

## **BÖLL TEA BRIEFING**

### **OBAMA TWO YEARS LATER: EVALUATION AND PERSPECTIVES AFTER THE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS \***

*When on November 4, 2008, the U.S. voters elected Barack Obama to become their 44th president, the enthusiasm in Europe was great. After eight years of Bush administration, Europe was longing for a change, a new partnership and expected fundamental change in the U.S. foreign policy. Not every European shared that optimism. Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer predicted that Europeans were likely to be disappointed in their hopes for a fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy, that “it would take a medium-sized political miracle for these hopes not to be disappointed, and such a miracle will not happen – whoever is elected.” (Project Syndicate) It looks as if this “medium-sized political miracle” will indeed not happen. Not only was European enthusiasm already wearing thin, the recent Congressional elections which produced an overwhelming Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives and returned a pencil-thin Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate has caused more disappointment on this side of the Atlantic. What effect will the results of the Congressional elections have on transatlantic relations and cooperation (Afghanistan, Middle East, Iran, climate change) and what are the expectations for the second half of Obama’s presidency?*

Never before in history has a leader of a country been so warmly welcomed outside his own country as Obama. The rally in Berlin was an amazing demonstration of this enthusiasm. There are three reasons for Obama’s popularity. One is that people see two things in Obama: themselves and whoever they want to see. Europeans see a classically trained intellectual, a role model for a European leader, black people see a black person, Muslims somebody who is sympathetic towards Islam, Christians see a Christian and everybody clearly sees that he is not George Bush. The second reason is Iraq. Obama was the candidate who as early as 2002 said that he opposed this war. Iraq was a defining issue for European politics in the last decade. It was the issue that split the U.S. and Europe more than anything else in history including the Vietnam War. The third reason is that he was a soothing presence after the shock of the Bush years. The Bush presidency was a shock for Europeans. They did not expect (or had forgotten) that they could hate America so much. These were emotions which hadn’t been felt since the sixties. The winning of the Nobel Peace price so shortly after he was elected was perhaps a manifestation of the soothing quality of peace that people saw in Obama.

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\* **Guest speakers** were: **Paul Adamson**, Founder and Publisher of E!Sharp magazine; **Reinhard Bütikofer**, MEP, Vice-President and Treasurer of the GREENS/EFA Group and **John Miller**, Journalist, Wall Street Journal. The meeting was moderated by **Bastian Hermisson**, Head of Department European Union / North America, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Berlin. The event was held under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

If we look at the actual policy two years after, what is the Obama doctrine? Provocatively put, one could say that it is like the Bush doctrine with a softer tone. The U.S. has continued to fight the war against Islamic extremism in a way that Europe probably wouldn't, like going after leaders of various movements in Pakistan or Yemen and kill them. It is the rhetoric that has changed. Obama's speech in Cairo is probably still having an impact. The actual policy, on the other hand, has not changed that much. The war on terror is still going on. The new talks with Iran which are trying to get Iran more transparent about its nuclear plans are a good example of a more practical and moderate tone. With Pakistan it is similar. The Obama administration is maybe tougher on Pakistan than the Bush administration was, but in a more cordial tone. Concerning the Middle East peace, there has been an attempt of playing good cop/ bad cop with Hillary Clinton who is well liked in Israel and Obama who is less so. But a lot of these things America has been doing for many years.

There is a general feeling in Brussels that the cancellation of the U.S.-EU Summit under the Spanish EU Presidency by Obama is proof that the US is not taking the EU seriously, whereas in fact the U.S. are trying very hard to take Europe seriously. The US administration is very aware of the fact (already under Bush) that their public diplomacy had to improve a lot. On the other hand, they want to be able to count on Europe more in their endeavours to keep the world peace (which is the way they see it).

The outcome of the midterm elections was expected and not really a disaster. The tragedy is that in the aftermath of the election, nobody has come up with a valid answer to why the voters decided the way they did. Analysis does not lead to one concrete issue, but certainly Obama has failed to connect to the patriotic parts of the population as well as sacrificing some of his pre-election core credos. The issue on extending the tax cuts of the Bush era surely does not help to keep his credibility. It was not a 'smart deal'. It is not true that 'both sides got what they wanted'. On substance it wasn't a smart deal and on tactics it has undermined the morale of the Democratic Party as they have been fighting against it for so long. Obama should have said that he was forced to do that. The health care reform was a disaster and in times of financial crisis he did not succeed in dissociating himself enough from Wall Street. His aloofness undercut him. If Obama does not go into the new year with an engaging executive agenda, he will not have a chance of serious impact on the legislative agenda for the next two years. The Republicans will dictate to him what he is supposed to do. The (Democrats in the) Senate will not be able to put up anything against them. From the Senators to be re-elected on short term, only ten are Republicans: the Democrats will not risk their neck to promote the agenda of a president who is already losing, they will not deliver anything. There could be an executive agenda, but this will not be a domestic agenda.

There could be an international foreign policy agenda. There are opportunities regarding Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and China. In the Middle East this administration has not achieved very much. Neither Israel nor the Palestinians believe that things have to move now and you cannot force them from the outside. But Europe and the U.S. should work

more closely together on the Middle East, even if no big goals will be achieved, in foreign affairs symbols do count to a certain extent.

In the Asian context Obama has been more successful. The way in which Asian nations assembled to ask for U.S. help indicated that there is an interesting game to be played vis-à-vis China. The Chinese are overly cocky. They are hurting their own narrative of a peaceful rise. Strategically Obama could make a lot of progress in Asia, where Europe has very little to offer. Obama could be successful in Afghanistan in the sense of winding down the U.S. involvement without withdrawing completely. Of course there is a risk that the Republicans may be just stupid enough to deny the president any single success even in foreign policy. Still, Afghanistan could be a successful area because here the Republicans have invested political capital. Important was and will be the outcome of a new START agreement and its follow-up which is another topic where the Republicans look unlikely to jeopardise negotiations. Together with the EU Obama could move things in Africa where he could build on what the Bush administration has done.

Europeans have to understand that nothing will move on climate change, the whole green agenda is out. They still should cooperate with individual states like California, states or cities who still have and pursue green agenda's.

With a focus on the international stage, Obama might be able to regain some trust and it is possible that after a while the Republicans could face a credibility problem in the domestic area which could increase Obama's chances for a second term in office though at this moment his chances are slim.