort is to deploy military and civilian missions to preserve peace, prevent conflict, and strengthen international security.

'U.S. reactions to CSDP have been everything from confrontational to supportive to denigrating to mute,' [wrote](#) Mai'a K. Davis Cross, a senior visiting fellow at the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands. 'This is at least in part because the American government's vision for CSDP seeks to balance a fine line between encouraging the EU to gain capabilities, while discouraging it from developing different foreign policy goals to the US. The essence of the US concern can be summed up as wanting the EU to become more self-reliant (especially since America's own interests have shifted to other regions in the world), but not wanting the EU to be able to challenge US leadership in the world.'

And this has not necessarily worked in America's interest. Washington's effective veto over the EU's defence ambitions, concluded a 2021 [study](#) by the Center for American Progress, 'has frequently resulted in an absurd situation where Washington loudly insists that Europe do more on defence but then strongly objects when Europe's political union—the European Union—tries to answer the call. This policy approach has been a grand strategic error—one that has weakened NATO militarily, strained the trans-Atlantic alliance, and contributed to the relative decline in Europe's global clout.'

For many years, the EU has attempted to bolster the European defence industry and pushed for closer coordination between defence industrial players to give European militaries a more independent, reliable, and competitive military industrial base. As part of this effort, Brussels launched a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative, which sought to pool funding to support joint EU defence projects and the EU has created a small European Defence Fund to co-finance joint defence industrial projects and supports collaborative defence research. But, the U.S. defence industry, worried about potentially being shut out of the European defence market, lobbied the Trump administration to oppose such EU efforts.

With the arrival of the Biden administration, the U.S. has voiced more support for EU defence capabilities. In a joint [statement](#) by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell, Brussels and Washington agreed: 'that EU defence initiatives should enhance the European contribution to Transatlantic security and can offer concrete opportunities for cooperation between the EU and the United States.' In addition, the EU member states of NATO and the U.S. affirmed in NATO's 2022 [Strategic Concept](#) their commitment to deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security.

A fifth EU-U.S. institutional development has been the emergence of the EU as a foreign policy player. EU foreign policy is coordinated through a monthly meeting of EU Member State foreign ministers in the Foreign Affairs Council and conducted on a day-to-day basis by the European External Action Service, which came into being in 2011, and is the EU's diplomatic arm, led by the High Representative.

The EU role in the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), which was chaired by the EU High Representative, demonstrates the EU's potential. As Wendy Sherman, the U.S. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs and the American negotiator of the Iran agreement, wrote in her book [Not for the Faint of Heart](#): 'the EU's coordination role was essential to gaining the support from the international community that we all would need for any final deal.'

And the EU and the U.S. have begun high-level dialogues on China, Russia, and security and defence, long overdue discussions that have secured the EU a place at the strategic table.

Yet, the EEAS has fallen short of some Europeans' hopes. 'The (geo)political aspirations of the European Commission, the increased prominence of the European Council in charting the EU's

international course (overshadowing the significance of the Foreign Affairs Council), and ad hoc diplomatic initiatives from some Member States without [the High Representative's] involvement, have hampered the development of a distinct role for the EEAS,' concluded a task force [report](#) by the Centre for European Policy Studies, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.

And many Americans feel the same. 'Compared to where it was, the EU has had some gradual improvement on foreign and security policy,' noted Shapiro. 'But that is grading on the curve. Relative to actual problems, it's pretty pathetic. And relative to what you would expect from a real foreign policy actor, it's pretty pathetic.'

Shapiro blames these shortcomings on the reluctance of national capitals to surrender some of their sovereignty. 'On foreign policy issues that are a country's problem,' he said, 'they don't want the EU deciding. And when it's not a country's problem they don't want the EU committing them.'

Moreover, Washington continues to play national capitals off against Brussels. 'If the State Department thinks about Member States,' said Shapiro, 'it's how do we use them to get the EU to do things. The EU is the instrument and the forum, it's not the decider. It's the convener who can influence the Member States. The Member States are deciding in a meeting in Brussels. And we play that game with them of course.'

## 8. Highlights and lowlights of the last four decades

### 8.1. The Reagan years

When Ronald Reagan became U.S. president in 1981, the European Community was not taken seriously as a player in transatlantic relations. Congressman David Dreier, then chairman of the House Committee on Rules, wrote in 2005, 'in 1981, the European Union was nothing but an idea...few Americans (and not many more Europeans) ever expected that the ten countries of the EEC would ever achieve economic integration, let alone polity unity, within our lifetimes.'

But some key Reagan administration officials saw things differently.

'George Schultz [Reagan's Secretary of State from 1982-1989] took the European Community more seriously than any other American leader in his time,' recalled Rand's Ries. 'Schultz would meet with [EU Commission President Jacques] Delors when he was in Brussels for the NATO ministerial, and it would be Schultz plus some of the U.S. cabinet and Delors with some from his cabinet. Schultz liked Delors, he liked Delors' vision and liked the single market and pushed back on Americans who saw this as anti-American.'

So, while many Europeans thought Reagan administration plans to introduce intermediate-range nuclear missiles into Europe would lead to a confrontation with the Soviet Union, sentiment that led to massive anti-American demonstrations, actually relations with the European Community began to improve, despite ongoing trade disputes.

Richard Burt recounted in an interview that, when he was director of Politico-Military Affairs at the State Department from 1981 to 1983, 'the EU had very little impact, it was an invisible entity to the Bureau and to me.' But, he continued, 'it became a creeping presence while I was assistant secretary of State for European and Canadian affairs (from 1983-1985).'

'During one of Reagan's visits I came up with a proposal that he speak to the European Parliament,' recalled Burt. 'Most of the people in White House asked: 'what? They have a parliament?'

In May 1985, Reagan went to the Parliament in Strasbourg, France, and spoke, [saying](#): 'I'm here to tell you that America remains, as she was 40 years ago, dedicated to the unity of Europe. We continue to see a strong and unified Europe not as a rival but as an even stronger partner.'

'He got booed,' remembered Burt, 'but in his genial way he won them over. It turned out to be a milestone for the U.S.-EU relationship.'

'The main reason we wanted Reagan to speak to the Parliament was to recognize the importance of the European Community,' Burt explained. 'The EU was being counterproductive to U.S. interests. But in the 1980s that had started to change. And, if we wanted to solve problems on a national basis, we needed to recognize the EU's role on certain issues and factor them in.'

'You would not have thought at the beginning,' he marvelled, 'that this was a marriage made in heaven with a Republican administration and American scepticism about the European institutions.'

## 8.2. The George H.W. Bush Presidency

George H.W. Bush assumed the presidency in 1989 having amassed extensive international experience as U.S. ambassador both to China and the United Nations, and head of the Central Intelligence Agency. And he had an open mind about the European project. 'We believe a strong, united Europe means a strong America,' [said](#) Bush in 1989.

'As vice-president, Bush would come to Brussels and see [European Commission President Jacques] Delors,' recalled Lamy. 'Bush would enlarge the circle of conversation to geopolitical issues, which Delors liked because of his mindset.'

The post-Cold War era created a new environment. The Soviet Bear was no longer at the door. The centrality of the all-preoccupying nature of the nuclear confrontation with the Soviets could no longer be sustained.

'After the fall of the Soviet Union,' remembered a senior member of the European Council secretariat, 'the world completely changed. It was the victory of the West. It was the end of history. And Europeans genuinely believed their model was the model for the future.'

The Bush administration drove strong cooperation with Europe on German reunification, management of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. But dealing with the European Union did not have total support within Bush's government.

'Blackwell [Bob Blackwell then head of European affairs at the National Security Council in the White House] tried to keep functional people out of relations with the EU,' recalled Eric Melby, who worked on economic issues on the White House National Security Council (NSC). 'On some issues USTR was looking at a narrow focus on trade issues and the NSC looked at it more broadly and so we were able to shape things that USTR was not comfortable with. [Carla] Hills [the U.S. Trade Representative] was not going to go to Bush and say she disagreed with the NSC.'

'When Delors came to Washington, [despite their previous meetings] Bush was not keen to meet with him,' Melby recalled. 'But [National Security Advisor Brent] Scowcroft persuaded Bush to meet Delors. And then when the communiqué came out, the U.S. said it would meet twice a year with the EU.' And this led to the annual Washington-Brussels summits, which were affirmed in the 1990 Transatlantic [Declaration](#) on U.S.-EC Relations.

'There was an awareness of the EU as an institution,' Melby said, 'even though there were a lot of differences, certainly on trade issues. You could talk to individual countries, but the competence was the Commission.'

Yet, from an American perspective, dealing with Brussels got more difficult with enlargement.

'Bush was anxious about EC-92,' recalled Zoellick, referring to Europe's goal of completing creation of a single internal market by 1992. 'It was his re-election year and he worried it would delay the Uruguay Round. I helped persuade [James] Baker [Bush's White House chief of staff] and the administration that we should not oppose a single market, that it would be good for the U.S. economy and that we needed to get Delors to finish the Uruguay Round.'

Zoellick, who led the U.S. German reunification effort for Baker, said Washington always saw reunification as part of a broader American ambition for transatlantic relations. 'We wanted a united Germany within a new relationship within Europe and a new U.S.-EC relationship,' he said. 'We could tell that the EC was going to deepen, but we wanted it to widen as well. We were interested in having the EC look east.'

But enlargement posed problems for Washington. 'Once they got up to 25 (in 2004),' said Wayne, 'it got a lot harder. It was harder for them to get things done. When it was 15, people would still get frustrated, but it was fine. But when their own decision-making slowed down, people were less interested in building consensus.'

'The Transatlantic Declaration in the Bush administration was an effort at recognition of the EU,' agreed Dan Hamilton. 'But then we had to construct an architecture around that: it was the New Transatlantic Agenda [agreed upon by the Clinton Administration]. That superstructure collapsed of its own weight. It was too much process.'

### 8.3. The Clinton Honeymoon

Bill Clinton was the first U.S. president born after World War II. An internationalist, he had graduated from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University.

Just months after his inauguration he [reiterated](#) longstanding American policy: 'We believe a strong and united European Community as a key partner in the pressing problems around the world is very much in the interests of the United States.'

'Clinton was the golden years,' remembered Malmström. 'There was a very close cooperation. The EU was less developed, but he showed that the EU was an ally and he wanted to work with Europe.'

'In the 1990s,' remembered Wayne, 'a number of people in charge in Brussels saw cooperating with us as an advantage to them within Europe. And in the U.S., for our own reasons, it would be easier for us if we could get Europe to come together, and with a number of issues it would be fine if we dealt with the EU on these issues. The 1990s was a period where cooperation moved out of the trade-centric into global, regional issues, things like organized crime and development assistance.'

In December 1995, Washington and Brussels signed the New Transatlantic Agenda, with a proposal for a New Transatlantic Marketplace and creation of the Transatlantic Business Dialogue, and a consumer dialogue and other dialogues in support of efforts to deepen transatlantic economic integration.

But such efforts did not mean that there were not some American reservations about the European project.

'When we looked at the EC-92 programme,' recalled Reiss, 'We were anxious about fortress Europe, that the taking away of internal barriers and creating a single market was going to raise barriers to U.S. goods. Actually, the U.S. companies turned out to be the biggest supporters, it was national companies in Europe who did not want the competition.'

Meanwhile, Europe's ambitions for a single currency as a logical extension of the European single market worried some American elites who had long argued that a single currency among such divergent economies could not survive. Martin Feldstein, a chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers in the Reagan administration, argued in two articles in *Foreign Affairs*, that creation of the euro would divide Europe and be a thorn in transatlantic relations.

In 1994, when the then National Security Council Director for European Affairs, asked the U.S. Treasury Department what the Clinton administration's policy was toward creation of a single European currency, he recounts he was told 'there was no need for the administration to have a policy because the single currency would never come about.'

## 8.4. The George W. Bush Rollercoaster

With the beginning of the 21st Century, American and European views of each other and of the European Union went through tumultuous ups and downs.

American foreign policy realists argued that the transatlantic alliance died with the Cold War. They argued that the United States, as the world's sole military and economic superpower, had global, not simply transatlantic interests. Moreover, they believed that the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, imbued subsequent American action with a moral imperative that trumped both European queasiness about the exercise of military power and the EU's preference for collaborative decision-making.

Two decades later, it may be hard for those who did not live through it to appreciate the profound challenge the first years of the Bush administration posed for transatlantic relations. In the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, long smouldering European resentment toward the United States burst into flame, fed by U.S. indifference to European concerns about the International Criminal Court and U.S. tariffs on imported European steel. Those flames were further fanned by President Bush's plans for the war with Iraq. 'Even my most sincere colleagues in the European Parliament are moving to anti-Americanism,' observed Erika Mann, a Social Democratic Party Member of the European Parliament, who was also the body's rapporteur on EU-US relations, in an interview at the time.

'It was always possible to say, "what unites us is more than divides us" ', said an EU diplomat in Brussels speaking at the time, 'and, while that was fundamentally a cliché, people believed it. It was what held us together. But no more. They are now more problems with the transatlantic relationship than at any time in the post-war period.'

In 2001, Bush visited Brussels and went to NATO, but bypassed the EU institutions entirely. The snub was noticed and not appreciated.

Bush first met with the leaders of the European Union in June 2001 in Gothenburg, Sweden. He got an earful from his counterparts about his administration's abrupt renunciation of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and other White House faux pas (as his European hosts saw them).



But Bush was not shy about giving as good as he got. 'Bush was mightily dismissive of the EU,' remembered Mandelson. 'He found the summits very perplexing. Who were these people arrayed in front of him? [German Chancellor Gerhard] Schroder and others used it as an opportunity to lecture the president about climate change and other issues and Bush's response was "what do I need these guys for? Shouldn't they have some respect? The less I have to see of these people the better."' '

Moreover, from an economic standpoint the United States was worried that by 2004, the European Union, then 15 nations strong, was going to grow to include possibly 20 nations. The candidates, the timing, the changes in an array of EU policies dictated by enlargement, and the changes in internal decision-making made necessary by increasingly unwieldy EU membership were all critically important to Washington.

'We are a non-member member state of the European Union,' Simon Serfaty, then Director of the Europe programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, told the author at the time. 'At the end of the day, everything the EU decides related to security, enlargement, and reform has a transatlantic dimension.'

With so much at stake, a U.S.-EU enlargement dialogue was long overdue. But at times it was not cordial. 'When Americans venture an opinion on enlargement,' wryly observed Antony J. Blinken, who had been the senior director for European affairs at the National Security Council in the Clinton administration but has gone on to be Biden's Secretary of State, in an interview at the time, 'Europeans often try hard not to look as if they have swallowed something very unpleasant.'

Not all observers agreed. 'Things that are corrosive are still within the realm of problems that can be contained,' Dana Allin, editor of *Survival*, published by the international Institute for Strategic Studies in London, told the author.

And, after its re-election, the Bush administration realized they had a problem with the EU, and Secretary of State Condi Rice advocated a 'new chapter in our relationship and a new chapter in our alliance,' wrote Rockwell A. Schnabel, the U.S. ambassador to the EU from 2001-2005, in his memoir *The Next Superpower?*.

'Dan Fried [then the assistant secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs] and Condi Rice learned a lesson,' said Chase. 'The Member States of the EU that disagree with you can be a real restraint on what the U.S. wanted to do.'

'When Bush was re-elected in 2004,' recalled Mandelson, 'he clearly decided to wipe the slate clean and mend fences. He really made a serious effort to make himself available to summits and EU officials. During his second term he was quite different and he really made an effort.'

In 2005 Bush returned to Brussels, and Schnabel noted: 'no U.S. head of state had ever met so extensively with the leaders of the EU institutions in the city where those institutions have their headquarters,'. It was during that visit that President Bush reaffirmed: 'America supports a strong Europe.'

## 8.5. Obama's Soured Love Affair

In 2008 Barack Obama was elected U.S. president. And, for many Europeans, he encapsulated all of their idealism about America, He was a young, well-educated, articulate Black man, someone they knew their country could never elect. And they admired him all the more for it. Most important, he was not Bush. In Europe, median support for the U.S. president rose [70](#) percentage points in 2009.

And Europeans expected him to walk on water: to end the financial crisis, to stop global warming and to bring peace to the Middle East.

'Obama was more loved in Europe than in the U.S.,' observed Malmström, who was then Minister for European Union Affairs in the Swedish government. 'But it was a sad love affair. He was clear that Europe was second place. And he hated the summits. He didn't want to go. Too much protocol; nothing exciting happening.'

One interesting tell about the lack of priority Obama gave Europe, was that, in journalist Jeffrey Goldberg's interview in the April 2016 *Atlantic* on the '[Obama Doctrine](#)', Obama never mentioned the European Union.

Gardner recalled: 'Susan Rice [Obama's national security advisor] would say 'you can't get anything done with them. They are too slow. Why should I get the President over there?' And, he added, '[Sandy] Vershbow [the assistant secretary of Defense for Security Affairs] would say: "why do you want to work with those [EU] issues. Nobody in this building wants to work with that stuff".'

'I arrived in August 2010,' recalled Joao Vale de Almeida, the EU ambassador to the United States from 2010 to 2014 (and the first formal EU ambassador to Washington in the wake of the creation of the European External Action Service, in an interview. 'At the time we had an annual EU-U.S. summit with the United States, and Obama cancelled it. He was involved with the pivot to Asia and decided it was not worth happening. This was a shock to Europe about U.S. relations with the EU because this presidency was close to the European centre left.'

De Almeida acknowledged that the impasse was overcome and by the end of the Obama term the U.S. and the EU were best friends, having found common ground on issues such as climate change.

Yet, despite his frustration with the EU, Obama was supportive of European solidarity when it was in America's interest, such as during the global financial crisis he inherited.

For a number of years, Greece's continued membership in the euro, and possibly the EU, was in question. And American critics were quick to say: 'we told you so'. But Obama firmly backed the EU.

'There have been very sensitive moments where the U.S. has made informal interventions—in the second Greek financial crisis and [the Germans were] thinking of pulling the plug, they were warned against this by the Obama Treasury,' noted a current Biden administration official. 'That is a dimension of the relationship that is not understood.'

Of course, there were disagreements. The [2014 Wales NATO Summit](#) set a formal goal of 2 % of GDP to be spent on defence, establishing a goal for defence burden-sharing, amplifying a long-standing American irritant with Europe. And after much fanfare, the U.S. and the EU were unable to conclude their high-ambition Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

At the same time, the Obama administration made a number of own goals in EU relations.

In 2013, reports that the United States had tapped the cell phone of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, among other prominent Europeans, and had been doing so for years, had a dramatic impact on European views of America's commitment to privacy. Disclosures of American spying not only soured European trust in the United States, but they called into question the 2000 Safe Harbour Agreement, that had enabled the movement of data across the Atlantic, a data privacy issue that has only grown as the digital economy has expanded.

## 8.6. The Trump Disaster

'I perceived a stark change of the [longstanding U.S.-EU] narrative with the Trump administration,' recounted Mildner. 'The new narrative emanating from Washington was: "The EU is not our partner and EU institutions take advantage of us".'

'There was this huge switch,' said Zoellick, 'you go from U.S. pursuit of systemic interests to purely transactional policies.'

'The European Union was formed in order to take advantage of the United States,' Trump [complained](#). 'I think the European Union is a foe.'

Trump's ignorance of the EU was demonstrated in a 2017 meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel where he reportedly asked her not once, but ten times, if he could negotiate a trade deal with Germany. She patiently explained to him that the U.S. could only negotiate such an agreement with the European Union.

In 2018, President Trump imposed 25 per cent duties on imports of five types of steel and 10 per cent duties on imports of aluminium from Europe, citing 'national security' reasons. And he threatened tariffs on EU autos.

The EU responded by filing a dispute settlement case in the WTO, applying 'rebalancing' tariffs of its own, and by readying safeguard actions against a possible surge in steel and aluminium imports that had been deflected from the U.S. market.

Trump's rhetoric and actions worsened Americans' partisan view of the EU. Just [four-in-ten](#) Republicans gave the EU a positive rating in 2019, compared with two-thirds of Democrats. For two decades Democrats had held more favourable views of the EU than did Republicans. But the partisan difference in most years was roughly 10 percentage points. That gap widened dramatically with Trump's election and his unrelenting criticism of the EU. The 26-percentage point partisan difference in 2019 was the largest gap between the views of Democrats and Republicans in two decades of the Pew Research Center asking the question.

And Trump also went after NATO. Senior administration officials told [The New York Times](#) that several times over the course of 2018, Mr Trump privately said he wanted to withdraw from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

## 8.7. A Biden New Beginning

Trump's antipathy towards the EU has had a lingering effect. 'In the first year of this [Biden] administration,' recalled one Biden official, 'I was surprised how much of the Trump scepticism took root in the bureaucracy.'

Yet, despite this, in its first two years the senior leadership of the Biden administration has shown a deep commitment to the European Union. [President Biden](#) was the first U.S. President since George W. Bush in 2001 to participate in a European Council session and the first to participate in a U.S.-EU summit at the leaders' level since 2014. The administration also recommitted the United States to multilateralism, one of Europe's chief criticisms about the Trump administration. In its first two years, the Biden administration rejoined the Paris climate agreement and re-engaged in European efforts to revive the Iran nuclear agreement. The United States also rejoined the World Health Organization and joined the COVAX global vaccine initiative, restored U.S. funding to the UN Population Fund, lifted Trump-era [sanctions](#) on International Criminal Court officials, and has been more active in the

G7 and the G20. However, it did little to revive the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement mechanism, an EU priority.

## 9. Conclusion

It has been more than six decades since the creation of the European Economic Community, and more than seven decades since the beginning of the post-war reconstruction of Europe with the support of the United States. The U.S.-EU relationship has deepened and evolved over those years and continues to do so.

'There are some aspects of this relationship that keep repeating themselves,' noted Zoellick. 'It's not surprising that they do. We have been dealing with these tensions since the 1950s and they have taken different forms. It didn't just happen [that the relationship has survived them]. It required some Europeans and Americans to face the problems, try to manage them and find common ground. It's reassuring.'

## Main references

Acheson, Dean; *Present at the Creation*; WW Norton; 1969

Bradford, Anu; *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*; Oxford University Press; 12/19/2019

Gardner, Anthony; *Stars With Stripes: The Essential Partnership between the European Union and the United States*; Palgrave Macmillan; 3/31/2020

Kohut, Andrew and Stokes, Bruce; *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked*; Times Books; 5/2/2006

Quigley, Carroll; *Tragedy and Hope*; Macmillan; 1966

Sherman, Wendy; *Not for the Faint of Heart: Lessons in Courage, Power, and Persistence*; Public Affairs; 9/4/2018

Stokes, Bruce; *Open for Business: Creating a Transatlantic Marketplace*; Council on Foreign Relations; 1/1/1996

Zoellick, Robert; *America in the World: a History of US Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*; Grand Central Publishing; 8/3/2021

## Public Opinion Surveys

Eurobarometer; Winter 2021-22

Gallup; Americans Know Little About European Union; 6/16/2004

Gallup; Americans Rate Canada, Britain, France, Japan Most Favorably; 3/13/2022

German Marshall Fund; Transatlantic Trends 2022; 9/29/2022

German Marshall Fund; Transatlantic Trends 2005

German Marshall Fund; Thought Leader Survey; 3/21/2017

German Marshall Fund; Thought Leader Survey: Issues

Impacting the Transatlantic Relationship 2018; 3/9/2018

Pew Research Center; Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy; 10/16/2017

Pew Research Center; Two Americas, One American; 6/6/2006

Pew Research Center; What Do Americans Know About International Affairs?; 5/25/2022

Pew Research Center; Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey; 10/21/2019

Pew Research Center; Attitudes toward EU are largely positive, both within Europe and outside it; 10/21/2019

Pew Research Center; The State of the World and America's Global Role; 11/17/2005

Pew Research Center; Positive views of European Union reach new highs in many countries; 10/13/2022

Pew Research Center; EU seen favorably across 17 advanced economies, but views vary on its coronavirus response; 6/24/2021

Pew Research Center; America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties; 3/18/2003

Pew Research Center; U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership; 6/26/2017

Pew Research Center; Views of Obama; 1/13/2011

Pew Research Center; Bush Unpopular in Europe, Seen As Unilateralist; 8/15/2001

Pew Research Center; America's Image Abroad Rebounds With Transition From Trump to Biden; 6/10/21

Pew Research Center; Americans and Europeans Differ Widely on Foreign Policy Issues; 4/17/2002

## Interviews

Allin, Dana; editor *Survival*; 7/7/2020

Barzon, Matthew; former U.S. ambassador to the Court of St James

Blinken, Anthony; former senior director for European affairs at the Clinton National Security Council

Burt, Richard; former director Politico-Military Affairs, U.S. State Department; 4/25/2022

Burwell, Fran; distinguished fellow Atlantic Council; 4/21/2022

Bütikofer, Reinhard; Member of the European Parliament; 11/22/2021

Chase, Peter; senior fellow German Marshall Fund; 3/25/2022

Daalder, Ivo; President Chicago Council on Global Affairs; 5/9/2022

Dobbins, James; former U.S. ambassador to the EU; 4/18/2022

Elles, James; former Member of the European Parliament; 5/24/2022

Gardner, Anthony; former U.S. ambassador to the European Union; 5/6/2022

Hamilton, Daniel; senior fellow Johns Hopkins University SAIS Foreign Policy Institute; 5/13/2022

Hodac, Ivan; then senior vice president of Time Warner Europe.

Hübner, Danuta; Member European Parliament; 5/10/2022

Lamy, Pascal; former chef de cabinet for European Commission President Jacques Delors, EU Trade Commissioner; 12/8/2021

Malmström, Cecilia; former EU Trade Commissioner; 3/30/2022

Mandelson, Peter; former EU trade commissioner; 5/17/2022

Mann, Erika; former Member of the European Parliament

McIntosh, Mary; vice-president of Princeton Survey Research; 2002

Melby, Eric; former George W. Bush National Security Council staff; 5/3/2022

Mildner, Stormy; Executive Director Aspen Institute Germany; 11/5/2021

Morningstar, Richard; former U.S. ambassador to the EU; 3/23/2022

O'Cleireacain, Seamus; adjunct professor Columbia University; 3/22/2022

O'Sullivan, David; former EU ambassador to the United States; 3/18/2022

Paeman, Hugo; former EU ambassador to the United States; 5/3/2022

Richardson, John; former EU ambassador to the United Nations; 3/30/2022

Ries, Charles; adjunct senior fellow at the Rand Corporation; 4/15/2022

Schroeter, Lisa; Global Director of Trade and Investment Policy for Dow Chemical Company; 5/2/2022

Serfaty, Simon; former Director of the Europe programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies'

Shapiro, Jeremy; research director European Council on Foreign Relations; 5/5/2022

Vale de Almeida, Joao; former EU ambassador to the United States; 4/21/2022

Wayne, Earl Anthony; former Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Mission to the EU; 5/17/2022

Wolff, Alan; former general counsel U.S. Trade Representative, deputy director general World Trade Organization; 5/2/2022

Woolcock, Stephen; Associate Professor London School of Economics; 3/16/2022

Zoellick, Robert; former deputy U.S. Secretary of State and U.S. Trade Representative; 6/13/2022

---

EPRS invites leading experts and commentators to share their thinking and insights on important topics of relevance to debate in the European institutions. In this paper, Bruce Stokes, visiting senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and associate fellow at Chatham House, offers an overview of the development of U.S.-EU relations since 1957, with a strong emphasis on ties in the last 30-40 years, largely based on the author's interviews with former officials who lived that relationship.

The past 65 years has seen the pace and depth of official transatlantic interaction increase as the powers of the European Union grew, something the United States belatedly and reluctantly came to recognise, as transatlantic economic integration deepened, and shared challenges – China, technological change, global warming, pandemics, and global economic disparities – became more important to governments on both sides of the Atlantic.

The paper does not attempt a comprehensive chronology of U.S.-EU relations, but discusses several longstanding challenges that have preoccupied the relationship: differences in values between Europeans and Americans and the contrasting perceptions they have of each other and of the European Union, their respective roles in the world, and their positions on given issues at hand.

---

This is a publication of the European Parliamentary Research Service | EPRS

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.