

## **German-American and Transatlantic Relations under President Barack Obama**

### **What can we expect?**

**by Eckart von Klaeden**

Barack Obama won a historic victory on 4 November. However, the President-elect is facing a threefold challenge which brings to mind that faced by Franklin D. Roosevelt at the time of the Great Depression: healing an American society which has been deeply unsettled by the financial and economic crisis, and which is highly polarised in political and social terms; reversing economic decline and loss of influence in foreign policy, and the associated reduction in America's ability to lead; and restoring the reputation and credibility of the United States. Barack Obama's victory has created an optimistic mood filled with expectations: expectations which are not always realistic and which he tried to lower on election night in his first speech.

What does Obama's victory mean for us Europeans? A radical change in American foreign policy towards its European allies is unlikely, as the United States (like Canada) also became a European power following the Second World War. This status was established in binding international law by the Helsinki Final Act of the CSCE, also signed by Leonid Brezhnev, and even following the end of the East-West conflict the United States remained a European power. It is in our interests for this to remain the case – particularly in view of Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy. This became clear on the day of Obama's election, when Russian President Medvedev, in his first state-of-the-nation address, signalled that a harder line would be taken on foreign and security policy and that Russian short-range missiles would be stationed in Kaliningrad in response to the American missile defence system.

The Bush administration has a poor reputation in Europe, largely because of the means it considers necessary in its struggle (or 'war', in its words) against international terrorism: for example, the establishment of the prison camp in Guantánamo, and the use of interrogation methods (including 'waterboarding') considered internationally to be torture.

Those in Europe who held President Bush responsible for everything – from international terrorism to the financial crisis and climate change – were applauded, and few objections were voiced. For many Europeans those absurd accusations were a welcome excuse to self-righteously reject US calls for Europe to play a greater role or adopt a clearer position.

This all too convenient position is now a thing of the past!

## **Continuity**

Barack Obama is likely to continue in general to follow the multilateral course pursued by President Bush in his second term of office and before him by President Clinton, and to seek to intensify transatlantic relations further. There is a real need for this, whether in policy towards Russia or Iran, on climate protection and energy security, in the Middle East or Afghanistan.

The new US President will give Europe greater opportunities to participate, without, however, abandoning America's claim to leadership. But this also means that the European side will be expected to contribute more than in the past. Fears, however, that one of the new US President's first decisions upon taking office will be to call for more German troops in Afghanistan are overblown and more an indication of a lack of self-confidence. If, in the words of the coalition agreement, we are committed to "effective multilateralism", then the United States must be willing to take a multilateral approach, but we must also be willing to take effective action. We should seize this opportunity for closer cooperation under President Obama, because we need the United States to be a strong partner – but the United States also needs us Europeans as reliable partners.

## **The United States – a leading power**

Although US power is likely to decline in relative terms in view of the rise of emerging countries, primarily in Asia, the United States will remain the leading Western power and a force for international stability for a long time to come. Its military dominance will continue in the coming decades. Despite the current financial crisis, the US economy will continue to lead the world for many years due to its great potential for innovation.

Despite the structural changes in the international system following the end of the Cold War, there are no two regions in the world which have so much in common as Europe and the US and which enjoy such close political, economic, cultural, strategic and historical links. The transatlantic partnership is also important for purely pragmatic reasons, since the strengths of both partners complement each other well.

## **Priorities in foreign policy**

Although the Iraq war played only a secondary role in the election campaign, an orderly withdrawal from Iraq is likely to be high on the foreign-policy agenda in Barack Obama's first year in office; after all, during the election campaign he announced his intention to withdraw combat troops within 16 months. President Bush had already announced cautious troop reductions on 9 September 2008, after beginning negotiations in the spring with Iraqi leaders on a 'status of forces' agreement and a strategic framework agreement on a long-term US engagement in Iraq, both of which have since been concluded. These agreements provide for a strong US military presence of up to 50,000-70,000 soldiers. This ought to ensure that the withdrawal does not leave behind a vacuum which might be filled by new violence or Iranian aspirations of hegemony.

Advisors close to Obama believe that Iran holds the key role in the conflict between moderate and extremist forces in the Middle East, a region of vital significance for US national security. Energy security, support for democracy, and relations with strategic partners such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are likely to remain priorities for US engagement in the region under

President Obama, although the focus will probably shift even further away from support for democracy and towards stabilisation.

Iran is accused, not without cause, of being the biggest sponsor of terrorism in the region, seeking the destruction of Israel, supplying weapons to insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, violating human rights in Iran itself, destabilising the region (Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories), and pursuing a military nuclear programme. Barack Obama, too, is completely determined to prevent Iran from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. He is also unlikely to be willing – despite an imprudent statement made during the primaries – to begin negotiations with the Iranian president without preconditions. However, the talks at working level which began under President Bush will probably be continued and lifted to a higher level with a more coherent approach.

President Obama is also likely to continue the Middle East peace process, revived by the Annapolis Conference but currently blocked by the situation in Israel. This would mean that, unlike the last two occupants of the White House, he would make reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians a priority at the highest level from the very beginning, not just shortly before the end of his (second) term of office.

In view of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, Obama is likely – as announced – to significantly expand the US engagement in Afghanistan, primarily in the development of the Afghan security forces and civilian reconstruction. From 2009 onwards, the US troops in Afghanistan are to be joined by an additional three brigades freed up in Iraq. Obama hopes that the NATO partners will support his strategy and also step up their engagement in Afghanistan, not necessarily by sending additional soldiers, but via greater civilian assistance. The new administration is likely to consult and involve allies to a greater degree. Greater involvement also means taking on a greater share of responsibility, however, and we must not shrink from this; after all, we are already playing a significant role in Afghanistan.

Finally, the president-elect will also need to focus on relations with Russia in the very near future. The Georgia crisis in August 2008, which closely coordinated transatlantic crisis management helped to resolve, marked a new low in relations with Russia. The Obama presidency has the chance to make a new start with Russia – and the Russia side, too, ought to be interested in this, faced with a decline in revenue from energy exports and growing economic problems. One specific opportunity to involve Russia in negotiations could be a new round of disarmament negotiations, which is urgently needed, as the START I treaty expires in December 2009. If Obama should seek – as he stated in his election campaign – to ensure a massive reduction in the global arsenal of around 27,000 nuclear weapons, 95 per cent of which are in Russian and American hands, this aim can only be achieved in cooperation with Russia.

It is also welcome that the president-elect has spoken out in favour, both before and after his election, of new initiatives relating to disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is the foundation of international non-proliferation policy and plays a central role in the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Growing risks of proliferation – in particular the current cases of Iran and North Korea – which endanger the treaty regime must be countered, above all by strengthening verification of the NPT via adoption of the IAEA Additional Protocol, which allows more efficient monitoring of possible illegal nuclear activities.

To prevent the current ‘renaissance’ in the civil use of nuclear energy from causing a further rise in proliferation risks, ideas regarding multilateralisation of the fuel cycle, e.g. via a uranium enrichment facility under IAEA control, should rapidly be turned into concrete plans.

Ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by the US Senate, which Barack Obama has called for, would also be a positive signal for the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which will be of vital significance for the future of the treaty regime.

Export controls are an essential instrument in combating proliferation, and are used to monitor the transfer of equipment, technology and components which can be used to produce WMDs or military missile technology. As president, Obama is also likely to expand the Proliferation Security Initiative – proposed by the United States in 2003 – and other initiatives to prevent proliferation and nuclear terrorism.

An important date for us in terms of foreign and security policy will be the NATO summit taking place in Strasbourg and Kehl in early April, which is likely to be Obama’s first trip to Europe as president. As well as being a celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Alliance, this summit will also see the launch of the process of developing a new Strategic Concept.

Despite the undeniable risk that existing differences of opinion about NATO’s future development will come to the surface, this offers an opportunity for a necessary process of clarification and, above all, the opportunity to deepen and intensify the transatlantic relationship again at the start of the Obama presidency.

The future Strategic Concept must reflect the full spectrum of security-policy changes in recent years, and raise the issue of NATO transformation, a process which has not yet been completed. First of all, we need a comprehensive analysis of the new threats and security challenges, which are almost unlimited in terms of geographic scope. In this context, it is of course necessary to take into consideration non-military aspects, such as ecological, economic, social and cultural aspects. This includes issues relating to missile defence, cyber-defence and energy security.

There is an urgent need to clarify the relationship between NATO and the EU. From our perspective, NATO and the ESDP are not in competition with each other; their specific capacities mean they complement each other. We need a common strategic culture involving NATO and the EU.

NATO must continue to be open to new members. Their admission must be guided by the Alliance’s membership criteria. It is equally important that we expand our relations with partners – particularly in Asia – which have contributed troops to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, for example.

To ensure that Germany, too, can participate adequately in the growing range of tasks facing NATO and the ESDP, the necessary funds must be made available in the federal budget for the development of the capacities needed. This also applies for our European partners. Only in this way can Europe take on the independent role in the Alliance with the United States that is desired in political terms.

### **Europe as a partner**

Although the EU is prosperous and holds a powerful attraction for its neighbours, it is not yet a genuine strategic actor on the world stage. Strategic operations such as the current operation

in Afghanistan can only be carried out under US leadership or within the framework of NATO. However, since the fiasco experienced by the US in the first few years following the Iraq war, it has become increasingly clear that the US should not forgo the support of the major European nations and the legitimacy this provides. This is all the more true given that Europe enjoys a higher standing than the US in certain regions of the world, and involving Europe significantly increases the chances of joint success – for example in the Middle East.

The EU now possesses significant resources and expertise in the field of civilian crisis management and reconstruction. The current situation in Afghanistan and the Balkans, in particular, makes clear the importance of linking military and civilian measures. Transatlantic cooperation should not, however, be limited to Europe and the United States; other democratic and like-minded countries should also be involved, such as Japan and India, Australia and New Zealand, Brazil and Mexico.

In dealing with the major challenges ahead of him, Obama will be dependent on support from beyond his party and movement – on moderate Republicans and on allies in Europe and elsewhere.

\*\*\*

*Remarks:*

*Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*



*Eckart von Klaeden is a Member of the German Bundestag and Foreign Policy Spokesman of the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group*