

ETHICS IN A CHANGING TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP

Introduction

A large portion of my diplomatic career and now my role as the Director of the European Leadership Network – a pan-European network of heavyweight European leaders working for mutual security in wider Europe – has been concerned with Euro-Atlantic security relations. So I have plenty to say on the changing transatlantic relationship and especially on the security dimension that lies at its heart.

But ethics? Diplomats may or may not behave ethically but they don't think all that much about "ethics" as such. They are focused heavily on the art of the possible and on pursuit of the national interest. For example, and with honourable exceptions, we rarely resign on matters of principle. When Robin Cook declared on becoming Foreign Secretary in 1997 that the government would pursue "an ethical foreign policy", he struggled.

So for me this is an unusual and welcome chance to step back and reflect on how ethics are at play as relations between the United States and Europe evolve. In the process, I confess I have confirmed my prejudice that this is deadly serious business.

I hope it will be welcome that this Elson lecture builds on and responds to a previous one. As a practitioner of international relations, I recognise and want to adopt many of the insights in Professor Mervyn Frost's distinguished lecture four years ago on "*Ethics, Foul Play and Asymmetric Warfare*".¹

My definition of ethics is the same as Professor Frost's I believe: normative but generally informal concepts of right and wrong conduct. And I share a core message of his lecture - that ethics are a far more pervasive force-field in international relations than conventional assumptions about states simply pursuing national self-interest and *realpolitik* would suggest.

Professor Frost pointed to the power of the ethics inherent in what he distinguished as two global 'practices' – one the 'society of states', the other 'global civil society'. The international community of states, for example, generally do not consider it acceptable to invade another country. Similarly, global civil society generally condemns, for example, rape.

Like me as a diplomat, participants in these 'practices' – the international community of states and all of us as individuals – might not reflect day-to-day on the ethics. But, simply by being unavoidable members of these 'practices', whether states and individuals like it or not, we are subject to the current concepts of right and wrong international conduct embedded in them. Indeed, a national or personal interest generally suffers if a decision is widely considered within the 'practice' to be unethical.

In considering transatlantic relations in this context, I can only offer a practitioner's perspective, not an academic's rigour. But I should like, very unrigorously, to point to a few trends and policy conclusions that possibly deserve further consideration.

First, however, I need to set the scene.

The foundations of transatlantic relations

Let's start with two set piece speeches about the United States and Europe. In one a European leader declares solemnly to an American audience "...we must never cease to proclaim in fearless tones the great principles of freedom and the rights of man which are the joint inheritance of the English-speaking world and which through Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the Habeas Corpus, trial by jury, and the English common law find their most famous expression in the American Declaration of Independence."

In the other an American leader declares solemnly to a European audience: "I am here today not just to visit an old ally, but to hold it up as an example for others who seek freedom and who wish to summon the courage and the will to defend our civilization."

The Brit is wordier than the American but the invocation of freedom and will to uphold values, the reciprocal transatlantic courtesies, the defence of a concept of civilisation, are the same.

There are two things to draw from this. First, values are a really important part of the transatlantic political vocabulary, baked into the discourse by the blood and history of two World Wars. Second, it's not just a shared vocabulary but a shared transatlantic ethical ideology. We really believe it's our moral duty to uphold "freedom and the rights of man". This way of thinking is pervasive, embedded for example in the preamble of the foundational North Atlantic Treaty on mutual defence which says of the North American and European NATO Allies: "They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law".²

So if my first observation, with Professor Frost, is that ethics are far more important in international relations than commonly supposed, my second is that the countries in the transatlantic relationship - and indeed the relationship as an idea in itself - are particularly liable to ethical evaluation both by the community of nations and by global civil society. No other international relationship sets itself up quite so much to be measured about freedom, liberty, democracy, law, the rights of man and commitment to each other's security and prosperity. This is an important feature of contemporary international relations.

The changing transatlantic relationship

One speech is Winston Churchill's famous March 1946 'Iron Curtain' speech.³ The other is by Donald Trump in July 2017.⁴

So you might conclude that - 71 years on - nothing much has changed in the fundamentals of the transatlantic relationship. American troops were stabilizing Europe in 1946; American troops are back in Europe in 2017. NATO, established in 1949 as a vehicle for engaging US military might in Europe's collective defence, is still going strong. More generally, the international institutions that transatlantic victory in World War Two brought into being - the United Nations, the World Bank, the

International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation via its precursor the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and others – continue to serve Europe and North America well.

But this would be to miss some important shifts, not just in the geopolitics but in mindsets and in the concepts of right and wrong that they reflect.

Who was Donald Trump addressing as “an old ally” and holding up “as an example for others who seek freedom” and the defence of “our civilization”? It was not the United Kingdom. We kept him out last summer in a righteous uproar over his personal ethics. Trump’s speech was no Churchillian message of the American and British peoples to mankind. No, the Donald was addressing the good people of Poland, whose government is in dispute with the European Union over violations of Poland’s constitution and rule of law, has refused to accept its EU quota of Muslim migrants, and might not altogether resist the charge of running an “illiberal democracy” - a label already embraced by our NATO Ally Victor Orban in Hungary. Unlike Churchill, Trump’s speech in Warsaw makes no reference to human rights or rule of law.

So I suspect I hardly need to persuade you that transatlantic relations are changing.

You would not be alone in thinking this. The Pew Research Centre’s Global Attitudes Survey shows that, across most of Europe, attitudes towards the United States have grown less favourable since Mr Trump became president. ⁵

Some of this is no doubt about Trump personally. At the European extreme, Swedish civil society views have swung from 93% positive towards Obama to just 10% positive towards Trump.

But judgements are also being made by Europeans about right and wrong conduct by the US as a state. In Germany, for example, the percentage of people with a very or somewhat favourable view of the US has dropped from an Obama high of 64% to a current Trump low of 35%. In many cases, these European shifts are stronger than those globally, reflecting the close and correspondingly more emotive, values-based nature of the transatlantic relationship.

And before we get too smug about President Trump’s shortcomings, we should consider whether it might be Western Europe that in recent decades has departed more than Mr Trump from a shared transatlantic consensus. West European countries have raced ahead with a liberalism that leaves not only Presidents Erdogan and Putin but US Republicans contemptuous. And this is at all ethical levels –individual ethics such as abortion, societal such as LGBT rights, governmental such as migration, and geopolitical such as international development funding. At the state level, the “principled realism” that allows Trump’s “America First” to consort with Middle East autocrats against terrorism is not so different from the pragmatism that allowed NATO to include military regimes in Turkey, Greece and Portugal as treaty allies in the struggle for “freedom” and “individual liberty” against communism during the Cold War. Now Brussels more than the White House struggles to reconcile itself to “illiberal democracy”.

I do not suggest that any of this is clear cut. There has always been incoherence and dissonance in US-Europe relations. Although Mervyn Frost speaks of two global 'practices', he acknowledges that they are characterised by considerable diversity and freedom for both states and civil societies to hold differing ethical positions. The long term trend in transatlantic relations is in fact unclear. To the extent that polling is any guide, relations have had their ups and downs but no clear pattern. European attitudes towards the United States have not - yet - reached the lows achieved under President George W. Bush. Moreover, European states and civil societies themselves are internally divided – to say nothing of US politics. I think of the passionate ethical divisions that I sat through in the UN Security Council in 2002 and 2003 over the legitimacy of military intervention in Iraq, with the US and UK on one side of the table, literally, and France and Germany on the other.

Nevertheless, I think we can say that views on both sides of the Atlantic clearly are changing, not just about what "civilization" it is of ours that needs defending but about how to go about this. Much less conventionally, I believe we can go further and say, first, that it is primarily the changing ethics that are changing the transatlantic relationship and, second, that it is primarily these changing ethics - diverging norms of right and wrong conduct - that are driving the United States and Europe apart.

After all, despite President Obama's well-advertised "pivot" to Asia and despite growing European ties with China, in absolutely crucial "national interest", "hard power" ways the US and Europe still depend on each other. The US and EU are each other's main trading and investment partners. They each have a huge and rising stock of commercial investment in the other. And shared prosperity continues to make a compelling case for mutual security. For example, in purely *realpolitik* terms, the US needs Europe to be secure and Europeans should want to work with the United States to counter terrorism: the only time NATO's mutual defence clause has been invoked was when Europe came to the United States' defence after 9/11. Both the United States and Europe have interests beyond the purely moral in seeking to promote trade with, prosperity in, and stability and preferably democracy for, third states. This includes a state interest in managing unmanageably large migrant flows.

Yet in all these policy areas, there are significant transatlantic divergences. Just as polling of European publics shows strong negatives towards signature US policies such as the torpedoing of free trade agreements, the Global War on Terrorism, hostility towards the Iran nuclear deal, construction of the Mexican wall, and pull-out from the Paris Climate Change Treaty, so European states appear to be making ethical as well as national interest judgements about US lack of respect for the global commons, dismissiveness of multilateral institutions, unwillingness to uphold commitments made, reduced interest in win-win international solutions and tendency to resort to the threat or use of force.

Three weeks ago, British Cabinet Ministers declared that the UK must make the "moral" case for free trade. Last Friday (13 October), May, Macron and Merkel parted company with the US Administration over Iran, making a "fairness" argument that they expected full implementation of the nuclear deal by all sides. Although President Trump used his Warsaw speech to reaffirm the US's treaty obligation to assist its allies against armed attack, his failure to do so at NATO in May and his

refusal to recommit to the Paris climate agreement, led Angela Merkel to say that “The times in which we could completely depend on others are on the way out.....We Europeans have to take our destiny into our own hands.” In transatlantic terms, this implicit expression of German doubt about whether the United States can be relied on to defend “democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law” in Europe is dynamite, suggestive of a growing rupture in the most central element of transatlantic relations. And if Europeans are feeling wronged about US hesitancy to stand by them, Americans have for much longer wondered how fair it is for Europe - the richest economy on the planet – still to be freeloading on US military effort and doing so little for its own defence more than 70 years after the Second World War and 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Some of all of this is good old-fashioned national interest, with no particular ethical dimension. But much more of it reflects feelings on both sides of the Atlantic that what the other is doing is simply not “right”. And in what I have suggested is a particularly ideological relationship, we should not be surprised that ideas about right and wrong conduct have a particularly disruptive power.

Why is the transatlantic relationship changing?

This all makes a good policy case for taking a long hard look at the ethical dimensions of why and how the relationship is changing. So I want to turn now to offer some inexpert explanations and to draw some policy conclusions.

To start with, at the risk of great oversimplification, I want to pick out two deep trends in the way ethics play into US and European state policy.

Civil society, social media and soft power

The first trend is that Professor Frost’s global civil society ‘practice’ is increasingly colliding with and permeating his society of states ‘practice’.

There has of course always been overlap, especially in the case of democratic states. Domestic civil society’s opinion has always weighed on foreign policy. And vice versa. But across much of the globe the internet and social media have made it much easier and faster for non-state ethics to impact judgements about acceptable state behaviour. As Niall Ferguson argues in his new book ‘The Square and the Tower’, with incredible speed civil society networks are becoming powerful against hierarchical structures. Over half (34 million) of the British population are on Facebook. One third use Twitter. Facebook has two billion regular users globally. 45% of Americans get their news from Facebook. Facebook did not exist 14 years ago.

This is going to have tremendous impact on what is considered to be ethical conduct by states. The British Empire could get away with murder. Now international forces in Afghanistan are apologising within hours for unintended civilian casualties and imposing legal standards on themselves and their host government that are arguably counter-productive to a narrow security calculation of national interest. Already, the EU and the UK lobby the United States against the death penalty. As long ago

as 2004, I was leading the campaign for a UN General Assembly vote in favour of human embryo cloning. Leading the opposing camp was the United States.

Because the transatlantic relationship makes particular claims to uphold a set of shared values, it is particularly susceptible to such ethical issues. So, increasingly, our own societies' judgements about the national and individual morals of the other side of the Atlantic affect the transatlantic relationship.

And increasingly, not just our own societies but global civil society is able to challenge our claims about upholding democracy, liberty and the rule of law. Increasingly, the transatlantic community is therefore going to have to show "a decent respect for the opinion of mankind" as the US Declaration of Independence so neatly put it. Although 'hard power' military and economic strength will of course remain crucial, 'soft power' global attraction is going increasingly to matter to what states can accomplish in the international arena. Increasingly, what you would have done unto yourself at an individual level is going to be what you would have your state do unto other states and their citizens. And increasingly it will be what other states can require that you do unto them. Geopolitics is becoming personal.

Anti-globalisation

A second, cross-cutting and complicating deep trend is the collapse of consensus on globalisation. Since the end of the Cold War a belief in free markets and free trade has supplemented and to some extent supplanted old transatlantic values as the dominant ideology internationally. The transatlantic community has believed in globalisation particularly strongly and is particularly associated with it internationally. And it has been an ethical proposition. It is not just that free trade, free flows of capital and people are good for you materially; it is that they are good for everyone else, lifting poor societies out of poverty, boosting not just productivity but human rights, strengthening individual liberty and the rule of law.

But this has gone too far, too fast, too dogmatically and with the 2008 Great Recession globalisation has come to be challenged not just on economic but on ethical grounds. People in Niall Ferguson's square may like the power of networks against towering governmental iniquity. But they are not all so keen on a truly flat world. Not everyone likes losing their job to offshoring or experiencing rapid immigration or witnessing a fast changing High Street.

In the UK, the strongest social predictor of whether someone would vote Leave last year was not age, geography, social class or income but whether or not they favoured restoration of the death penalty.⁶ Other 'traditional' social values also correlated strongly with the essentially foreign policy decision of Brexit. Could there be a clearer case of concepts of right and wrong individual conduct impacting on state level policy? In the United States, the strongest social predictor of whether someone would vote for Donald Trump as opposed to one of his republican primary competitors was their attitude towards discipline for children – a standard measure of authoritarian or liberal values.⁷ People who voted for Trump seemed in their social attitudes to want a tougher, less laissez-faire approach that made them feel less like pawns in the grip of large, impersonal forces.

Similar currents have been at work in the slogan “Take Back Control”, the relative success of Marine Le Pen’s anti-globalisation campaign, and of other parties of the far right or left elsewhere in Europe.

This is already presenting significant challenges to the transatlantic relationship and to its relations with the rest of the world. It marks a significant fracture in the ethics at work both in the community of nations and in global civil society. Values are now contested between “open” and “closed”, “liberal” and “authoritarian”, the “anywheres” and the “somewheres”. What you would have done unto yourself may turn out to be what you would have done unto others of your tribe or mindset but not unto people on a different side. Domestically, key concepts like “civilisation”, cited by both Churchill and Trump, are contested, most obviously in Trump’s explicit defence of “Judeo-Christian civilization”. And the debate gets turbo-charged, polarised and potentially destructive through the trends in social media that I have described.

Internationally, strongly nationalist or populist sentiments make countries less attractive and less easy to work with for other states. That’s true in transatlantic relations. ‘Brexit’ and ‘America First’ are already in visible tension as are ‘America First’ and ‘Europe’. And because globalisation is such a transatlantic doctrine, the breakdown of consensus on it lends fuel to alternative, competing narratives not just against globalisation but against other Western values such as individual liberty and the rule of law.

These are major and enduring trends rapidly reshaping the ethical expectations underpinning transatlantic relations. Taken together, they suggest to me that, if we let them, deeply engrained national differences about what constitutes right and wrong conduct at an individual and social level will increasingly tend to drive wedges between the United States and Europe, between European states and inside our own countries.

Conclusions

So what is to be done?

I have raised large questions about big ideas, about “freedom and the rights of man” as Churchill put it, about governance and the future course of transatlantic politics. So please also forgive me some over-large conclusions. They are instinct rather than analysis, but I do think they are worth further consideration.

It seems to me that we must now foster absolute seriousness about our politics, diplomacy and international relations and that debate about right and wrong conduct must be at the centre of this. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the transatlantic community went on summer holiday, assuming the end of history and the triumph of liberal values. That bred complacency, self-indulgent identity politics and inattention to the competition from other models - China, Russia, Islamism, ethnic or tribal politics or home-grown populism. So we now have to fight for our values.

The West includes much of the world’s economy, three of the world’s nuclear powers and a majority of the world’s military might. There is huge responsibility here and no room for hubris. For the world’s sake as well as our own we must get this right.

And yet – extraordinarily - the transatlantic community hasn't fully returned to work after its summer holiday. One of the most striking things to me in Trump's Warsaw speech is how little substance it contains and how few practical proposals it offers, compared to the norm for set-piece Cold War speeches or to Churchill's Iron Curtain speech.

So I believe that, as we work our way painfully towards a new globalisation 2.0 consensus and a new relationship with social media companies at home, we must in parallel take more seriously the role of concepts of right and wrong in international relations.

The rest of the world does not respect us or our values when we do not live up to the high standards we set ourselves. They will not model themselves on us unless increasingly we do unto them as we would have done unto us, including being kept to high standards. As the world shrinks and ethics become a more primary driver in international affairs, the transatlantic community – given its weight internationally and the values it has set itself - must either increasingly be a steward of the world's interests or erode from within.

We must recognise that foreign policy begins at home. In an increasingly transparent world, if we cannot treat our own citizens and guests right, our values won't command much respect abroad. More ambitiously, if the transatlantic community is to hold together, we must also care about how our Allies treat their citizens and guests, at least on some core measures like democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. So we need not only more capacity for our diplomacy but more ethics in our diplomacy, including in our transatlantic diplomacy. We have to be even readier to disagree about right and wrong conduct. Diplomatically, of course.

Despite, or because of, President Trump, that diplomacy must include deep transatlantic attention to the preservation of truth, without which democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law eventually become impossible. Truth really is fundamental. And here's a positive example of civil society already weighing on state practice, providing healthy fact checking on politicians and, for example, the Russian government.

We must walk our talk. So we need substance in our transatlantic speeches once again. We need, if I may put it this way, a 'radical centre' approach to our diplomacy that pushes substantive, practical win-win solutions that those outside the transatlantic community can respect. One area that would be particularly powerful is nuclear arms control where the rest of the world has grown deeply frustrated with waiting. Tough mindedness is perfectly in order but President Trump's hostility to the Iran nuclear deal and indifference to the US-Russia nuclear balance cannot be acceptable.

Easy to say all this; far harder to do. But I am optimistic. Transatlantic divergence is not inevitable. There is great momentum in transatlantic institutions and great resilience in US and European politics and judicial systems. Since 1945, the transatlantic community has been sailing in a widening bay, circumscribed by the headlands of on the one hand the Western post-war settlement and on the other the discipline of the Cold War and then the comforting liberal international order. The waters have sometimes been choppy but those headlands had a dampening effect. Now we are heading out into the open sea where the weather is bigger and altogether less predictable.

But Europe and the United States are still very much in the same boat. I have pointed already to the huge scale of mutual investment in each other's prosperity and security. And if it is different, essentially ethical, convictions that are pulling us apart, we must also recognise that we still hold our concepts of right and wrong conduct at both state and civil society level far more in common with each other than with Russia, Asia or elsewhere.

In a moment of deep international darkness, President Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union address insisted that people in all nations shared Americans' entitlement to four freedoms: the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom to worship God each in his own way, the freedom from want and the freedom from fear.⁸ Large majorities in both the United States and Europe still believe in these moral entitlements for themselves and for the world. Large majorities still believe in the NATO preamble's principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. So there is plenty to build on but a great deal to defend.

Footnotes

1. Professor Mervyn Frost, *"Ethics, Foul Play and Asymmetric Warfare"*. 2013 Elson Ethics Lecture. https://www.stgeorghouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2013_Elson_Ethics_Lecture_Frost.pdf
2. The North Atlantic Treaty, 4 April 1949. http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/stock_publications/20120822_nato_treaty_en_light_2009.pdf
3. Speech by Winston Churchill, 5 March 1946 at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri,. <https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace>
4. Speech by Donald Trump, 6 July 2017 at Warsaw, Poland. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/06/remarks-president-trump-people-poland-july-6-2017>
5. Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends Survey. <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/survey/all/>
6. Alex Burton, BBC Online News Magazine 17 July 2016: *The Link between Brexit and the Death Penalty*: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/sshp/politics/news/BirkbeckDepartmentofPoliticsBrexitBriefing.pdf>. See also: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/sshp/politics/news/BirkbeckDepartmentofPoliticsBrexitBriefing.pdf>
7. Matthew MacWilliams, Politico Magazine 17 January 2016, *The One Weird Trait That Predicts Whether You're a Trump Supporter. And it's not Gender, Age, Income, Race or Religion.*, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-2016-authoritarian-213533>
8. Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union by Franklin Roosevelt, 6 January 1941: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16092>