

(The Day) After the US Presidential Election: Prospects for Transatlantic Relations*

On November 4, 2008, the US voters will choose between John McCain and Barack Obama as their next president. In the eyes of many Europeans, the Bush administration has not only blundered seriously in its foreign policy, it has also caused a deep transatlantic estrangement between Europe and the US. Europe is longing for a change, a new partnership. If McCain will become the new president, US foreign policy will hardly change fundamentally. Will it still be possible to come to a common strategy in conflict areas like Iraq, Iran, the Middle East or Transcaucasia? Will it be possible to sort out the problems between NATO and the EU or would it mean that transatlantic relations will continue to deteriorate? On the other hand, will there be really fundamental changes in case Obama wins or is former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer right when he claims that Europeans are likely to be disappointed in their hopes for a fundamental change in US foreign policy after the presidential election, 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). If so, what would be the right EU strategy to approach the new US administration regardless of who the new president will be?

First impressions after the elections

Obama's election victory is a historic moment. In the US it has caused a real sense of patriotism, a sense of “redemption” that Americans haven't felt for a long time. Even conservative Americans are proud of the fact that an Afro-American became president. The enthusiasm in Europe poses the question whether Europeans feel the need to share in this redemption. Can something similar happen here in Europe? Will it change people's mindsets? Will we see more local representation of minorities?

In a way one could speak of a “reverse 9/11” feeling. The election result certainly does not mean that there is no vicious racism left in American society. But after the election of a black president after 43 white presidents, the emotion is palpable in the US. After 9/11 this emotion turned into fear, which is a massive difference to the current emotion. Obama and Biden do not look at the world through the prison of fear, they see it as a way of engaging with the US.

The patriotism felt now is new and different. After all, it is rare for someone like Obama who is placed at the left of the political spectre to be that patriotic. That was not even the case with Clinton. Still, this type of patriotism might not be any easier to deal with in the long run for Europeans.

This is a historic moment also in the sense that the new administration is facing unprecedented challenges in domestic and foreign policy. On the other hand Obama will have a very strong mandate, a large senate and house majority, i.e. all the levers of policy are in his hands. He even has room to manoeuvre to vote the 2009 budget which doesn't even exist yet.

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It is important to see that the political spectre in the United States is changing very much. The Republican Party seems to be out of touch with the electors. It has fallen into the hands of right-winged ideologues. The Republicans underestimated the resentments of many people after the last, “stolen” elections. The electorate is changing. This election has shown that there is a completely other “real America” than Sarah Palin’s “real America”.

Realistic expectations

For Europe that is good news: it will be easier to work with the new administration. On the other hand Europeans should not have overblown expectations. One can expect slightly more multi-lateralism, pragmatism and more reaching-out, but all within the restraints of the current political reality (e.g. the more than 100.000 US troops in Iraq). The US will want to partner with Europe and they want Europe to share burdens, which means that Europe will have to engage. However, there is reason for cautious optimism. The symbolism of Obama’s victory should not be underrated: it will strengthen the US soft power which was lost in recent years.

The election of Mr. Obama throws down the gauntlet for the EU. The question is whether those who are cheering right now, will be cheering in six to nine months. As a senator Obama voted against the Central America Free Trade Agreement CAFTA to “protect American workers”. He also voted against the Kyoto protocol. He is an elected official who will represent the interests of his constituents. In climate change, Europe should not expect too much from the US in this period of crisis. Even if the government would like to do anything about it, measures would be very difficult to get it through Congress.

Still, one could also argue that Obama’s philosophy and lay-out in energy issues is far ahead of the Europeans’. First, he ties climate change and energy together. And he does not present it as a burden, but as a technological opportunity, a challenge that we must meet. He talks about green jobs. He speaks of helping the auto industry to retool. To make them ready for competition in developing an intelligent car. His approach is intelligent. And as far as Kyoto is concerned: it is an international treaty and it is well-known that the senate does not like them. Many are lingering in the senate drawers. So, maybe there is a chance that the US can catch up with and overtake Europe.

In the environmental area the US president has enormous executive power. We should not forget that we still have a Bush administration – Bush is still able to write rules which will be especially hard to run around. Obama first will have to undo some of the changes which are still happening as we speak.

Finally, most of which Mr. Obama has said on trade protections was during the primaries where one has to convince one’s own party. This may be why he said things which were a bit to the left of his own thinking. Once you are elected you automatically move to the centre. A lot of his protectionist talk will be swallowed. Obama’s chief economic advisers are not primitive trade economists. However, in case the auto industry in the United States goes down the drain, this will be a very first test for him whether or not he will succumb to populist economics.

President Bush was a very easy president for the left of centre in European politics. Mr. Bush never asked them anything. Now Europe has to raise its game. Still, during the second term of president Bush, things were already less ideological, more

pragmatic and there was more reaching-out than under Bush I. In that sense, there will be no abrupt change, but one will see further movement. As Solana said, Europeans and Americans are keen to open a new chapter in their relations. Obama personifies what is good and impressive about America. He had change, empathy and good judgment at the heart of his campaign. The excitement in Europe shows how much Europeans care about the United States and how much they want to have a good relationship.

This election result is as much a challenge for Europe as it is for the United States. The most important response the European Union can come up with is to get its act together. Europe has to speak with one voice and that voice needs to be extended to security matters. Some of the member states are partly responsible for the mess in Georgia. The EU should have had clearer views on NATO enlargement. These are the issues the EU should raise and it should go to Washington only after having fixed its own position. The EU is trying to do that on climate change. Thanks to the French presidency the EU is doing it on the international financial architecture. But in order to speak with one voice, the Lisbon treaty needs to be ratified before the end of next year. The EU has to rethink strategically what it wants to do with the United States, how far it is willing and able to engage outside of Europe. The EU must no longer wait till the United States have made up their mind. It has to be present and talk to them permanently.

Future US foreign policy and its impact on Europe

The financial and economic crisis will be Obama's main issue, domestically and internationally. Then there are Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran to deal with. In the United States foreign policy is basically the two wars that the country is fighting. Obama has in his campaign pre-empted some of the things the Bush administration has ended up doing in Afghanistan: calling for more soldiers and focussing on the tribal areas in western Pakistan. The question of Iraq is complicated. Obama is famous for his 2002 speech where he called it a "dumb war" and he said that he does not oppose all wars, just dumb wars. Since the surge things are going better, but there are still 100.000 US troops in Iraq and nobody knows what's going to happen when they pick up and leave. There Europe will probably get a lot of consultative power that it didn't have before. It's hard to believe that the US will find a solution without Europe. Afghanistan will probably be a lot trickier for Europe. With Obama it is unclear how much he will turn to the right or the left on certain issues. It is not unimaginable that Obama turns into a hawk on this issue because he thinks this is the war he has to win. Obama underestimates how the support for the war in Afghanistan has eroded in Europe. The European NATO countries will not deliver many more troops. The Netherlands will remove their troops soon and the Dutch government is not ready to send new troops. As far as Iran is concerned, there will be a serious difference in tone with the Bush administration

One of the biggest victims of the Bush administration was the image of the US and, by implication, of the west. Obama as a "black" president and carrying the middle name Hussein will do a lot to improve that image. There are four crucial foreign policy issues for the new US administration. First, burden-sharing vis-à-vis Europe, Brazil, Australia and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The US is sick and tired of having to pull the weight alone. Second, rather than have a war on terror, the idea is to target the terrorists. That also implies more emphasis on non-military aspects of foreign policy. Three, they will want to cooperate with many partners around the world to harness globalisation. Globalisation is something that has mixed response in Europe and the last months it has also caused rather mixed feelings in the US. The

US wants to work with others to harness financial markets. Four, they will want to go for greater energy independence. Energy dependency has heavily restricted the geoflexibility of US foreign policy. And the US will want to work with Europe on all these issues of energy efficiency.

Europeans have strong expectations towards Obama considering the United Nations. The EU is taking the leadership on quite a few international treaties which are on the table. The problem is that systematically these draft-treaties (landmines, Kyoto, arms trade...) have been sabotaged by the current US administration. Many people believe that this will increase multi-lateralism, however, this is doubtful. Americans will become more plurilateral, but they are not going to become admirers of the UN. President Obama will never give in to any blackmail from Russia or China in the UN Security Council.

The Obama administration can be expected to be more forthcoming than Bush. But in the US elite be it Republican or Democrat, there is a high degree of scepticism vis-à-vis the UN. The UN needs to be reformed, but the efforts so far have not brought a lot. The Council for human rights is a scandal. A number of things in the UN does not work. Europe will have to think about its role in multi-lateral institutions as well. Do Europeans consider it normal that the Benelux countries have as much weight in the IMF as China? Do they consider it normal that they still have two seats in the UN Security Council? In other words, when Europe speaks about effective multilateralism it sometimes speaks with a forked tongue.

There may also be policy changes in Africa. However, Africa is one of the areas where the Bush administration has been very active and successful. They created the Africa Command¹ (AFRICOM) which became operational only on October 1, 2008 and was carved out of the U.S. European Command and whose headquarters are still located in Stuttgart. This is something the Obama administration has to look at and ask itself whether this is the proper way of engaging with Africa, whether the primary engagement of the USA with Africa should be military or otherwise.

We can expect a less hawkish relationship between Obama and the Kremlin. Obama's election should have implications on the US stands on missile defence in Poland and the Czech Republic. However, Russia stands for authoritarian capitalism with a strong 19th century nationalistic streak to it. It would be surprising if Russia would open up and embrace Obama. But he will certainly be less antagonistic than the neo conservatives were.

When Bush became president, he inherited a massive budget surplus. A lot of what Obama has promised is no longer affordable due to the financial crisis. Tough choices will have to be made. The Iraq war costs 300 million dollars a day. The war in Iraq was actually not even in the budget, it was paid on a "credit card". The US will still have a lot of soldiers in Iraq and a surge in Afghanistan is not possible for nothing either. The main challenge is to make sure that all adds up.

If the Obama administration is thinking that they can increase their pressure on European governments to increase their military expenditure, it is mistaken. This is absolutely without any perspective in the current financial and economic situation. In fact, the Obama camp has already signalled in Germany that they would not ask for

¹ <http://www.africom.mil>

more German soldiers. There is no chance for the US to decrease their military budget.

This discussion is similar to the discussion held in the nineties. But we should not forget that burden-sharing is not only military. Europe does not believe that problems can be solved militarily. It has to scale down rather than build up military efforts. Still, we should not forget that Europe has 70.000 people „in boots“ on the ground in various situations. It is not as if it is not doing anything at all and the EU is the biggest donor of public development aid: the European development budget is three times as high as that of the US, and as far as climate change is concerned: the US is still responsible for one quarter of global emissions. It has to be said here that Clinton is more responsible than George Bush for deteriorating the climate. But it can be expected that Obama will have no problem with a more general interpretation of burden-sharing which takes into account that international security it is not only guns (though it may not be possible to realise it without). It is important to have a transatlantic strategic debate on all these challenges.

Transatlantic relations and EU-NATO relations

What Europe wants out of the next US administration is:

1. A climate change agreement,
2. a new set of financial rules,
3. a resolution of the entanglements the US has in Iraq and Afghanistan and a resolution on the Iran question.

It's not clear whether Europe will get the solution it wants on either of those questions.

The stakes are going to be clearly higher than under Bush II. The potential for a new Atlantic agenda is tremendous. The Obama administration will be more in listening mode than the Bush administration. They will emphasise things that Europe likes, for instance a greater reliance on soft power and the idea of harnessing globalisation, making globalisation work for a much bigger chunk of the population. These are all matters which fall squarely within the competences of the EU, so the Obama administration will have to discuss them with the EU not with NATO. But it will only work out if Europe is capable to rise to the occasion. Commission president Barroso has written a Harvard speech², where he talks a lot about the new Atlantic agenda. Europe can talk the talk, now the challenge is to walk the talk. The potential for a major boost for transatlantic relations is definitely there, but will Europe be able?

As far as the enlargement of NATO is concerned, it can be expected that Obama will probably push NATO enlargement not as hard as McCain did. He was much more moderate in his reactions on the war in Georgia as McCain. Obama will understand that for the foreseeable future it is not possible for many European countries to have Georgia enter NATO.

When Obama made his first. presidential debate in the democratic primaries he was asked who were the three most important allies for the United States and his answer was: "The European Union as a whole has been a long-standing ally of ours, and

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<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/08/455&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

through NATO we've been able to make some significant progress."³ He was heavily criticised for mentioning the EU first and not for example Israel. And in his Berlin speech he said that the USA needs "a strong European Union that deepens the security and prosperity of this continent, while extending a hand abroad..."⁴

The European ministers who came together in France briefly before the US elections also discussed transatlantic relations. There is this common EU debate and it links in with the three strands that we have in transatlantic relationships EU, US and bilateral relationships: the EU-US strand is the prominent one. The NATO summit in Strasbourg will be the right place to address that and the EU is ready to work with the United States.

In 1997, a French president freshly elected made a proposal to the US and that was to rejoin the European command of NATO if under certain circumstances it were feasible that the southern flank of NATO would have a European command. Within 24 hours the Clinton administration answered that that was out of the question as it would be in complete contradiction with the American military doctrine. This is how Clinton caused the European common defence policy. The US will have to reconsider that element: what is going to be the weight of the European pillar in NATO? Next year in Kehl/Strasbourg they should be thinking about this, because burden-sharing is impossible without decision-sharing.



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³ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18352397/page/14/>

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/07/24/obama-in-berlin-video-of_n_114771.html