

The US pivot towards Europe – an upshot of Ukrainian developments?

Are there any positives to be found in the dramatic events currently unfolding in Ukraine? The question appears to be thoroughly inappropriate considering the sheer scale and the implications of the conflict playing out behind our eastern border with people dying and with the situation made all the graver by fears that Vladimir Putin's imperialistic ambitions may not end at Crimea. All this should make any questions about positives in the Ukrainian developments purely rhetorical.

However, there is a notable aspect which, although difficult to articulate or gauge, seems to arise as a consequence of Russia's aggression in Crimea. The aspect is the recent reactivation of US policy towards Europe. Only a few months ago, the majority of experts and analysts agreed that the United States has for years consistently continued to turn away from Europe in a process which seemed impossible to slow down if not reverse. Although the divergence of US and European interests goes back to George W. Bush's presidency during which tensions in the Trans-Atlantic Community arose over Iraq and even in connection with the end of the Cold War, the trend actually picked up shortly after Barack Obama won the office.

The first African-American to reside in the White House, the son of a Kenyan father, Obama spent most of his childhood in Asia without the kind of emotional links with the Old World that characterized nearly all US leaders who came before him, the majority of whom stemmed from the East Coast.

No. 161 / 2014
19'03'14

Institute for Western Affairs
Poznań

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While this indeed has been one of the reasons why America turned away from Europe, it is not the most important of them. The primary factor was that, simply put, Europe fell short of the expectations of the US administration. One of the main tenets of Obama's European policies was Europe's preparedness to act as a significant international player and an effective partner which the US needed in an increasingly multipolar world tormented by a wide range of problems.

The Obama administration appealed to its European allies to shoulder their share of the burden and assume a more active role in facing today's challenges. In this field, Europe and the European Union failed to satisfy Washington's expectations for a variety of reasons. Seen from the American perspective, Europe remained fairly fragmented, sluggish in its decision-making and insufficiently assertive despite having created an office equivalent to that of a foreign affairs minister to represent the EU. On the other hand, many European countries felt let down by some of the gestures and actions coming from Washington. When Russia fell within the scope of the US reconciliation policy intended, in the particular case of Russia, to reset the mutual relationship between the two countries, new tensions and disputes arose. The key consequence was the loss of confidence in Washington seen in the capitals of Central and Eastern Europe.

The weakening of America's interest in Europe also resulted from the simple fact that Europe was no longer a security concern and that the US was not nearly as anxious about its stability and progress in building democracy as it had been during the Cold War and immediately afterwards. President Obama perceived the Old World mainly in the context of other issues which constituted a true challenge for American interests and priorities, especially economic. No longer a central security concern for the United States, Europe took a back seat to other US foreign policy goals.

Furthermore, the changing geopolitics of the early 21st century and the arrival of new powers with their individual strengths became another factor in shaping America's policy towards the Old World. As a consequence, the European continent lost its priority status for the US. Meanwhile, the need to compete with other powers on the geopolitical scene, particularly China, drove it to pivot to the Pacific Rim in what has become a major trend in recent foreign policy of the US. Commentators went as far as to call Obama not as much the first African-American president of the United States but rather the first Asian president who distinctly reoriented America from the Atlantic towards the Pacific. The result was obvious: a widening rift between Europe / the European Union and the United States.



In view of the above and in light of recent developments, one has reason to believe that the trend of the US turning towards the Pacific has been stopped abruptly. And, most importantly, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic realized fully well that the stability of Europe is not to be taken for granted and that the sense of eternal security enjoyed on the Continent is illusory and fleeting. For that reason alone, European affairs cannot disappear from Washington's radar. The United States remains the key strategic partner for its European allies. At times as crucial and dramatic as the Ukrainian developments, America remains the only power capable of facing up to Russia and keeping its ambitions at bay. It appears that the American superpower is waking up to its sense of responsibility for Ukraine and, indirectly, for Europe's security.

This change of heart is in fact undeniable, particularly in view of how adamantly the Obama administration approached the Ukrainian challenge although, I might add, that approach was not without certain delay and hesitation. This determination on the part of Washington appears all the stronger when contrasted with the response of its European allies. Although somewhat resolute towards Russia, and, in fact, beyond its usual inertia and reserve in dealing with Moscow, the European Union continues to struggle to come up with a firm and unambiguous stance on the issue. America, on the other hand, perhaps in part because it is in a position to avoid painstaking negotiations and heated debates to assert its standpoint, as is the case in the EU, has responded with more fortitude and resolve.

Whether the United States will prove effective in its knotty confrontation with Russia as the latter glaringly defies international law and the basic standards of decency, depends largely on the support it receives from its European allies. The stakes are high. What is certainly at stake is Ukraine's territorial integrity and perhaps even its independence as well as, equally important, the security and stability of Europe. Finally, America's ability to act in unison with its European allies is about strengthening the Trans-Atlantic Alliance and nearly restoring it to the significance and rank it enjoyed during the Cold War.

Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic have an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that the Trans-Atlantic Alliance plays a vital international role safeguarding stability and the enforceability of law. Just as its military and political pillar, the NATO, the Alliance offers the best available guarantee of security and order. Europeans have again seen the significance of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance which has lost much of its prestige due to failures in Afghanistan, internal disputes and the assertiveness of certain member states. The recent developments come as a reminder that NATO remains the most effective and strongest military alliance. Nevertheless, its strength depends on the dedication and even the willingness for sacrifice on the part of its members who need to stop weighing their costs and dwelling on their claims. A big role here may be played by Europe which, having long basked



in its sense of stability, should recognize the need to assume obligations and live up to challenges, even at a significant cost.

America seems to have made that choice already as it again recognizes the need to engage in Europe, restore its strong political and military ties with that Continent and even absorb any related costs. After all, Europe has risked seeing further American bases on its Continent being shut down and, even more importantly, having American defense spending cut dramatically in the next decade (by over a half a trillion dollars) and American military personnel severely reduced (at a time when, Russia is not only far from contemplating any such cuts, but in fact unrelentingly pursuing an armament policy). As a result of having redefined its priorities in a way which benefits Poland, the US has stepped up its presence on Polish turf and may change its approach to the nuclear missile defense system. What is certain is that, for the first time since long, Poland has felt included in America's protection zone.

Once reaffirmed and strengthened, the Trans-Atlantic Alliance will gain further significance should the pessimistic Ukrainian scenario unfold which, by all indications, is already happening. In this scenario, Crimea ends up incorporated into Russia while Moscow-instigated unrest in eastern Ukraine continues to erode the country's integrity. A united American-European front on Russia will remain the only power strong enough to hold Putin's ambitions in check. And yet, for this to happen, the approach needs to become truly united and be unlike today's mix of a determined stance of Washington coupled with an amalgam of divergent views coming from individual EU member states. Such an incoherent blend would afford Putin an opportunity to play Europe and the US to his advantage as skillfully as he has in the past. This would be to the detriment of the Trans-Atlantic Community as well as European and global security and would eventually turn the American pivot toward Europe into a passing reorientation of United States strategy. After all, disappointed with Europe's incoherence and deprived of clear support from its European allies, Washington will focus on its priorities leaving Europe to its own devices.

The statements expressed in this text exclusively reflect the views of its author.

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