

## Column

### **‘Just a region’ or strategic asset?**

#### **How Americans see Europe**

Marten van Heuven

**What is the state of Europe as seen from America? Where you stand depends on where you sit. My perspective is that of a confirmed Atlanticist who spent his career dealing with Europe and transatlantic relations. In this view, it serves the interests of all transatlantic partners to maintain a close and mutually supportive relationship.**

Americans know that Europe has much to be proud of. Its course over the past six decades has been spectacular. Europe is prosperous as never before, and (mostly) at peace. With exceptions on its geographic periphery, it lives free from vital threats. It is no longer divided. It has contributed its share to a security alliance with the United States in NATO. It has built a European Union from the ground up. These European structures make room for the prominent place now occupied by Germany. The US has played a significant role in bringing about this European transformation, which also serves American interests.

#### **Reality test**

Grand statements about transatlantic relations, however, often fail to meet the reality test. For the state of Europe is not healthy. The economies of the EU states are weak, dragging non-EU members along. Social changes and new information technology are triggering irreversible changes in politics and society. Established political parties are undergoing transformation from within and forced to change from without. It has become harder to come up with workable governing coalitions. Effective governance has suffered. Public dissatisfaction is growing. Calls for Europe to play a role as a world power ring hollow. Defense budgets are declining. Europe is mostly inward looking. EU “Brussels” is losing popularity. Recent events in Ukraine suggest the danger of new fault lines in Europe. An experienced American observer notes that “Washington has not fully come to terms with the fact that its closest partners and allies are facing the most significant existential crisis since the Second World War”.<sup>1</sup>

Within Europe, the “German Question” has a new form in the issue what should be the role of that key country within the European Community and Europe at large. Germany now faces a dilemma — Europeans want leadership and understand that only Germany can play that role. On the other hand, its partners and their publics are quick to detect a heavy German hand. Nevertheless, Berlin is actively engaged in Central Europe and can — and does — leverage its position within the EU to deal with Putin’s Russia. The American public does not see a “German Question”. Chancellor Merkel has a positive image. The American public sees her as a solid and trustworthy leader. She was invited to address a joint meeting of Congress. President Obama conferred on her the Presidential medal of Freedom.

There are specific and corrosive issues that bedevil Europe today. One is unemployment. Except for the few Americans who remember the pre-war depression, the European unemployment figures are incomprehensible to the interested American public. This situation is tearing social cohesion apart. Unemployment is creating a growing group of mostly young people who are feeling increasingly alienated from the system and who are looking for alternative social and economic models. Some choose emigration to other continents. There are consequences: One is the fragmentation of the political system. Another is the growth of right-wing populism. The last is a beggar-thy-neighbor mentality, of which popular outrage in Greece with German austerity policy is but one example.

The other divisive issue is immigration. Demographic statistics indicate Europe needs an influx of people to offset the effects of an aging population. But many EU countries are averse to let in immigrants, and discriminate against Roma and other groups, once they arrive and attempt to stay. The issue of assimilation has roiled the waters in many countries, including in the Netherlands, which has always prided itself to being open to foreigners, even those with a different cultural background. There will not be a one-size-fits-all approach that could be devised and implemented by the EU. Each EU country must find its own way through this thicket, coordinating — at times contentiously — with its neighbors. The issue of immigration also brings into play that of Turkish accession. EU countries must arrive at a common view about letting Turkey into the EU. This is not now the case. But if Turkey were to be a full member of the EU (not a given in the light of domestic developments in Turkey), as it has long been a member of NATO, it might ease acceptance of the prospect that, like it or not, the EU is likely to have to deal with not only a growing Muslim population in EU countries, but also immigrants from the Middle East and Africa.

### **A clouded prism**

The American view of Europe has its roots in World War II, and in the Cold War. But the collapse of the Soviet Union and unification has brought Europe onto a new stage, though no one has yet come up with an apt and appealing phrase to replace the term Post Cold War period.<sup>2</sup> Washington has long seen Europe through the prism of NATO. Early American suspicions about the reach of European ambitions, fed by verbal aspirations to world leadership, have given way, during the Clinton Administration, to American support for the EU. But this has not kept Washington from dealing with Europe as it is, including with capitals of major European powers. And Washington has been mostly silent on the issue of EU enlargement. Germany is now seen as key to Europe, and some US officials have trouble hiding their feeling that Germany should do more, in defense but also in stimulating its economy. France is seen as a country that, in global politics, has become more comfortable dealing with America, and as one of the few European countries that can field military forces on expeditionary missions. Views in Washington about the UK are mixed. The relationship is underpinned by years of close cooperation and cultural affinity. But the UK seems to be on an uncertain path. Britain has stayed out of the Eurozone. The Scots will soon vote on the degree of autonomy they want. And a national referendum on the relation of the UK with the EU is on the horizon.<sup>3</sup> From an American perspective, a Great Britain that seems intent on dropping the

term Great is not in the US interest. Washington prefers a strong British role within the European structures, including the EU.

Unsynchronized and seemingly contradictory US policy statements cloud the prism through which Washington sees Europe. But the so-called pivot to the Pacific is a non-issue. Twenty years ago then Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger speculated, to general consternation, that this was the direction in which American policy interests were likely to lead. The same has been true for EU countries, judging by the popularity of Beijing as a destination for traveling Prime Ministers, Chancellors, fellow ministers and industrialists. Just before leaving office, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned that planned defense reductions by NATO allies would create a hollow shell. Not long thereafter, however, Vice President Joseph Biden and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton underscored, at the Munich Security Conference, the US view of the importance of the alliance. Meanwhile, on Capitol Hill one can hear a steady trickle of complaints that, particularly in stringent times, the US is bearing an outsize burden to keep the NATO alliance intact.

### **Leadership**

The raw truth is that, as a colleague from Brookings put it to me privately, from the US perspective, Europe is just a region, like other regions on the globe. US European policy is no longer about Europe. It is about issues elsewhere. From the American point of view, the issue now is to what extent Europeans can, and are willing, to support US objectives in other geographic areas.

Seen through this prism, Europe comes up short. This conclusion may be illustrated by a *Gedankenexperiment*. Suppose the EU had over time achieved all the goals it set for itself in its public statements. This would not have been in the US interest. Matching two power centers, each of which pretty set in its ways, would have made for difficult policy coordination. Now suppose that in every major aspect of its agenda the EU failed. This would not be good for the US either, since it would leave the US to tackle global issues without significant support of any European allies. The best situation, from an American perspective, would be a situation somewhere in the middle. But the actual state of affairs seems to be that Europe is somewhere short of the middle. From an American point of view, it could stand reinforcement. This does not seem on the horizon for now, though over time an economic recovery, elections to the European Parliament, a reconstituted EU Commission, and greater public acceptance of the EU might give the EU a second breath. These issues will be for the Europeans to decide.

This picture leads to several observations. One is that, unless European publics regain a more favorable view of the EU, no amount of elite European leadership will be able to maintain the objective of an ever closer union. Europe will have to rethink what structures and processes will best serve the interests of its peoples. Second, Russian policy needs US-German coordination to the extent possible. Each ally has a huge stake in the relationship with Moscow. It is not just about the future of Ukraine, or energy. It has to do with whether Russia can, over time, accommodate itself and its interests to being a part of the transatlantic community.

My last point is about the importance of leadership. Washington will look to Chancellor Merkel, who has been a steady ally and will continue to be, despite the flap over electronic eavesdropping. But she has shown the ability to change course abruptly, as she did on nuclear energy, and she might surprise again when the NATO countries review their nuclear weapons policy. And Europeans may ask whether the United States will have the same ingenuity and drive to set a course for the Atlantic community as it did after WW II. The jury is out, but there are encouraging voices that see a second chance for US leadership.<sup>4</sup> In pursuit of this objective, Americans will see Europe as a strategic asset.

Marten van Heuven spent most of his government career as a US foreign service officer dealing principally with transatlantic and arms control issues. During the years 1987-1991 he served at the National Intelligence Council as the National Intelligence Officer for Europe. Since then, he has been with the RAND Corporation, and serves as a Board member of the Atlantic Council of the United States. He is a member of the International Advisory Board of *Atlantisch Perspectief*. The views expressed above are the personal opinions of the author.

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1. Heather A. Conley, *Foreign Policy*, November 2012.
2. Stephanie Hofmann & Kenneth Weisbrode, 'Will the post-Cold War period ever end?', *World Policy Journal*, Summer issue 2010.
3. In a magisterial review of British relations with the EU to an audience at the London School of Economics on May 2, 2013, Sir Malcolm Rifkind concluded that Britain's focus on practical achievements rather than political vision has helped shape the European project for the better: [www.malcolmrifkind.com/news/britain-and-eu](http://www.malcolmrifkind.com/news/britain-and-eu).
4. Drawing on the intelligence community's quadrennial global trends report, the President of the Atlantic Council of the United States, Frederick Kempe, argues that the US is facing an inflexion point, and that it has a second chance to shape the international political and economic system: <http://blogs.reuters.com/thinking-global>. And in an address at the Atlantic Council of the United States on November 13, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland called for a transatlantic renaissance, noting that President Obama has called Europe our global partner of first resort.