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## Transatlantic Relations under Obama's Presidency: Between Dream and Reality

### US-EU Relations: Time for Assessment

On 4 November 2014, Democrats and President Obama had not just another bad night. The mid-term elections held on that day brought a huge success to the Republicans who succeeded not only in keeping a comfortable majority in the House of Representatives, but also in taking away majority from Democrats in the Senate. The power shift on Capitol Hill will certainly have international consequences. Most importantly, it could have an impact on the transatlantic relationship, since the Republicans are expected to put pressure on President Obama to take more decisive actions in terms of foreign policy, in particular regarding the enforcement of firmer sanctions against Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis and Iran's nuclear program.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, some important changes took place, too. The representatives of the three main EU institutions handed down the mandate to their successors. On 1 November 2014, the former President of the Eurogroup Jean-Claude Juncker succeeded Jose Manuel Barroso as President of the European Commission, while Italy's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini replaced Catherine Ashton as Vice President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Last, but not least, on 1 December 2014, the Belgian Herman Van Rompuy, the first President of the European Council since the introduction of that position by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 was replaced by the former Prime Minister of Poland Donald Tusk. Three new faces for Europe that President Obama needs to get familiar to and work with during his last two years in office – not an easy task for him knowing that, as he himself expressed it, he had some difficulties remembering “who is who” in Europe and getting used to the fact that when dialling “Europe's phone number” he can be put through to three different persons. Before looking in the future, it seems to be the right moment for assessing the state of transatlantic relations under Obama's Presidency so far.

Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 US presidential elections did not bring about a new golden age in transatlantic relations, as many Europeans initially expected. Of course, compared to the Bush' years of unilateralist and hard power-driven foreign policy disrespecting European allies unless they agree to align with US interests and take part in a “coalition of the willing”, tone and style of US-European relations changed significantly as the new Administration tried hard to renew American leadership on “moral and exemplary” basis<sup>1</sup>, as well as to put the US foreign policy back on a multilateral and “multi-partner<sup>2</sup>” track by pursuing what can be regarded as a “smart diplomacy<sup>3</sup>” strategy. However, as a matter of substance, there has been no significant change in transatlantic relations. Shortly after stepping into office, President Obama openly declared that America's security priorities had shifted from the Old continent towards economically and militarily rising Asia, and even identified himself as “America's first Pacific President<sup>4</sup>”.

Actually, during Obama's presidency there has been neither a drift nor a radical change in transatlantic relations, but rather they have been marked by ups and downs. Five main phases in the evolution of the US-European relations could thus be identified.

### Phase One: the Honeymoon

The first phase in transatlantic relations started even before Obama stepped in the White House. It was a very short but at the same time a very intensive and rich in emotions phase opened up by then candidate for presidency Obama's 2008 Berlin speech in which he forcefully declared that “America has no better partner than Europe” and that it “needs a strong European Union that deepens the security and prosperity of this continent, while extending a hand abroad<sup>5</sup>”. Only one speech was enough for candidate Obama to conquer Europeans' hearts and minds, eager for change after Bush' “go-it-alone” era. Public opinion polls spoke about Europe's “Obamamania<sup>6</sup>” and “Obamaeuphoria” given the very high level of support which Europeans granted to Obama - 69% of Europeans viewed Senator Obama favorably in 2008 with the highest ratings

being in France (85%), the Netherlands (85%) and Germany (83%) against only 19% of approval for Bush<sup>7</sup>. Despite the fact that Obama barely mentioned Europe during his first presidential campaign, his popularity in the Old continent stood almost unaffected.

Nevertheless, the US-EU honeymoon phase, as pictured by the Europeans, lasted as long as the honeymoon “lol”. The first event that put an end to the European dream-like condition came from the decision made by President Obama to skip the 24-25 May US-EU Madrid summit in 2010 as a result of “excessive summitry”<sup>8</sup>. After having visited Europe six times in 2009 and attended US-EU summits in Prague and Washington, Obama made it clear that he was “fairly unimpressed” with the transatlantic summits and therefore unwilling to go to any further meetings that “risk lacking substance”<sup>9</sup>. The second blow that entirely cooled Europeans’ enthusiasm off was Obama’s no-show at the 20th Berlin Wall Anniversary celebration on November 9, 2009 drawing heated criticism on both sides of the Atlantic as expressed by Rich Lowry, editor of National Review, who contended that “Obama’s failure to go to Berlin is the most telling nonevent of his presidency. It’s hard to imagine any other American president eschewing the occasion”<sup>10</sup>.

During this phase, some US-EU friction also appeared concerning the war in Afghanistan. The latter became the apple of discord in late 2009 after President Obama announced a surge of 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan while at the same time setting up the end of 2014 as a deadline for withdrawal. In reaction to that, some EU countries, including France, took a very critical stance towards this strategy and started rushing to retreat their troops from the field, thus putting at risk, according to Obama, the successful accomplishment of the operation.

## Phase Two: Back to Reality

What put a further strain on the US-European relations was the economic reality itself. The ever-growing amount of US public debt that exceeded 100% of GDP for the first time in 2011 drove the adoption of the Budget Control Act (BCA) by Congress that imposed the so-called “sequestration process”, i. e. automatic spending cuts, especially with regard to the defense budget. In order to meet strict budget constraints and avoid a fiscal cliff, the Pentagon put forward a new doctrine of “burden sharing” and “smart defense” that requires from the

European allies to take fully their part of responsibility and cost. But, the economic crisis also hit the other side of the Atlantic where public debt skyrocketed, especially in the Southern EU countries, thus making European governments commit themselves to implement austerity measures and limit spending in all spheres, including security and defense.

This phase was particularly marked by the farewell speech of former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Before leaving office in July 2011, Gates spoke on the future of transatlantic relations by bluntly stating that NATO had turned into a “two-tiered alliance” divided between the “soft” and the “hard” member states. While the “soft” ones, in his view, specialize in “humanitarian, development, peace-keeping, and talking tasks”, the “hard” ones conduct military operations. The “hard” members thus invest a lot in the alliance and bear almost the whole burden, whereas the “soft” members, according to Gates, only take profit from their membership without really engaging in the alliance and take their true responsibility. To support his words with facts, Gates pointed out that “just five of 28 allies – the US, the UK, France, Germany, along with Albania – exceed the agreed 2% of GDP spending on defense”. In 2014, the situation looks even worse because, according to NATO data, only three EU member states (France and Germany are no longer part of this group) meet the 2% target, namely Britain, Greece and Estonia. It is therefore obvious that the long lasting US calling on EU member states and especially on those who are also NATO members, to increase defense spending so as to face new threats is like a voice in the desert.

The NATO capability gap issue was in particular put forward during the 2011 intervention in Libya. Despite the fact that several EU countries officially took part in the UN-led international coalition, only two of them, namely France and the UK, provided military forces to enforce a no-fly zone so as to protect civilians from Kaddafi’s armed forces. In reality, the Libyan crisis generated both intra-European and transatlantic tensions. On the one hand, while France and the UK, both permanent members at the UN Security Council, cast an affirmative vote for Resolution 1973 (2011) authorizing “all necessary measures” to protect civilians and establish a “no-fly zone” over Libya, Germany, a holder of a non-permanent member seat at that moment, abstained from voting, thus clearly expressing its reserves regarding a military intervention against Kaddafi’s regime. On the other hand, although the French and the British

took the lead of the operation, it soon turned out that their military capability was quite limited, a fact that made the US abandon its “leading from behind”<sup>11</sup> tactic and give a solid hand to its European partners by letting NATO enter the game and take command over the no-fly zone over Libya.

Although NATO’s operation in Libya was hailed as “a model intervention” that reaffirmed that the “alliance remains an essential source of stability”<sup>12</sup> for its rapid response to the deteriorating situation in the country, it also made it obvious that Europe could still not be considered as a full security partner for out of the three leading EU military forces, Germany opted out of the intervention, while France and the UK clearly showed they lacked equipment to carry out correct targeting and airstrikes. As a result of that, there was no real burden sharing between the US and its European allies given the fact that the US provided 75% of the intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance data, and military equipment in the operation<sup>13</sup>.

### Phase Three: the US Pivot to Asia

Phase two undoubtedly paved the way for phase three. It was almost no surprise when the Pentagon revealed in its January 2012 “Strategic Guidance” that America’s new defense strategy will from now on be a balance shift to Asia-Pacific. What became famously known as the “US pivot to Asia” actually aims at rebalancing the US military presence and investment in Europe where the majority of countries are considered by the Pentagon as “producers of security rather than consumers of it”, towards the Asia-Pacific region where containing China’s military rise and potential threat has now become a strategic priority for Washington.

Against this background, the “US pivot to Asia” is generally seen as a “natural, if long overdue”<sup>14</sup> reaction to Europe’s inability to act as a security provider without counting on the US security umbrella. Moreover, at time of pressures for spending cuts imposed on Washington by the 2011 BCA, American officials see Europe as the best arena to disengage. Not only does the Old continent no longer represent any major threat for the US interests and the international security but also, as the Financial Times chief foreign affairs commentator Gideon Rachman outlined, “it has made the US lose its patience because of Europe’s inability to act on its own”. In addition to that, the “US pivot to Asia” can also be seen as a strategy of Realpolitik adopted by the

Obama’s Administration to face the new balance of power triggered by the “global power shift”, i.e. “the transfer of power from West to East” that occurred at the beginning of 2000s and is driven by the rapid economic growth of some emerging markets, famously known as the “BRIC”<sup>16</sup>. Consequently, the debate of a transatlantic drift took front stage during this phase. Some analysts like Michael Cox even argued that “in a world where economic power is shifting eastwards towards Asia, the transatlantic relationship is bound (at worst) to become irrelevant, or likely (at best) to become far less important”<sup>17</sup>, while others pointed out that “the relatively limited US involvement in Libya may be a sign of things to come, as America becomes less willing to carry the greater burden in interventions in Europe’s neighborhood”<sup>18</sup>. However, what seems problematic about the US retrenchment from Europe is to know if it will really make European countries spend more on defense, or if it will rather make them more inward-looking and unwilling to engage abroad.

### Phase Four: the PRISM Scandal

The scandal that broke out in June 2013 following former NSA (National Security Agency) contractor Edward Snowden’s revelations regarding the existence of a top-secret surveillance program code-named PRISM<sup>19</sup> aimed at processing electronic personal data including that of EU citizens and officials, strained further transatlantic relations. Some pundits even hurried to declare that “the public outrage that the affair has spawned could potentially be more damaging to the transatlantic relationship than the Iraq war was a decade ago”<sup>20</sup>. Although the disclosure of PRISM mass surveillance activities provoked an outrage across Europe, there was no coherent EU reaction and messages sent to Washington by the EU institutions were contradictory. For instance, the Resolution voted by the European Parliament in October 2013 that was calling for the suspension of the US-EU Terrorist Finance Tracking Program (TFTP) was rejected by the Commission. Member states’ reactions in response to the NSA revelations also varied significantly from one state to another. France and Germany where the public debate was really heated, announced they would seek new bilateral arrangements with the US to impose some strict regulations on their respectful surveillance activities. Germany even went further by suggesting that a bilateral “no-spy” agreement could be signed with the US but this proposal was refused by Washington. Other EU member states’ reactions were more limited as the one of the UK,

which could easily be explained by the disclosure about the British national surveillance services' complicity with the NSA.

NSA revelations actually provoked not just a new transatlantic drift. It was also about a crisis of trust in the transatlantic partnership caused by the breach of EU citizens' right to privacy and data protection by US surveillance agencies in the name of security measures. Solving this crisis seems complicated because it hinges upon understanding and bridging the gap between two fundamentally different approaches of balancing between national security and civil liberties. On the one hand, the European approach that is based on EU member states' constant efforts to strike the right balance between privacy and security. On the other hand, the American approach that tends to give priority to national security, even if it means violating privacy and data protection rights<sup>21</sup>. While the PRISM scandal revealed that the legal asymmetries between the EU and the US data protection laws were deeper than expected and could therefore hamper the transatlantic cooperation in the security field, especially regarding the fight against terrorism and serious crime, it also raised consciousness about the need for urgent reforms of the data protection legislation on both sides of the Atlantic. In this regard, reforms concerning the US surveillance system have recently been announced by president Obama, while the European Commission keeps on working on the Data Protection reform as well as on the Umbrella Agreement that was launched in 2011 as a framework agreement with the US on data protection in the area of police and judicial cooperation.

### **Phase Five: the Rapprochement**

What shifted the focus of attention from the PRISM scandal, thus making the US and the EU act again in tandem, was the crisis in Ukraine that began in November 2013 when pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich decided to break Ukraine's EU association agreement negotiations in favour of stronger ties with Russia resulting in the signature of a free trade agreement between the two countries. This decision triggered social protests in the capital Kiev causing the fall of Yanukovich's regime defined as a "coup d'état" by Russia. In reaction to this, Pro-Russian separatist protests arose in Crimea where the majority of the population is ethnic Russian. Pro-Russian insurgents took advantage of the chaos to seize key government buildings. The Referendum organized by the Parliament was a sheer success

with 97% of all voters backing up the proposal to join Russia. Despite some US-EU differences at the beginning as to what sanctions to be applied against Russia – the Europeans taking a more reserved stance towards Moscow because of the dependence of some EU countries on Russian oil and gas supplies, both the US and the EU officials condemned the annexation of Crimea and imposed the first economic sanctions on Russia in March 2014 that were enhanced in July and September 2014 targeting Russia's financial, defense and energy sectors.

Although the US-EU cooperation demonstrated a renewed transatlantic cooperation, some observers argue that the sanctions are not completely harmonized depending on the interests that each side of the Atlantic has with regard to Russia, which might make US-EU tensions resurface, especially if some EU member states start pressing to withdraw certain sanctions if a ceasefire in Ukraine is respected by Moscow<sup>22</sup>.

Another case of expected rapprochement between the US and its European allies is the US-led military intervention against the fundamentalist group Islamic state (IS) controlling much of eastern Syria and western Iraq, that both American and European officials defined as an imminent threat for the transatlantic and the international security. However, intra-European and transatlantic differences appeared again since some EU countries, such as Germany, decided not to participate in the military operation, while others put in doubt the efficiency of the US-pursued strategy of arming Syrian rebel forces to fight the IS on the frontline.

Last but not least, even the case concerning Iran's nuclear program on which Americans and Europeans have jointly been working for quite some time now, contain some subtle differences in the EU and US positions. While the Europeans tend to "play by the rules" by using only diplomatic means for pressure on Teheran, the Americans are conducting a cyber-war against Iran begun by Bush, but accelerated by Obama, that aims at attacking the computer systems running Iran's main nuclear enrichment facilities<sup>23</sup>.

The above-made analysis contends that transatlantic relations under Obama's Presidency cannot simply be qualified in terms of success or failure. Indeed, they were marked by ups and downs depending mostly on systemic factors, i.e. external factors related to the "global power shift", the global economic crisis and



the emergence of new threats on the international scene. For sure, Obama has not been the “Atlantic president” that Europeans dreamt for. Moreover, he never tried to conceal his boredom concerning the EU institutions’ heavy bureaucracy and complicated functioning, as well as his feeling of unease when discussing every time with a different representative of the EU on global issues instead of being given “Europe’s phone number” and being always put through to the same person. Nevertheless, thanks to his pragmatic and smart diplomacy-oriented foreign policy approach, Obama managed to improve transatlantic relations and make the transatlantic partnership work, especially in hard economic times and in the context of “hot cases” such as the crisis in Ukraine and the rise of the Islamic state, representing an imminent threat for the European and American security that need a quick and efficient joint plan and action.

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