

How can a Union of the West be formed?

By Ira Straus*

Balladur argues in his book that a Union of the West is a matter of some urgency and the highest priority: the future of Europe and of America depends on it, so does the stability of the world, and historical changes are compressing the time available. Rather than evaluate his reasons for saying this, I will simply state that I think he is right. The question I will address here is: Can his goal be realized in a timeframe that answers to its urgency, and if so, how?

The problem: contradictory timeframes

Balladur himself believes that it will take a generation to do it, and that little more can be done in the near future than create a U.S.-EU Council to institutionalize U.S.-EU foreign policy consultations and further improve on the existing economic cooperation. This leaves it for a distant future to get to the point where Americans and Europeans could say they are together in a union.

This conclusion is at first sight eminently realistic, given the lack of an internal Will to form a Union. Yet this schedule—the internal schedule, so to speak—falls far behind the schedule demanded by the external realities Balladur identifies. The two timetables are incompatible.

The problem transformed: can Union be accelerated by incorporating existing structures?

Can the contradiction be resolved, by amending Balladur's pathway to Union?

This was, directly or indirectly, the subject of Balladur's meetings in Washington. His interlocutors brought home repeatedly the need to incorporate, as a cornerstone for building the Union, the "acquis Atlantique"—the accumulated heritage of institutions, policies and norms developed over many decades for Atlantic unity and integration. It was a point that he for the most part accepted in principle. But incorporating this *acquis* immediately affects the pace: it means the Union would not start from scratch. The glass would already be half full in military unity and economic unity, thanks to NATO and OECD. The timeline to Union would be shortened.

If all the existing Atlantic institutions were bundled together into a whole, along with all their decades of *acquis*, all their current trends of development, and all their new steps presently underway—and augmented further by the near-term steps proposed by Balladur—would this suffice for proclaiming a Union?

In my view it would suffice, albeit tenuously. Such a Union would be far from complete; its completion could still take a generation as Balladur wrote. Nevertheless it would be substantial enough to justify the word "union" and sustain conviction in it. To see this, it is worth taking a glance at all the elements that would be added together:

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1. NATO. It has a governing Council in nearly continuous session, which consults on all major foreign policy issues. When it issues common statements, as it does frequently, it does so in the name of an alliance with a common arm, giving it some substance as a common foreign policy.
2. The “Global NATO” processes: expansion of NATO’s missions around the world, growth of NATO partnerships worldwide, growth of UN-NATO cooperation, expansion of NATO membership. Compared to the past, this is dramatically expanding the range of the common foreign policies of the allies.
3. NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR) and Integrated Military Command structure. These quietly give NATO the most important form of supra-nationality of any international institution in the world: they internationalize the military, impinging on national sovereignty in this sensitive core area. This is something that was not achieved easily. It took the pressures of two world wars to bring the Atlantic allies to establish a SACEUR, as an emergency form of military union needed for saving Western freedom from total destruction at the hands of Nazism. The experience proved positive and, in face of a longer term Soviet threat, it was institutionalized in enduring form. It has asymmetries that are the healed scar tissue of its real world origins: the German military is subordinate to it to a unique degree. Germany’s neighbors have been able for half a century to sleep at night without fear of what the German military might be planning against them, because its plans are made through NATO. It has been the concrete cornerstone of the democratic peace in Europe; it is what has made the EU possible. It is an *acquis* of inestimable importance.
4. Current proposals and trends in NATO that are accepted in the Balladur book: further expansion of NATO’s global tasks; an updated globalized strategic concept; rules for operation of circles within NATO, so the circles can proceed to action without needing consensus among all the allies. The last of these would deepen the common foreign policy, by allowing NATO flexibility to respond to a far greater number of situations; it could turn NATO itself into a security and foreign policy Union.
5. The economic harmonization achieved over half a century through OECD. The U.S.-EU Transatlantic Economic Council, formed in 2007 to carry out a Transatlantic Single Market program, builds on this.
6. The cooperation achieved by a host of less well known trans-Atlantic institutions and arrangements—energy (IEA), inter-parliamentary (NPA), export control clubs for dangerous technologies and materials, G-7 and G-8 summits, and many others.
7. The U.S.-EU summits and their Transatlantic Agenda. Balladur’s proposal for upgrading them into an Executive Council. Balladur’s action proposals for it: currency coordination, common market, customs union.

These seemingly disparate elements have always formed an “Atlantic system”¹ or international “regime”. They have however lacked much of a joint public

¹ James R. Huntley demonstrated this in *Uniting the Democracies: Institutions of the Emerging Atlantic-Pacific System* (New York University Press, 1980).

identity. Combining them and proclaiming them a Union would supply that crucial missing link.

The residual problem: opposing sensibilities on Atlantic institutions

There remains one obstacle to taking this approach. As Balladur shows in his book, the existing Atlantic unity is unbalanced and fragile psychologically. As long as America is dealing as Leader with a couple dozen small European countries as Followers, America will continue playing Leader games of exaggerated bluster and self-confidence, and Europeans will continue playing Follower games: falling begrudgingly into line, hedging all the way, and cultivating public opposition.

This is why he is loathe to build an Atlantic Union on the basis of the existing institutional acquis of NATO and OECD: their functioning depends too heavily on American leadership.

Balladur accepted the point that the Atlantic acquis must be incorporated into the Union, and specifically that NATO must be included. Yet he maintained his underlying French sensibility against using NATO as a foundation for the Union: he wants the Union based on a new departure, a bilateral U.S.-EU Council, where Europe and America talk one to one as equals.

This left unanswered the question of how in fact the existing Atlantic institutions could be incorporated into a Union if the structural cornerstone of the Union were a U.S.-EU consultative Council. It is not easy to see how this could be done, unless in a form that subordinates their tested, workable decision-making Councils to an untested U.S.-EU one where obstruction would be easier. If no good way can be found to incorporate them, one risks cashiering the present structures, with their large degree of union already quietly achieved, for the sake of a weaker structure bearing the imagery of Union. This is what the British have long accused the French of wanting to do: to undermine the real existing Atlantic quasi-union for the sake of a facade of U.S.-EU unity.

The problem is thus transformed, in this its third and final iteration, into a question of whether a viable compromise can be achieved between the two sensibilities: the French sensibility (shared by much of the EU) that a Union must have a structure and imagery of U.S.-EU equality, and the American sensibility (which is also the sensibility of many Europeans) that the existing Atlantic institutions and acquis must be incorporated into a Union without any loss in the process.

Can a Union in fact be formed that includes a new U.S.-EU Council, yet incorporates fully and undiminished the old Atlantic structures? Can these various institutions be combined structurally into a coherent whole, and bound together into a common identity under the name "Union"?

The solution: a West of integrated circles

We will suggest here a way in which this can be done. The key to our answer lies in incorporating into the Union of the West the method of "circles" which Balladur upholds on the European level.

Balladur devotes the longest chapter of his book to explaining the extent to which the EU in reality works through multiple circles, and to advocating that the EU be reformed to operate even more this way. What is missing is to apply this method to the wider level: the Union of the West.



The Council of the Union of the West, on this model, would not be the new U.S.-EU Council alone as was initially proposed by Balladur. Rather it would encompass all the existing transatlantic councils equally alongside it: the NATO Council, the OECD Council, and the councils and summits of the other transatlantic bodies. The several Councils would be mutually associated as different formats of the Council of the Union of the West.² In each format the council would continue to act on the basis of its prior legal authority and through its established institutional structures. This is how the feat is managed of combining the institutions and gaining a stronger combined identity while losing nothing. NATO might end up as the defense ministry of the Union, OECD as an economic ministry.³

To avoid a self-defeating incoherence from the circle method, however, it is necessary to make use not only of the flexibility of circles but of the means pioneered in the EU for integrating them into a Whole. This is achieved in the EU through the shared overarching name and identity, and through structural links, such as a general Union council and a Union summit council that work in varying degrees with the councils in other formats.

We may call this the “Integrated Circles method”, to underline both of its elements, flexibility and cohesion.

The flexibility of circles, known in Eurojargon as “variable geometry”, is something that Balladur champions: he views himself as a pioneer of it, he wishes to see more of it on the European level, and he might well be pleased by the fact that it already exists also on the Atlantic level. It does not yet exist on the Atlantic level.

The integration of the circles into a cohesive whole is something that he takes for granted on the EU level; he does not write about it, but relies on it to give reassurances that further development of circles would be no threat to EU cohesion. At the same time, he is concerned to ensure that the general EU Council, with its inefficiencies, will not hamper the circles with their smaller and sometimes more efficient Councils. He seeks protection in both directions, for cohesion and for efficiency. Through Integrated Circles he finds an adequate measure of both protections.

Balladur does not apply either facet of Circles to the Atlantic level, their variable geometry or their integration into a Whole. Nevertheless it is a logical next step in his argument. It provides the formula for including NATO and the other circles of the Atlantic acquis together with his proposed U.S.-EU Council in a Union of the West, without the tensions and obstructions that would flow from an attempt at subordination of one to the other.

More important: the Integrated Circles method is probably the only one that would allow the Union of the West to be achieved realistically in a timeframe consistent with the necessities to which Balladur points. It enables this to be done by the device of adding up the existing powers along with any new elements of a fresh start, eliminating the need to demand an addition of unrealistically large new common powers at the moment of a Declaration of Union. It would very nearly resolve the contradiction that

² In EU language, when they meet separately they would be “the Council in NATO session”, “the Council in OECD session”, “the Council in U.S.-EU session”, and so forth.

³ Other institutional connections would tend to develop on this basis. Countries might begin appointing a single main representative to several of the Council formats, with specialized deputies for each format. Parliamentary assemblies would tend to become associated. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly has already doubled at times as the core of an OECD assembly; the practice would likely be regularized as the Union Assembly, and there might eventually be a directly elected chamber of the Assembly, as this befits a Union.

seemed so hopelessly irreconcilable at the start of this article: the contradiction between the realism of how much is necessary in the way of Union of the West and the realism of how little people are as yet willing to do.

The painful necessity of realism about inequalities

Is this compromise of sensibilities sufficient to be accepted on both sides? It requires a maturity in dealing with things as they are, including inequalities. Inequality exists in the objective realities, no matter whether Europe is taken as individual states or as the EU; it cannot be overcome by demanding to be treated as an equal.

In a West united in Integrated Circles, the U.S.-EU Council would be fully present; it would have open institutional space for building as much as it can on a basis of U.S.-EU one to one relations and on image of equality—as much as the capacities of the EU will bear; but it would not detract from the work of the NATO and OECD Councils or from the integration they have built and continue to build on a basis of the existent realities.

One runs up here against the propensity of some Europeans—even occasionally Balladur—to blame the existing Atlantic institutions for the inequality in relations between Europe and America. It is a mistake, or perhaps an optical illusion: The Atlantic institutions increase the visibility of the inequality, but they are not the cause of it. In practice they reduce the inequality and restrain the shocks it would otherwise impose on the weaker parties.⁴ From 1900 to 1939, before the Atlantic institutions existed, Europe suffered from its inferiority before American power in a far more severe manner than it has suffered from the same inequality since the institutions began forming in 1947: in the earlier period it suffered a breakdown in two world wars, thanks in no small part to America's policy of standing aside with its power in peacetime and entering into real commitments only after the continent had sunk into total war. That was, on the surface, a policy of non-hegemony and respect for European equality; but that benign view of it was yet another optical illusion. Wise Europeans have learned to see the reality and ignore the optical illusions.

The Atlantic institutions have provided them an incubator for beginning to unite Europe, one of the two paths for eventually overcoming the inequality. The other path is by strengthening the common Atlantic institutions themselves: they serve to reduce the impact of the underlying inequality on Europeans, give Europeans a consultative say in the policies that affect them, and allow the beginnings of common direction of common policy. At a distant ideal endpoint of perfected Union, they would provide full equality in the direction of all relevant policies; just as, at an even more distant ideal

⁴ This illusion about the origins of intra-Atlantic inequality is a specific case of a more general optical illusion about the “democratic deficit”: The democratic deficit in foreign policy is at its most severe at the baseline of international relations among separate states, but is usually taken for granted on this level since it is hard to imagine anything being done about it. When international institutions are formed, the deficit is reduced, yet becomes more visible; it persists inside the institutions in a form that is new, and is easier to attack since the institutions are fragile and can easily be blown apart. Nevertheless, it is the further deepening of international institutions that is the only cure for the deficit. For a theoretical schema on the institutionalization and overcoming of democratic deficits and international inequities see Ira Straus, *Supranational Norms in International Affairs* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia Department of Government and Foreign Affairs, 1992), chapter 7.



endpoint, a perfected European Union would achieve a full separate equality vis-à-vis America. One can understand an urge to assert a separate and equal dignity against America, by completing the second line of equalization before doing anything along the first line. But if the goal is not psychological but the practical one of such equality as can be achieved, then the first line must also be pursued in the here and now.

It is a matter of maturity, for the absence of which Balladur often flays his fellow Europeans, to do what can be done under the conditions of the inequality that exists. These conditions are likely to persist for a long time to come; even if all of Balladur's proposed reforms for the EU were adopted, it would be generations before the EU achieved true equality with the U.S.; and unfortunately it is possible, as Stanley Sloan points out, that none of them will be adopted. One cannot make historically urgent matters wait on an equality that is a long way off at best. One has to make the best of the situation. Europeans, with their long traditions of diplomacy in a system of independent and radically unequal states, should understand this more readily than Americans, with their shorter experience and larger penchant to rhetorical idealism.

America has for the most part accorded the EU as much role and attention as it can bear, given its limited capabilities. The shortfalls it has shown from time to time in this regard are secondary; more often it has favored the EU with exaggerated attentions, in the hope of helping it along. There are ways America can still do more to support the EU, but Balladur has a point when he criticizes Europeans for using America as a scapegoat for their own failures in uniting and taking responsibility for themselves.

Balladur has floated an important compromise between European and American sensibilities on one specific set of circles: the circles within NATO. It was back in the 1990s that NATO adopted a policy of circles, called CJTFs or "coalitions of the willing". In more than a decade, it has barely implemented it; the EU always wants to be the main coalition, while the U.S. wants its own coalitions. Balladur supplies the formula needed for overcoming this stand-off: it is, for NATO to develop rules for proceeding without unanimity. This would open up space for the circles desired by both parties to go forward. Should this wait on prior EU military strengthening? It would make more sense to proceed the other way around: adoption of this reform on the NATO level would in itself be advantageous to both sides, and would serve as an incentive for the EU to strengthen itself to make fuller use of the opening.

The inevitability of the Integrated Circles approach for a Union of the West

The idea of a Union of the West in multiple circles is not entirely new. If, as we have suggested, it is the only way for Union is to become a reality in a relevant timeframe, then it is all but inevitable that persons who are looking for a realistic pathway to Union will arrive at one or another form of it.

This has in fact happened in past experience, with the Committees for a Community of Democracies (CCD), an offshoot of Streit's Atlantic Union movement, consisting largely of former diplomats and high level personalities in Washington and London. CCD in its early years, 1978-83, was seeking to find a way to bind the West together into a Community with a level of integration and self-awareness comparable to the EC. It initially did this by looking for such new collective programs and structures for the Atlantic and OECD countries as were immediately needed in that period; but, with its close personal ties to the diplomatic world, it quickly found what Balladur observes today: that there is not sufficient will around for forming new structures with strong new

powers. CCD concluded that the main thing to do was to put together the substantial Atlantic and Atlantic-Pacific institutions that already existed, giving them a common umbrella structure and common identity; with that done, there would already be a proto-Community, and, invigorated by the common identity, it could develop the will to proceed farther. CCD's founder, James Huntley, encapsulated this doctrine in a book⁵ that became the main restatement of Atlanticism for the later decades of the 20th century, building on Streit but adapting his goal to the realities of the partial integrative institutions that had been meanwhile developed in the Euro-Atlantic world and what could be learned from them. Huntley established the plural foundation of Union by pointing to the multiple existing institutions that would have to be joined in it. Robert Foulon, co-founder with Huntley of CCD, carried this thought a half step farther: that it should be categorized as a "plural Union", and should have multiple levels of country membership as well as multiple institutional substructures. This left open the question of what would hold all this pluralism together. Balladur, with his emphasis on the circles method as used in the EU, supplies, if only by analogy, the practical formula the Atlanticists have needed for joining their multiple institutions into a higher unity: structural links among the institutional circles, beginning with an association of their Councils, a common identity and legal existence as a Whole, and a strong identity name for the Whole, such as "European Union" or "Union of the West".

Interestingly, Huntley, again like Balladur, pinned much of his hopes on a summit or Executive Council. He admired the European Council for invigorating the EC, and hoped the G-7 would similarly reinvigorate the Atlantic institutions.⁶ Some decades later, it is worth considering why this has not happened. The Summits have no formal relation to the Atlantic institutions; they cannot draw them together into a Community or Union. It works more readily the other way around: Once the several Atlantic institutions are bound together formally, e.g. by associating their Councils as a Council of a Union, the great power Summits within the Union—whether Huntley's G-7 or Balladur's G-2—will naturally take on an energizing role for the Union as a whole. If a G-7 or G-2 proved itself in practice more reliable and efficient than other councils in the work of the Union, it might later be given a formal title of Council of the Union with some supervisory authority over other councils.

Union as a positive Identity

A Whole with an Identity is more than the sum of its parts: an identity creates virtuous circles, reinforcing some of the elements that go into its making. And "Union" is a powerful identity. So is "West". It is a name that publics can identify with as a new layer of their political identity and belonging.

In its absence, the West has at best a weak self-awareness and little confidence in its own solidity. This is a source of the core paradox of today's world that Balladur identifies in his book: a continued objective material predominance of the West, coupled

⁵ James R. Huntley, *Uniting the Democracies: Institutions of the Emerging Atlantic-Pacific System* (New York University Press, 1980).

⁶ Huntley, *Uniting the Democracies*, pp. 293-4. John Ikenberry has also written on the G-7 as a potential motor for a Western Community. Professor Modelski, who was also an early member of CCD, has recently transposed this proposal from Huntley's G-7 to Balladur's G-2, proposing it be used as the energizing instrument for the wider Atlantic community, in "A Window of Opportunity for a Rebalanced Relationship," *Freedom & Union* Vol. III No. 1.



with a rapid subjective weakening of the West,⁷ risking the destabilization of the world order in which the West continues to play an indispensable role. Balladur logically identifies Union as the solution.

A strong identity-name is something that the EU already has, and that the wider Western institutions taken separately have been lacking. Sensationalistic books on the decline of America put this difference to use: they treat the EU as an entity but the West as virtually non-existent. This brings them by definition—by false definition—to the conclusion that the EU is not to be counted together with America but apart from and against it.⁸ It turns the EU's rise, by this sleight of hand, or sleight of definition, into a proof of America's decline, and encourages adversarial behaviors that really could tear apart the West.⁹ A visible, solemnly declared Union of the West is the obvious way to put an end to the illusion of the West's non-existence.

Balladur's explicit goal of Union comes as a breath of fresh air. It blows away the stale air of the assumption that the Western countries must and will continue acting separately and against one another; it throws into the picture the thought that they could after all do the sensible thing, and ought to consider it. It has almost shock value to hear it coming from a French Gaullist source: this has led it to be received with near amazement by most commentators.¹⁰

In the two decades after 1945, Union of the West was a widely shared goal among Western governments and foreign offices; and it had been the goal of France ever since World War I. It was a goal that provided inspiration, and an almost physical image in the minds of leaders and elites of the direction they needed to be going. Thanks to the orientation provided by the goal, national leaders were able to take historic steps—the Marshall Plan, NATO, OECD—to build a long-term institutionalized unity on some of the most important matters. The goal and the orientation faded out of view in the period of Vietnam and De Gaulle. The integration of the West stalled at half-way point. The



⁷ Balladur, *Pour une Union occidentale . . .*, p. 14.

⁸ This can be seen in Parag Khanna's 2008 book, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*.

⁹ This can be seen in Khanna's precursor, Paul Kennedy, who performed the same sleights of hand, or of category, in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Despite misleading categories and statistics, Kennedy succeeded in lending respectability to a movement of nationwide belief in America's decline in the late 1980s. The Western alliances were treated as a factor causing America's decline and draining its economy to the advantage of its European and Japanese competitors. The implicit—sometimes explicit—prescription of breaking with Europe and Japan, had it been acted upon, would have turned the anti-Western categories into a self-fulfilling prophecy. But it turned out differently: the West won the Cold War, the Japanese bubble burst, and the West held together, and America and the West, far from declining, held still greater preeminence than before.

¹⁰ But not perhaps by *Freedom & Union* readers. De Gaulle had proposed an organic Union to Britain in 1940; documents on this can be found in *Freedom & Union*, July-August 1958, pp. 14-16. The editor, Clarence Streit, always interpreted De Gaulle's later anti-Atlanticism generously, as a reaction to Suez; he often cited communications from Gaullist leaders that it would be different if America were willing to discuss a genuine Union with Europeans. Streit was a longtime friend of Michel Debre, a close associate of De Gaulle and a Prime Minister under his Presidency. During the war, Debre and Emmanuel Monick had written *Demain la paix* (Plon, 1945); it took an Atlanticist view, and portions of it were later translated by Streit's wife Jeanne Defrance and printed in three issues of *Freedom & Union*, Oct., Nov. and Dec. 1959.

European Community came out of its era of stagnation in 1985, and in half a dozen years transformed itself from Community to Union. NATO came out of stagnation in 1991. The West is moving again, albeit sometimes slowly. The glass is still half full from all the progress previously achieved in moving toward Union; it puts the goal in striking range. The book is certainly timely.

From Book to Action

Balladur writes as a political actor, not an abstract theorist. His book is not a treatise engraved in stone but a proposal in motion, with all the contradictions that political motion entails. His consultations in Washington were intended to identify and think through the contradictions, and thereby move his proposals toward a form that could be shared and acted upon. He expressed throughout a confidence that ways would be found, through discussion and through pragmatic adaptations, to resolve the major issues that were raised.

Balladur's method of managing contradictions in political motion is one that has not been lacking in fruit in the past: he is credited, or blamed by his enemies, with having led most of the Gaullist movement back to a pro-EU stance and out of its anti-Americanism. In the process he has had to bridge contradictions far worse than those that remain in his present book. Will his method bear similar fruit this time?

His book has the virtue of facing the full range of challenges before the West; the virtue of proposing solutions that are politically realistic yet are intended to become commensurate with the challenges; and the virtue of expressing the author's will to develop the proposals in motion and see them through to realization. That last virtue may prove the greatest of all.

