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# Of Greeks and Romans: The EU, US and Security Strategy in a Multipolar World

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**Sven Biscop**

**>>** In relation to overarching security strategy, the EU and US have had high expectations of each other since President Obama took office. These expectations have not been fully satisfied. Some convergence has been forthcoming, as part of a ‘resetting’ of transatlantic strategic relations. But the EU needs to set its own priorities more clearly and proactively if it is to make a success of this new opportunity for the transatlantic relationship.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

‘Five years on from the adoption of the European Security Strategy, the EU carries greater responsibilities than at any time in its history’, reads the opening sentence of the December 2008 *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy*. The European Council adopted that report dutifully rather than enthusiastically. The Irish ‘no’ vote to the Lisbon Treaty of June 2008, the Georgian war and the financial crisis all conspired to nullify any new energy behind the EU’s international role.

When Barack Obama was inaugurated as President of the United States, the EU was not fully ready to react and reciprocate the revived American desire for multilateralism and true cooperation with ‘friends and Allies’. This led to disappointment in the US. But in the spirit of mutual goodwill prevalent since former President Bush’s departure, Washington showed understanding of the EU’s internal difficulties and patiently awaited the tortuous progress towards the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.

Now that the President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy have been appointed and a



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»»»» strengthened foreign policy machinery is being put into place, US expectations are high. The choice of Herman Van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton, unknown to most American observers, provoked mostly negative reactions, however. Yet, one could ask those same observers how many Europeans who do not specialise in US politics had heard of Barack Obama before he became a serious contender in the primaries, or how many in both Europe and America had heard of Hu Jintao before he became President of China. Americans must be forgiven though for placing too great an emphasis on the President – who unlike the US President is actually a chairman – and not enough on the High Representative. The latter is partly Europe's own fault for not using the rather more obvious title of Foreign Minister.

Americans should thus judge the post-Lisbon EU on the results of its actions. But Europeans must be aware that if expectations are high today and the US genuinely interested in partnership, this may be their last opportunity to prove themselves a real partner. Otherwise they risk irrelevance. In its relations with the US, the EU must choose whether to continue to play the part of the ancient Greeks to the US's Romans. The Greeks produced great plays and marvellous statues, but looked to Rome for a foreign and security policy.

### **A TALE OF TWO CITIES**

With Lisbon in place and unprecedented popularity scores for Obama in Europe, Brussels and Washington can use the current momentum to revitalise their strategic partnership, but only if they rebalance the transatlantic relationship. Both sides must also take into account that the only way of keeping this relationship viable is for the EU to become a fully-fledged strategic actor, and for the US to accept it as such.

On the US side, the Obama administration seems more willing than previous governments to accept European integration, including in the field of foreign and even security and defence policy. But between the lines of repeated American calls for

burden-sharing, one often detects the assumption that this European capacity will be used in the service of American strategy. Although that was the case during the Cold War, when US leadership was ultimately always accepted, the assumption no longer automatically holds true. There have always been differences in interests and priorities, but with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the existential threat that made the US security guarantee vital, the EU gained the political margin of manoeuvre to define and pursue its own priorities. This it did, notably in adopting its own 2003 European Security Strategy. The fundamental factor therefore is not who is occupying the White House – even though the negative effects of some of the Bush administration's policies certainly accelerated this evolution – but the gradual emergence of the EU as a strategic actor in its own right; a new structural factor in the transatlantic relationship. It is not the Americans, but the Europeans that have changed.

A viable transatlantic partnership must be flexible. In a multipolar world, the EU must be free to interact flexibly with all global actors. Nevertheless, the US will obviously remain the closest to Europe. The direct EU-US partnership therefore must be more comprehensive and more operational, so Europeans and Americans have a forum jointly to discuss global foreign affairs challenges. But they will sometimes agree to disagree, without that creating doubt about the partnership as such. This political partnership must be much more than the current 'summitry'. Perhaps permanent bodies are in order; in any case Europeans must speak to the US as the EU.

The implication is that within such a political partnership, NATO will become more of a technical, executive body. It has already lost much of its centrality as a forum for debate between Europe and North America. If the EU and the US decide to act together militarily, they will use NATO, but primary decision-making is between the EU and the US, de facto the two 'pillars' of the Alliance. In recent years it is increasingly in the EU that Europeans take the primary political decision on whether to act in a given crisis. If military action is decided upon, the secondary deci-

sion is to choose the operational framework: the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), NATO or the UN.

That choice will always be a tailored decision, based on which partners want to go along and which organisation is best suited to the crisis at hand – reality is too complex for a fixed division of labour to work. It is also in the context of CSDP that European military capabilities must be further developed, notably via the 'Permanent Structured Cooperation' provided by the Lisbon Treaty. Europeans have a capability problem, caused by the fragmentation of their defence efforts, which only they can solve, through increased cooperation and pooling. In short, the US does need not to 'beware Greeks bearing gifts': a more autonomous and more integrated EU will truly be a more capable EU.

#### HARD TIMES

On the EU side therefore, the time has now come to live up to both American expectations and to its own rhetoric and translate the ambitious Euro-

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pean Security Strategy – in reality a foreign policy strategy – into a proactive policy. Becoming a fully-fledged strategic actor requires identifying specific EU interests and defining concrete objectives in a number of priority areas, in order to direct policies and actions. On that basis, the EU must proactively engage the US, abandoning its usual reactive stance. On many of these issues, Europeans and Americans have different views, but on many of them the EU has something to offer. It is up to the EU to bring its assets to the table and debate with the US, so as to come up with joint policies based on common interests between equal partners. In a multipolar world, EU-US

cooperation is more necessary than ever, or the Atlantic community will face some hard times.

A top priority for the EU is its immediate neighbourhood. What is the desired end-state of the European Neighbourhood Policy? Can only democracy create a consensual value-based community and thus safeguard EU interests, or will democratisation create such upheaval that EU interests would be damaged? Only when EU interests are clear can a true strategic partnership with Russia be pursued. In view of their proximity and mutual dependence in the energy field, Brussels and Moscow have no option but to establish a close working relationship. The EU should not fear Russia, nor should it be in favour of everything that Russia is against. Brussels must make policy in line with its interests and priorities. If it can do so in partnership with the US, it will be all the more effective. Obama's outstretched hand on nuclear disarmament certainly is important in this regard. So too is NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen's constructive stance. But NATO can only ever be a complementary actor in this respect; the EU has the means to conclude a package deal covering all aspects of relations with Russia.

Enlargement is a second priority. A successful instrument so far, further enlargement will determine the EU's geopolitical position. It cannot proceed without strategic debate. If the accession of Iceland and eventually the Balkan countries – and perhaps one day Norway and Switzerland – is relatively uncontroversial, membership for Belarus or Ukraine would play a determining role in relations with Russia. Membership for Turkey would expand the EU into a whole new geographic area. Unless the EU aims to duplicate the UN, enlargement is a finite instrument in any case. Whether further enlargement is still necessary requires a careful assessment of the strategic pros and cons, something which the US must understand.

Third, as a strategic actor, the EU must also consider its regional objectives further afield. A reluctance to discuss interests and join up the different European presences, from aid and trade to diplomacy, has so far undermined policies towards Cen-

»»»»» tral Asia, the Gulf and Africa. Other regions too, such as Asia, Latin America and the Arctic, need a thorough assessment of EU interests to determine whether or not its presence should be stepped up. The US will have to take into account that true burden-sharing may imply accepting an EU role in areas where perhaps until now its presence has been rather limited.

Fourth, EU institutional objectives need to be defined. The EU must sharpen its view on the multilateral architecture, reconciling reform – which will imply fewer seats and votes for Europe in favour of the ‘emerging powers’ – with increased effectiveness of EU representation. If the growing prominence of the G20 has the positive effect of recognising the increasing power of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China), this can only be a temporary fix, pending reform of the permanent multilateral institutions. Is the US willing to sign up to comprehensive institutional reform, and indeed to ‘effective multilateralism’, that is to more enforceable international rules? These views should inform a truly strategic use by the EU of its partnerships with the BRICs, the existence of which too often seems more important than their content. Rather than objectives in their own right, the strategic partnerships are instruments to further effective multilateralism. The EU should identify shared interests with each of its strategic partners, in order to establish in a number of priority areas effective practical cooperation with those that share its interests in that specific domain, with the ultimate aim of institutionalising those forms of cooperation and linking them up with the permanent multilateral institutions. Is the US willing to engage in such a strategy of ‘socialisation’ with the EU, or will it bypass the EU as it did at the Copenhagen climate summit?

Finally, conflict resolution and crisis management are obvious priorities. A White Book should define Europe’s ambition as a global security provider. Regardless of whether in a specific case Europeans deploy under the flag of CSDP, NATO or the UN, a definition is needed of which types of operations European forces must be capable of; which regions and scenarios require intervention; and the scale of the effort to be devoted to these priorities. The EU

has played a leading role in the negotiations with Iran – now is not the time to abandon that, but to continue its proactive involvement and engage with the US. Now is also the time to try to revive the Quartet and forge joint initiatives to further the Middle East Peace Process. And now is the time for EU countries to think strategically about what they seek to achieve in Afghanistan, rather than passively awaiting US decisions.

## CONCLUSION

The US rightly has great expectations of the EU, especially now that the Lisbon Treaty has entered into force. Washington should not hesitate to encourage the more Atlantic-oriented EU members to make the fullest possible use of the new Treaty provisions. The choice for Washington is easy: continue to work with a divided Europe, which is easy to steer, but which has limited capabilities to bring to the table; or stimulate a stronger and more united Europe, which will undoubtedly demand a greater say in decision-making, but with which true burden-sharing will be possible. With Lisbon in place, the EU no longer has an excuse not to translate its ambitious Security Strategy into real strategic actorness. The most successful Roman empire was Byzantium, the rulers of which called themselves ‘Romaioi’ – in Greek.

*Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop is Director of the Security & Global Governance Programme at Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and Visiting Professor at the College of Europe (Bruges) and at Ghent University.*

**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
www.[fride.org](http://fride.org)**

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