

For a more progressive, realist, transatlantic agenda

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The eight years of the Bush administration have been a dark time for U.S.-European relations. They have sharpened the public's perception - especially in Europe - of a growing estrangement between the two continents, which stems more from fundamentally different societal and political visions than from diverging economic or security interests.

In a recent Foreign Affairs essay, Bill Clinton's former Assistant Secretary of State, James Rubin, speaks of "a growing values gap between Americans and Europeans (...), primarily as a result of Washington's declaration of independence from the constraints of multilateral diplomacy and its assault on a series of pending and existing international treaty regimes."¹ What is more, the perspective of a Republican victory in November threatens to make the situation worse since part of the surge of the "Grand Old Party" in the polls will inevitably be attributed to Sarah Palin's nomination, and therefore to the popularity of her ultra conservative views among a significant part of the U.S. electorate. "The world's verdict will be harsh if the U.S. rejects the man (Obama) it yearns for", warns Jonathan Freedland in *The Guardian*.²

The clash between the Bush administration and key European countries over the war in Iraq has also increased the conviction that Washington has no qualms in fanning divisions and tensions among EU members. Even if tensions have abated between Washington and "Old Europe" in the last two years, some observers remain convinced that the U.S. is following a strategic plan to undermine the European project.

Some years ago, many European progressives would have rejoiced at the prospect of loosening links with the "Empire" and of dismantling the special relationship that had been the hallmark of the Cold War. Now they are no longer so sure of the benefits of a growing EU-U.S. divorce for their progressive agenda. Rather, the worsening international environment and the European institutional crisis have led some to emphasise the urgent need to reinforce and renew cooperation between two of the leading power centres in order to provide a framework for a more progressive, principled and enlightened world agenda. This approach has been bolstered by the prospect of change represented by Barack Obama.

¹ James Rubin, "Building a New Atlantic Alliance. Restoring America's Partnership with Europe", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008.

² September 12, 2008.

The threats confronting the next U.S. administration are overwhelming. “The next president will inherit a more difficult opening-day set of international problems than any of his predecessors have since at least the end of World War II”, writes Richard Holbrooke, former US ambassador to the UN under President Clinton, and a key Democratic foreign policy pundit. “In such circumstances, his core challenge will be nothing less than to re-create a sense of national purpose and strength, after a period of drift, decline, and disastrous mistakes.”³

Although the U.S. remains, militarily, the most powerful nation in the world, it is far from being the “hyper-power” described by former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine in the 1990s. The geopolitical map has been revised by an accumulation of new factors: the global emergence of China, the economic rise of India, the assertive foreign policy of Russia, the move to the left in many Latin American countries, the financial ascendancy of Arab gulf states, the development of new coalitions tending to reorder the world around multi-polarity and a redistribution of economic and diplomatic power, like the emerging IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) group. The U.S. has misused its military power and squandered its international reputation through its ill-fated invasion of Iraq and its transgressions of international law and human rights norms.

This “set of international problems” has been compounded by an extremely irresponsible management of the economy: the lack of regulation of the financial sector together with the sharp increase in social inequality has produced a situation that raises the spectre of a Great Depression-like economic crisis. If such a doomsday scenario ever becomes reality, the world will blame America.

Europe’s “paucity of hope”

On the whole, Europe’s response to this brewing catastrophe has been poor. On the economic front, despite its legitimate pride at having built a Euro-zone, it has not been able to police the world financial markets nor oblige its own banking sector to discipline itself. The firewall between the Euro-zone and Wall Street follies has crashed.

Furthermore, transatlantic malaise has not given rise to the development of an EU foreign and security policy at the level required by the new emerging threats. There is a divide between different groups of countries in the EU, especially between “older Europe” (France, Germany, Belgium...) and the new member states. The integration of former communist countries, in a way that many EU officials now consider “a bit too hasty”, has increased the power of the group of member states hostile to the deepening of the European integration and the reinforcement of its supranational dimension.

As popular votes in France, the Netherlands and Ireland have shown, the European Union has been losing its capacity to inspire its citizens, to the point that it is now seen first and foremost as a bureaucratic machine “at the service of neo-liberal globalisation”. The defeat of the “yes vote” in these referenda is not primarily attributable to bad EU communication policies or demagoguery on the part of the “no” leaders. Rather, it stems from an ontological question, which gets to the heart of the European project.

³ Richard Holbrooke, “The Next President. Mastering a Daunting Agenda”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2008.

European progressives have traditionally been divided on the process of European integration. The more radical groups have tended to see it as an instrument of growing capitalist rule. Former French socialist PM Michel Rocard famously wrote an essay in the early 70s entitled “The Common Market against Europe” when he was leader of the PSU (Unified Socialist Party), a small “left of the left” group. On the other hand, most Social Democrats, particularly in Germany, France and the Benelux countries, have assumed that the creation of a European community would reinforce the “European social model” and serve as a means to provide a valid and “reasonably progressive” alternative to the Soviet and U.S. superpower games on the global scene.

This perception was shared by many non-governmental organisations, especially those working in the field of development, the environment or human rights. In their despair at the shift to the right in the U.S. and the return to a policy of confrontation in the wake of Ronald Reagan’s conservative revolution, they placed their hopes on the European Union. Attracted by the European discourse on sustainable development, North-South cooperation and human rights diplomacy, they set up offices in Brussels to lobby the various EU institutions.

This honeymoon has long gone. The progressives’ disappointment about the “EU difference”, about the EU’s willingness and capacity to propose another model for its citizens and for the world, is now solidly anchored in many people’s minds. Ecologists complain that the EU’s righteous discourse on the Kyoto Protocol is negated by its policies on genetically-modified crops or bio-fuels. Development NGOs underline that the EU’s claim to be the most generous and enlightened international donor is at complete odds with the hostility of many African countries towards the Special Partnership agreements or the Common Agricultural Policy. Human rights groups are increasingly sceptical about the EU’s willingness to respect its own commitment to make human rights “an essential element” of its foreign relations. The lofty assumptions of the CSFP are undermined by its powerlessness in confronting key international issues, like the festering Israeli-Palestinian crisis or Darfur. In a recent report on European diplomacy at the UN, Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner document the “EU’s reluctance to use its leverage” to defend its proclaimed values. “If Europe can no longer win support in the UN for international action on human rights”, the authors assert, “it will have been defeated over one of its deepest convictions about international politics as a whole.”⁴

The New Frontier

This European malaise largely explains the expectations raised by the current U.S. presidential elections. Barack Obama would never have had such a following in Europe if the Europeans themselves had been satisfied with their own leaders. Obama obviously appeals because he is young, elegant, cosmopolitan and the first African-American to run for President. However, the support he gets in Europe is first and foremost an embarrassing indictment of the lack of leadership and “paucity of hope” in Europe. Any suggestions addressed to the next U.S. president should be interpreted in Brussels as a petition to the European Union to mend its fences and find its way in order to assume a world role that really contributes to tackling the most urgent challenges. Since Barack Obama’s surge, the Europeans’ New Frontier seems to have moved to America.

⁴Richard Gowan & Franziska Brantner, “A Global Force for Human Rights? An Audit of European Power at the UN”, European Council on Foreign Relations.

In such a context, what should we expect from the next U.S. president? A return to decency and reason is what is needed. The U.S. has been created under the assumption that it is a country inspired by individual freedoms and the rule of law. Yet the Bush administration made that claim unrecognisable.

Therefore, the most immediate measure that should be taken by the next U.S. President is to restore America's respect for international human rights and humanitarian law. As both presidential candidates have promised, Guantanamo should be closed, "enhanced interrogation techniques" should be clearly defined as torture and banned, and the rules of engagement of the U.S. Army should be reviewed in order to avoid civilian casualties. A serious plan should also be implemented to bring back the troops from Iraq without surrendering the country to chaotic and brutal forces.

These measures are as important to Europe as they are to the U.S. Indeed, the Bush administration's "exemptionalism", i.e. its disregard for international conventions, has dealt a terrible blow to the ambition of the West as a whole to promote the rule of law and democracy. It has provided an easy argument to authoritarian regimes describing the West's rhetoric of freedom as just a shrewd instrument of Realpolitik, serving to criticise enemies and protect allies. It has also tainted other democracies, making European allies complicit in violations of international law, as documented in the numerous reports on the "CIA flights" and extraordinary renditions.

This is where the need for decency meets the imperative of stopping and reverting what former vice-president Al Gore has rightly called the Bush administration's "assault on reason". The counter-terrorist strategy followed by the Bush administration has made America and the rest of the world, as David Cole and Jules Lobel write, "less free" but also "less safe".⁵ The return of the U.S. to a policy respectful of international law is a requisite if it wants to address rationally and effectively the most urgent security issues and keep its claim to world leadership alive. "Restoring respect for American values and leadership is essential", writes Richard Holbrooke, "not because it is nice to be popular but because respect is a precondition for legitimate leadership and enduring influence."⁶

Freedom, or if not, nothing...

A better U.S.-European relationship makes no sense if it means the joint adoption of policies that would make the world "less safe and less free". Such a convergence would seal the defeat - or at least accelerate the demise - of the European model.

That is why it is essential for Europe that a Democratic administration and a Democratic Congress replace the Republican Party. In the last 30 years, the rise of an increasingly conservative GOP has found willing partners in Europe. The first Bush years, until the Iraqi war was declared "mission unaccomplished", coincided with the rise of neo-conservatism in some European political and intellectual circles. During the Reagan administration it was even worse: extremists from Europe and the U.S. gathered under the umbrella of antidemocratic organisations like the World Anti-Communist League to support "freedom fighters" like the contras in Nicaragua or endorse Latin American military regimes. Both groups were profoundly anti-European: the neo-conservatives because they considered the "Old Europe" to be a continent "inspired by Venus", as Robert Kagan famously said - in other words, as a continent ready to "appease" its enemies in the forthcoming "World War IV against Islamo-fascism" (to quote Norman Podhoretz's essay); and the radical right because it was darkly antidemocratic, and therefore the antithesis of the European vision.

⁵ David Cole & Jules Lobel, *Less Safe, Less Free. Why America is Losing the War on Terror*, The New Press, New York, 2007.

⁶ Richard Holbrooke, "The Next President. Mastering a Daunting Agenda", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2008.

In other words, in order to reassert the European project, the power to define the tone and the direction of the transatlantic relationship should be taken away from the more traditionalist or conservative circles and taken over by the more progressive and liberal groups on both sides of the Big Pond.

Parallel to the official meetings that regularly bring together leaders of all Establishment-approved tribes, from limousine liberals to Studebaker conservatives, more “partisan”, i.e. clearly more progressive, transatlantic exchanges should be resolutely promoted in order to increase the possibility of either controlling the impulses of a future McCain-Palin White House or, in a more hopeful scenario, reinforcing the potential of a Democratic majority to effect a transformation.

In recent years, exchanges between European and U.S. progressives and liberals have been rather limited, though history tells us that both have greatly benefited from the creativity of their intellectuals and activists and the experiences of their politicians and public servants.⁷ There was, and there still is, a rich pool of talent to be shared.⁸

The 1980s provide some guidance as to what renewed convergence could bring. Then, U.S. liberals and progressives joined with European Social Democrats, Greens, Liberal Democrats and progressive Christian groups on at least two major international issues - Central America and nuclear disarmament -in order to provide alternatives to military interventionism and nuclear adventurism. This experience tells us that a more progressive transatlantic link should be premised on more modesty on the part of the U.S. In Washington, the official discourse, even in some liberal circles, and certainly among the Obama’s campaign, still considers “U.S. leadership” as a given and speaks of using that power more reasonably and more courteously, whereas new realities require the acceptance by the U.S. administration of real partnerships between (nearly) equals. This scenario also calls for a much more coherent and forceful engagement in the world on the part of the EU and would involve taking risks and effecting a transition from the position of “biggest world donor” to that of a real foreign policy actor.

The need for a more progressive transatlantic agenda has rarely been more urgent. The financial crisis has created a transatlantic constituency for a return to stricter, more enlightened and socially conscious economic policies. The urgency of the climate change crisis has been highlighted by a cascade of apocalyptic disasters (Katrina, Ike, etc.) that have blown away the Bush administration’s irresponsible arguments for passivity. The military fiasco and uncertainties in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown the limits of using guns as a substitute for thinking. The food riots in some poor countries are a barometer of a spiralling crisis.

However, is there a potential constituency for a more progressive transatlantic cooperation? The political map in Europe does not look very rosy. Many European countries are ruled by conservatives - Newsweek even speaks of “the lame European left”⁹ - and the European Commission has moved from a social-democratic philosophy à la Jacques Delors to neo-liberal dogmatism under President Barroso. In the U.S., the parameters of the political debate are even more to the right. According to standard European criteria, Barack Obama is a centrist while the Republican Party’s sharp shift to the right makes it a very difficult partner for Europeans, even for moderate conservatives. Very few, except in ultraconservative circles or in the national-populist movements of former communist countries, easily associate themselves with the evangelical or “gun nation” factions within the Republican Party. Sarah Palin’s nomination has been received with stunned bewilderment within Europe’s mainstream conservative or moderate Christian democratic circles. Although they cling to the dubious idea that John McCain is a maverick and has promised to reinforce the NATO alliance on the basis of trust, respect and consultation, they fear that a future Republican administration would be very similar to the Bush years.

⁷ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

⁸ For a more historical demonstration of these mutually beneficial links, read Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in A Progressive Age*, Harvard University Press, 1998, 634 pages.

⁹ *Newsweek*, September 22, 2008.

The current state of the world, symbolised in particular by the financial hurricanes rocking the international economy, does not allow for this “four more years” scenario. On the most fundamental issues facing both Europe and the U.S., progressivism is the new name of realism. Reducing energy consumption and dependence, as progressives have been claiming for years, was seen as a utopian dream, but it is now the only realistic option. The “drill drill drill” policy proposed by the McCain-Palin ticket is both reactionary and irresponsible.

If the liberal progressives have been developing alternatives that sound realistic, the realists on their side want to be seen as principled. Ethical realism, as defined by Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, is the new buzzword in responsible conservative circles. “Ethical realism points toward an international strategy based on prudence, a concentration on possible results rather than good intentions; a close study of the nature, views and interests of other states, and a willingness to accommodate them when possible.”¹⁰ The world has no space and will have no patience for gung-ho American “know nothings” à la Sarah Palin.

The scope of the challenges facing the world is such that it has already led to realignments. Leading voices of the left have decided to give Barack Obama the benefit of the doubt instead of retiring into the ghettos of third-party candidacies and Tweedledee Tweedledum dead-ends. Middle-of-the-road politicians and members of the foreign policy establishment increasingly talk like “liberals” and plead for the issues of climate change, economic deregulation or human rights exemptionalism to be seriously addressed.

For European progressives, the challenges will be daunting. Obama’s victory might be a factor in the realignment of the left: just below the surface of a social democracy in disarray, battling against a resurgent “harder left” resentful of the Schroeder-Blair Third Way, a new generation of progressives are seeking - to quote Sunder Katwala, General Secretary of the Fabian Society - “to combine governing credibility and idealism”, to “fuse social-democratic, liberal and environmental traditions to create new progressive movements”.¹¹

However, Obama’s victory would also be a benefit for Europe as a whole. In the White House, the EU would find an administration that might be much more receptive to the ideas that, despite all the failings in its implementation, underpin the European Common Security and Foreign Policy: respect of international law, multilateralism and support of the UN, an emphasis on human and sustainable development, and the mainstreaming of human rights. It would raise the possibility of Europe and the U.S. joining together to help the world confront one of its most critical moments by building alliances with countries in the South.

Indeed, as these progressive circles, both in the U.S. and in Europe, open up to the world and become more aware of the need for a more balanced and fairer globalisation, their increased cooperation would not be based on the assumption that the North has privileges nor on Northern arrogance. This in itself would guarantee that a progressive transatlantic link would address current world crises not from the point of view of them constituting a threat to European and US domination, but rather in such a way as to serve as a test of European and US values.

“We have it in our power to begin the world all over again”, Thomas Paine famously declared at the dawn of the American Revolution. Ronald Reagan hijacked the quote in 1981. It is now the turn of progressives both in the U.S. and in Europe to pay a tribute to Tom Paine.

The alternative would be ominous: the U.S. and Europe, ruled by short-sighted conservatives, indifferent to the environmental crisis, dismissive of extreme poverty in the South, clinging to their privileges, have it in their power to bury the world...

¹⁰ Anatol Lieven & John Hulsman, *Ethical Realism. A Vision for America's Role in the World*, Pantheon Books New York, 2006.

¹¹ Sunder Katwala, “Why Europe’s Left Can Rise Again”, *Newsweek*, September 22, 2008.

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