

TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS UNDER AN OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Europe, like virtually every other corner of the world, has been closely watching the US election campaign, looking for clues as to what might change in its relationship with the United States when a new president emerges from among the triumvirate of Senators Obama, Clinton and McCain. After the heated debates in 2002 and 2003 over the war in Iraq and a rise in anti-American sentiment in recent years, Europe is anxious to renew its ties with the United States and start anew.

Sometimes comparing him to President Kennedy, many Europeans are attracted to his messages of hope and change and assume that his commitment to bridging bipartisan divides in the United States applies to bridging the Atlantic as well. But what exactly might Europe expect from an Obama presidency?

Looking at his public statements and his piece in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 2007, Barack Obama shows a clear commitment to reestablishing America's strong partnership with Europe based on mutual respect and shared interests. He appears troubled by the fact that the last eight years have seen a deterioration of the transatlantic relationship and a decline in America's moral authority. As such, Obama has stated that he plans to rebuild America's relationship with Europe through NATO, EU-US ties, and common policies on a wide range of challenges such as the proliferation of WMD, terrorism, climate change, and several regional crises in the Middle East and Africa.

More specifically, if Barack Obama wins the election, Europe should prepare itself for requests to do more, particularly with regard to NATO's mission in Afghanistan. In recent months, several international reports have highlighted the mission's many shortcomings – the lack of troops and civilian resources, inadequate coordination, etc. Obama has called for the United States to increase its troop presence on the ground and has stressed that he would like to see Europeans follow suit. He would also like NATO allies to lift the caveats that limit how their troops can contribute to this critically important mission. On the reconstruction side of the equation, Obama believes that Afghanistan urgently needs greater resources and an enhanced civilian presence so that



Barack Obama speaks accompanied by US Air Force General Merrill McPeak

One of the candidates that is getting an inordinate amount of press coverage in Europe is Barack Obama.

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each and every military victory can be followed with a longer-term stabilisation package.

On Iran, Barack Obama has stressed that if he were to win the election, he would conduct direct talks with Iranian leaders – a reversal of the current administration’s policy. In a speech on 13 September 2007, Obama explained his position: ‘At every stage of this war, we have suffered because of disdain for diplomacy. We have not brought our allies to the table. We have refused to talk to people we don’t like. And we’ve failed to build a consensus in the region. As a result, Iraq is more violent; the region is less stable; and America is less secure. We need to launch the most aggressive diplomatic effort in recent history, to reach a new compact in the region. This effort should include all of Iraq’s neighbors. And we should also bring in the United Nations Security Council.’

Because Iran continues to pursue both nuclear weapons and ballistic weapons, Obama would support a careful exploration of deploying a missile defence system in Europe as an important component of protecting the Euro-Atlantic area. That said, Obama believes that such a system must be based on sound technology that works. Barack Obama would therefore work with America’s allies in Europe – possibly through NATO – to develop and test technologies that could counter short, medium, and long-range ballistic missile threats. Obama supports efforts to find a solution that meets American, European, and Russian interests, although, like the current administration, he would not accept a Russian veto over the deployment of the system.

There are several areas where Obama’s policies differ sharply from those of the Bush administration but two that might be of particular interest to Europeans are climate change and the rule of law. First, on climate change, Obama firmly believes that the threat of global warming is real and has stated his intention to change America’s image on this issue from that of a global laggard to a global leader. Europe should expect bold new policies from an Obama administration to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In addition to implementing a cap and trade programme, Obama would like to reduce America’s reliance on foreign oil and increase investment in renewables.

Second, on rule-of-law issues, Obama has committed to closing Guantanamo prison and prohibiting the use of torture as an interrogation technique. Europeans may also be interested in knowing that Obama would like to limit the use of extraordinary rendition – an issue that has created considerable tension in the transatlantic relationship in recent years. Obama hopes that these measures would allow Europeans and Americans to return to a shared counter terrorism agenda based on trust and an unwavering commitment to the rule of law.

Finally, Obama has expressed an interest in focusing on a number of other regional and bilateral issues such as the US-Turkish relationship, the US-Russia relationship and a number of brewing conflicts in the Balkans.

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Barack Obama disembarks with the Chargé d'Affaires of the US Embassy in Addis Ababa

However, when it comes to isolating Iran economically, Obama takes a harder stance. For example, he would ask European allies to end their practice of extending large-scale credit guarantees to Iran, assuming it continues to support terrorism and defy the Security Council’s calls to suspend uranium enrichment. In spring of 2007, Obama also proposed legislation that would require the US government to publish a public list of companies that invest more than \$20 million in Iran’s energy sector.