

35 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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When US President Barack Obama published his first National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2010, it bore a striking resemblance to the ones published by his direct predecessor George W. Bush's administrations in 2002 and 2006. Even Obama's close advisors such as current deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes had to admit as much. Although the president had changed and the overall tone and texture of US foreign policy changed along with him, the fundamental structure of American interests nevertheless remained the same. Obama's first NSS broadly reflected this continuity.

There was, however, one important difference between Obama's 2010 NSS and the two Bush administration documents that preceded it. That difference was the priority given to the need for a deep and lasting economic recovery. President Obama referred to economic performance as "the wellspring" of American power: a strong and resilient domestic economy is a vital strategic interest, he argued, because without that strength and resilience the government would struggle to achieve the country's other objectives.

The European Union faces a similar hierarchy of interests – with economic performance the number one strategic priority. The cornucopia of challenges to be addressed should not obscure that structural dependence. If anything, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) depends on the strength and resilience of economic performance even more than in the United States.

To understand why it is so vital, only a quick look at the strains on European solidarity posed by the financial crisis is needed.

The asymmetry of challenges

Strategic challenges are almost always asymmetrical. For example, Europe's southern flank is more exposed to the influence of cross-border migration, it has closer bonds with the peoples of North Africa, and it is more strongly affected by the instability in Libya and the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Conversely, Europe's eastern flank is more influ-

enced by Russia, its historic relations are with the post-Soviet states, and its attention gravitates towards the conflict in Ukraine.

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The asymmetry is not limited to traditional notions of security. EU member states also differ in their exposure to new security threats, like those associated with Islamic extremism, critical infrastructures, energy, migration, and climate change. The pattern of asymmetry is different, as is the structure of competition for limited resources, but the dependence on economic performance to underwrite European solidarity remains unchanged.

It's the economy

The situation is further complicated by the impact of security challenges on economic performance. Instability on Europe's borders cuts European exporters off from traditional markets, jeopardises access to energy, encourages cross-border migration and discourages cross-border investment.

Such factors matter not only because of their macroeconomic impact but also, and more importantly, for the way they tend to reinforce the differences between Europe's member states. Think of the divergent economic interests of Poland and Italy or Finland and Greece.

The United States experiences similar asymmetries, but also enjoys two institutional advantages. One is the capacity to exercise strategic discretion. Although Congress is implicated in foreign policymaking, the broad priorities of US foreign policy are set and implemented by the executive branch. The other advantage is the ability to create dynamic structures for burden sharing through taxes, expenditures, and side-payments.

The European Union on the other hand relies more on collective decision-making and has fewer mechanisms for redistributing the costs of engagement. Hence, solidarity is more important for action at the European level and internal frictions are more constraining.

If anything, the European Union should give even greater strategic priority to a deep and lasting economic recovery than the United States. The reason is neither to trade off butter for guns nor is it to abdicate global responsibility. Europe is too important for world order to withdraw into splendid isolationism. That is one point (of many) on which the Bush and Obama administrations are in agreement. A strong Europe is an American strategic interest.

Only by attending to economic performance as the wellspring of European power, can the EU achieve that transatlantic objective.

