

# LECTURE

DELIVERED JUNE 5, 2018

No. 1292 | OCTOBER 2, 2018

## The Transatlantic Bond: Preserving the West

A. Wess Mitchell

**Abstract:** *Today, the United States and Europe face challenges that few would have thought possible in 1989. President Trump's focus is on rebuilding U.S. defenses by shoring up the depleted armed forces and recapitalizing the nuclear deterrent; on rebuilding the economy by making American businesses more competitive, stimulating investment, restoring manufacturing, and fighting to give American companies a fair playing field in international markets. But preserving the West cannot happen without Europe. America and Europe together are the West and the heart of the free world. The U.S. is playing catch up, after years of not seeing Europe as a strategic theater. The United States is committed to working with Europe to narrow the gaps and arrive at a unified position against common challenges.*

Good morning everyone, it's really great to see a lot of friends in the audience, and I appreciate you all being here today. I'd like to thank The Heritage Foundation for inviting me to speak today. I have followed Heritage's research for many years and appreciate the work that you do, bringing original ideas to the debate here in Washington. I especially want to acknowledge James Carafano, Luke Coffey, Nile Gardiner, and the rest of the team here dealing with Europe and Russia—keep up the good work.

A hundred years ago this month, American soldiers were fresh off the boat in France, beginning to engage in their first battles of World War I. They had just won their first victory, at the French village of Cantigny, and were in the opening phases of the Battle of Belleau Wood, where U.S. Marines stopped a German offensive and saved Paris. In the decades that followed, America would fight again to save Europe. In three world wars—two hot and one cold—we helped

### KEY POINTS

- American strength is the foundation on which the world as we know it rests. If that foundation is vulnerable, all that we believe in is vulnerable as well.
- Preserving the West cannot happen without Europe. America and Europe together are the West and the heart of the free world.
- American efforts are incomplete, and can even be counterproductive, if they are not accompanied by a willingness on the part of European allies to defend their own continent.
- Taking geopolitical competition seriously is not just about burden sharing. It's also about taking responsibility for problems that, if not addressed, will put us all—Europe and America—at a major disadvantage down the road.
- The stronger we are today, the less likely assertive rivals are to choose the path of war tomorrow.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1292>

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

rally the democratic West to prevent brutal opponents from dominating Europe and the western rimlands of Eurasia.

After World War II, our grandparents' generation laid the foundation for future Western security and prosperity through Atlantic cooperation. Unlike in 1919, in 1945 we did not leave Europe. We created permanent bases for U.S. troops, we formed the Marshall Plan, we created NATO, and we supported the establishment of the European Union.

The end of Communism in 1989 brought vindication of everything we had fought for in the 20th century: representative democracy, free markets, rule of law, the Western way of life—in short, the cause of freedom. Next year we will mark three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall. It will be a time to celebrate and remind ourselves and our allies what we were striving for and how far we have come. The world that our grandparents and parents built is a place where we enjoy a degree of freedom and prosperity that was unimaginable to past generations. Together with our allies, the United States ushered in one of the longest periods without a Great Power war in recorded history.

### **Preserving the Community of Nations**

But as we contemplate the past we should also look to the future. Today, the United States and Europe face challenges that few of us would have thought possible from the vantage point of 1989. In his speech in Warsaw last summer, President Trump stated upfront what the goal of this Administration and its foreign policy will be in Europe: To preserve the West. As he said then, “There is nothing like this community of nations. The world has never known anything like it. We must have the desire and the courage to preserve it in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it.”

The starting point of the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy is that we are heading into an era of sustained big-power competition for which the West, collectively, is underprepared. Adapting ourselves to this new era is the central task of U.S. foreign policy today.

That task begins at home by making America more prosperous and secure. The President's focus is on rebuilding our defenses by shoring up our depleted armed forces and recapitalizing our nuclear deterrent; on rebuilding our economy by making American businesses more competitive,

stimulating investment, restoring manufacturing, and fighting to give American companies a fair playing field in international markets. Since January of last year, nearly 3 million American jobs have been created, the unemployment rate has dropped to its lowest numbers in nearly two decades, and job openings have reached 6.6 million—the highest level ever recorded.

A strong America is good for Americans. But it is also good for our allies and for the world. American strength is the foundation upon which the world as we know it rests. If that foundation is vulnerable, all that we believe in, all that we ground our strength upon—democracy, markets, deterrence—all of that is vulnerable as well.

---

## **A strong America is good for Americans. But it is also good for our allies and for the world.**

---

### **The Europe Strategy**

Preserving the West cannot happen without Europe. America and Europe together are the West and the heart of the free world. Europe is the central pillar of our international alliance system and by far our largest economic relationship, with more than \$5.5 trillion in annual commerce. Germany today hosts 35,000 U.S. troops; Italy, 12,000; the U.K. maintains a special relationship with the United States; and France is our oldest ally. There is no major foreign policy challenge in which America and Europe can hope to succeed without each other. A strong and free Europe is of vital importance to the United States.

Our Europe strategy begins by acknowledging that Europe is once again a theater of serious strategic competition and needs to be treated as such in how we think about our role and mobilize our allies. After 1989, Europe became in many people's minds a post-geopolitical, post-historical place. History was over, we had defeated the Soviet Union, and Western institutions were expanding. After the 9/11 attacks, we shifted the bulk of America's foreign-policy focus and resources to counterterrorism and the Middle East. After 2009, we “pivoted” to Asia, withdrew the last U.S. tanks from Europe and prepared for a “Pacific century.”

Fast forward to today. Coming into 2017, this Administration inherited: a failed Russia reset, a conflict in Ukraine that had already cost 10,000 lives, a failed red line in Syria, the largest migration wave in recent European history, an EU that was navigating the first formal exit of a member state in its history, and an insolvent Iran agreement that had helped enable a scale of Iranian expansion, from the Persian Gulf to the borders of Israel, not seen since antiquity.

Today Europe is indisputably a place of serious geopolitical competition.

The starting point of the Europe strategy is to say: We have to take this reality seriously. That means taking geopolitical competition seriously. America has to take it seriously. And Europe has to take it seriously.

First, we have to anchor the Western alliance. This is both a material and political undertaking. The material part starts with physical defense. Strong defense is cost effective. The stronger we are today, the less likely assertive rivals are to choose the path of war tomorrow.

America has set the example in accepting our share of the responsibilities for American security by being crystal clear on our commitment to NATO and Article V, reaffirming NATO as the bedrock of Western defense, and putting real resources into the defense of Europe. Since January 2017, we have requested more than \$11 billion in new funds for the European Deterrence Initiative.

In all of these areas, America is accepting and honoring its responsibilities to Europe. But our efforts are incomplete, and can even be counterproductive, if they are not accompanied by a willingness on the part of European allies to defend their own continent. Europeans cannot expect Americans to care more about their security than they do. We need allies to fulfill their pledges, made at Wales and reiterated at the Brussels Leaders Meeting; to commit to submit plans for spending 2 percent of GDP on defense and 20 percent of budgets on major equipment by 2024; get NATO more squarely into the counterterrorism business and increase CT cooperation between NATO and the EU; accept a greater burden for operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Western Balkans, and North Africa; and keep the European Union's pledge to strengthen military mobility.

We are making progress. Since January of last year, every member of NATO, save one (I will not say which), has increased defense spending. In that time, the

number of allies that will spend 2 percent on defense by 2024 has tripled (from five to 16). The number allocating at least 20 percent to major equipment has almost doubled (from 14 to 24). And the Alliance as a whole has increased defense spending by 5.1 percent (\$14.4 billion)—the largest commitment to defense in a generation. In the past year, 26 allies have increased troop contributions to NATO Missions, and we have secured \$30 billion for the stabilization of Iraq and nearly \$6 billion for Afghanistan.

---

## Europeans cannot expect Americans to care more about their security than they do.

---

But taking geopolitical competition seriously is not just about burden sharing. It's also about taking responsibility for problems that, if not addressed, will put us all—Europe and America—at a major disadvantage down the road.

### Finding a Common Way Forward

One of those problems is Iran. This is a country whose leaders shout “Death to America” and “Death to Israel.” We should take those statements seriously. Continuing to do business with an Iran that is building ballistic missiles is not an option. As Secretary of State Pompeo said recently at a Heritage podium: “No more cost-free expansion.”

Another example is Nord Stream 2. This pipeline will make the eastern flank of NATO more vulnerable to Russian pressure, reduce Ukraine's security as a transit nation and render it more susceptible to Russian aggression, and make Europe more dependent on Russian monopolies. Many European states, as well as the European Union, share our concern and are working with us to stop this project.

Taking strong U.S. positions on issues like Iran and Nord Stream 2 causes disagreements with some of our allies. But the long-term costs of neglecting these things outweigh whatever short-term benefits we get from the appearance of political unity today. In taking strong positions, we are *not* targeting our allies: We are countering those like Russia, Iran, and China that are putting our collective security at risk. We urge our allies to take these and other threats to Western security more seriously than they have in the past. And we are ready to work together to find a common way forward.

---

## **A Realm of Ordered Liberty**

Preserving the Western alliance is not just a material undertaking. As Churchill said, “arms—instrumentalities—are not sufficient; we must add to them the power of ideas.”

That begins with being clear about who we are. We are not being threatened as individual polities but as a political civilization: the West. What is the West? It’s a realm of ordered liberty, guarded by strong states bound together in leagues and alliances. The West is separation of powers to protect the liberty of individuals and communities, and alliances to protect the nations that preserve those liberties. Those are liberties we hold dear. Nowhere are they more clearly spelled out than in the Washington Treaty, the founding document of NATO, which states in its preamble: “The Parties to the Treaty... are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.”

---

## **Continuing to do business with an Iran that is building ballistic missiles is not an option.**

---

The United States stands for the cause of freedom: It’s who we are. America was founded on a constitutional creed that advances liberty not only for its intrinsic merits but as something that is intimately tied up in our security as a nation.

Today that cause is being threatened in a way we never could have foreseen after the end of Communism in 1989. Russia and China represent a coherent model—political stability founded on authoritarianism and brute force, harnessed to certain aspects of market competition—that threatens the basic principles of our functioning. In different ways, Russia and China want to break the West. Moscow wants to splinter and shatter it. Beijing, to supplant it.

To counter that, we have to be clear that we stand for strong democracy as the foundation of our security and prosperity. We must view the West as a community of democratic nations united by history, culture, and shared sacrifice. Some of its members are old democracies, some are not. Some are members of the EU or NATO, some are not. Some are weak, some strong, some are geographically insulated, some are

exposed. Ukraine and Georgia are part of the West, both by virtue of history and the choices of their people. Britain will still be very much at the heart of the West after Brexit.

The point is that there has to be a concept that binds us that is not just an institution: Institutions are means, not an end. It is this broader sense of community that has to be mobilized and strengthened for the era of geopolitical competition.

## **Countering Russian and Chinese Aggression**

One place where strategic competition is intensifying dramatically is on Europe’s Eastern frontier. The space from the Caucasus through the Balkans and up through the Danubian Basin is a region of renewed geopolitical focus for Russia and a new playground for China.

Our priority has been, first and foremost, to check Russian aggression. In recent years, Moscow has forcefully redrawn borders in Eastern Europe. It has intimidated and attacked neighbors, launched disinformation and cyber campaigns against the West, and engaged in military buildups on its western frontiers.

As Secretary Pompeo said recently, Russia’s “aggressive behavior was enabled by years of soft policy toward that aggression. That is now over.” We seek better relations with Moscow, but will not pay for these by sacrificing our principles or our friends. We are clear-eyed about the challenges we face and will raise the costs of Russian aggression until President Putin chooses a different path. Since January 2017, we have brought sanctions against 205 Russian individuals and entities. In support of our close ally the U.K., we rallied allies to conduct the largest expulsion of Russian diplomats and intelligence officers since the Cold War. Together with the U.S. European Command, the State Department is leading the U.S. government in systematically strengthening our tools to counter Russian cyber threats, active measures, and disinformation.

Second, in parallel, we are building up the means of self-defense for those states most directly threatened by Russia militarily: Ukraine and Georgia. We have lifted the previous Administration’s restrictions on lethal aid and helped both states acquire much-needed defensive weapons. We have also worked to keep Ukraine on the path of reform, including most recently by working to ensure creation of

an anti-corruption court that meets IMF standards. And we are working to strengthen U.S. political, military, and economic engagement with Georgia.

---

## **We seek better relations with Moscow, but will not pay for these by sacrificing our principles or our friends.**

---

Third, we are working with allies to build better long-term bulwarks against Chinese and Russian influence. Across the eastern frontier, that means strengthening frontline states' political systems, diversifying their energy grids, improving the resilience and readiness of their militaries, and encouraging their efforts at regional coordination.

In North Central Europe, we are working with Poland and the Baltic states to build a stronger military deterrent. In Central Europe, we are strengthening efforts to combat corruption, counter Russian disinformation, and ensure a vibrant civil society. In the Balkans, we are increasing aid against Russian influence and coordinating closely with the EU to bring greater stability. As I speak, our team is working in the field with the EU and key European partners on Serbia/Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Greece–Macedonia name issue. In the Balkans, as elsewhere in the world, the scale and depth of U.S.–European cooperation demonstrates the ways in which the transatlantic relationship helps us address very real, common problems.

Throughout this whole region, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, we are making steady headway in supporting diversified energy infrastructure through projects like the floating terminal for liquefied natural gas on Croatia's Krk Island and the BRUA natural gas pipeline (through Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Austria) to ensure that our friends have options other than Russian gas.

And fourth, we are working to engage with vulnerable states on the eastern frontier of NATO and the EU that face growing pressure from Russia and enticements from China. As outlined in the National Security Strategy, our main task here is to compete for positive influence. Unlike in the past, countries on the frontier have options: There's Russian pressure, but also Chinese money. China's so-called 16+1 and Belt and Road Initiatives are geopolitical projects aimed at cultivating influence and weakening

Western solidarity. We have to strengthen our ties with, and provide viable alternatives to, vulnerable states to keep them moored in the West, or expect to lose them.

Criticism alone is not a strategy. Criticism bereft of engagement is a recipe for estrangement. Engagement is not just diplomatic; it is also about winning hearts and minds of publics for whom the memory of 1989 and NATO enlargement is increasingly distant. Engagement does not mean indifference to our own principles of liberty. We will always be clear about what we stand for, and the values we share, while using the tools of diplomacy to close the gaps within the West that Russia and China so eagerly exploit.

## **The Southern Frontier**

Finally, we have to stabilize Europe's southern frontier—the Mediterranean Basin and its littorals.

---

## **We are playing catch up, after years of not seeing Europe as a strategic theater.**

---

We have been slower, I think, to view the south through a strategic lens, in part because the problems in Europe's east are more easily recognizable to us as being strategic in nature, being mainly military and familiar as a Cold War problem set. And in part because the main challenges in the south are things we associate with domestic politics. Counterterrorism for Europe has until recently largely been seen as a policing matter, and irregular migration has been a primarily political and humanitarian concern. But as recent events have shown, developments to Europe's south can also dramatically affect the strategic stability of Europe. The magnitude of recent migration flows sent ripples of political instability into the very heart of Europe: Brexit, the German elections, the bottleneck of migrants and foreign terrorist fighters in the Balkans, the growth of populism—none of these can be fully understood without taking into account the migration crisis.

The CT challenge is not simply a policing problem: ISIS and its successor groups have a kind of “strategic lift” capacity: They can hit large cities, including in the U.S. homeland, from European airports. The spread of Iranian influence from the Levant and Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf will profoundly shape Western security over the next several years,

and Europe is likely to feel its effects more directly before the United States does. Russia too is active in the Mediterranean—not only with its traditional naval presence, but as a life support for the Assad regime that has prolonged the migration challenge from Syria and enabled growing Iranian influence in the region.

For all of these reasons, we have to take Europe's southern frontier more seriously. We have worked to rally Europe to increase contributions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan; to turn NATO's attention more fully to a southern vector (which will be a major focus of the upcoming NATO Summit); and to increase allied efforts at strengthening borders and coordinating our dollars and euros for stability in North Africa and the Middle East.

On migration, we are working to be a catalyst to homegrown efforts of frontier states most directly impacted by the problem and who have done the most in developing local solutions. We are working with Mediterranean nations like Italy to build a strategic initiative on migration that encompasses all of the dimensions of this challenge: from onshore North Africa/Middle East stability and better coordination of NATO, EU, and member state aid to maritime security and border security.

---

## **We must view the defense of the democratic West not as something that will succeed automatically because of the “arc of history,” but as something that requires our conscious, dedicated effort, and the sacrifice of our societies.**

---

Finally, we have to buttress the Eastern Mediterranean. This is a major undertaking in its own right. This is an emerging maritime frontier, and we face full-on competition from the Russians. We are working determinedly to stabilize the relationship with Turkey and keep it on a Western strategic track. A permanent breach in this relationship would do multi-generational damage to U.S. national security. On a long-term basis, Turkey is the only country in the region with the throw-weight to counterbalance Iran. It is a NATO ally with legitimate security concerns—including many that we share—that we must help it address.

Turkey is a framework nation in the Resolute Support Mission, critical to European energy security and dealing with the migration challenge, and a partner in counterterrorism. At the same time, we cannot be silent when Turkey's leaders curb democratic freedoms and rule of law, harangue Israel, and wield rhetoric or pursues policies that unnerve Ankara's neighbors and our close friends and allies. We have sought to stabilize the relationship with concrete near-term objectives: pressing for the release of detained Americans and embassy staff, averting the purchase of a Russian S-400 system, and constructing a *modus vivendi* to avoid a collision of our forces in Northern Syria.

In parallel, we are working to put the pieces in place for a stronger long-term U.S. strategic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. We are cultivating Greece as an anchor of stability in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans; we're working with Cyprus as a vulnerable state that needs greater Western attention while continuing the process towards a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation; and developing the energy of the Eastern Mediterranean as a major plank of European energy diversification as Europe's traditional northern fields wind down.

### **Strategic Renovation**

In all of these areas—anchoring the Western alliance, securing the eastern frontier, stabilizing the south—I see our task as one of *strategic renovation*: doing the hard work of shoring up and strengthening the West now so that we don't have to do so later on terms that are less favorable. We are playing catch up, after years of not seeing Europe as a strategic theater.

This is not a task that we can accomplish alone. Only through cooperation—with individual allies, with NATO, with the European Union—can we succeed. Along the way, we will not agree on everything. But it is not our disagreements that will define us. The bonds that bind us are far stronger than anything that divides us. The transatlantic relationship has known its fair share of disagreements, from Roosevelt and Churchill to Kennedy and Adenauer—Suez, Vietnam, Pershing missiles, Iraq, quantitative easing, disputes over poultry and chlorine. But as in any family, we work out our disagreements in ways that leave us stronger. The United States is committed to working with Europe to narrow the gaps between us and arrive at a unified position against common challenges. At the same time, we keep up our work

together: on CT, Syria, Ukraine, Russia sanctions, North Korea, Venezuela, the Western Balkans—and so many other areas.

We are committed to accepting and honoring our responsibilities. In common cause, we all have our parts. We must accept ours, and Europe must accept its own. The days are over when the West could, in Lord Salisbury’s famous phrase, “float lazily downstream, occasionally putting out a diplomatic boat-hook to avoid collisions.” We must view the defense of the democratic West not as something that will succeed automatically because of the “end of history” or “arc of history,” but as something that requires our conscious, dedicated effort, and the sacrifice of our societies.

The work in front of us is not easy or painless, but it is worth every ounce of creativity and vigor we put into it. There is nothing more precious to us as societies, more valuable to our long-term economic prosperity, or more necessary for our mutual defense, than the bonds of history, culture, commerce, and security that exist between the United States and the countries of Europe.

Let us work together to preserve that.

—*A. Wess Mitchell is Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.*