The security relationship between the United States and the European Union is becoming increasingly important. This stems from two developments. First, the European Union has become a more capable actor, equipped with competences in both the external and internal security domains. Second, the range of security challenges confronting the US and the EU are pushing them closer together. On the one hand, this reflects the experience of complex conflicts where western forces have been challenged to demonstrate the legitimacy of their interventions and to rebuild post-conflict states. On the other, a variety of new security challenges, ranging from international terrorism to ‘states of concern’, have been driving the two sides of the Atlantic towards increased cooperation.

This is not to deny that, at the same time, US-EU security interests have been subject to divergent pressures. Since the end of the Cold War the traditional ballast of the relationship, the collective defence of Europe, has been of diminishing importance. This has contributed to the declining salience of NATO and a growing disparity in the force projection capabilities of the two sides. The US has come to prioritize global security issues, primarily the War on Terror, but also issues such as nuclear proliferation. The American government has complained that its EU ally has remained preoccupied with regional concerns and has failed to raise its sights to matters of global instability.

In spite of these differences, the logic of closer US-EU cooperation has been apparent. Whether in the case of imposing economic sanctions on countries seeking access to weapons of mass destruction, or ensuring homeland security against the threat from terrorism, the US has recognised that it has less chance of securing its objectives by acting alone. American military might has offered limited traction in trying to contain ‘states of concern’ as well as in countering insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even its enormous military strength has been liable to overstretch when confronting multiple threats. The US has discovered to its cost that it must enlist the help of allies, particularly when it attempts such complex tasks as nation-building and reconstruction. The growing range of competences possessed by the EU has afforded it the ability to contribute across the spectrum of security challenges. It has been able to offer economic, diplomatic, law enforcement and judicial instruments to complement the strengths of the United States. Since 1999 the EU has added a range of military capabilities to its toolbox and it has assumed growing responsibility both for policing its own Balkan backyard and undertaking operations in far-flung areas such as the Democratic Republic of Congo.

There remain challenges for the US-EU security relationship in the future. One is to develop a closer institutional dialogue so that the two sides of the Atlantic can discuss and cooperate more effectively on issues of mutual interest. The other is to enhance the EU’s ability and political will to contribute to the full range of security tasks, including war-fighting. This will require EU members to spend more wisely on defence, ceasing the duplication of defence resources and concentrating on efforts to make their forces interoperable with the US.