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Change in Washington: New Momentum for US-EU Relations 6 April 2009, Paris

Context:

This seminar took place during Barack Obama's first official visit to Europe, after the G20 London summit, the NATO Strasbourg/Kehl summit, the EU-US meeting including the President's address on nuclear disarmament in Prague and on the day of Obama's visit to Turkey. Consequently, the bulk of discussions focused on the transatlantic agenda and on the question of what change we can expect in transatlantic relations following the election of Barack Obama? The seminar also addressed the policies in Afghanistan, the Middle East Peace Process and the question of EU-US relations.

America's New Foreign Policy

This panel was intended as a discussion on the change in the US and the new direction that American foreign policy is taking. However, given the timing, it was perhaps inevitable that this discussion became more transatlantic, more Euro-centric, in nature. Below is a summary of the discussion's major themes.

What Change in American Foreign Policy?

The discussion's lead question was: how different really is America's new foreign policy, compared to foreign policy as it was pursued under the Bush administration? There was no uniform response to the question but some speakers cautioned against the expectations of a major change. On the other hand, it was argued, there is a tendency among the transatlantic experts to focus too much on past divergences and ignore the transformation of US foreign policy, as apparent in Washington's new attitude towards multilateralism, climate change, Russia or Iran.

The Russia Policy

The new ('reset') Russia Policy was singled out for special attention in this panel. Again, there was some scepticism here as to whether the 'reset' policy was going to be sustainable. It was argued in this context that every US administration begins by attempting to recast relations with Russia only to be confronted with the issue's complexity and then essentially opting for continuity. However, it was also argued that the Obama-Medvedev accord on nuclear disarmament was a good step forward and that it was likely to deliver a replacement of the START treaty.

Two separate points were made in the context of a possible US-Russia *détente*. First, it was argued that a possible US re-engagement with Russia may force the Europeans to establish a more unified position *vis-à-vis* Moscow. Second, the US's outreach to Russia concerns global questions, such as disarmament, but not regional ones, such as the Caucasus or Ukraine. Should this be maintained the EU might end up being the main arbiter of Russia's regional policy. This, arguably, would not always be beneficial for the EU.

European Responses to America's New Foreign Policy

A major theme on this panel was the question of why Europe is put in the position where it has to respond to the new American agenda. For some, this meant that the change is the US was in fact limited. But others argued that Europe has put itself in a reactive position by not being able to develop a coherent position on Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process or Russia. It was also argued that 'Europe now has the man it wanted', hence, the excuses to do less are no longer viable. In this context several American participants raised the question of whether Europeans will take some of the Guantanamo prisoners, what would be the European contribution in Afghanistan and whether the Europeans were prepared to join Obama's call for nuclear disarmament?

It was also argued that a momentum for a reinforced transatlantic co-operation was clearly there, as demonstrated by the enthusiastic reception that has greeted Obama in Europe. The Obama phenomenon shows, it was argued, that there has been an untapped potential for American leadership in Europe.

Afghanistan

This discussion focused on the review of the US's Afghan policy, the role of the EU and the future of NATO.

The American Review

The Afghanistan policy review process in the US was completed shortly before President Obama's visit to Europe. A domestic American debate has had a major impact on the outcome of the review process. Some in the US (on the left of the Democratic party) argued that the objectives of the Afghan operation should be scaled back and that Pakistan's toleration for insurgency presented the key problem. Other voices argued in favour of moving towards a defensive security posture – away from the focus on combating the Taliban and towards the protection of the civilian population. This method would essentially replicate the model applied by General

Petraeus in Iraq. Still others argued in favour of a bottom-up strategy that would involve an outreach to all sectors of the Afghan population, including those that participate in the insurgency.

President Obama chose to incorporate all these perspectives into his review. As a result the review narrows the purpose of the mission (i.e. to the prevention of the resurgence of al Qaeda or other terrorist threats in Afghanistan) while at the same time expanding the scope of the mission (i.e. to counter-narcotics and the protection of the local population). The review also recommends the empowerment of local communities and it places much greater emphasis on Pakistan. One of the implications of the review, according to the speaker, is that the Europeans will be asked to do more to establish effective control over the territory.

Two types of comments on the US review were made by participants. First, some questioned if the review constituted an adequate response. For example, an argument was made that the review did not sufficiently address the issue of preventing civilian casualties among the Afghan population, which remained the biggest source of grievance for the Afghans and which was fuelling the insurgency. It was also argued that the review's narrowed focus on the prevention of the resurgence of al Qaeda may further erode public support for the operation in those European countries (like Germany) where the mission is presented as a nation-building and peacekeeping operation.

Second, there was criticism of the fact that the EU has not produced its own review paper or a strategy on Afghanistan. Related to this was the criticism of what was described as 'half-hearted' or 'weak' European engagement in both the NATO's ISAF mission and the EUPOL mission.

EU Role

Afghanistan was a major item on the agenda of the EU-US summit in Prague. The US requested that the EU take a leading role in observing the August elections and it boost its contribution to police reform. In both cases the EU is looking for ways of providing support but much will depend on the arrangements reached between the EU and NATO, which may be blocked by Turkey.

In the discussion a question was posed as to whether the EU considers Afghanistan an CFSP/ESDP issue or whether it sees it exclusively as a NATO issue. There were split responses on this question. Some argued that the EU should not get more involved and that dealing with Afghanistan, including civilian operations, should be left exclusively to NATO and the US. However, others argued that leaving the issue to NATO would create an impression that this is essentially a US-led intervention which has been resented by regional powers and it is clear now that Afghanistan will not be stabilised without the co-operation of its neighbours.

The issue of capabilities was also raised in the discussion. It was argued that a greater EU involvement on the civilian side in Afghanistan would affect EU operations in Kosovo or Africa. Some American participants responded to this by saying that this is really a question of political will; if the EU could mobilise 5,000 personnel for the

mission in Kosovo, why can't it increase the size of the EUPOL mission beyond the current 200?

NATO

Afghanistan has exposed serious cracks in NATO's unity. With some nations making more efforts than others, some operating under caveats and others suffering heavy casualties, it was argued that NATO's solidarity is virtually on the verge of collapse. It was also argued that the uneven burden-sharing means that in effect the ISAF operation is a 'coalition of the willing'. Some speakers were saying that, as reflected in public opinion, support for this operation is so low in Europe that no further increases in troop contributions are feasible. An American response to this was that the leaders in Europe have failed to make the case for engagement in Afghanistan.

Middle East Peace Process

The panel's key question was: is the two-state solution still a viable option or not? The incremental approach of moving towards a Palestinian state, as prescribed by the Oslo agreement, has not worked. Should we abandon the incremental approach in favour of a 'big bang' solution? The other issues that dominated this discussion were the US's Middle East policy and US-Israeli relations, the role of Iran and the role of the EU.

Towards a Palestinian State/ US-Israeli relations

None of the speakers questioned the viability of the two-state solution and most of them argued that it is still the best option. However, there was also a consensus that the incremental approach has not worked. In this context, one of the speakers argued against returning to the so-called Clinton Parameters and proposed looking rather at the model offered by the Madrid Framework.

The speakers were also arguing that the US's policy on the peace process is evolving – as evidenced in the appointment of special envoy George Mitchell and the more open attitude towards the possibility of a national unity government – however, at this point in time it is too early to say how far-reaching this change would be. Still, it is certain, it was argued, that the Obama administration will not abandon its commitment to a two-state solution. This is one of the reasons why US-Israeli relations are expected to suffer after the election of the right-wing government of Netanyahu, who has not committed himself to the two-state solution. It was also argued that the influence of the pro-Likud lobby (such as AIPEC) in the US is now tainted with controversy, hence its impact is weaker.

Iran

The role of Iran as a potential spoiler in the peace process was also discussed. Most speakers argued that Iran will continue to link the nuclear issue with its attitude towards the peace process and its support for Hamas. Tehran is aware that it may lose its leverage on the peace process, hence, it has begun to portray the issue as a broader Islamic issue and not just an Arab matter. However, it was also argued that once

Hamas become engaged in the political process, Tehran would lose all its current leverage.

Iran wants to engage with the US and for that it is prepared to sacrifice a lot. But Iran will not back down on the nuclear issue, at the minimum it wants to achieve the status of a threshold state (not actually in the possession of but being able to produce the bomb in a short space of time).

The role of the EU

Some argued that the Europeans should return to their former policy of a greater sympathy with the Palestinians. This would not only be more consistent with the traditional European approach but it could also potentially mean that the EU would be able to regain some of its influence in the region. Moreover, by being seen as more pro-Palestinian the EU might also be more able to exercise a more effective and restraining influence on the Palestinian actors. However, as for now, it was argued that some European states, especially the UK, Germany and the Netherlands, support the Israeli position almost unconditionally. Many speakers argued in favour of ending the boycott of Hamas. One of the speakers, while not objecting to the engagement of Hamas, argued that the Europeans should not forget about Fatah and especially about the people outside of Abbas's inner circle.

EU-US Relations

This panel reflected on the place of the EU in the US's foreign policy, the question of EU-NATO relations and the priorities that should dominate the EU-US bilateral agenda.

The EU in US foreign policy

The EU-US summit, which took place a day before the seminar, was clearly overshadowed by the NATO summit and even more so by the G20 summit. As a result the EU did not feature very prominently during President Obama's European trip. The view expressed by one of the speakers that despite the G20 initiative the EU-US economic dialogue remains very important was not challenged. However, the relevance of the EU as a political actor is much weaker.

A speaker argued that one of the main reasons why the Prague summit was marginalised was because the EU and the US differ on what should be prioritised. Another speaker argued that the EU provides no more than an added value in transatlantic relations, the foundations of which are bilateral relations between the US and individual member states of the EU. However, it was argued further, some essential issues of major importance for the Obama administration – such as the economy, energy and climate change – are addressed within the EU-US format. The EU is also beginning to play a growing role as a security partner for the US. For example, the Prague meeting addressed the EU's involvement in the civilian side of the operation in Afghanistan – which was identified as essential in the American review.

Most speakers agreed that the framework of EU-US relations must be reformed. It was pointed out in this context that some think-tanks have already launched studies to produce recommendations, including a possibility of a treaty, for the reform of this relationship.

EU-NATO relations

The US will continue to prioritise NATO as the channel for security co-operation with the Europeans. However, the US has moved away from seeing the ESDP as a challenge to NATO and this change, according to one speaker, is real not tactical. The logic of Berlin Plus has not worked and it is being replaced by practical co-operation between the EU and NATO on the ground. This, however, is routinely hampered by the persistence of the Cypriot-Turkish dispute.

The US's involvement in the ESDP mission in Kosovo sets an interesting precedent and a clear manifestation of the changing attitude in the US.

Priorities for EU-US Relations

The speakers named the following priorities for EU-US relations (in order of importance)

- The Economy (by far most frequently mentioned)
- Regional Stability – the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe
- Afghanistan
- Climate Change.