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# TIME TO GROW UP: WHAT OBAMA'S RE- ELECTION MEANS FOR EUROPE

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SUMMARY

Most Europeans are relieved at the re-election of Barack Obama. But in his second term, he will face even greater pressure to cut costs than in his first term and is likely to continue the US “pivot” to Asia, though the Middle East still has the potential to derail it. This means that, although transatlantic security co-operation will continue, Europeans will increasingly be expected to take responsibility for sorting out problems in their own neighbourhood. Whereas Europeans seek to build a multilateral, rule-based world, Americans seek to craft a multi-partner world. Thus Europe may increasingly lack an engaged partner on multilateral issues as well as in its own neighbourhood.

Europe now needs to grow up and focus on developing its own power, relationships with rising powers and its ability to manage crises in its own backyard. In particular, Europeans need to reach out to their neighbours – especially Russia and Turkey – through a European security initiative. They should engage with the Syrian opposition; push back against any shift towards military action against Iran and focus on partial and immediate sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable suspension of uranium enrichment; and support the new democracies in North Africa. Finally, a serious strategic debate in Europe – which is to say, a Strategic Review commissioned by the European Council – is now essential.

If Barack Obama had been running for president of Europe rather than of the United States, he would have won by a landslide. His re-election for four more years was above all a relief for most Europeans.<sup>1</sup> Now that Obama is back in the White House, most European governments will comfort themselves that they know what to expect of the 44th president of the United States. But second-term presidents are often very different from their first-term selves: both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush became more moderate after they were re-elected in 1984 and 2004. So what will Obama's re-election mean for Europe? How will Obama II differ from Obama I?

One immediate difference between Obama I and Obama II could be at the level of personnel. James Mann has argued that Obama had two teams in his first term.<sup>2</sup> One, designed for public consumption, was the baby boomer “team of rivals” that included Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defence Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Advisor James Jones, Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, and CIA Director David Petraeus. They gave him gravitas, and by having them “inside the tent”, they were prevented from criticising him. But they never penetrated the inner core, which was made up of a second team consisting of much younger, more political staffers who had joined his campaign or came from jobs in the Senate rather than the foreign policy machine. This core included Deputy National Security Advisors Denis

<sup>1</sup> See “Charlemagne: Hope and no change”, *The Economist*, 10 November 2012.  
<sup>2</sup> James Mann, *The Obamians. The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York: Viking, 2012).

McDonough and Ben Rhodes, Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, Senior Director of Multilateral Affairs Samantha Power, and Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul.

The biggest divide between the two teams was generational: where the “team of rivals” was shaped by the experiences of Vietnam and the Cold War, Obama and his inner core came of age in a post-European world of emerging powers and financial austerity and were shaped by post-Millennium events such as 9/11, the Iraq War and the global financial crisis (although the Balkans and Rwanda in the 1990s were also formative experiences for some, such as Power and Rice). As he grew in confidence, he felt able to fire or sideline many of the older figures and move more of the inner core into public-facing roles. Obama may now create an authentic team of genuine “Obamians”, as Mann calls them. Even if Obama replaces Clinton with a seasoned hand like John Kerry instead of Rice, it seems unlikely that he will put so much energy into his working relationship with High Representative Catherine Ashton or any other European leader.

Thus Obama’s foreign policy is likely to be more “Obamian”. Obama’s first two years were taken up with aftercare for the policies of Bush. Domestically he sought and succeeded in preventing a depression; internationally his goal was to rebuild American leadership after Iraq. Obama’s early tentative attempts to extend the hand of friendship to China and Iran had at best mixed results; the “reset” with Russia was the main achievement of his first two years in office. But after the killing of Osama bin Laden, Obama could draw down from Afghanistan and shift more obviously to his own priorities. He was able to move from surge to drawdown in Afghanistan and to shift from wars of occupation to an ad hoc approach to interventions.

In Obama’s second term, he will face even greater pressure to cut costs than in his first term.<sup>3</sup> Austerity will be the backdrop to all foreign policy decisions and the US will become even more of a “frugal superpower” than it was in the first term. In fact, many people within the administration have talked of an “Obama doctrine” of low-cost leadership for the age of austerity. Apart from the use of drones, Special Forces, and cyber warfare rather than large-scale interventions, this involves a mix of soft power (symbolised by Obama and his powerful speeches), sanctions (used against Iran and Syria) as the default substitute for deeper diplomatic engagement or military action, and “leading from behind” (as in Libya) where interventions are perceived to be absolutely necessary. Libya illustrated this approach: it cost US taxpayers between \$1 and \$3 million a day – compared to \$300 million for the Afghan operation.

Obama’s most immediate challenge will be to avoid having defence spending – which is already being reduced from its bloated post-9/11 levels – fall off the upcoming fiscal cliff. Even the Pentagon would face a real defence management crisis if forced to forgo some half trillion dollars of funding

over the next ten years. With so many near-term costs (personnel, long-term contracts) effectively fixed, cutting perhaps 7.5 percent of planned spending in 2013 would mean freezing most if not all uncommitted expenditure. But even if this train wreck can be averted, the Pentagon is no longer flush with money. The 2011 defence cuts, though in reality no more than the foregoing of further anticipated increases, marked the end of the years of plenty. The service chiefs signed up on the basis that the US military will be asked to do less in the years ahead and be able to rebuild after a decade of war.

The one exemption from this frugality will be the “pivot” to Asia that began in Obama’s first term. Although it is still largely rhetorical in nature, the pivot promises a major strategic re-alignment that could be the beginning of a new era of bipolarity. There are all sorts of issues that could still divert Obama from his goal of shifting attention from the Middle East to the Pacific – Iran and Syria are two obvious examples – but Obama’s determination to avoid “leading from the front” on Libya showed how disciplined this president can be. In short, Obama will aim to hold the rest of the world apart from Asia at bay by drone strikes, cyber defence, and greater energy self-sufficiency. This means that Europeans will be expected to take responsibility for sorting out problems in their own neighbourhood.

## The diminished West

In many ways, Obama is the kind of American president that Europeans have always said that they wanted: he does not divide the world into friends and enemies and has little of the “with us or against us” approach of President Bush; he is less militaristic and more economically-focused; and his values tend to be humanitarian and based on supporting popular aspirations, not focused on a clash of rival political models. Most importantly, he is a pragmatist who is willing to change course when things don’t work and he is inclined to work with any power that shares his objectives. Because he is not drawn to Europe because of a nostalgia for the “West”, Obama has made a deliberate effort to get the buy-in of emerging powers such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, and Turkey so that maintenance of the liberal order seems less like the “white man’s burden”.

Yet, paradoxically, the result of this worldview, which Europeans to a large degree have welcomed, is both to loosen the bonds holding Europe and the US together and to contribute to the hollowing out of the liberal order itself. Obama’s pragmatism means that he has limited patience for a European partner that is often more interested in process than outcomes and that has shown a lack of political will to use its considerable potential capacity. The move away from large-scale ground wars is likely to further reduce the significance of US-EU military co-operation. But, more fundamentally, the importance of the West as a strategic unit of shared values is diminished by Obama’s more universalist approach.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower. America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010).

Of course, transatlantic security co-operation has not disappeared. For many Europeans, Obama's first term represented the classic story of a president going out in the world trying to open new horizons, being disappointed, and then coming back to Europeans, because for all their flaws, they remain the most dependable allies. Although the post-colonial powers of Brazil, Turkey, and South Africa are democracies, they have a strong attachment to national sovereignty and are wary of the excessive influence of multilateral institutions that they did not create. Thus Obama has had to turn to Europeans on missile defence, Iran, Afghanistan, the Arab Awakening, and in particular, Libya.

However, this transatlantic co-operation was more tactical than strategic: Obama worked with Europeans where they could be useful rather than trying to craft a joint Western approach to preserve the liberal order. In fact, it seems that Europe and the US will increasingly be divided by the way that they are dealing with their diminishing roles on the world stage. As America puts ever more energy into the Pacific and treats the EU in a more tactical way, so Europeans are becoming less dependent on America for their security and prosperity. The biggest symbol of this divergence is the increasing gap between Berlin and Washington on economic issues. Obama is likely to continue to criticise Chancellor Angela Merkel's austerity-led approach to the euro crisis (which will, however, resonate with much of the rest of Europe).

At a deeper level, Europeans and Americans have quite different visions for the world. Europeans seek to build a multilateral, rule-based world and have pushed for the creation of institutionalised global responses to climate change, genocide, or various trade disputes. To the extent that today's world has not collapsed into the deadlocked chaos of what Ian Bremmer calls a "G-Zero" world, it has often been due to European efforts to create a functioning institutional order. But, ironically for a continent that has embraced multilateralism more than any other on earth, Europe has not pooled its own impressive economic, political, and military resources. As it struggles to resolve the euro crisis, the EU may now split into two or more tiers, which would make concerted foreign-policy action even more difficult. As a result, European power is currently too diffuse to be much of a help or a hindrance on many issues.

The US, on the other hand, has a quite different vision. Although Obama is as committed as Europeans to liberal values, he seems to think that the best way to safeguard American interests and values is to craft a multi-partner world. Obama continues to believe that he can transform rising powers by integrating them into existing institutions (despite much evidence that they are transforming the institutions and hollowing out many of the incursions on national sovereignty that entrench the liberal bias). But he also thinks that Europe's overrepresentation in existing institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund is a threat to the consolidation of that order.

There is no alternative to engaging the world's big powers in global institutions, but the conditions that are attached to their participation and the ability of the West to develop a common strategy will have a decisive say on the normative basis on which these institutions function. This divergence between Europe's multilateralism strategy and America's multi-partner one creates a dilemma for the EU in each of the four key theatres of its foreign policy: Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Wider Europe, and the global system as a whole.

## Asia

The "pivot" – the centrepiece of Obama's Asia policy in his first term – amounts to an exemption of East Asia from the deep military drawdown that will follow Obama's defence cuts. The Obama administration has given security commitments to ASEAN countries against the use of force on territorial issues and has had to do the same for Japan, which exercises "administrative control" over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands (a formulation that Japan is not entirely happy with and that China is likely to test over the coming months). The State Department has also launched novel and successful policies towards Burma and may be considering applying a similar policy to North Korea.

The effect in China has been surprising: the media and nationalist elements have launched a barrage against the Obama administration, which finds itself suddenly demonised in spite of its initial overtures towards China after Obama came into office in 2008. Part of the reason may be with Beijing's perception of American economic weakness, which also allows China to play a role as an unsolicited economic adviser for domestic American policies. During the election campaign, Romney tried to present Obama as a wide-eyed idealist who was duped and even ridiculed by China. But the argument never worked: the electorate focused almost exclusively on the economy and Romney's background and past business with China made his arguments unconvincing.

Obama's second term is likely to bring more conflict with China. Clinton's departure from the State Department will remove one of the administration's strongest advocates of a values-driven foreign policy and of closer ties with Asian democracies. Meanwhile, as budgetary pressures increase, the US will struggle to improve its hard-power footprint in Asia or elsewhere. However, China's stubborn refusal to engage or compromise is likely to force Obama to take a tough stand on some issues. The antidumping actions against China initiated in the last months of the campaign are likely to continue. Fifty-nine percent of Americans see China as an economic threat compared to only 45 percent of Europeans.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, the US is likely to regard Taiwan and North Korea as China's burden and will not need to make other concessions to China when Taiwan itself is more and more falling into a "United Front" pattern or if North

4 Transatlantic Trends, Topline Data 2012, available at <http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/TT-2012-Topline-Data.pdf>.

Korea opens to the outside world to avoid being locked in with China as its sole guarantor.

At the same time, however, Obama will see practical convergence with China: on climate change issues, where the US is as pragmatic as Europe is ethereal; on an approach to multilateralism based on national and changing interests; and perhaps even on investment if the American current account balance falls back into deep red. But whether it will produce conflict or convergence, the “pivot” will certainly mean an America that is more focused on Asia.

## Middle East and North Africa

However, even after drawing down two wars in the region and only “leading from behind” on a third, MENA still has the potential to derail Obama’s “pivot” towards Asia. Even as he prepares for his re-inauguration, President Obama’s inbox will already be crowded with three pressing challenges from the region – Syria, Iran, and Israel/Palestine – that could draw him back into the kind of conflicts in the Middle East from which he has tried to extract America.

There may already be a new point of departure in the handling of the Syria crisis. Together with Europeans and regional allies, the US is taking a more proactive approach to finding a Syrian opposition address, having belatedly acknowledged the dysfunctionality and growing irrelevance of the Syrian National Council (SNC). The immediate goal is the creation of a more inclusive, credible, and centralised opposition. The newly formed Syrian opposition body seems designed in part to facilitate increased direct and indirect European and American assistance (non-lethal and later, one imagines, lethal) to the insurgency, with the inevitable prospect of mission creep leading to more serious consideration of an element of Libya-style intervention. However, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) do not see eye-to-eye with Europe (itself somewhat divided) and the US on the details of what to do next, so there are likely to be disagreements among the “Friends of Syria”.

A re-elected Obama administration is likely to proceed with caution. But unless a serious diplomatic effort can replace the half-hearted and finger-wagging-dominated diplomacy of the past year, slippage towards an enhanced military role becomes more likely. Neither Americans nor Europeans share much appetite for difficult and distasteful and uncertain compromise-driven diplomacy with the Syrian regime and those either allied to it or distrustful of Western designs (including China, Iran, Iraq and Russia). But Syria is now the epicentre of a new regional cold war with an increasingly sectarian Sunni/Shia dynamic and a proliferation of warring parties. It threatens to spill over not only into Lebanon and Iraq but also possibly to Jordan, Turkey, the Kurdish areas, and beyond.

Obama will also seek a diplomatic outcome on Iran. Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s generosity in allowing his red marker pen to veer towards summer 2013 means that there is now more time for diplomacy (albeit constrained by Iran’s presidential election in June 2013). Even before the election there was speculation about direct US-Iranian channels of negotiation and of attempts to deliver a diplomatic breakthrough in the coming months. Achieving any mutual diplomatic climbdown will not be easy given the mistrust and entrenched positions on all sides, Iran’s own electoral timetable and desire not to be seen to succumb to Western pressure, and Israel’s interference on the diplomatic track. Yet a diplomatic success, even one that is partial and simply buys time, is overwhelmingly preferable to the alternatives.

Europe can be helpful on this – the P5 +1 mechanism is obviously heavily European-weighted and High Representative Ashton’s ongoing channels of communication with the Iranians can be an asset: when relevant and appropriate it is easier politically for Europe to significantly ease sanctions than for the US president (congressional maximalism on Iran is set to continue). Should diplomacy go slowly or downhill, a strong European stance against military action should at least inform both American and Israeli considerations and scenario planning. Both Obama and the E3 leaders will also have to ask themselves how much further to push sanctions that are starting to have a terrible effect on innocent Iranian civilians and that may anyway prove counterproductive; and how far Iran policy will become a hostage to scaring GCC countries into spending yet more tens of billions on Western arms purchases.

Obama may also believe that solving Israel-Palestine is a US interest and a piece of unfinished business, but, given domestic politics, Europeans should not hold their breath for more robust leadership by him. A vote in the UN General Assembly on upgrading Palestine’s status to non-member state (something like the Vatican) could end up taking place in the middle of an Israeli election campaign (the election is set for 22 January). Fearful of how Israeli and Congressional punitive responses may undercut the already economically fragile predicament of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, the US has thus far been working with European allies to dissuade the Palestinians from proceeding with the UNGA vote. President Obama’s first call will be whether to offer the Palestinians a serious inducement to pull back from the vote (such as a more forward-leaning and detailed formula for re-launching talks in 2013). If Obama II does remain paralyzed on this file then Europeans will increasingly be challenged to step up their own game to be more consistent with regional policy, regional interests, and with their own public opinion – and the issue will become more acute if the Palestinians undergo their own version of an Arab Awakening.

The interests and challenges for Obama II in MENA do not end there of course. Americans and Europeans will have to continue to respond to the transitions in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen as they debate constitutions, hold elections, and contest the parameters of the new political



dispensations. The challenge there for Europe and America is to find the right mix of support, aid and other economic incentives and to decide if and when those are to be conditioned, how and when to promote values and to show contrition for past accommodation of autocratic allies. There is also no guarantee that President Obama will not be faced with further convulsions in the MENA region – including in monarchies in the Gulf, Jordan or elsewhere – as the call for deeper enfranchisement proves contagious.

## Wider Europe

If the US leadership in the Middle East will be as low-cost as possible, the US could cease to be a leader at all in Europe's eastern neighbourhood. This will place more pressure on Europe to show greater initiative in dealing both with the return of Vladimir Putin as Russian president and in completing the unfinished transformation of the Western Balkans and the former Soviet Union. Fortunately, Europe is in better shape than it was eight or even eight years ago. At that time, the EU's policy towards Russia was paralysed by drastically different views and interests among member states; now it is united in its analysis of the situation. In particular, there is a new, although still somewhat weak, consensus about the need for a more effective policy towards Putin's Russia.

The Obama administration saw its "reset" policy with Russia as one of its first big foreign-policy success stories until the changed circumstances in Russia – in particular the return of Vladimir Putin as president – made it seem like a rather hollow success. In reality, the "reset" did not accomplish all the things that State Department diplomats had claimed, but neither was it the failure that its critics claim. By late 2008, President Bush had lost all leverage over Russia; the "reset" changed the tone of the dialogue and again gave Russia a stake in the relationship. But Russia needed the "reset" even more than Washington as a face-saving way out of an inconvenient situation that followed the Georgian War. After the crisis demonstrated the vulnerability of Russia's petroeconomy and the embryonic shale gas boom endangered Gazprom's monopolistic position in the European markets, Moscow also realised it could not dictate terms to the West and looked for a rapprochement, among other things in order to modernise its economy.

However, four years later, Russia's modernisation – even technological, not to mention political – has failed to materialise. To be fair, the "reset" policy never aimed to modernise and democratise Russia. Quite the opposite: the goal was to make some progress, where possible, with Russia as it is. However, when Medvedev and the elites that backed him adopted "modernisation" as their slogan, Washington's rhetoric became more blurred. Some assumed that Medvedev really was a devoted liberal and good relations with the US would help his mission at home – a double miscalculation, as critics are correct to point out. Still, the "reset" policy has accomplished some useful things, such as

the new START treaty or the Afghanistan transit via Russia. Russia's somewhat improved relations with neighbours – most notably with Poland – cannot be directly attributed to the policy, but they have the same origin as Moscow's willingness to engage with "reset".

However, the "reset" policy has now run its course. One should not read too much into Obama's promise to Medvedev that he would be "more flexible" on NATO's missile defence after the election. Russia wants a "legally binding" guarantee that the missile defence system will not harm Russia's deterrence and has also proposed assuming responsibility for some of NATO's territory. This is a non-starter among NATO allies: progress on missile defence therefore depends first and foremost on Russia's willingness to be more realistic. Washington does not have a policy that would address the changes in Russian society and politics that manifested themselves last winter. Nor is such a policy also likely to emerge under Obama II: Russia is simply not a policy priority for Washington and is unlikely to become one unless events take a much more dramatic turn.

The "pivot" will also exacerbate the de-prioritisation of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus that began during Obama's first term. This leaves the task of dealing with the region's unfinished transformation mainly on the EU's shoulders. One possible exception is likely to be Turkey – an important partner in the MENA region during Obama I. For example, Turkey has neither the capacity nor the political appetite to act alone in Syria and is therefore keen for a more forward-leaning and interventionist US approach to emerge. Meanwhile, in the Western Balkans, there will be little change. The US will continue to "lead from behind" in Kosovo – and influence the talks with Serbia through the EU. But the choice of the next secretary of state matters: someone with a Balkans background from the Bill Clinton years might make a significant difference.

## International co-operation and law

Just as Europe will increasingly lack a partner in its eastern neighbourhood, it may also lack a partner on multilateral issues. The election of Obama in 2008 seemed to promise a brave new era of international co-operation. Obama's team embraced the G20 and declared that it would reinvigorate American engagement with the UN. While fearing Obama might reduce their leverage in multilateral institutions to make space for China and other Asian powers, Europeans hoped that Obama would be a champion of global governance. At times, he has fulfilled those hopes. His administration re-engaged with the UN Human Rights Council in 2010 and turned to the UN Security Council in order to impose sanctions on Iran and to take military action in Libya in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On Obama's re-engagement with the Human Rights Council, see Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner, "The EU and human rights at the UN: 2010 review", European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2010, available at <http://ecfr.eu/page/-/the-eu-and-human-rights-at-the-UN-2010-review.pdf>. On sanctions and Libya, see Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner, "The EU and human rights at the UN: 2011 review", European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2011, available at [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR39\\_UN\\_UPDATE\\_2011\\_MEMO\\_AW.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR39_UN_UPDATE_2011_MEMO_AW.pdf)

But there have also been disappointments. The president cut his European counterparts out of crucial decision making at the 2009 Copenhagen climate change summit. His administration put public pressure on the EU to cut back its presence on the governing board of the IMF to accommodate rising non-Western economies. Washington's interest in the G20 also faded with the first storms of the financial crisis. This summer, the US ignored European pressure to agree on an international arms trade treaty – apparently to placate the domestic gun lobby. The Obama administration has found its European friends exasperating too: if the G20 has lost momentum, it is also because EU leaders wasted time bickering over the euro crisis at recent summits.

Obama and his team have also revealed that they have an instrumentalist approach to international law. The administration has done a good job at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, lining up non-Western states to attack former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. But, reluctant to expend much political capital on global governance at home, Obama has still not ratified major international treaties that EU member states like, such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty or the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (which, paradoxically, the US seeks to enforce in the South China Sea). At the same time, the Obama administration has operated against the spirit of international law in stepping up drone strikes and cyber warfare.

Now that he has been re-elected, Obama is not going to suddenly become the principled multilateralist for which Europeans once hoped. While the administration has scored multilateral successes (like Libya), it has won the most kudos at home when it has acted alone (killing bin Laden). And there is a growing realisation that China and especially Russia are unwilling to play by the rules of a US-led multilateral game, as over Syria. Thus the second Obama administration will promote multilateralism when it finds it useful, especially when building new coalitions in Asia to balance China. Europe does not have a major role in these plans. But the US will lean on the EU when it needs it, such as the case of sanctions on Iran. However, co-operation will be intermittent: for Washington, the overriding issue in multilateral dealings with the EU will be the euro.

There were few areas where Europeans had higher hopes of Obama than in his approach to international law and counterterrorism. But the Guantanamo Bay detention camp remains open – even if its population has decreased. Obama did forbid the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” approved under the Bush administration, but to the surprise and disappointment of some European officials, he did not launch an official investigation into the US government's sanctioning of torture. Most strikingly, Obama has dramatically expanded the administration's programme of drone strikes – by one estimate, carrying out more than six times as many attacks as Bush did – with a new risk that North Africa (Libya and Mali) will be added to

the Pakistan/Yemen/Somalia crescent as a zone of remote control killing.

European governments have largely remained silent in the face of these developments. EU policymakers recognise that in some areas Obama's hands have been tied by a hostile Congress – which for instance has passed legislation that increasingly restricts the transfer of Guantanamo detainees into the US. In addition, there are aspects of international law where Obama has changed US policy in ways that Europeans welcome: while he has not joined the International Criminal Court (a step that, given political and military opposition within the US, does not currently seem feasible), he has engaged with the Court and made the US into an active supporter of its work. Finally, European officials recognised a while ago that it would be pointless to try to get Obama to shift further before the election, given domestic views on the question.

Things are unlikely to be dramatically different in a second term. While Obama would undoubtedly prefer to leave office in 2017 with Guantanamo Bay firmly shuttered, there is no reason to expect that he will suddenly decide that it is safe to release all of the prisoners who cannot be tried. Obama said in the foreign policy debate that terrorist networks remain the number one security threat to the US. Nor is there any realistic prospect that Congress will change its stance and allow Obama to take steps such as transferring prisoners into the US either for trial or continued detention. Most likely, Obama's policy in his second term will be to try to talk about Guantanamo as little as possible, while reducing the numbers held there as much as circumstances (such as the security situation in Yemen) allow.

The administration's policy on drone strikes is also likely to continue. Given Obama's increasing resistance to ground operations, such individualised military actions are set increasingly to become the main focus of the hard edge of national security policy. A recent in-depth investigation in the *Washington Post* reported a broad consensus among senior administration officials that targeted operations against designated terrorist suspects “are likely to be extended at least another decade”.<sup>6</sup> But some have also indicated that they recognise that more needs to be done to establish a credible and clear standard for deciding when drone strikes are permissible – especially as more and more countries acquire the ability to carry them out. Obama's second term could see a redoubled effort to establish more transparent guidelines and processes to determine when drone attacks are legitimate – an effort that the EU should welcome and engage with.

## How should Europe respond?

How should Europe respond to Obama's re-election? It is tempting to imagine that Obama's re-election clears the way

6 Greg Miller, “Plan for hunting terrorists signals U.S. intends to keep adding names to kill lists”, *Washington Post*, 24 October 2012, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/plan-for-hunting-terrorists-signals-us-intends-to-keep-adding-names-to-kill-lists/2012/10/23/4789b2ae-18b3-11e2-a55c-39408f6e6a4b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/plan-for-hunting-terrorists-signals-us-intends-to-keep-adding-names-to-kill-lists/2012/10/23/4789b2ae-18b3-11e2-a55c-39408f6e6a4b_story.html).

for Europe and the US to work together on a common project for the future of the international system at a period of deep change in global politics (an agenda that many in the US and EU hoped for when he was first elected in 2008). The president may have strayed from this agenda, the argument goes, but now he is no longer constrained by the need to win a second term and can make up for lost time. However, Obama's highly pragmatic approach to international affairs is unlikely to change in his second term. For example, his tepid commitment to global governance and willingness to use tactics like drone strikes have not been aberrations.

The president's hard-nosed foreign policy and security strategies sold well at home in his first term. It is hard to imagine that he would have won foreign-policy debates with Mitt Romney if he had had to riff on ratifying the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea rather than killing bin Laden. It is possible that Obama will find it easier to make efforts to overhaul US policies on issues such as climate change in his second term. But this does not seem like another "present at the creation" moment when a comprehensive new world order can be fashioned. China shows little interest in reworking the international system. At home, a divided Congress is not going to vote through divisive changes to the structure of power at the UN or approve treaties aimed at transnational governance.

Rather, both the White House and Congress are likely to focus on the continuing "pivot" to Asia, which will become increasingly important to American domestic policy – if for no other reason than that it justifies sustained military spending. This does not mean that Europe will be left alone, especially if tensions with Iran lead to chaos in the Middle East. But, in many of the areas where Europe is active, it will be lacking an engaged American partner. This could be a good thing: it challenges the EU to get its house in order. Rather than trying to woo Washington, Europeans should focus on developing their own power, their relationships with rising powers and in particular their ability to manage crises in their own backyard. In fact, the US would welcome a tougher Europe of this kind.<sup>7</sup>

The foundation of Western pre-eminence in the post-Cold War world was above all economic, and it seems that the most powerful way of preserving a liberal bias in the international order is to increase the bargaining power of Europeans. This is one of the reasons why many people have rightly argued that there is a strategic necessity for Europeans and Americans to try to increase Western bargaining power through the creation of a transatlantic free trade area. But, given US fiscal realities and the "pivot" to Asia, this is not enough. Europeans also need to understand that the US will increasingly leave them to fend for themselves in their own neighbourhood. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it seemed as if Europe was becoming a "postmodern" continent that had moved beyond the principle of the balance of power. But that is no longer the case. Therefore, as Joschka Fischer

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Shapiro and Nick Witney, "Towards a Post-American Europe: A Power Audit of EU-US Relations", November 2009, available at [http://ecfr.3cdn.net/cdb1do4be418dc49c\\_2em6b7a0.pdf](http://ecfr.3cdn.net/cdb1do4be418dc49c_2em6b7a0.pdf).

has recently argued, "Europe must grow up and develop the capacity to defend its own interests, because the day is fast approaching when others will be less able and willing to do this for us than they once were."<sup>8</sup>

Paradoxically, Europeans have spent much of the past decade defending a European security system that their own governments realise is dysfunctional. The EU, Russia and Turkey are increasingly working around the formal institutions, which have become deadlocked by rivalry: some EU member states recognised the independence of Kosovo in spite of Russian opposition; Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in spite of EU opposition; and Turkey co-operated with Brazil in formulating a response to Iran's nuclear threat without consulting NATO. As Russia calls openly for a new European security architecture and Turkey pursues an independent foreign policy and looks for a larger role, a multipolar Europe now is emerging.<sup>9</sup> In order to prevent this, Europeans need to reach out to their neighbours – in particular Russia and Turkey – through a European security initiative. This could start with three elements.

First, whatever the fate of the newly-formed Syrian opposition organisation, Europe should not wait any longer in order to engage more directly with the existing and credible internal opposition centred around local revolutionary councils – and start providing them with direct assistance. At the same time, Europe should be more rather than less diplomatically engaged – which has to include creating and preparing for a moment when there is space for political deal making. Making ourselves more relevant in diplomacy will mean being less squeamish about re-establishing channels into the Assad regime and talking problem solving, not just lecturing key states on the other side of the Syria question.

Second, if US efforts to make a diplomatic breakthrough on Iran via direct channels do not bear fruit before Iran huddles down in the spring in advance of its own presidential election, Europe should take the lead in pushing back hard against any shift towards military options and in pursuing an effort to buy time that focuses on partial and immediate sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable suspension of 20 percent enrichment.

Third, Europe should do more to demonstrate that it is playing its part in response to developments in its southern neighbourhood and the MENA region. Given the economic realities, the EU and member states are unlikely to develop the "Marshall Plan" for post-revolutionary North Africa for which Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini called. The alternative is to enhance Europe's strategic dialogues with the new democracies in the region, as well as with the Gulf, Turkey, and others, in order to promote closer integration within North Africa and make progress on major win-win

<sup>8</sup> Joschka Fischer, "Provincial Europe", Project Syndicate, 31 October 2012, available at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/europe-s-missing-foreign-and-security-policy-by-joschka-fischer#GPDhrzdHFSqz95my.99>

<sup>9</sup> See Mark Leonard and Ivan Krastev, "The Spectre of a Multipolar Europe", European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2010, available at [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR25\\_SECURITY\\_UPDATE\\_AW\\_SINGLE.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR25_SECURITY_UPDATE_AW_SINGLE.pdf).

economic projects.<sup>10</sup>

Europeans will struggle to have credibility with its neighbours – or the Obama administration for that matter – unless they demonstrate a readiness to take the defence of their own strategic interests more seriously. A serious strategic debate in Europe – which is to say, a Strategic Review commissioned by the European Council – is now essential. A failure to wake up will ensure that the coming presidency will be seen as the one during which America finally gave up on Europe.

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<sup>10</sup> See Nick Witney and Anthony Dworkin, "A Power Audit of EU-North Africa Relations", European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2012, available at [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR62\\_NAPA\\_REPORT.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR62_NAPA_REPORT.pdf)



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