

United States: What Does the World Expect of the “Indispensable Nation”?

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When a new US president arrives in the White House on January 20, 2009, the entire world hopes to turn a new page. The Bush era – which has been deeply marked by the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (as chapters in the “global war on terror”) – has had a profoundly unsettling effect on international relations. It has generated serious divisions within the Atlantic alliance, massively increased the volatility of the greater Middle East, spawned new and dangerous fissures in Central and South Asia, fostered a mood of uncertainty and growing unease in North Asia, offered a global rallying cry for Islamic jihadists, undermined the legitimacy and the efficacy of the United Nations, and fueled an unprecedented level of anti-Americanism across the globe. Never in the history of the United States has an incoming president been faced with so many urgent and immensely difficult strategic challenges deriving in large part from policy errors committed by the outgoing administration. Whoever sits in the Oval Office on January 21, 2009, will immediately have to set priorities, both temporal and spatial, among the many severe challenges awaiting him: Iraq, Iran, Israel/Palestine/Lebanon, Afghanistan/Pakistan, North Korea, China, Russia, Georgia, energy, climate, trade, immigration, to name only the most obvious.

Indeed, the challenges will be so severe that the question posed in the title of this essay will also be reversed: What will the United States expect of its friends and allies in the way of help to deal with those challenges? Senators Barack Obama and John McCain both have made it clear that their first major overseas trip – early in 2009 – will be to Europe, where they will hope to reconnect with their closest allies and negotiate assistance. Active cooperation will be expected in most of the difficult areas being faced, but especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. This essay will therefore focus particularly on the prospects for a new transatlantic rapport under the incoming administration.

The End of the “Uni-polar Moment”

Regardless of who takes office in 2009, the entire world will be hoping for a new US approach. The United States remains the only global superpower with vast resources in every area: military, economic, commercial, scientific, technological, educational, and cultural. And it remains the world’s main provider of public goods. That situation is likely to last into the middle of the century, but the story will nevertheless be one of gradual, relative decline.¹ Although the US armed forces were able rapidly and easily to defeat both the military resistance of the Taliban and the shell-shocked ranks of Saddam Hussein’s army, the clearest lesson of these two wars is that military power alone has severe limitations (especially if it has to be used) and that the tasks of regime change, post-conflict reconstruction, and nation-building require a far greater – and more sophisticated – range of instruments and skills than was previously imagined. The US national debt, which will rise to \$10 trillion by 2009,² has continued to increase by an average of \$1.80 billion per day since September 2007. The vulnerability of the US economy to external holders of dollar reserves, or to capital wealth funds, the volatility of the credit sector (as illustrated by the sub-prime crisis), and the steep decline of the US dollar against most major currencies, all underline one basic lesson of economics: things that cannot go on forever . . . will not. The comparative decline of the US manufacturing industry, symbolized by the near bankruptcy of General Motors and the continuing crises at Ford and Chrysler, now overtaken in the US domestic automobile market by Toyota and Honda, suggests a structural vulnerability in the labor market that the fierce debates over NAFTA during the 2008 primary campaign served only to accentuate. At the same time, the steady “rise of the rest” (Zakaria, 2008) – China, India, Brazil, Indonesia – as well as the resurgence of Russia under Vladimir Putin and the increasing presence of the European Union (issues of institutional reform notwithstanding), suggest that the “uni-polar moment” will prove to be momentary and that the world will increasingly be structured by an ever smaller number of ever larger units. The US will have to learn to deal with these competitive poles in new and imaginative ways.

Meanwhile the world will look to the new administration to change its recent behavior in several major ways. The most important will be a return to multilateralism and the use of international institutions as the guiding principles of US diplomacy. As Bill Clinton put it, “We should act together

1. For examples of the “declinist” literature, see Kupchan (2003) and Zakaria (2008). A contrary view is expressed by Lieber (2008).

2. The figure registered in August 2008, as this essay was going to press, was \$9,572,403,168,805.79.

with others whenever we can, and alone only when we must.” Despite the enormous power and influence enjoyed by the US, the Bush era has demonstrated that there are few – if any – problems around the world that the US can fix on its own. Unilateralism has been tried: it does not work. Most nations around the world will also expect the new administration to abandon the doctrine of preemption (which was, in fact, a doctrine of prevention) and to deploy the US military with caution and parsimony (Walt, 2005). They will expect Washington to pay far greater attention to international law – or, at the very least, not to flout it openly as in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and CIA rendition flights. Most nations around the world will also put pressure on the new administration to drop its fascination with the notion of a “league of democracies,” as either a complement or (still worse) an alternative to the United Nations. There is virtually no support for this idea, even among established democracies (Carothers, 2008). A constructive lead on climate change is expected from the world’s biggest polluter. The Global South will expect the new administration to accelerate its development aid activities and to adopt a more constructive approach to the elimination of global inequalities. All countries will be hoping that the new administration will adopt a much subtler and more comprehensively framed approach to counter-terrorism.

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Expectations in Asia and Africa

That said, the expectations of different actors around the world vary enormously. Asian nations in general, while remaining nervous about each other, are already moving towards greater autonomy in their strategic relations with the United States. China, beyond aspiring to continue to increase its trade with the entire world, expects the US to respect its inexorable rise as a commercial power and to avoid a naval arms race in the Pacific. Since 95% of Chinese trade is conducted by maritime transport, the domination of the Pacific by the US Navy is seen in Beijing as a strategic problem. The US is unlikely to withdraw or reduce the size of its Third and Seventh (Pacific) Fleets, for fear of stimulating naval expansion by Japan and/or India. But China is currently concentrating the bulk of its defense spending on naval assets – largely destroyers and submarines – which will inevitably be perceived in Washington as a challenge to US dominance in the Pacific (You, 2006). If Washington’s strategic objective is to persuade China to embrace the international system as a stakeholder – rather than to seek, as has been the traditional course of rising powers, to overthrow the existing system (Ikenberry, 2008) – then China will clearly expect some trade-off in terms of the naval balance in the Pacific.

Japan, for its part, is seeking to “normalize” its military assets both as a way of escaping from its strategic dependency on the US and as a reflection of its growing presence on the world stage (Hughes, 2006). It is attempting to transform its “passive pacifism” into an “active pacifism” through a new approach to the deployment of force (Ito, 2008). In this endeavor, it finds itself in a very similar position to that of Europe vis-à-vis the United States. Surrounded by nuclear powers, Japan has few illusions about American capacity to guarantee its island sanctuary indefinitely. That is in large part why Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda (2008) proposed that the Pacific Ocean be turned into an “inland sea,” whose stakeholders would include not only Japan, China, and Korea, but also the ASEAN states, India, Russia, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as North and South America. His aim is to persuade every Pacific-Rim country to cooperate in turning the Pacific Ocean into a sea of stability and order, based on peaceful – and positive-sum – commerce and exchanges. The ASEAN Member Countries are attempting, for their part, to strengthen their collective resources by establishing an ASEAN Community by 2015 (Ong, 2004). They expect US cooperation.

India has recently come to expect the United States to play a much more balanced role in its relations with the various nations both on the Asian Subcontinent and in Asia as a whole (Mohan, 2006). It will be looking to the new US president to find a way of solving the Afghanistan/Pakistan crises in ways that will bolster India’s security and regional influence. New Delhi will expect Washington to continue to view India in a light at least as favorable as that in which the US has traditionally viewed India’s two main Asian rivals, China and Pakistan. India expects

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to be taken seriously as a major partner of the US. The new administration in Pakistan, for its part, will be expecting the US to adopt a far more even-handed and judicious approach to its policy on aid to the Islamic state, and to leave Islamabad to determine for itself the direction of its policy on the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and to Afghanistan. Russia will look to the new president – at least if it is Obama – to treat Moscow as a proper strategic partner, to revise US policy on NATO in general and NATO expansion in particular, and to rethink plans for a missile-defense shield in Europe (Simes, 2007). The Russia-Georgia conflict of August 2008 has considerably increased the complexity of US-EU-Russian relations.

The Islamic world is far too diverse a reality to allow of a single set of expectations for the new administration. In general, the US is viewed more

negatively in the Muslim world than anywhere else on the globe.³ Traditional allies in the Gulf and in North Africa will hope that US support will continue as in the past, with no new conditions linked to democratization. Arab states critical of the US role in the Middle East will expect a far more even-handed approach to the resolution both of the Iranian problem and, especially, of the Israel-Palestine problem. Africa as a whole – given its experience over recent decades – will probably expect very little, though the prospect of a black president with a Kenyan father (and extended Kenyan family) must raise some hopes across the continent at least for greater sensitivity to Africa’s problems.⁴ Most African nations have serious misgivings about the new US Africa Command, which has had to be headquartered in Stuttgart because of a lack of enthusiasm in Africa (Mushtaq, 2007).

Expectations in Europe

It is in Europe above all that enormous expectations are likely to be vested in the new administration. The crises surrounding the invasion of Iraq, the blatant attempts on the part of the Bush administration to divide Europeans against one another (“old” and “new”), the reservations expressed repeatedly – at least until comparatively recently – about the strengthening (or even the existence) of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), the constant dashing of European hopes for a new initiative in the Middle East, quarrels over NATO’s strategic objectives and the implementation of Alliance policy in Afghanistan, misunderstandings about the nature and sources of contemporary terrorism, and many more issues have brought transatlantic relations to their lowest ebb since the Second World War (Anderson et al., 2008). Indeed, European expectations are so high in some quarters that one major analyst has warned of a coming crisis of high expectations. “Europeans,” writes Kori Schake (2007: 1), “will expect a more pliable, chastened and multilateral United States. They will want it to start solving problems on terms comfortable to Europeans. The US will expect a more helpful Europe that will take more responsibility and run risks to solve common problems. Neither aspiration will be met.”

Some European analysts, and particularly former officials (Patten, 2006), long for a return to the more balanced and mutually respectful relationship

3. *Pew Global Attitudes* survey, 2008, 23. Among the eight Muslim countries surveyed, only Tanzania has a positive image of the US (56%). Elsewhere, the “unfavorable” score, even among countries traditionally seen as allies of the US, is unrelenting: 75% in Egypt, 79% in Jordan, 65% in Pakistan, and 76% in Turkey.

4. Interestingly, sub-Saharan Africa is the *only* part of the world in the *Pew Global Attitudes* survey to show consistently high support rates for the US: 65% in Tanzania, 64% in Nigeria, and 60% in South Africa.

that existed under the administrations of Bush Sr. and Clinton. That is very unlikely to happen and in any case relies on a somewhat rose-colored reading of the transatlantic relationship in the immediate post-Cold War world. Bill Clinton was by no means averse to acting unilaterally if he saw fit, and the elements of continuity between the Clinton and Bush administrations were as numerous as the elements of discontinuity. Moreover, the US and the EU have both changed significantly since 2000. The US has experienced, for the first time since 1812, the trauma of personal vulnerability across the homeland. Neither of the presidential candidates has questioned the need for the US to project power overseas in order to hunt down residual “bad guys.” The main difference between the candidates in this regard is their contrasting view of where the “bad guys” are mainly located and precisely how to go about dealing with them. The EU has also changed in the 21st century: despite the ongoing drama of institutional reform, it has grown as an international actor. Its voice in world trade is increasingly unified and powerful. Its new currency has been embraced not only by the peoples of the 15 nations that have adopted it but also by currency markets, which have pushed it to record highs against the dollar and effectively transformed it into an alternative reserve currency. The EU has also undertaken 20 overseas missions under the mantle of ESDP and is increasingly solicited around the world as a purveyor of crisis management and as an artisan of nation-building (Dobbins, 2008). The EU is beginning to think in strategic terms.

Under these circumstances, when the new US president visits Europe in the spring of 2009, with the expected long shopping-list of “alliance” requests for assistance, the EU should be ready with its response. It is not enough for Europeans to “expect” something new and better of their partner and ally. They must also be clear on what they can bring to the table, how much they can offer in the way of assistance and burden-sharing, and especially how they can bargain for support in certain policy

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areas and against diplomatic or other US “concessions” in other areas. The timing is propitious. A new generation of leaders has come to power in Europe, replacing those who fomented division either by their unconditional support for the US or by their knee-jerk opposition to it. Angela Merkel has demonstrated that Germany remains a good, though critical, ally. Gordon Brown, while marked by his Atlanticist instincts, is fully aware of the dangers of excessive obsequiousness – his own political future depends on his distancing himself somewhat from Washington. Nicolas Sarkozy has successfully transcended the rather facile image of France as the eternal spoiler and, by offering a new start to Franco-US relations (notably

through his return to NATO), has laid the groundwork for a new transatlantic rapport. Violence is receding in Iraq (even if only temporarily), the G8 has finally reached some degree of agreement on the necessary approach to climate change, and most allies agree that the new focus should be on stabilizing Afghanistan. So what are likely to be the respective expectations of the main transatlantic partners in the coming year?

Towards a New Transatlantic Partnership?

The immediate and most urgent focus will be on the broader Middle East from the Levant to Afghanistan. Both the US and the EU have high expectations of positive partnership in these areas. But the precise priorities are different. On the US side, Iraq and Afghanistan will top the agenda. On the EU side, the priorities will be Israel/Palestine and Iran. Whether it be President Obama or President McCain, there will be an American expectation that the Europeans – who are, after all, much more directly concerned than the US by the outcome of the Iraq crisis – will finally agree to help out in some form, even if only through the deployment of additional assets for the training of Iraqi policemen and rule-of-law officials. Either president would expect considerably more European assistance in Afghanistan, in terms of both military and civilian assets. The EU, for its part, will expect new political will to be injected into the Israel/Palestine stand-off, notably by the adoption in Washington of far more conditionality in US support for Israel and by a new, more even-handed approach to the plight of the Palestinians. Europeans generally will also be expecting the new US president to abandon almost 30 years of refusal to speak to Iran and to adopt a more comprehensive attitude towards the current bargaining round. None of these expectations is likely to meet with an unequivocally positive response from the other side.

Many Europeans remain unmoved by the US imbroglio in Iraq, and, despite the geographical proximity of Mesopotamia and a far greater dependency on energy supplies from the region, they fail to see why they should help the US out in what was a war of choice that has turned sour. Public opinion remains convinced – massively – that US failure in Iraq is inevitable (Pew, 2008: 28).⁵ Most EU members of the "coalition" have either removed their troops or are in the process of doing so. Most Europeans seem to hope that the US will quit Iraq as soon as possible. Yet "failure" in Iraq, however defined, would have major long-term negative repercussions

5. Asked whether the US mission would succeed, only 25% of Spanish, 26% of German, 33% of French, and 40% of British respondents answered affirmatively.

for Europe. The EU has been tight-fisted with aid, pledging only \$3.5 billion since 2003, of which only about 10% has been disbursed (Japan has been far more generous). The EU's training program for Iraqi rule-of-law officers (EU-JUST LEX) has involved 1,500 judges, investigating magistrates, senior police, and penitentiary officers for a total cost of less than €30 million through June 2009. The least the EU should offer would be to double that program. It has also been proposed that the EU should appoint an "EU-Options Team" to be based in Iraq and to develop a strategic approach to the EU's potential input under the new US administration (Gowan, 2008).⁶ There is no doubt that the EU Member States and publics expect a significant change in US policy towards Iraq – especially if Obama becomes president. If the EU is to have any influence at all over that shift, it needs to have hard options available by January 20, 2009.

On Afghanistan, both the EU and the US recognize the gravity and the urgency of the present situation, as well as the need to generate an appropriate response. While both Barack Obama and John McCain emphasize the need for more US and EU military deployments, most EU Member States stress the need to re-balance Western efforts in favor of nation-building rather than war-fighting and in favor of differentiating between, on the one hand, Pashtun elements of the Taliban (with whom political negotiations are conceivable) and, on the other hand, al-Qaeda fighters (with whom they are not). To date, US officials, and both presidential candidates, have refused to engage with the EU's approach. Although the EU has contributed some 8,000 troops to the International

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Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, its direct contribution has been the much more modest police training scheme, EUPOL Afghanistan, involving some 230 personnel to date (though the Council agreed in May 2008 to double this number). While many in the EU fully measure the historical perils of intervention in Afghanistan (Jones, 2008), there is nevertheless official determination to increase EU commitment under the new US Presidency (EU, 2008: 26–29). A similar dilemma exists with respect to Pakistan, with both sides recognizing that the solution to Afghanistan lies, increasingly, with Pakistan. A recent report from the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2008) argues that the EU and the US can do much more to help to stabilize the security situation in Pakistan by training the security forces and particularly the police. However, the expectations on either side of the

6. Gowan notes that a proposal by Carl Bilt to appoint an EU Special Representative to Iraq failed to gain approval in the European Council.

Atlantic as to how the other side will respond to its overtures on Afghanistan are currently at cross-purposes. A proposal has been formulated that a transatlantic "Baker-Hamilton-style" commission should be appointed, with the approval of the major EU powers, Javier Solana, and the two presidential candidates in an effort to coordinate appropriate responses before the January 2009 deadline (Korski, 2008).

The Future of the Middle East

The EU has long considered the Israel-Palestine stand-off to be the most urgent global security challenge and has deplored the Bush administration's failure (until Annapolis – too little, too late) to commit political will towards a resolution. This will probably be the policy area in which the highest expectations will be forthcoming from Brussels and the major European capitals, particularly after the relative breakthroughs of summer 2008 in the context of the Union for the Mediterranean. However, given the pile of urgent priorities on the new president's desk, the EU will have to be very persuasive in urging him to make Israel/Palestine a top priority. The political costs, domestically, for any US president who wishes to strong-arm Israel into a more pliant negotiating position are very high. Most newly elected presidents, facing a multitude of urgent strategic challenges, will instinctively attempt to steer clear of the Eastern Mediterranean. If the Europeans seriously expect the president to place Israel/Palestine higher up the policy agenda, they will have to be prepared to make contributions in Iraq and/or Afghanistan.

On Iran there is a growing body of opinion that believes "the West" has been attempting to negotiate something that is, from Tehran's perspective, non-negotiable: the renunciation of Iran's "inalienable right" under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to the nuclear fuel cycle (Bertram, 2008). US talk of "all options being on the table" makes most Europeans cringe (Rogers, 2008). However, the Europeans are themselves divided over what to do next. Germany is ambivalent about sanctions, while France and the UK press for them. Divisions within the "5+1" negotiators are even more severe. China needs Iranian oil and Russia has no intention of doing the US any favors. Under these circumstances, it behooves the EU to prepare a bold new approach to urge upon the new US president. However, the identity of that individual will be critical. If McCain becomes president, and especially if (as many in Washington predict) he appoints Joseph Lieberman as Secretary of State, the chances of de-dramatizing the Iranian situation will be slim. Obama, on the other hand, has indicated his willingness to talk to the Iranians. Under those circumstances, a new bargaining stance, which Russia and China would have no reason not to

embrace, might shift the onus of responsibility onto Tehran to demonstrate that, as they insist is the case, they have no intention of pursuing weaponization. This would remove the military option from the enrichment process and shift it (as a potentiality) to the weaponization issue. Offering a security guarantee to Tehran would also help in the political struggle within Iran between hawks and moderates. There are many diplomatic stages yet to be gone through, and a grand bargain between the EU and Barack Obama is by no means out of reach.

The EU needs to be ready by January 2009 with a strategic trade-off with which to engage the US. Greater EU inputs might be considered for both Iraq and Pakistan on the condition that Washington undertake a new political effort on Israel/Palestine and a new, more constructive approach to the bargaining over Iran's nuclear ambitions. But the framework for such a grand bargain would have to be a new, bilateral EU-US forum. NATO is neither the appropriate nor the possible framework for such a comprehensive strategic discussion. Expectations in both Europe and the US are high. The Europeans must stop worrying about the Lisbon Treaty and develop a strategic approach to their relations with the US. The United States must be prepared to listen and to negotiate. If there is no transatlantic meeting of minds between the two sides after January 2009, many might conclude that we would indeed be witnessing "the end of the West."



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