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## Transatlantic Politics After the 2008 Election

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**Theme:** The fundamental realities on which the Atlantic relationship rests remain in place and are highly unlikely to disappear at any time in the foreseeable future.

**Summary:** Whoever the American voters choose in the 2008 presidential election, Europe is likely to experience a political honeymoon with the new President and feel relieved at the departure of the Bush Administration. However, it is important to avoid the misconception that has all too frequently distorted discussion of this subject during the past eight years: that the largely harmonious relations between the US and its European partners were rudely interrupted by the coming to power of the Bush Administration with what are said to be its unilateral, aggressive and warlike habits. Issues such as Iran, the Middle East, terrorism and international trade will ensure that there will not be the kind of easy harmony and seamless multilateralism that some observers have explicitly or implicitly ascribed to the pre-George W. Bush years and assumed would re-emerge in the post-Bush era. On the other hand, the fundamental realities on which the Atlantic relationship rests remain in place and are highly unlikely to disappear at any time in the foreseeable future.

**Analysis:** If Europeans could vote, the Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama would be overwhelmingly favoured. Senator Obama's European trip in July elicited broadly favourable reactions, and his vice presidential running mate, Senator Joseph Biden, has had extensive European contacts over many years, most recently in his role as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. European supporters of Obama do express concern about his position on free trade or note that the Illinois senator's relative youth and inexperience might work against him on election day. As for the Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, though only a minority of Europeans express sympathy for his candidacy and many indicate surprise and uncertainty about his choice of Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, there is nothing of the visceral antipathy towards him that one often finds directed at President George W. Bush. In any case, whoever the American voters choose, there is likely to be a political honeymoon for the new President and relief at the departure of the Bush Administration.<sup>1</sup>

Over the longer term, however, more fundamental factors are likely to condition the transatlantic relationship after the new President takes the oath of office on 20 January 2009. And here there is reason both to identify the basic durability in the European-

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay can be found in the Newsletter of the European Politics & Society Section of the American Political Science Association, Spring/Summer 2008.

American partnership as well as to expect periodic disagreements on specific issues, many of which stem from underlying asymmetries in the relationship.<sup>2</sup> It is thus important to avoid the myths and slogans that have all too frequently distorted discussion of this subject during the past eight years. The most common of these attributes a largely harmonious intrinsic character to relations between the US and its European partners, rudely interrupted by the coming to power of the Bush Administration with what are said to be its unilateral, aggressive and warlike habits, but ultimately to be consigned to the dustbin of history by the arrival of a new President.

Illustratively, early in this decade, at a time when European-American tensions were at their peak, one well-established American academic author predicted that NATO 'is soon to be defunct'.<sup>3</sup> But even a decade earlier, at the moment of the Cold War's end, Kenneth Waltz, had claimed that 'NATO is a disappearing thing. It's a question of how long it is going to remain as a significant institution even though its name may linger on'.<sup>4</sup>

In reality, after the acrimonious dispute between the leaders of France, Germany and the US over the Iraq War during the years from 2002 through 2004, as well as sharp disagreements on a number of other issues, relations between Washington and the major capitals of Europe had already begun to improve during the Bush second term. Though European public opinion has been highly critical of the war and of US policies more broadly, it is also worth noting that some two-thirds of the Presidents or Prime Ministers of the EU countries and NATO initially supported the decision to use force against Saddam Hussein. And in the past few years, with the exceptions of Spain and Portugal, governments of the moderate centre-right have come to power throughout most of Western and Central Europe. These are prone to find accommodation with the US as well as to welcome whoever American voters choose in November. European elites, opinion makers and the general public also appear more favourably disposed. Foreign audiences have followed with unusual attentiveness the free-wheeling and robust politics of the American presidential primary season. The openness of the selection process along with the emergence of an African-American and a woman as the two top Democratic Party candidates, caused many in Europe to contrast the American experience favourably with their own more closed and less flexible political systems.

An era of good feeling will surely follow the election, but the honeymoon will not last. In some cases the new Administration will find active and willing cooperation by European allies, but in others there will be differences of opinion, free-riding or outright opposition. None of these will cause a fundamental rupture. The Atlantic partnership will remain intact, but there will not be the kind of easy harmony and seamless multilateralism that some observers have explicitly or implicitly ascribed to the pre-George W. Bush years and assumed would re-emerge in the post-Bush era.

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<sup>2</sup> For an elaboration of this argument see Robert J. Lieber, 'An American View of Transatlantic Relations', in Michael Smith & Natividad Fernández Sola (Eds.), *Perceptions and Policies in Transatlantic Relations*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis, London and New York, forthcoming 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Kupchan, 'The Waning Days of the Atlantic Alliance', in Bertel Heurlin & Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen (Eds.), *Challenges and Capabilities: NATO in the 21st Century*, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, 2003, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Waltz, US Congress, Senate, 'Relations in a Multipolar World', Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 102nd Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 26, 28 and 30 November 1990, Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1991, p. 210, quoted in Gunther Hellman & Reinhard Wolf, 'Neorealism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and the Future of NATO', *Security Studies* 3, nr 1, Autumn 1993, p. 17.

For example, both Obama and McCain have taken positions on global climate change that depart from those of the Bush Administration. These will be welcomed in Europe, yet the task of finding common positions on potentially costly and contentious environmental policies will be challenging. On Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, which began some two decades ago, McCain has taken a very forthright stance and Obama's senior foreign policy advisor, Tony Lake, has been quoted as saying 'I genuinely believe that the most dangerous crisis we are going to face potentially in the next three to 10 years is if the Iranians get on the edge of developing a nuclear weapon. If I were the Europeans I would much rather put on the table more sanctions, together with bigger carrots, and have that negotiation than I would face that crisis down the road'.<sup>5</sup> Obama himself, in a television interview, has stated that, 'It is unacceptable for Iran to possess a nuclear weapon', adding 'It's sufficient to say I would not take military action off the table and that I will never hesitate to use our military force in order to protect the homeland and the US' interests'.<sup>6</sup>

While some European governments share these grave concerns, German companies, which are key trade partners with Iran, have been providing strategic materials and show little willingness to restrict their lucrative commerce. Thus Siemens has annual trade with Iran of between US\$500 million and US\$1 billion, and the Wirth company, another German exporter, has sold heavy tunnel-boring equipment, officially for an Iranian water project, but that has obvious dual-use capabilities for the building of underground nuclear facilities.<sup>7</sup> To date, many European governments have been unwilling to adopt the harsh economic sanctions that might cause Teheran to reverse its dangerous course. In the absence of such measures, the US might well find itself seriously contemplating the use of force and doing so in the face of European reluctance or more probably serious opposition.

Differences also are likely to persist on other Near East issues. Obama and McCain, along with a solid majority of the American public, are strongly supportive of Israel. On Afghanistan, with the exceptions of the UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark and to some extent Germany, other NATO countries have been unwilling or unable to provide the troops necessary to effectively counter the Taliban and al-Qaeda or have placed serious restrictions on where and how their troops can be deployed. In contrast, Obama says that Afghanistan must become the 'central front' in the War on Terror. For his part, McCain prioritises victory in Iraq while determined ultimately to prevail in Afghanistan as well.

Disagreements might also emerge on a range of other issues, for example free trade, agriculture, the reshaping of existing international financial institutions and whether and how to revamp the G-8 and the UN Security Council. Energy represents yet another complex area, with Europeans themselves divided as to how to respond to the problems of increasing dependence on Russia and the explosive rise in world oil prices. As additional evidence of this there is the weak EU response to the Russian invasion of Georgia. A number of countries, including Britain, the Baltic states and Poland have

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Daniel Dombey & Edward Luce, 'Obama camp signals intent to tackle "crisis"', *Financial Times*, 2 July 2008.

<sup>6</sup> 'Obama 'Surge Succeeded Beyond "Wildest Dreams"', Foxnews.com, 4 September 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Information on the tunnel-boring equipment is from Emanuel Ottolenghi, Director of the Transatlantic Institute in Brussels, cited in Benjamin Weinthal, 'Germany Admits Financing Larijani Forum', *Jerusalem Post*, 6 July 2008.

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favoured a stronger common policy –more or less comparable to the American position– while others, especially those such as Germany and Italy who are heavily dependent on imports of Russian natural gas, have preferred a notably milder response.

More important than these specific issues and the areas of agreement or disagreement that are likely to emerge, are the three fundamental realities that continue to shape the transatlantic relationship. First, there is the reality of a shared threat. Terrorism, radical Islamism and weapons of mass destruction pose a lethal danger to Europe and the US. Instability in neighbouring regions also constitutes a European concern, and one which is best dealt with in cooperation with the US. Thus even at the height of the Iraq War controversy, cooperation on counterterrorism between the American and French authorities was exemplary. In the aftermath of the Madrid train and London underground bombings of March 2004 and July 2005, the security services in Britain, France, Germany and Spain have thwarted dozens of mass casualty plots, and the head of Britain's MI5 has stated that approximately 2,000 residents of the UK pose a threat and that terrorism there has not yet 'reached its peak'.

Secondly, despite the heavy burdens of its commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US possesses unique military strength and power projection capabilities that no other country can match for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the EU's own limitations ensure that despite its 490 million population, technological proficiency and advanced economies, its military potential will continue to go largely unrealised. Though a prominent realist author, Barry Posen, has asserted that 'The European Union has gradually strengthened its military capabilities so that it can get along without the US if it must,'<sup>8</sup> few other observers would share this judgment. More representative, in this case of European views, is the acerbic remark by the former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer that 'Europe is weak and the US is blind'.<sup>9</sup> The limitations here are deep rooted and include institutional shortcomings, evident in the failure of the Lisbon Treaty to gain unanimous consent, the lack of a genuinely common and integrated European foreign and military structure, inadequate defence spending and a political and cultural climate inimical to the development of these capacities. Hence Europe continues to need the US as a partner in facing regional instability and future security threats. In turn, the US needs the European partnership for joint efforts in peacekeeping, burden sharing, against WMD proliferation and even for the significant legitimacy that cooperation with allies represents in the complex interplay of domestic and foreign policy.

Third, despite what Sigmund Freud termed the 'narcissism of small differences', Europe and the US possess common interests and values. Though we are economic competitors, we share fundamental interests in the successful functioning of common economic, financial and trade institutions as well as in the operation of NATO and in the stability and success of international institutions and regimes, most of which grew out of close allied cooperation in the years after World War II. And regardless of divergent views about the death penalty, the role of religion in society and the use of force, the shared legacy of the enlightenment and liberalism, especially in the rule of law, liberty, democracy, religious freedom, free speech and assembly, and full equality for women and minorities, connect

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<sup>8</sup> Barry Posen, 'The Case for Restraint', *The American Interest*, November 2007, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Joschka Fischer, 'Between Kosovo and Iraq: The Process of redefining the Transatlantic Relationship', Eighth Gerd Bucerius Lecture, Washington DC, 22 May 2007, reprinted in *German Historical Institute Bulletin*, nr 41, fall 2007, p. 9-19.

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Europe and America in ways that differentiate them from many other societies and regions.

Ironically, one of the greatest obstacles to cooperation lies in Europe's institutional weakness. A truly unified EU would be a more capable transatlantic partner and ally. It would possess more flexibility as well as decisiveness in international negotiations and bargaining, as contrasted to the rigidity that often characterises policies so laboriously hammered out among 27 separate countries. To be sure, there would be inevitable differences with America, but a more effective capacity to act as a great world power would facilitate both responsibility and accountability. Despite their enormous impact in economics, finance and trade, the inability of Europeans to act in common on the most pressing political and security issues is a source of dual resentment –on the European side at not possessing the same authority and decision-making capability, and on the American side that the burdens of leadership are disproportionate–.

**Conclusion:** The fundamental realities on which the Atlantic relationship rests remain in place and are highly unlikely to disappear at any time in the foreseeable future. As a consequence, it is a safe bet that the post-election environment will be one in which Europe and America continue their long partnership *and* that they do so while periodically finding themselves in disagreement about policy issues.

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