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The Essence of the EU's Strategic Partnerships: Relations Between the EU and the USA After The Implementation of the Lisbon Treaty

Daniela Bochvarska

Abstract

In order to increase its strategic and autonomous capacity, the European Union needs greater visibility in its global partnerships. After the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, this issue became highly relevant, particularly in assessing the impact of the Treaty—namely, whether it contributed to the establishment of the EU as an actor both at the regional and global level. One of its main contributions was the attempt to create a framework that would strengthen the coherence and effectiveness of the EU in the field of foreign and, above all, security policy.

The wars taking place today on a global scale pose a real challenge to the European foreign and security policy, putting pressure on EU institutions as well as member states for proactive engagement and wise collective decision-making. In order to deliver more in this regard, the EU's partnerships with its strategic partners must be prioritized, because only through greater engagement with its partners can the EU remain focused on its interests.

The emphasis in this paper is placed on analyzing the novelties introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in redefining the EU as a global actor, and whether it enabled—or failed to enable—the achievement of political cohesion and greater authenticity of the EU in foreign policy and security cooperation with its strategic partners, above all with the United States.

Keywords: strategic partnerships, treaty, policy, global power.

Introduction

The profile and behavior of the European Union on the international stage cannot be viewed separately from global processes and trends. The development and strengthening of its policies—above all, the strengthening of the European Foreign and Security Policy—creates challenges in its relations with the EU's strategic partners, especially with the United States of America. Namely, the USA represents an external factor that, depending on the context, often influences developments within the EU more than a whole range of internal actors. The influence of the USA is constant, regardless of serious geopolitical repositionings. As the EU strives to develop its own recognizable foreign policy, the USA, in turn, continually makes efforts to position itself closer to events and decision-making processes within the Union. For the United States, the EU has always represented a regional power seeking to transform and advance its position on the global stage. At the same time, the EU aspires to possess legal mechanisms that will provide a framework for coordinated and effective cooperation with strategic partners, regardless of the political orientations and individual positions of its member states.

Cooperation Between the European Union and The USA Before the Lisbon Treaty

The ambitious agenda and framework for cooperation between the EU and the USA were established as a result of continuous and intensive dialogue between the two, ranging from technical to expert levels. The emergence of the European Movement in 1948 aimed to support the process of European integration toward a federal Europe (Sotiroski, 2011). The countries that later formed the EU aspired to create their own foreign policy as well as their own defense and military institutions. Attempts to create an independent foreign policy and a European Defense Community were the subject of numerous debates: on the one hand, there was a clear desire among member states to strengthen integration (through the possible creation of a European foreign policy, including the defense element); on the other hand, the realization of these essential goals placed special emphasis on the United States and its military power, led by NATO.

Namely, the USA supported European integration for numerous reasons, including those of a historical nature. There were opinions that integration could reduce the risk of future conflict among the states that belonged to the EC, in which case the USA might once again be required to resolve European problems. Accordingly,

the USA expressed support for the creation of a European defense and security complex within the framework of existing Euro-Atlantic structures. Of course, in practice, the USA imposed a fundamental precondition: the development of such European initiatives must not run counter to the strategic national interests of the United States (Hunter, 2002). Diplomatic relations between the EU and the USA were established in 1953, and the USA was the first country outside the EU to officially recognize the European Coal and Steel Community. The agreement that the United States signed with the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) in 1959 represents the first formal act of cooperation between the two entities. However, it was not until 1990 that cooperation between the EU and the USA was formalized through the Transatlantic Declaration. (European Parliament Declaration, 1990). This Declaration laid the foundation for the so-called “structured political dialogue,” within which issues related to foreign affairs were addressed.

Five years later, the New Transatlantic Agenda created a revised framework for relations, including a plan for joint action in four key areas: promoting peace, stability, democracy, and development; responding to global challenges; participating in liberalization, expansion, and the improvement of communication; ensuring a long-term commitment to the partnership. This format of communication between the two politically distinct sides contributed to better basic coordination of the foreign policy activities of the USA and the EU. Within this established framework, issues of defense and security, as well as the status of NATO in Europe, represented matters of strategic importance for the United States. (European Parliament Declaration, 1995).

Regarding cooperation in the field of security, the concept of security in 21st-century Europe raises the question of the role of the USA in this domain. The transatlantic debate on the relationship between NATO and European “defense,” which has lasted for decades, has gone through various phases.

The end of the Cold War brought new decisions among EU member states regarding institutional arrangements in foreign and security policy, along with significant changes in the USA’s perspective. Namely, the USA recognized that European efforts to enhance defense represented an additional incentive for Western European states to continue maintaining military budgets, which also benefited NATO (Hunter, 2002). Although security matters during the entire Cold War period were exclusively managed by the USA, after 1991, certain forms of joint security management began to emerge, leading up to attempts within the EU to strengthen autonomy in decision-making.

The Maastricht Treaty established the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The CFSP advocates for the shared values and fundamental interests of the member states, for greater independence of the Union, for the strengthening of its security and the security of its members in every regard, for the preservation of peace, as well as for the promotion of international cooperation (Bindi & Angelescu, 2012). Thus, Article J.4.4 of the Treaty stipulates that European policies should be compatible with the common security and defense policy established within NATO. (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1992) In line with this, the question arose as to whether such initiatives might lead to rivalry between the EU and the USA, given that the Union was attempting to build an institutional structure similar to that of NATO.

A response to this potential dualism between the EU and NATO was provided through the so-called Grand Agreement on mutual institutional relations with the EU, achieved by the NATO foreign and defense ministers in Berlin in 1996. The most important aspect of this Agreement was the recognition by NATO that, in principle, missions led by the Union (at that time the WEU) were possible, from the planning stages to the execution of specific operations. Furthermore, NATO committed to previously identifying a portion of its capabilities and command structures that could be made available to the EU in such cases, with the use of these capacities to be continuously monitored by NATO (Hunter, 2002).

At the NATO Summit in Washington in 1999, a new NATO Strategic Concept (Washington Summit Communiqué) was adopted, emphasizing that European security and defense would continue to develop within the framework of NATO. (NATO Press, 1999) This reaffirmed the Alliance's well-known official position supporting European defense and security policy as a distinct pillar—but one that remains within NATO. The Washington Summit is also significant due to further progress in the agreement on bilateral relations between NATO and the European Union, better known as the "Berlin Plus" agreement. In the communiqué from this summit in April 1999, the logistical and operational prerequisites for EU-led missions using NATO capabilities were further specified. One of the outcomes of the conclusions from the Berlin Plus Agreement was the facilitation of the first EU peacekeeping operation—Operation Concordia in the Republic of Macedonia (March 15 – December 15, 2003) (Reka, 2016). The mission aimed to establish a stable security environment for the successful implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Nevertheless, the Berlin Plus Agreement proved to be an insufficient framework for cooperation between the two sides, as it was limited only to low-level military

cooperation and did not provide for broader collaboration, particularly in the process of post-conflict recovery and reconstruction (Cvrtila & Tatalovich, 2008).

Apart from defense, other aspects of cooperation between the USA and the EU were included in the New Transatlantic Agenda of 1995. As a result of the commitments made under this Agenda, an agreement was reached in London in 1998 to strengthen cooperation in the field of trade, which led to the creation of the Transatlantic Economic Partnership.

The Impact of The Lisbon Treaty on EU–US Relations

Although in terms of interests and economic ties, the EU and the USA are closer to each other than to any other international actor, at the same time, EU–US relations—diplomatic, economic, social, and security—remain among the most complex relationships.

Transatlantic relations between the EU and the USA have, over time, become more measurable than they were before the Cold War. EU policies have shown far greater convergence with those of the USA than, for example, with China. The EU's policy of promoting civilian power as opposed to military force reflected its global positioning (Bindi, 2010). However, in order to be effective, the partnership between the USA and the EU needed to focus on identifying shared strategic challenges and concrete priorities. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty (December 2009) was intended to serve as a legal framework for a more effective partnership between the EU and the USA, and for the realization of a common goal—to move into a new phase of European integration with transformed transatlantic relations that can promote security and prosperity for citizens.

With regard to the CFSP, the innovations introduced by the Lisbon Treaty focused on strengthening majority decision-making and enhancing cooperation among member states (Bindi, 2010). The Treaty included provisions for mutual assistance and solidarity and according to Article 13a-enabled the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), headed by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who also serves as Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) (Official Journal of the European Union, 2007). An integral part of the Lisbon Treaty, directly related to relations with the USA, were the provisions concerning the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). The High Representative did not hold full authority in this domain, and decisions regarding certain special arrangements remained under the control of the individual

member states. The Treaty expanded the scope of the so-called Petersberg tasks, which primarily concerned crisis management, allowing the EU to employ both civilian and military means to carry them out (Bindi, 2010). According to Article 42 of the Lisbon Treaty: “The obligations and commitments in the field of the Common Security and Defense Policy shall be consistent with commitments under NATO, which, for those states that are members of the organization, remains the foundation of their collective defense and the forum for its implementation.” Based on this, NATO’s role as the cornerstone of European collective defense is not questioned. In fact, for the first time, NATO’s role in European security is explicitly mentioned in this Treaty. It is now up to the leaders of the member states and the European institutions to utilize the tools introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in order to develop an authentic CFSP (Bindi, 2010).

The development of bilateral relations between the USA and the EU directly depended on reaching a consensus between the United States on one side and the European Union on the other, regarding the nature of the challenges faced by both parties. According to Brzezinski, such a dialogue requires two things: that the United States genuinely—rather than merely rhetorically—respects Europe, and at the same time, that Europe acknowledges that its global obligations and responsibilities do not lie solely in the socio-economic sphere (Brzezinski, 2006). Mechanisms for other types of cooperation between the EU and the USA—particularly in the field of energy—were not explicitly included in the Lisbon Treaty. Both sides were expected to focus on how to make the broad scope of their relations more effective, and the development of a coordinated energy policy was deemed essential. The necessity of this step became evident given that European leaders had recognized the extent of the EU’s dependence on energy imports, primarily from Russia and the Middle East (Bindi, 2010). Considering the fact that the energy sector will continue to be a dominant factor in shaping the global future, Europe and the United States share a strong interest in cooperation and mutual support in this area.

The Strategic Partnership Between the EU and the USA in the Field of Defense and Security

One of the conclusions of the special summit of the European Council held on September 16, 2010, emphasized that, in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty and in line with the European Security Strategy, the EU and its member states must act more strategically in order to project the true value of the EU on the international

stage. It was also emphasized that this requires not only a clear identification of European strategic goals and interests but also a full commitment to their realization. In this context, it was noted that the EU's strategic partnerships with key global actors represent a valuable tool for achieving European objectives and interests (European Council Conclusions, 2010).

The EU's key partnerships are, in fact, those with NATO, the USA, and the United Kingdom, for several reasons: the powerful membership within the Alliance, the specific global military power of the USA, and the importance of the UK for European security, as well as its military and industrial ties with EU member states. The foundation of all these strategic partnerships is the security of the EU, which is closely linked to European strategic autonomy (Major & Marrone, 2022).

In May 2011, the USA and the EU signed a Framework Agreement that provided a legal basis for American civilian participation in EU crisis management missions and enhanced coordination during crisis situations. Additionally, this Agreement enabled U.S. citizens to take part in EU CSDP (Common Security and Defense Policy) operations.

In 2016, the EU High Representative adopted the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, which aimed to strengthen stability and security and contribute to addressing risks and threats to security both in the European neighborhood and beyond. It represented a broader security concept encompassing both external and internal threats (Gjuroski, 2021).

During their discussions on EU security and defence cooperation, the foreign and defence ministers at the 2018 Foreign Affairs Council adopted conclusions on security and defence. It also adopted a decision setting out governance rules for projects undertaken under PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), and approved the overarching high-level part of the military requirements for military mobility within and beyond the EU (Foreign Affairs Council, 2018). In 2021, Washington joined the PESCO project on military mobility through a range of political and legal commitments concerning the CSDP. That same year, in March, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and EU High Representative Josep Borrell issued a joint statement establishing the U.S.–EU Dialogue on Security and Defense (EU External Action, 2021).

The USA has always been considered the most important strategic partner of the EU. Transatlantic cooperation, based on shared goals, represents an effort to be an effective part of the solution to numerous regional and global challenges—primarily

in Iran, Libya, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, and the Balkans. However, the question arises whether the Lisbon Treaty provides the EU with a genuine framework to assert itself as a relevant strategic security partner. Namely, after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, the commitments to unanimity and consensus among EU member states proved difficult to implement—even in situations where the Treaty technically provided a legal basis for majority decision-making. Disagreements emerged regarding policies, as well as about the priorities that had to be defined with respect to certain goals. This issue revealed the EU's incoherence and inconsistency. Disagreements were particularly pronounced regarding positions on the wars in Iraq (2003), Georgia (2008), and the intervention in Libya (2011) (Bindi & Angelescu, 2012).

In fact, the division among EU member states began even before the Lisbon Treaty, specifically regarding the policy toward Iraq in 2003. This raised the question of whether the EU's relations with the USA concerning Iraq represented a precedent. In matters of defense, the EU was not particularly effective and lacked a realistic mechanism to overcome internal disagreements. As a result, in the absence of consensus among member states, there was no unified political direction (Bindi, 2010).

Even after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, the EU's continued dependence on the military capacity of the United States remained evident. This was particularly apparent in the case of NATO's intervention in Libya, which reignited debate over whether the 2011 U.S.-led intervention in Libya constituted a success and whether it was strategically well-directed.

Regarding the issue of Iran and nuclear weapons, the USA and the EU adopted a joint approach aimed at exerting pressure on the regime. With the support of China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, the USA and the EU initiated negotiations with Iran in November 2013, and by July 2015, an agreement on Iran's nuclear program, called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was reached. (NDTV World News, 2025) Although this agreement demonstrated the EU's role in facilitating peace negotiations, the dominant military power of the USA remained evident even after the deal. A persistent dilemma for the United States remained the proper assessment of its security policy course toward Iran. The dilemma revolved around whether the USA should resort to unilateral sanctions against Iran—a concern that persists to this day, as illustrated by the recent unilateral attack on three of Iran's nuclear facilities, carried out as part of U.S. measures to counter Iran's nuclear weapons development.

As for Ukraine, although it had received support in its transformation into a democratic society and a free-market economy, the developments following the Russian aggression on February 24, 2022, raised the question of whether the EU and the USA, as strategic partners, are taking all necessary steps to stabilize the situation in the country. This particularly concerns the question of whether the EU would be capable—both from a security and defense perspective—of independently responding in the event of the war spilling over into its own borders.

In general, the EU continues to demonstrate deep dependence on U.S. capabilities in the field of defense and security. The security policy of EU member states remains nationally oriented and is primarily focused only on the most significant security issues. Most member states show little interest in advancing this field—some due to unwillingness to engage militarily beyond their national borders, and others due to financial constraints (Bindi, 2010).

On the other hand, the USA has consistently harbored concerns that the efforts of its strategic partner, the EU, may undermine NATO, as well as skepticism over the EU's limited commitments to investing in military equipment. As a result, Washington views the EU's defense-related efforts with suspicion, particularly in the area of the defense industry, where there is clear competition between American and European industries (Major & Marrone, 2022).

Conclusion

The new institutional structure introduced by the Lisbon Treaty was intended to enable the European Commission and the Council to act in a coordinated and effective manner, independent of the individual positions of member states. However, the Treaty failed to strengthen the EU's autonomy in decision-making. Although it created a legal framework for enhancing cooperation with strategic partners, significant obstacles remain, stemming from institutional complexities and the lack of unity within the EU. The Treaty did little not only in addressing the EU's institutional complexity but also in shaping the nature of the EU's external actions. It became evident that policymaking within the EU still depends on the consent of its member states, which retain their sovereignty, and that matters of national security continue to fall under the responsibility of each individual member state (Bindi, 2010).

Despite its commitment to building authentic cooperation with strategic partners—above all with the United States—the EU still remains merely a potential

“superpower for civilian crisis management,” capable of filling security gaps only in cases where the USA and NATO are unable to act (Smith, 2011).

Regarding the partnership between the EU and the USA, the United States continues to rely on strong bilateral relations with individual EU member states. There remains a prevailing perception in the U.S. that the EU is overly complex and burdened by internal procedural struggles. Geopolitical developments—particularly in the Middle East and Ukraine—demonstrate that a stronger and more unified role of the EU on the global stage is still deeply dependent on the support of international allies, and that the EU cannot independently assert its influence as a stabilizing actor. Major moves and decisions in this area continue to be led by the United States. Nevertheless, the USA is attempting to support progress in the EU’s efforts to strengthen its own capabilities in order to fully engage in the shared strategic partnership and to contribute to transatlantic and global security.

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