

Transatlantic Differences:  
Can International Relations Theories Explain the Evolution of European-American  
Relations Since the Cold War?

Edited by Michel Girard and Helen V. Milner  
23 juillet 2005

Since the end of the Cold War, transatlantic relations have undergone a significant, qualitative change. This change, which could be purely perceptual, appears as a multiplication and/or intensification of the differences between Europe and the US. All areas of their relations seem increasingly fraught with growing divergences between the two sides of the Atlantic. The central hypothesis of this volume is that this evolution, which could be caused by changes in international relations and/or by domestic factors, should be understandable from the vantage point of various theories of international relations. These theories should be able to help one better comprehend the roots and implications of these transatlantic disagreements.

Without attempting to exhaustively review all the elements of disaccord between the US and Europe or all of the theories of international relations that could apply to them, the volume brings together different contributions which seek to evaluate if various theories of international politics can help one understand the sources of the profound differences that seem to shape transatlantic relations. It focuses on several specific issue areas and several theoretical traditions to do so.

The existence of many differences between the US and Europe certainly does not represent a unique occurrence; earlier periods during the Cold War were often fraught with disagreements within the western Alliance. But the character of the disputes today often seems much more bitter and intractable, in part because actors on each side seem at times to deliberately construct such divergent perceptions for political purposes. Even given the problematic nature of European unity, the countries and publics within the EU today tend to converge more and more with one another and to diverge increasingly from the US on issue after issue. Indeed, part of European identity is almost defined by opposition to the US.

Paradoxically, this multiplication of differences is occurring at the same moment that transatlantic economic interdependence is growing and cultural similarities remain strong. Such divergent trends within this relationship raise profound questions about the connections between political and economic factors in current international relations.

Theoretically, the differences between the US and Europe may be most easily explained by a realist or neo-realist approach. Changes in the global distribution of capabilities since the end of the Cold War are an obvious source of one explanation of the divergences between the two sides of the Atlantic. But the complex character of transatlantic relations, which embody very significant amounts of cooperative activity, suggests that a neo-liberal perspective may contain very important explanations for the differences and commonalities that mark the relationship. In addition, it is important to note that many of the differences that have arisen are not just given by domestic or international structural factors; they are constructed by actors for specific purposes—often domestic. This suggests that constructivist approaches to world politics may also be useful in engaging the sources of transatlantic disagreements. All of this is to say that the complex nature of the relationship between the US and Europe makes it likely that a wide variety of theoretical traditions can usefully contribute to a better understanding of those differences. They may also alert us to the possibilities for resolving, or at least living with, these differences.

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