

STRATEGIC POWERS IN EUROPE: WHO IS IN AND WHO IS OUT?

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In the years when the Cold War was referred to as a reality in Europe, particularly in the first decades after WWII, the agenda was defined in simple terms: “To keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down.” All global chess games were played according to this rule. The reason was clear: the only faithful allies that the United States had in the bipolar world of those days were the Europeans. Europe felt indebted to and dependent on the United States. On the one hand, victory in WWII would not have been so convincing, and the rebuilding of Europe in the post-war years would not have been so fast, if America had not become involved in the war, which started in Europe but soon became global. On the other hand, the United States, through the Marshall Plan, helped not only Western European nations, but also some Warsaw Pact countries to recover.

Are old terms and expressions still valid?

During the Cold War, the restriction of German influence was guaranteed by its partition, the presence of US Armed Forces on its territory and, of course, by all the possible international forums, organizations, and other forms of international obligations in which the Germans took part.

More than twenty years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Now, Germany is united. It is one of the most influential countries in Europe. Together with its historic rival France, it has the lead in decision-making. Behind the scenes in the European Union it is said that whenever a working dinner of the leaders of these countries takes place before an upcoming European meeting, the decisions

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can be guessed in advance. The European socialization makes thinking about revisionism in the centre of Europe utopian and irrational.

The relations of the United States and Russia towards the EU as well as their role in Europe are also changing. Other than seven decades ago, the USA is almost invisible in Europe and EU politics, while Europe is unimaginable without Russia. Europe for Russia means wealthy markets, and in the meantime Russia for Europe is the largest source of minerals.

What determines the withdrawal of the US from Europe?

The US President Barack Obama throughout his pre-electoral campaign and in times of crisis has been for some time more popular in Europe than in his own country. Obama could enjoy European acceptance at times when he was struggling with the economic crisis or the healthcare reform. However, for the US President himself, European opinion was important only during the pre-electoral campaign. European disappointment in the Republican foreign policy and especially in George W. Bush was a perfect reason to assert that after becoming president, Obama is going to bring back dialogue to US foreign policy, and will renounce its unilateralism, etc.

When looking from the European perspective, these promises do not seem to have come true. Obama refused to participate in the EU-US summit. If this decision can be explained and understood on the diplomatic level, in the public it seemed to be a disappointment in the new Democrat administration. European leaders rarely visit the White House and in case they do visit, they expect much more attention. Therefore, the relations have begun cooling.

Why is that the case? There can be a couple of answers to this. First of all, the US administration does not have as many members with good European contacts as was the case in Republican times. There are no emigrants from East European countries in the highest levels of the US government or those who would guarantee the continuity of foreign policy even with the change of parties in the administration. Many analysts emphasize that Obama, because of his origin, better understands the problems of Africa and not Europe.

Secondly, despite promises to include Europeans in multilateral dialogues and to coordinate actions in “hotspots”, up to now one can notice a more pragmatic

goal to fulfil the electoral promises in foreign policy. To end wars, to ensure optimal conditions for the oil supply, and to end the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Multilateralism manifests itself via American requests to actively engage in the operation in Afghanistan – to undertake new development projects and to send more soldiers. However, Iran is still seen not as a matter of joint efforts but rather as the result of US–Russian negotiations. Without the support of Russia and, of course, China, no additional sanctions can be applied on the Iranian government, which are so thirsty for nuclear weapons.

Thirdly, the opinion that Europe is safe, stable, and no threats could arise in the short or mid-term is increasingly more widespread in the US. That is why the Europeans could and should take matters into their own hands – care for the wealth of their citizens, catch up with America and Japan in the field of innovation and high-tech and, finally, secure the supply of energy resources that come not from the “hot” Middle East but from Russia.

Who should be blamed for the changes in the US approach?

First, the Americans are pragmatic, which is particularly true of the current US administration. Foreign policy issues are less interesting to US politicians and the human resources that they are given have considerably declined. Moreover, these are distributed more pragmatically as the Middle East is now top priority. It is easily explainable to the domestic audience and also in terms of global stability.

Second, the Americans may have become disappointed in the Europeans. Many European political leaders and public figures are very persistent in their demand that the United States should respect human rights and shut down the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. Most Americans see it as a slogan, and not as a wish to help the new administration, because only several European countries have agreed, for this or that reason, to accept Guantánamo detainees.

On the other hand, during the Cold War and in the period of challenges that followed, the United States allocated the largest amounts for Europe’s defence compared to the European countries themselves. Even during the economic crisis, the approach taken by the United States and Europe to defence expenditures is visibly different: the US continues increasing defence allocations or at least tries to

keep them from declining, while the Europeans are initiating their first cutbacks in the defence sector.

The third aspect of the American disappointment in the Europeans may seem to have a subjective tinge, but it is most clearly seen in person-to-person contacts. The anti-American sentiment that became strong in Europe during the Bush presidency did not go unnoticed in the United States. The European leaders, although mostly those representing center left positions, described the Americans as one-sided and tending to overrate capitalism. Similar views were also expressed by public figures. The spread of anti-American feeling did not stop even after changes took place in the ruling coalitions. Since around 2004, European daily newspapers and the popular media have been highlighting stereotypes on America and Americans on their front pages. Arguments that two-thirds of all Nobel Prize winners are Americans, that the former US president is a Yale graduate, and that Barack Obama graduated from Harvard do not seem to be convincing.

Can America be brought back to Europe?

The realistic answer would be “hardly”. If the United States still wants to play the role of a global policeman, there is actually nothing for it to do in the major part of Europe. Moreover, the EU or its dominant member states have sufficient negotiating power to solve their own problems. Finally, Europeans are not yet prepared to contribute either financially or through human resources to dealing with issues of urgency to the United States in other regions, while their strategic location is not so important as to make the US interested in engaging Europe. The Europeans have nothing to offer America at this point in time.

Meanwhile, the influence of such countries as Russia and China in global processes is constantly growing. Because of its geo-strategic position, Russia – even though exhausted by the crisis – is among the main actors that want to end the conflict in Afghanistan, persuade Iran to renounce its nuclear ambitions, ensure that Pakistan does not become a revisionist state, etc. For this reason, the United States announced its reset policy towards Russia. Differently than Bush, who looked into Putin’s soul and saw a good man and an ally, the Democratic Administration did not need to do the same with the Russian leaders: START, Iran, and Afghanistan are the issues that will reveal the “true friends” of the US.

However, we cannot assert that the Americans have left Europe for good, of course. Traditional transatlantic ties are also built on pragmatic and economic interests: Europe and the United States are still the largest trading partners. However, the pressure felt by the Americans in these turbulent times of crisis to transfer business to less secure but higher-profit countries is strong.

What are the possible consequences of American indifference towards Europe?

First, it encourages some European countries to play the same game of relationship improvement with Russia hoping that after having found a niche of cooperation with Russia, or at least having demonstrated a capability to speak with Russia, one can expect US attention for own endeavours. That is why even the dislocation of the American anti-missile shield in Central and Eastern Europe is proposed to be coordinated with Russia.

Second, the other part of countries, who believe in a decreased American attentiveness towards Europe suggest going even further and hope that the Europeans can take care of themselves. From this belief comes the suggestion to withdraw all US tactical nuclear weapons from European soil. The truth is that they do not have a suitable replacement, unless, as the incumbent NATO secretary general suggests, with some sort of NATO forces.

Third, it is these countries that do not want or cannot believe that the geopolitical situation has changed and by having nothing to offer in return to the pragmatic Americans, they still want at least a symbolic declaration of an American presence in Europe. And they get it.

According to an optimistic scenario after having experienced decreasing US attention, the Europeans are going to launch initiatives that guarantee their safety and stability not only in the military but also in the political and economic sense. The realistic scenario presupposes that because of natural internal competition European states will seek to defend their bilateral interests and not go for a common European outcome. Finally, the pessimistic scenario suggests that the vacuum of a strategic player will be filled by someone else, most likely by none other than Russia.

US – in, Russia – out or vice versa?

Almost all EU countries are dependent on Russian gas. The project “Nord Stream” will even more so increase the interdependence of the German and Russian energy system. Putin had personally invited the leaders of Germany to take an active part in the privatization process, which is planned to be renewed. French relations with Russia is another example. Two Mistral is probably not going to change the military balance in Europe, but on the regional level some changes can be expected. Moreover, a Mistral is not only a barge for transporting helicopters and fighters, but also military technology.

The Russian President Medvedev has initiated an international discussion about a new security architecture in Europe as well as an attempt to persuade Europeans to renew negotiations on conventional forces. A European reaction is expected – with the support of the US or without. However, the reaction of strategic issues highly depends on the location of the states – how close certain European countries are to Russia, on the country’s historical experience, as well on its negotiation power vis-à-vis Russia. There is no unity in the development of the EU-Russian relations. This increases the Russian opportunities to be a part of European policy and, moreover, in certain situations – even to influence the formation of the European agenda.

At this moment, the existing formats – the EU and NATO – ensure that Russia does not participate in the decision-making. Still, more and more often the questions of Russia’s membership in these organizations are raised. Even rhetorical questions testify that Russia is present in Europe already. How successful will Europeans be in balancing this presence? This will probably depend on Russia’s intention to become “civilized Europeans” as well as on the EU leaders’ intentions and potential to remind their Eastern neighbour as to what “civilized Europeans” truly means.