

NSS Review: Europe Given Short Shrift

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Is the European Union (EU) – or even its Member States – still a key ally for the US? Is the transatlantic alliance in decline?

To be sure the alleged crisis President Obama's decision not to participate in the planned Madrid EU-US Summit in May was largely exaggerated. Yet there undoubtedly is a growing feeling of marginalization in Europe – of marginalization in international affairs, as experienced in Copenhagen, and of marginalization in the transatlantic relationship, as illustrated by the fall-out over the Madrid Summit. Whether this perception is founded is not really the point: Europeans sense a growing gap with their American ally, and the US should be aware of it.

Last week's publication of a new National Security Strategy (NSS) is likely to emphasize that perception. Indeed, the document only mentions the EU twice. In comparison, the EU was mentioned 11 times in the 1998 NSS of Bill Clinton, three times in the 2002 and five times in the 2006 NSS's of George W. Bush.

Moreover, the context in which the EU is mentioned is evolving as well. In 1998, the EU was referred to essentially as a major economic pole and as a security/political actor with limited potential in its neighborhood. Bush depicted the EU as a fully global security and political actor active in counterterrorism, nuclear counter proliferation, and post-conflict reconstruction. It is true that in the meantime, the EU had further integrated and had created the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), triggering large (and perhaps exaggerated) expectations of EU global power.

In contrast, Obama shows more moderation in his assessment of the EU. The NSS does say that "Building on European aspirations for greater integration, we are committed to partnering with a stronger European Union to advance our shared goals, especially in . . . responding to pressing issues of mutual concern." But the EU is mentioned as just one actor among the many now exerting power and influence.

The declining centrality of the EU (and Europe) in American strategic assessment can be explained by the rise of emerging powers on the global stage — notably Russia, India and China — which increasingly attract Washington's attention and by a more realist reassessment of the EU's limited power potential, in spite of the expectations generated by the Lisbon Treaty. To some extent, it is a luxury problem: if Europe is not high on the US list of priorities, it is because the old continent no longer presents any major problems for US security. The real problem is that the EU is not really seen as a significant partner in addressing the problems that do exist in other parts of the world.

In a changing global environment, with a new global order in the making and new global challenges, the strategic attention of Washington is increasingly diverted away from the transatlantic partnership. Yet precisely in these challenging times collective action is required to deal with global threats, under the impulse of global leaders. And who else can be up to the

task than the American superpower and its powerful European allies? Surely, nobody expects Russia, India or China to share the US project to the same extent. In such an environment therefore, the transatlantic relationship should be renewed, not marginalized.

In order to shape a new global order based on universally shared norms, rules and values, we need a renewed transatlantic leadership for a new grand bargain in which the emergence of new powers demanding power and recognition, and the emergence of new challenges requiring global responses, can be reconciled through an effective multilateral approach. As the EU's own European Security Strategy says, "Acting together, the European Union and the United States can be a formidable force for good in the world." Their joint effort will be required if they are to retain global influence in this new world order.

The US should therefore not forget about its "old" Allies. Europe is not simply on call for when the US needs it, but ought to be treated as an equal partner that can bring creative strategies and a comprehensive toolbox to address global problems. Obviously, Europe should do what it takes to be an equal partner: make full use of its new institutions under the Lisbon Treaty, set clear strategic priorities, and proactively pursue them. Then next time Barack Obama meets Herman Van Rompuy they can have a true strategic conversation.

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