

Analysis

Mobilising EU – US Foreign Policy Co-operation: EU Diplomacy, the Middle East and Eastern Europe

by Marcin ZABOROWSKI, 15 May 2006

This brief is the outcome of Marcin Zaborowski's mission to Washington DC between 20-26 March 2006. During his trip Marcin attended a conference on 'NATO and the EU: Improving Practical Cooperation' at the National Defence University, visited the Office of European Union and Regional Affairs, the Office of Arabian Peninsula & Iran Affairs and the Office of Chinese and Mongolian Affairs at the State Department. Marcin also met some staff members from the two Houses of Congress and the Library of Congress as well as from some leading think-tanks.

Key Points

- It is the general perception in Washington that EU-US relations are on the road to recovery after Iraq, though overall interest in the EU remains moderate in the United States.
- The US debate on Iran is gathering pace, and with a tenor which is increasingly belligerent. The outcome of the American debate is, as yet, impossible to predict. The EU needs to capitalise more systematically on the fact that its opinions on Iran are listened to in Washington. In this way, the EU can contribute to and influence the American debate.
- Motivated by its global agenda of democracy promotion, the United States is placing renewed focus on the states in Eastern Europe – especially Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia.
- It is imperative that the EU Council establish a stronger presence in the United States and especially that it reaches out to Congress.

1. EU-US Relations as viewed from Washington

As seen from Washington, there has been a general improvement of atmosphere in US-EU relations and there is no doubt that Europe has been spoken about in warmer terms in Washington since 2005. The following factors have led to this change:

- Co-operation and convergence of views in dealing with Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Eastern Europe (Ukraine and Belarus in particular).
- The changes in the US administration – the departure of the often anti-European neo-conservatives (Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Pearle and Douglas Feith) and the return of seasoned diplomats and veterans of the administration of the President's father (Robert Zoelick, Philip Zelikow and Robert Kimmitt).
- The increased importance of the traditionally pro-European State Department. Whilst during Bush's first presidency the State Department was balanced by the National Security Office and the Pentagon, under Condoleezza Rice's leadership the State Department is now an undisputed driver of US foreign policy.

- Military and diplomatic overstretch. With the situation in Iraq getting out of control and the President having committed himself to maintain the military presence there at least until the end of his Presidency (2008), the US is in obvious need of allies willing to relieve it so it can increase its military and diplomatic involvement in other parts of the world.

However, while a majority view in the US is that relations with the EU, or with the 'Europeans', are unproblematic and on the whole good, this is by no means a unanimous opinion. There are three distinctive categories of opinion on the EU, with each of them being prominent within different sets of actors.

- 1) **The optimist view** (State Department). Relations with the EU are excellent but the EU could do more to improve burden-sharing. The standard view there is the following: 'We have recovered from the argument caused by the war in Iraq. Our values and interests are close if not identical. Our co-operation in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Balkans is very good, although a stronger European involvement in Afghanistan and (civilian) in Iraq would be appreciated'. Beyond the burden-sharing issues some concern at the State Department remains considering the European position(s) towards Hamas and some disquiet as to whether the E-3 will keep up their current position on Iran (which the US is very happy about).
- 2) **The critical view** (conservative think-tanks + left-wing intellectuals). This is a patronising and essentially anti-European perspective according to which relations with Europe remain bad, although the State Department pretends otherwise. The reason for this is that the Europeans have simply not woken up to the challenges of the 21st century (globalisation) and continue to indulge in anti-US sentiment. The proponents of this view (e.g. the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute) are deeply critical of the internal condition of the EU. They argue that the EU is marred by economic malaise, that it is inward-looking and unable to address its growing immigration crisis.

Whilst the above-outlined view is widespread among conservative circles, lately a link has been established between this perspective and some left-wing American intellectuals. The latter group criticises Europe for its inability to address homegrown Islamic fundamentalism and the alleged growth in continental anti-Semitism (see the following books: Bruce Bawer, *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within*; Claire Berlinski, *Menace in Europe: Why the Continent's Crisis is America's, Too*).

- 3) **Disinterest** (legislative branches). For this group, relations with the EU are not a top foreign policy concern of the US. This is a traditionally domestically-focused group whose interest in foreign policy (limited at the best of times) stems from the immediate security concerns of its constituents. These are dominated by the war in Iraq, the nuclear dispute with Iran and uncertainty about China. With the possible exception of Iran, the EU does not often appear in this context. In fact, even in the case of Iran there is little knowledge of the role of the E-3/EU. Some attention is given to the events in the Balkans (Kosovo) and more so to Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Belarus) but these are not the top issues on which Congressional or Senate staff choose to focus.

There is a lingering sentiment within this group that Europe represents a force of yesterday and that the US should concentrate on developing relations with India and China – seen as the powers of tomorrow.

2. Key Areas of Co-operation

As seen from Washington, the top issues in US-EU security co-operation are the Middle East, Eastern Europe and, to a much lesser extent, the Balkans and Darfur.

The Middle East

It is certainly the area of highest importance in US foreign policy – not least because it has a major domestic appeal and it influences voting preferences. It is significant, for example, that most legislators, many of whom have no apparent interest in foreign policy, have made speeches and taken positions on Iraq, Iran and to a lesser extent on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in the latter case, interest is often tied to the prominence of the Jewish electorate in the legislator's district, for example, in the New York district of Hillary Clinton).

*Iran*¹

The EU, and especially the E-3, are considered to be on the 'same wavelength' as the US on this issue. In general it is acknowledged, especially at the State Department, that the European method of negotiating with Iran – as opposed to the US policy of ignoring it – has been the correct one. With the common belief in the US being that the Europeans are soft and would do anything to avoid conflict, Washington has been positively surprised about the strength, coherence and consistency of the European negotiating position.

The European position was considered crucial in securing the vote at the IAEA on referring Iran to the Security Council. In particular, it is believed at the State Department that the EU has been instrumental in bringing Russia on board during various stages of the dispute. The American officials are also aware that due to their policy of engaging with Tehran, the Europeans have a better understanding of and more developed expertise on the nature of the Islamic regime.

The current congruence of the US and European positions may however not last. In its recent (March 2006) Security Strategy the US singled out Iran (together with Syria) on a number of counts – aiding and financing terrorism, developing an illegal nuclear programme, domestic authoritarianism – and explicitly threatening Tehran with the use of force in this context. The strategy was followed by the publication of an alleged plan of American attack on Iran in *New Yorker* on 8 April.² The article, by Seymour M. Hersh, argued that the Pentagon presented the White House with an option to use bunker-buster nuclear bombs against Iran's underground nuclear sites. The White House denied these claims and President Bush repeatedly stressed that the US would continue to pursue a diplomatic solution to the Iranian crisis, yet still, there is a lingering suspicion in the EU that the US is moving down the same route as it did with Iraq.³

There is no doubt that some circles in the US favour a military option against Iran. They include first and foremost leading neo-conservatives such as Richard Pearle or Douglas Feith. Whilst it is true that neo-conservatives are currently on the losing end in terms of political fortunes in Washington, it is nevertheless important to note that the general mood on Iran in the Congress is turning hawkish. For example, the likely contender for Presidential elections in 2008, John McCain (Republican), has called for harsher policies against Iran.⁴ Perhaps more significantly, the House of Representatives has debated a new bill on sanctions against foreign companies investing in Iran's energy sector – which is harsher than the 1996 Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (**ILSA**) and if passed it would first and foremost hit

¹ For more on US-Iran relations see the recent note by Walter Posch, EUISS Research Fellow, 'The US versus Iran: Towards Regime Change' (*Iran Series* No. 1, May 2006).

² Seymour M. Hersh, 'The Iran Plans: How far will the White House go?', *The New Yorker*, 17.04.2006.

³ See the article by former National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Do not attack Iran', *IHT*, 26.04.2006

⁴ 'McCain Remarks at the German Marshall Fund', 28.04.2006. 'McCain introduces resolution calling on FIFA to ban Iran from soccer cup', 6.04.2006

European companies as well as complicate negotiations with the Chinese and the Russians in the Security Council.⁵ The new bill – called the ‘**Iran Freedom Support Act**’ – would make it much more difficult for the President to waive sanctions against foreign firms on national security grounds – the provision that the White House used in the past so liberally that no firms have been sanctioned under the ILSA law.⁶

In its current form the proposed bill has probably little chance of becoming law. The Senate does not like its radical tone and the White House considers it unhelpful in the context of finding a consensus in the Security Council. The executive also does not like the bill’s proposed automaticity (the bill requires the President to take certain steps and regularly report to the Congress on its implementation), which would limit the President’s freedom of action. However, in some shape and form the ILSA act is likely to be extended and the President’s liberal waiving of sanctions curtailed.⁷

The ILSA affair illustrates that the mood on Iran in the US is turning more bellicose and more unilateral. There is an unmistakable philosophy in the ILSA bill of creating a regime of sanctions independent of the UN and centred around the US. The new proposed bill – the Iran Freedom Support Act – has also required that the President report to Congress on what countries co-operate (and, more importantly, which do not) with the US’s sanctions regime. It is illustrative, for example, that the only time the bill uses the word ‘multilateral’ is in the context of referring to America’s own (ILSA) regime.

Finally, it is also worth noting that, according to some conservative commentators, there is a growing consensus in the US for the President to take radical action against Iran. It is argued in this context that it is highly likely that the President will deal with the issue before the end of his term.⁸

Iraq

The expectations of EU support in Iraq are modest but the view in the US is that there is a growing convergence of aims. The Americans believe that the transatlantic fallout over the war is largely over and that the Europeans share their concerns regarding the future of Iraq. The US has appreciated Javier Solana’s statement following the bombing of the Samara shrine and his urging of all sides to resume the process of forming the national unity government.

It was also noted that Chancellor Angela Merkel has spoken firmly in favour of aiding the process of building democracy and unity in Iraq and that Prime Minister de Villepin urged the international community to unite in helping Iraq to move forward. As a clear sign of the European commitment to the stabilisation of Iraq, the US officials quote member states’ donations of military equipment to the Iraqi army, amounting to 120 million dollars, and the EU’s development assistance that, according to US sources, has been worth 200 million. Following these developments it is expected in the US that the EU will ‘embrace’ the new Iraqi government which took office on 3 May.⁹

Beyond these diplomatic niceties it is clear that the US has very modest expectations of what the Europeans would be prepared to do in Iraq and what difference that would make. Whether one supported or opposed the war, the prevailing mood in the country is that it is up to the US alone to deal with Iraq. The President’s announcement that the decision to leave Iraq will be taken by future administrations – hence committing the US engagement at least till 2009 – was received with relief by those who supported the war (and who suspected the Pentagon of

⁵ See the latest draft ‘Amendment in the nature of a substitute to H.R. 282 offered by Ms. Ros Lehtinen of Florida’: www.house.gov/international_relations/109/20646.pdf

⁶ Kenneth Katzman, ‘The Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA)’, *CRS Report for Congress*, 19.04.2005

⁷ Interviews in the Congress, March/April 2006.

⁸ Interviews in conservative think-tanks, Washington DC, March 2006.

⁹ ‘US-European Relationship: Opportunities and Challenges’, Testimony of Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on Europe and Emerging Threats, 6.03.2006

drawing up plans to withdraw) and with resignation by the growing camp of the opponents. But there was little discussion of European or any other international engagement in this context.

Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The election of Hamas and the dilemma this presents for US foreign policy strikes right at the centre of America's foreign policy debate. With the administration so keen on the 'democracy-promotion' argument (for example in the newest Security Strategy) it is no doubt problematic, if not embarrassing, for Washington that democracy in Palestine brought to power a party that does not recognise Israel, describes suicide bombings as a 'legitimate resistance method' and is full of anti-US rhetoric. Whilst the Security Strategy argues that democracy is the best way to address the causes of terrorism, the sceptics, such as the former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, argue that democracy applied to the nation that is not ripe for it 'brings terrorists to power'.

The administration will no doubt continue to argue that the election of Hamas was a fluke and that the party will have to shed its radical principles or be rejected by the Palestinian people. But, for the time being, Washington appears confused and uncertain on how to deal with Hamas. The mantra these days is 'nobody wants to reward Hamas but also nobody wants the Palestinian authority to collapse'.

In this context, the Europeans appear as potentially helpful.

Whilst officially the EU takes a hardline approach towards Hamas, the Europeans are generally considered to have better lines of communication with the Palestinian Authority. Faced with the dilemma of how to reconcile the boycott of Hamas with maintaining supplies of aid, the US seems most eager to act on the advice of and in concert with the EU. With Russia pursuing an increasingly active policy towards Hamas, the US is also strongly in favour of revitalising the Quartet and avoiding being isolated on the issue.

The administration has not yet decided whether Hamas is reformable or not. At the moment it seems to be prepared to give Hamas some more time and work towards forging a multilateral co-operation on the issue. Interestingly the calls for a harsher line against Hamas come rather from the Democratic Party, most prominently from Senator Hillary Clinton.

Eastern Europe

Somewhat surprisingly, Eastern Europe is the object of renewed attention in the US. It figured prominently in the March 2006 Security Strategy and in the policy of the State Department during Bush's second term. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, Condoleezza Rice and some of her closest collaborators, including Assistant Secretaries Robert Zoelick and Dan Fried, are former sovietologists whose foreign policy experience has been shaped by dealing with the end of the Cold War and focusing their attention on Russia and the CIS. This adds to the usual institutional bias of the State Department, which for generations dealt with the Cold War format. In fact, some neo-conservatives have started to complain that under its new leadership the State Department is pre-occupied with Russia and the former Soviet area and that Secretary Rice is unable to conceptualise in non-Cold War terms.¹⁰

Secondly, the focus on Eastern Europe is intellectually consistent with the democratisation agenda and, arguably, it is more likely to deliver success than promoting reforms in the Middle East. The whole process is perceived in terms of the continuation of the 1989 revolutions and as such it supplies America with a feelgood factor. A success in Georgia or Ukraine would, in the view of the State Department, reinforce the message that democracy could be successful anywhere. The next in order is Belarus – the country that – given its size and strategic importance – has received an unusual amount of attention from Secretary Rice, who has referred to it as the 'last outpost of tyranny' and 'the last dictatorship in Europe'.

¹⁰ Interviews, 20-26 March 2006, Washington DC

Interestingly, the old-new interest in the East comes hand in hand with a renewed emphasis on acting in concord with the Europeans and this remains the area where transatlantic co-operation is clearly sought.

Ukraine

Despite some anti-EU criticism from conservative think-tanks, the State Department stresses that the change in Ukraine would not be possible without the EU's engagement in the process. Following the splitting up of the Orange camp and the latest elections in Ukraine, the US has called on the EU not to give up and to strengthen its engagement with Kyiv. However, despite the calls from Kyiv and some new member states, the US has been cautious not to pressurise the EU on Ukraine in the same way as it has done with Turkey. As argued by Assistant Secretary of State Dan Fried, the EU is experiencing enlargement-fatigue and Ukraine is nowhere near ready to be considered for membership. However, Washington considers it important that the EU keeps an 'open door' policy and does not actively discourage Ukraine from seeking a European vocation.¹¹

As for itself, the US has continued to encourage Ukraine's pro-western orientation, employing a mixture of economic and political instruments. Hence, Washington has granted Ukraine a market economy status and signed a bilateral WTO market access agreement, which is perceived as a step towards full WTO membership. Washington encouraged Ukraine's closer co-operation with NATO and it worked towards Kyiv completing a 'membership action plan' next year and becoming the Alliance's full member in the foreseeable future.

Belarus

Whilst Ukraine is considered by Washington as a 'democracy in the making', Belarus is described as fully authoritarian and is spoken about in the same breath as North Korea, Sudan or Iran. Belarus has therefore become one of the most prominent targets of the promotion of democracy policy and Minsk has been one of the most detested and criticised governments in Washington. The US's self-professed strategy towards Minsk is now about 'regime change'. However, so far this strategy has been stronger on rhetoric than on action. The funds dedicated to the support of pro-democracy movements are symbolic and almost exclusively focused on breaking the state monopoly on media access and broadcasting. Otherwise the strategy seems to be centred on isolating Lukashenka's regime. There is little indication of a more pro-active approach, for example, reaching out to reform-minded members of the government.

Importantly, however, there is a strong transatlantic dimension in the US's Belarus policy. Whether it was in response to the harassment of opposition leaders or national minorities or electoral irregularities, the US sought to co-ordinate its response with the EU.¹²

Lately, in response to the fraudulent Presidential elections in Belarus, the US joined the EU in political sanctions and pledged funds for European radio and television broadcasting to Belarus. The US Congress and the European Parliament issued a joint declaration condemning the electoral fraud and harassment of opposition leaders, which was the first such initiative between the two legislatures. Finally, the EU and the US planned a joint diplomatic mission, led by Director General Robert Cooper and Assistant Secretary of State Dan Fried, who were meant to travel together to Minsk. When the Belarusian authorities responded by trying to receive them separately, the US and EU stayed united and the mission was cancelled.¹³

¹¹ See the speech by Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary for European and Euroasian Affairs, 'Who'll Vote for Freedom? Elections in Belarus and Ukraine', CSIS, Washington DC, 10.03.2006.

¹² For example, see the following statement 'Belarus: Detentions and Violence against Peaceful Demonstrations in Belarus', State Department, Washington DC, 24.03.2006.

¹³ See the Testimony of Daniel Fried 'US-European Relationship: Opportunities and Challenges', 6.03.2006

Transatlantic considerations seem to be amongst the main factors behind the US's policy towards Ukraine and Belarus. In both cases the US aspires to show that it continues to lead (by strongly supporting national and pro-democracy movements) and demonstrating that it cares about Europe. This strategy is also relatively inexpensive and the risks involved are not excessive. Additionally, as argued above, the East Europe policy is consistent with the US's global democracy-promotion agenda.

3. Strengthening the voice of the EU in the US

On all of the issues discussed above there is much room for the EU to make its position better known and its outreach to American domestic actors improved. The State Department, the White House and the Congress, whenever they are addressing security co-operation with the Europeans, tend to emphasise the role of NATO. In its public pronouncement the State Department sticks to the line that 'security co-operation with the Europeans would remain conducted through NATO and only in co-operation with the EU'.¹⁴ NATO is also very popular in Congress where it is considered the prime framework for conducting relations with the Europeans.

This prioritisation of NATO is of course only natural for the US but it is still surprising given that – with the exception of the prospect of Ukraine's joining the Alliance – NATO has almost no place in the most topical issues of EU-US co-operation, as they have been discussed above. To be sure the Balkans or Darfur – where NATO remains active – are of course still present in the US debate but nowhere near as prominently as the Middle East or even Eastern Europe. It is also clear that, despite this continuing commitment to talking to the Europeans via NATO, there is a growing recognition in the US that the opposite is happening and that direct co-operation with the EU is bound to be growing. This tendency is openly – though not publicly - admitted by the State Department officials who deal with European affairs. Even the more traditional Congress has set up a caucus on EU affairs and it holds hearings on EU-US foreign policy co-operation. However, it seems that the EU itself is not always adequately prepared to promote its foreign policy amongst US domestic actors. For example, when the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee debates transatlantic co-operation on Iran, the EU is represented by the officials of E-3 countries and, occasionally, by the head of the Commission's delegation Ambassador John Bruton. According to the Committee's permanent staff, there has been no presence of the Council's representative at these meetings and the staff did not even know who should they speak to at the Council.¹⁵

Whilst both the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee and the House of Representatives' Committee on International Relations are subjected to lobbying practices from various national and interest groups, the presence of the EU has been barely apparent in this context. This is a significant oversight since the Congress's competencies in foreign policy are in fact quite considerable. For example, whether it is in the case of the Iran sanctions law (ILSA) or the issue of aid policy towards the Palestinian Authority, the initiative is on the side of the legislature with the executive's power limited to acceptance or veto.

But perhaps one of the main tasks facing the EU in the US is to make itself better known as a foreign policy actor. For example, it is clear that there continues to be confusion in the US about the internal workings of the EU and the respective roles of the Commission and the Council. It was quite revealing, for example, that in his testimony to the Congress Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Dan Fried referred to Javier Solana as 'High Commissioner'.¹⁶

¹⁴ As stated by Mr. Gary Robins, Principal Deputy Director, State Department Office of European Security and Political Affairs at the National Defence University Conference 'NATO and the European Union: Improving Practical Cooperation', Washington DC, 20. 03.2006

¹⁵ Interview, Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff, Washington DC, 24.03.2006.

¹⁶ See the Testimony 'US-European Relationship: Opportunities and Challenges', 6.03.2006

4. Recommendations

- **Iran** - There is an apparent escalation of preoccupation with Iran in Washington, which means that the President's assurances that only diplomatic solutions to the crisis are currently being considered cannot be fully accepted by the EU. The issue has become internalised – with prospective Presidential candidates, members of the Congress and Federal agencies each trying to have their input considered and their voice recognised in the debate. In the past, the internalisation of foreign policy issues often pushed the administration to adopt a bolder and more aggressive position. The EU should be prepared for a possibility of an American military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities before the end of Bush's presidency.
- In its East Europe policy, Washington will be pushing for the further expansion of NATO and it will be supporting the forces that are in favour of greater independence from Russia. Aspects of this agenda are congruent with the EU's interests, but as well as supporting East European states' emancipation from Russia, the EU should also focus on promoting functioning democracy and effective state institutions there.
- **The EU Council needs to strengthen its presence in Washington and especially in the Congress.** It is essential that Congress obtains a better understanding of the EU as a foreign policy actor and that a more permanent dialogue is established between the Council and the two branches of the US government.