

President Obama, Europe and the Middle East

Sven Biscop

Sven Biscop is a senior research fellow at Egmont—The Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels and a visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges.

The election of Senator Barack Obama as president of the US was certainly greeted with enthusiasm throughout Europe. After a period of very tense relations and fiery debates during the first term of the Bush administration and a period of what is perhaps best described as a “frozen conflict” during its second, the majority of Europeans are now hopeful. They are hoping not so much for a revitalization of transatlantic relations per se as for a new positive engagement of the US with the world and, without doubt, for an end to the many wars and conflicts. At the same time, though, observers, both academics and practitioners, are almost unanimous in their warning that no revolution in US policy or in transatlantic relations can be expected. Certainly, relations with the new administration will be very cordial, but President Obama will be bound by the implications of many of his predecessors’ decisions, and, furthermore, the fundamental causes of contention between Europe and America will not disappear with another occupant in the White House.

The fact is that since the end of the Cold War, a divergence in strategic outlook has arisen between the two sides of the Atlantic. With the disappearance of the Soviet threat disappeared the necessity to always subscribe to American leadership in NATO, the forum where security and defence policy was made. Europe gained a margin for maneuver to pursue its own interests and priorities, which, as it already knew from Cold War times, do not always coincide with those of the US. And Europe used that margin, as the European Union created first a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), then a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), and in 2003 adopted its own European Security Strategy (ESS), the clearest expression yet of how it sees its own distinctive role on the world stage.¹ The EU is now an actor in its own right, including in the fields of diplomacy and defense—it is too easily forgotten that over 80,000 European soldiers are deployed on operations (ESDP, NATO, UN, ad hoc coalitions). Of course, and sadly, the EU all too often is still internally divided and hence does not always live up to its ambitious ESS. But the fact remains that even though Europe and the US largely share the identification of the challenges, they have different ways of dealing with them. If, in the eyes of the US, the world is a dangerous place, seen through European eyes it is most of all a complex place—and that leads to very different

responses. This divergence is a permanent, structural factor. It will not disappear merely because Obama succeeds Bush—it is a consequence of change not on the American side, but on the European side. Europe has become more self-conscious about its role and place in the world.

The implication is that actors on both sides of the Atlantic have to accept that the EU and the US will no longer systematically agree on everything. If that flexibility is indeed accepted, it need not hinder cooperation on issues, and there will be many, on which they do agree. In that regard, what in US parlance is “the greater Middle East” will be the primary area of focus and the first testing-ground for Obama’s foreign policy. The decision, already announced by the Bush administration, to gradually withdraw forces from Iraq is unanimously welcomed in Europe. Even those who initially supported the US-led invasion of Iraq have realized that ultimately it aggravated, rather than alleviated, the global security situation.

There is less understanding, however, for the intention to increase the military buildup in Afghanistan. While Americans seem to distinguish between the “bad war” in Iraq, to be ended as soon as possible, and the “good war” in Afghanistan, which can (must?) still be won, public opinion in Europe does not make such a distinction. The public, and most of the decision makers as well, have increasingly come to see the war in Afghanistan as a conflict with no end in sight, which costs human lives without apparent results. Yes, all supported the operation against the Taliban and the safe haven it provided to al-Qa’ida—the European Allies even invoked NATO’s Article 5 on collective defense. But while creating a reasonably well-governed and democratic state in Afghanistan was always going to be difficult, it may have become impossible with the invasion of Iraq, not only because the main effort was diverted, but because the whole international climate was turned against “Western interventions.”

The military situation today is one of stalemate: the Taliban cannot beat the International Security Assistance Force, but ISAF cannot beat the Taliban either—and in the meantime, soldiers are killed nearly every day. Ten thousand more troops will not make a substantial difference—some military leaders claim as many as 400,000 would be needed to control the territory. In Europe, therefore, many feel that the priority should be the definition of an exit strategy: setting an, alas, more modest end-state that would allow the withdrawal of the troops within a relatively short time frame. So, if President Obama comes to NATO’s sixtieth anniversary summit in April 2009, probably his first major meeting with his European counterparts, to ask for more troops for Afghanistan, the answer will not be easy. Not only are Europe’s leaders less and less convinced of the

viability of the operation—at the current level of capabilities, there simply are not that many more deployable forces available.

Europeans are more eagerly looking forward to Obama's policy vis-à-vis Iran. It is often felt in Europe that until now the US has not given the negotiations about the proliferation issue an honest chance, and that the state of affairs today would be much better if they had. The need to contain Iran's nuclear threat represents great potential for successful transatlantic cooperation. For his part, it seems likely that Obama will sincerely commit to negotiations with Iran, while at the same time the European Council, in December 2008, emphasized the importance of dealing with Iran in earnest. Such an approach can only work if it is part of a broader regional initiative, involving, for example, the Gulf States. The same holds true for Afghanistan: an acceptable end-state can only be achieved in accord with Pakistan, India and others. So far, in spite of the rhetoric about "the greater Middle East," this regional approach has been missing in US policy. Ideally, the EU and the US could find agreement about a strategy toward the region as a whole, including the Israeli–Palestinian conundrum. That would require a more constructive engagement on behalf of the US, as well as a much more concerted and proactive stance on the part of the EU.

In Europe certainly, it is felt that the success (or failure) of any EU–US strategy is predicated on working with the states of the Middle East, rather than against them, in order to find a viable regional approach. If that is accomplished, it may help restore the image of both the EU and the US in the region. That improved image, in turn, is necessary if in the longer term the EU and the US also want to pursue a democratization agenda. Thus, idealism may give way to hopeful pragmatism.

Note

- ¹ Sven Biscop, *The ABC of European Strategy: Ambition, Benchmark, Culture* (Brussels: Egmont—Royal Institute for International Relations, 2007), <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/paperegm/ep16.pdf>.