



The Middle East between the United States and Europe

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A Vanishing West in the Middle East: The Recent History of U.S.-Europe Cooperation in the Region

by Charles Thépaut

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The issue of American-European cooperation on the Middle East resurfaces every few years, usually with the election of a new American president, and especially with the change from a Republican to a Democratic administration. This was the case, for example, in early 2021 with the inauguration of Joe Biden as President of the United States after the Trump era, which nurtured expectations on the continent for a renewal of transatlantic harmony. The prevailing assumption is that a Democratic president is interested in meaningful transatlantic cooperation that benefits foreign policy based on democratic-liberal values and the protection of human rights, as opposed to a Republican president, who is likely to be more reserved

on these issues (Daalder, 2000; Moss, 2002, pp. 49-61; Osiewicz, 2021).

A Vanishing West in the Middle East analyzes the transatlantic relationship and addresses an issue that is less in the spotlight in Middle East studies: a multi-dimensional historical perspective from the end of the Cold War to the present (1990-2021) on the shaky relationship between the United States and European countries. The book seeks to contribute to the academic literature and to policymakers and decision makers. Author Charles Thépaut is a political and diplomatic adviser who served as a foreign policy adviser at the French Embassy in Berlin, and when he wrote the book was a research fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. His biography and training align the book with a relatively new trend that has emerged primarily in the last decade: a genre that provides a platform for diplomats, national security advisers, and political advisers in the practicing and consulting worlds, who try to use their practical experience to analyze an academic issue (see, e.g., Chivvis, 2014; Freilich, 2018; Wieland, 2021).

The emphasis in this genre is on the practical solution of complex research problems with an emphasis on the human component in conflict management and decision making associated with security and foreign policy. In general this is a welcome trend that can enrich research and build important bridges between academia and the world of decision makers. Thépaut's book is a worthy addition to this genre, and his training makes him the right man in the right place. His approach has several advantages: First, the content not only gives readers an alternative perspective on the subject but also—as the title of the book implies—links the slow and safe retreat of Americans from the Middle East to that of the Europeans, and deals with the need to redefine the impact of international politics on the region. A second advantage is that the quality of the book is also evident in that it is well written in flowing and fluent prose, which invites a diverse readership: academics, policy

experts, and the general public will find that the book is easy to read. Yet while Thépaut's book seeks to contribute to the discourse and academic literature, the content and the ambitiousness of the research do not always meet a high academic standard that presents an innovative argument based on a variety of primary sources, provides important historical background to readers, positions itself well within the scholarly debate, and offers empirical research and a defined structure.

Thépaut's introduction (pp. 1-5) outlines the thematic framework of the book, the timeline, and the central discussion to which the book seeks to contribute. The research focuses on the changes that have taken place since the end of the Cold War in the transatlantic relationship in terms of cooperation between the United States and Europe in three areas: strategy, institutional cooperation, and operational cooperation (p. 2). The book's main thesis is that despite the squabbles between the Americans and the Europeans, the dialogue between the parties must be renewed in light of the events of the last two decades, which include the Arab Spring and the intrusion of new powers—China, India, and Russia. These powers used the large vacuum left by the United States and European countries to change the geopolitics of the region. Thépaut also seeks to clarify that in light of such large gaps between the United States and Europe, the “West” cannot be related to as a single body shaping international relations in the Middle East, and we must rethink how this reality shapes the contemporary Middle East (p. 5).

The book includes five main chapters: the first chapter deals with the years 1990-2011 and focuses on the asymmetrical relationship between the United States and Europe, emphasizing American hegemony that made it the only power in international politics after the collapse of the communist bloc. The chapter is spread over a particularly extensive time frame, and it might have been better to split it into two shorter chapters. The second chapter discusses the years 2011-2021 and deals with

the Arab Spring and the withdrawal of the United States and the West from the Middle East. Then there is an unexpected change in the structure of the chapters: the third chapter, entitled “The New Middle East Geopolitics,” is not about a concrete time frame, but about how other powers (non-Western, such as China and India) fill the void left by the United States and European countries. The fourth and fifth chapters continue in this vein and likewise deal with a particular subject, rather than a specific time period. The fourth chapter, “Heading in Opposite Directions,” deals, as the title implies, with the opposing directions that the Americans and Europeans pursued after the Arab Spring in their approach to the Middle East. The final chapter, entitled “Toward Western Humility in the Middle East,” serves as a kind of brief policy paper that provides practical advice to decision makers in the United States and Europe—how to continue to work together despite the challenges of cooperation and the trend of American forces leaving the Middle East. Notwithstanding the pessimistic and realistic claim of the book, this chapter attempts to illuminate the possibility of transatlantic collaboration positively in light of the common challenges.

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There are two main areas where the author's message could be sharpened. First is the need to provide a broader historical context to readers, which can reinforce the starting point of the discussion throughout the book. It is important to emphasize that the tension and asymmetry between the Americans and Europeans discussed in the first chapter did

not start unexpectedly in 1990. In the rich and fascinating literature on the Cold War, one of the main discussions deals with the question of what ended the Cold War in the late 1980s. One of the more well-known and accepted claims is that these were the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev, who promoted perestroika and glasnost (Brown, 2007; Lévesque, 2004; Odom, 2004).

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However, there are competing explanations that are relevant to Thépaut's book: one of them focuses on the tension and rift created between Brussels and London and Washington over military and economic priorities in the transatlantic alliance. These tensions between the United States and West European countries grew in the early 1980s, along with a deep chasm between the parties after three decades of close cooperation. The United States, led by Reagan and his deputy Bush Sr., teamed up with Britain led by Margaret Thatcher ("The Iron Lady") to present an uncompromising neoliberal approach: they sought to accelerate the arms race against the Soviets in the last campaign of the Cold War. Reagan and Thatcher "smelled Soviet blood" and the weakness of the Kremlin as well as the rebel forces in Eastern Europe, and sought to wage a final campaign to exhaust the Soviets, realizing the magnitude of the economic crisis of the communist bloc. In a famous 1983 speech to the American nation, Reagan called the Soviet Union "the evil empire" and coined the term to be remembered for many years. The thought then was that a final arms race might overthrow the communist bloc. As is well known, Reagan, Bush, and Thatcher were not wrong.

On the other hand, there was growing criticism in West European countries that did support joining the arms race of the 1980s, after almost unreservedly supporting American positions throughout the years of the inter-bloc struggle. The voices heard from Western Europe argued that another arms race is unnecessary and puts these countries in a pointless economic and military tailspin (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2004; Young, 2010, p. 293). As can be learned from the lively discourse in the literature on the end of the Cold War, the years 1985-1990 were an important milestone in shaping the perception of the major actors mentioned in Thépaut's book, and in this spirit their positions have been shaped since the end of the Cold War and the unipolar era.

When combining the above-mentioned tension between Brussels, London, and Washington over the Middle East at the end of the Cold War with the starting point in Thépaut's book, his analysis is easily understood. As he also argues in his conclusions (pp. 243-244), Europeans believed that US military and strategic policy in the Middle East throughout the 1990s was too adventurous and ambitious, and the tension in the last decade of the Cold War provides a clearer historical connection to this conclusion.

A second area inviting improvement concerns the manner in which the empirical findings are presented and the reference to the many personal interviews that the author conducted for the purpose of writing the book. Thépaut notes that he interviewed more than 50 different experts, including Dennis Ross, Ben Fishman, and Oliver Schmidt (p. 2). This is certainly an impressive number of in-depth interviews, which gives a meaningful texture to the analysis of the core topics of the book. For the benefit of academic readers, Thépaut would have done well to provide readers with a brief methodological explanation as to the use of interviews in the content of the chapters. It would have been especially intriguing to know how they fit in with the rest of the materials

he collected, how they were weighted, and what the background was for choosing the interviewees.

In conclusion, Thépaut's book is a worthy contribution to the genre of policy advice. Readers will derive important insights from it and be exposed to lesser-known angles in the discourse in the field of international relations and the Middle East. The book can also be interesting and preliminary reading material for academic researchers who want to understand what the main topics in the book look like from the point of view of political advisers and policy researchers.

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