

Europe's great opportunity

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Summary: The EU and the US presidential elections; an opportunity for new momentum in Transatlantic relations; how Europe can ensure it is equipped to take on a leading role in re-defining the rules of the game in the global governance system.

In Brussels, as in every other part of the world, people are eagerly awaiting the outcome of the US elections in November. The 27 members of “Club Europe”, in particular, are waiting to find out who will become the next President of the United States, the most important person they will be dealing with.

It is therefore useful to consider how Europe is currently equipped to approach this change of administration and the moves the EU will need to take in order to relaunch the Transatlantic relationship and its own international role in general.

Both Obama and McCain have announced that they will, to varying extents, move away from the unpopular and much-criticised positions taken by George W. Bush's administration and, whoever wins, one can expect a substantial change of course in Washington – both in terms of substance and in terms of form.

The winner will have to address a number of thorny issues on the international agenda which, it has been seen, require consensus-based solutions. And he will definitely need to repair the damaged relationship the US has with the rest of the world and restore the country's moral prestige and political leadership. Authoritative analysts and Republican and Democratic representatives agree that the next US administration will need to make a major change in its outlook and its overall strategy and that it will have to re-establish a dialogue with the international fora and actors which have been snubbed for a long time under the current President. American public opinion, whatever happens in the world and despite some of its latest international positions, has now made up its mind that this administration represents a political failure (G. W. Bush has now begun his 23rd consecutive month at a popularity rating of less than 40%). And whoever succeeds him will be forced to take this into account.

Europe will therefore need to be ready to react promptly to this political watershed which provides it with exceptionally advantageous opportunities.

But it is inevitable that most of the attention is focused on the prospects for the Transatlantic relationship which would ensue from an election victory for the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, the advocate of change and the proponent of a new direction in American policy.

This event, which is currently still the most likely outcome, would provide Europe with a great chance to start out on a new cycle of political co-operation with the United States, restoring momentum to a partnership which remains intense but has lost the emotional fervour it once had.

In Europe there is excitement at the prospect that a new Democratic administration could as a matter of course further the return to a constructive dialogue between the two sides of the Atlantic. In actual fact, the Democrats will also be putting conditions to the Europeans before the Euro-Atlantic engine can be re-started.

What is however clear is that the democratic ticket nominated in Denver – Barack Obama and Joe Biden – will both formally and substantially avoid the most criticised positions taken by the previous administration in the areas of foreign policy, climate change and world governance and that it will in all likelihood seek solutions based on a broader consensus in the areas of combating international terrorism, stemming nuclear proliferation and managing the most serious ongoing crises.

Europe thus has before it a potentially favourable scenario, but it must prove that it is finally capable of shouldering the responsibilities a global player on the international political scene has to bear.

If the Democrats were to win the election, Europe could no longer use the contested decisions of the previous administration as an excuse for inaction but would need to be ready to respond to Barack Obama's message of change.

That does not mean acquiescing to all of the new Commander-in-Chief's policy desires but rather approaching the discussion on the new rules of the game and the main strategic options available with its own scale of values and its own world vision to put to its American allies – and also to the new actors on the fluid multi-polar scene- and pressing the United States by means of practical measures to improve the way the world's business is conducted.

In order for Europe to show solidity and be ready to capitalise on this significant possible change in US policy, the 27 members will once and for all have to stop dribbling the ball on their own and “act as a team”, at least in relation to some of the strategic issues on the international political agenda.

Europe's political leaders will need to make a real change in their outlook and stand up in order for the EU to act credibly and effectively in the world at large.

In addition to this, there are further requirements which are necessary but not sufficient in themselves, such as ratifying the Treaty of Lisbon, accepting clearly-defined international responsibilities, beginning advanced forms of cooperation and expanding common policies, adopting new internal political arrangements and leaner and more efficient decision-making procedures (which to some extent are already envisaged in the Treaty of Lisbon).

This all appears to be essential in order to establish an effective dialogue with the new US administration and with the other – emerging or re-emerging- leading actors in the international community, if Europe wishes to be able to have a say in redefining global arrangements and outlining new solutions to the many challenges on the global agenda.

It is first of all necessary for the European Union to ratify the Treaty of Lisbon as quickly as possible so as emerge from the political deadlock it seems to have suddenly fallen into again after the first French and Dutch rejections. Currently, about 0.2% of the European population is standing in the way of the Treaty's entry into force. One must hope that at the next Autumn Council the French Presidency will be able to find an effective way out.

It is true that the EU's external action can, theoretically and practically, also function without the provisions of the Treaty approved by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon – as was demonstrated during the recent Georgian crisis where the Union's role was driven by strong European leadership – but it is increasingly clear that only the Treaty can provide the political conditions and the requisite tools which can ensure effective action in the foreign policy arena, with the establishment of a permanent President and the external representation tasks attributed to the High Representative for Foreign Policy and the “European External Action Service”.

These are all provisions which, while expressing the intergovernmental nature of future European foreign policy, have the advantage of strengthening the external legitimacy of the European Union.

In times of world disorder and globalised insecurity, a condition which is well captured by the apt term “disarchic multipolarism”, it appears essential, in order to gain credibility on the international level, to be able to show one is capable of managing the international crises which are taking shape with increasing frequency in many, sometimes unexpected, international theatres: basically, one has to earn one's badge as an international policeman on the ground.

The skill of the EU (and of its individual member states) in managing crises and delicate post-conflict situations is broadly recognised and it also has a natural aptitude to act as a balancing agent in the face of fluid equilibria and unstable (and often not clearly determined) actors, thanks to the use of a skilful mix of military force and soft power. This is an increasingly rare commodity and the EU should make full use of this strategic strength.

The EU's own borders are adjacent to countless theatres of conflict and instability, for example the Mediterranean, the Balkans, former Soviet territories and the even more volatile areas of the Middle East and the Gulf. This is clearly manifested in the conflicts or crisis situations in Georgia, Lebanon, the Balkans, Cyprus and the Middle East.

Ensuring an effective political, diplomatic and military commitment in these areas would be the best way to actually become an essential player on the international stage.

The vast geopolitical swath of the broader Mediterranean region has, for too many years, been in need of a political entity which could serve as a reference and guide the future of the region: the EU – also in view of the failures of US policy in this area – could repeat the miracle worked in just over 15 years with Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall. These considerations clearly show how essential it is for the Union to make significant progress in its defence policy and in updating the European Security Strategy adopted in December 2003.

The European Union has all the potential to turn to its advantage the current international transition characterised by a decline in American leadership and the inability of old and new international actors to take on leading roles inside the international community.

In order to be able to act effectively in one's back garden one needs to set one's own house to rights: in this regard the EU needs more effective internal policies, new rules and more efficient structures. New, truly common policies are now essential in a number of sectors, such as research and innovation, managing internal security and migratory flows and energy supplies.

Furthermore, the European elections next Spring are an opportunity to re-vitalise the European political debate; it is by now necessary to create a true European political space inside the Union in the same way that it appears necessary to move towards the politicisation of the Union's common structures.

A European Union which has more effective internal management, with more efficient structures and swifter decision-making procedures, based on majority and elective principles, and which is also a main player on the international scene, would make it easier for Europeans to achieve their ambition of working with other international main players, first and foremost with Washington, to re-write the new rules required to define a new system of world governance and influence the decisions of other main players on the international scene.

Barack Obama has often spoken of the need to create new instruments both for governance and for partnership; in any case the current international system – which was patterned in line with the balances of power which emerged from World War II and adjusted only in part after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, has gaping cracks and is obviously unable to respond to the complexities of political, economic and social globalisation. In view of this, it appears to be increasingly inevitable

to overhaul today's multi-level global governance system, as expressed by the complex network of institutions, rules and actors which currently govern the international community.

In all likelihood, therefore, we have before us a phase of deep-reaching change in the very nature of the current decision-making fora: the Security Council and the whole UN system with all its agencies, the international financial and trade institutions, the organisations established to guarantee regional security and the various formats which now bring together powers at the regional and global level.

It will in any case be necessary to re-cast sources of legitimacy, systems of representation, decision-making processes, substantive policies and monitoring and sanction mechanisms.

Certainly, repairing the Transatlantic relationship is no longer enough to ensure supremacy over and control of global affairs – there is no way that emerging actors can be ignored now – but it will in any case be an essential first step in order for the European Union to be considered a protagonist in our changing world.

We are approaching a period which will see a general re-definition of the world's future power arrangements; new actors will re-write the rules of the “constitutional architecture” of the international community and will provide a pattern for the processes and decisions of politics; after the November election, the United States may come knocking at Europe's door: it is to be hoped that it will be the European Union which answers.