



Germia Hill conference 2012
European Council on Foreign Relations &
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*The Future of Transatlantic Relations:
South East Europe and Beyond*

The second edition of the Germia Hill conference was convened in November 2012, in the wake of Secretary Clinton and EUHR Catherine Ashton's tour of the Balkans and President Obama's reelection. In this context, the conference offered a good opportunity to take stock of the transatlantic relationship and issue a bill of health on such areas where the nature of U.S-EU cooperation has been altered and its efficiency compromised, in the Balkans and beyond. More particularly participants reflected on the compelling reasons for the EU and US to jointly engage Turkey and simultaneously provide a new Grand Strategy for the Middle East.

After the welcoming remarks from Kosovo President Atifete Jahjaga and Kosovo Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj the first day of debates kicked off with a panel titled "A post-American Europe?" that was followed by a keynote speech featuring former UN High Representative and former French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner.

Panel 1: A post-American Europe?

Some panellists questioned the accuracy of the opening panel's title, either by suggesting an alternative one (EU Special Representative Samuel Žbogar suggested « A post-European America? ») or by trying to bring evidence showing strong U.S engagement in current European affairs. There was nevertheless consensus amongst participants that Europeans needed to focus on what they could do to avoid U.S distancing.

From a Balkan perspective speakers argued that the transatlantic relationship remains strong and functional: despite the eurocrisis and the enunciation of the US pivot to Asia, EU's enlargement process and NATO are still the main anchors for South East Europe. In this context Denmark's Minister for European Affairs, Nicolai Wammen, and his Kosovar counterpart Vlora Citaku insisted on why the EU must not be hit by enlargement fatigue especially in the Balkans.

Minister Citaku challenged conventional wisdom on the so-called U.S distancing from Europe and argued there was a clear continuation of American engagement in the Balkans but also warned that if status-quo remains EU's line of conduct in terms of Foreign policy, the US will be needed again in Europe's periphery.

Reflecting on EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, EU Special Representative Samuel Zbogar interpreted the recent Ashton-Clinton visit as yet another sign that the duo is efficient. The EU and US bring different ingredients in the region – « you need two to tango, even if the nature of the job in the Balkans has changed », Zbogar said.

One of the speakers acknowledged US concerns over the future of the EU itself but was also reassuring regarding US engagement in Europe : 60% of the briefings the US Secretary reads are about Europe, he remarked. The management of the eurocrisis has shown that the Union's nature has evolved, he argued, and this has led Balkan countries to question their own integration strategies: which club are we trying to join in a multi-speed Europe?

As regards Kosovo's own EU integration prospects, panellists concurred in saying that those European countries that have not recognized Kosovo are now thinking that they have bet on the wrong horse. Nevertheless, US leverage is still needed to convince reluctant EU members to recognize Kosovo, Former Albanian Foreign minister Paskal Milo remarked. There is fatigue not only regarding enlargement but also on dealing with Western Balkans' politicians, Milo diagnosed. It is therefore in the interest of the Western Balkans to have a strong EU-US relationship. Balkan politics have not entered a phase of maturity yet and the region still needs a strong U.S and EU engagement to keep the European integration process going.

Former Foreign Minister Antonio Milošoski and Former German Ambassador Ernst Reichel reflected on NATO's strong appeal to most Western Balkan countries. As Milošoski put it, "NATO is also Europe and we must keep it that way at least until all the Western Balkans become part of it". The EU with its own multi-dimensional involvement, holds the key to the region's future. While Europe does not want to impose solutions in the Balkans, it can provide incentives for the stakeholders to find their own solutions. Ambassador Eichel insisted there was no US neglect for Europe as the US has enough assets and manpower to remain very active in Europe and recalibrate its strategy in the Pacific at the same time. Commenting on the Greek-Macedonian dispute, Antonio Milošoski acknowledged that Washington and Brussels cannot solve all ongoing confrontations in the Western Balkans but opening up membership talks could ease-up tensions.

In the following Q&A session conference participants challenged speakers on EU's commitment to open accession talks with candidate countries: in the wake of the eurocrisis the EU seems to have regretted letting some countries join too soon, one participant commented, but has anyone regretted opening membership talks? Why then not open membership talks with all the Western Balkan countries, one participant asked.

Russia's leverage in the region was also questioned with speakers agreeing that Russia is not an alternative for the Western Balkans.

As the conference coincided with the opening of a new round of talks at a prime-ministerial level between Serbia and Kosovo some participants examined the efficiency of the negotiations. On that specific topic one participant argued that agreeing not to fight with each other was not

enough, making the point that the negotiation process needs to be more ambitious.

Keynote speech by former UN Special Representative Bernard Kouchner:

Conference participants enjoyed listening to France's ex-Foreign minister who gave a keynote address on Kosovo's strong record of achievements since the aftermath of the 1999 war. Bernard Kouchner reckoned that even if this is a bad time for EU enlargement, Western Balkans countries must transform Brussels' hesitation into a necessity to act. The Ashton-Clinton recent visit is also a call for a Balkans born proposal and perspective that can convince reluctant public opinions in Western Europe. « The EU needs a success, [...] finding a path towards a European federation and achieving a breakthrough in the Balkans are both part of that success », Kouchner said.

Panel 2 : Lessons learned in the Balkans

The second day of the conference opened with a session on the lessons learned in the Balkans and the conditions under which joint US and EU transformative power works. 2013 will see another Balkan country become a member of the EU, yet the rest of the region remains economically and socially fragile. From an economic point of view the EU has exported its crisis in the Balkans and the situation is deteriorating, warned István Gyarmati, President of the Democracy Center Public Foundation in Budapest. Kosovo Vice Prime minister Slobodan Petrovic also insisted on the fact that unemployment remains the major issue in Kosovo and the region as a whole. For Marko Prelec (International Crisis Group) one major lesson learned is that unlike in other periods of History, the Balkans are responsible for what happened in the 90's. Regarding Kosovo, Prelec brought to attention the importance of investing on the quality of both public policy staffing and private sector training after the formal end of supervised independence.

Balkans veteran analyst Daniel Serwer reflected on some fundamental lessons learned from Bosnia's state building path. In his view it is important for the U.S and EU to use the whole economic and strategic toolkit in the Balkans – which includes military presence. As Professor Serwer put it « you need to give the same message with the civilian and the military capabilities. If the U.S leave Kosovo without a clear recognition from Serbia we might be giving a wrong message. Troops still give strong messages across the region ». This holistic approach is even more important now as the Balkans give way to other pressing issues in the U.S Foreign Policy agenda. An indirect lesson learned in the Balkans is that now the EU must fill the security gap left from a possible lack of interest from the US. In such a context the 5 EU member states that do not recognize Kosovo might be putting the wider region at risk. In view of the Kosovo-Serbia second round of discussions, recognition must come first Serwer advised. The dialogue must not be about the dialogue, it has to be about recognition and establishment of diplomatic relations.

ECFR's Sofia office head Dimitar Bechev made the point that the major lesson for the EU itself is a lesson of humility. In the EU we are still questioning the 2004 enlargement, Bechev emphasized. As a consequence of the financial crisis the Balkans have enlarged : Greece and Hungary are back. The EU is entering a phase of differentiated integration and under these new circumstances we must answer some tough questions regarding the conditions under which EU's own transformative power can work.

Panel 3: Engaging Turkey - towards a joint US-EU strategy

The chair of the panel, Kostanty Gerbert from ECFR's Warsaw office, opened the debate by pointing out the current transatlantic dilemma regarding Turkey : « the US cannot figure Turkey out and the EU cannot figure Turkey in » Gebert said. There is frustration in Turkey for not achieving accession as there is frustration in the EU for not getting enough out of the accession talks.

The first panellist reflected on the impact of the U.S presidential elections' outcome abroad. We are at a threshold where we have to renegotiate the trade-offs, duties and advantages. In Ankara there is a sense of destiny in being at the forefront on this debate about a post-American world : the blockage in Turkey's EU process is an explanatory factor. And then the Arab spring kicks in.

The second speaker defined the U.S – EU – Turkey triangle as a triangle of distrust. Even if there seems to be a close relationship between Obama and Erdogan, this does not seem to trickle down in the rest of the administration. Beyond that there is an ever increasing distrust between US and EU on the way to approach Turkey. The speaker then introduced the idea of a new grand strategy for Turkey based on two pillars : the EU can say to Turkey that it will never be a fully fledged member but use Turkey to become the main element of a redefined Eastern Mediterranean. Current gas prospection projects between Israel and Cyprus emphasize the need for such a grand bargain in the region.

According to the third panellist the current eurocrisis offers an opportunity. Turkey deserves to be in the second tier Europe (non eurozone). Turkey should be part of the discussion today, since Europeans are now redefining the EU. The Turkish economy is in good shape but it needs to show signs of sustainability. The panellist insisted that the EU is still the only anchor – the only guiding light for the Turkish economy. Turkey has made a first jump – a story of economic liberalisation. The second jump can only be done with deeper integration with the EU – « integration with the world is not enough » she said.

During the Q&A session most participants agreed that the way forward in EU-Turkey relations was to keep accession talks on the table even if the efficiency of EU's conditionality mechanism is being strongly tested in the Turkish case.

One participant challenged the view of a need to bring forward a grand strategy. There is nostalgia for a grand strategy yet there has been no U.S grand strategy for the Balkans. So why should there be one for the Middle-East the participant asked? Also, who should lead such a grand strategy about Turkey ? The EU or the US ? According to another participant, during the last three decades the strategy of the West has been to diminish its own power. Now Turkey realises how western it is. In foreign policy terms it is even supplanting some former colonial powers in Africa and has opened 24 new embassies around the world in the last few years. Turkey is an export driven and investment thirsty economy – but it is relying too much on construction industry. So can this bubble bust?

Reflecting on the Europeanisation of Turkey one participant pointed that one can now find internal incentives and motivation for the democratisation of Turkish society. Another participant suggested that when Turkish soft power is projected in the Middle-East and the Balkans it projects universal values. The West is underestimating Turkish soft-power and US and EU should keep reminding Turkey to lead by example – remind Turkey that its secular model should work in Turkey

first. A third participant brought to attention the importance of the young, well educated and sophisticated AKP members that could bring some momentum in the future. As one of the speakers pointed out, it seems that the danger looming today in the Turkish society is not islamism but rather the legacy of the Kemalist state and the risk of putinisation of the current regime.

Panel 4: EU and US in the new Middle East

The first panellist advocated the need for a new relationship between the Middle East, the US and EU. In the region there is a clear distinction between Europe and the US as well as between societies and governments but European policy towards the Middle East still feels like a complement to US foreign policy.

We now face a post-Arab Spring region where for the first time regional factors can become actors and not only subjects of international affairs. We need to distinguish the first wave of revolutions where foreign intervention was practically non-existent (Egypt & Tunisia) from the second wave when the West was present and had both positive and negative influences.

EU and US now face two types of regimes : those who want to maximize the changes and those who want to contain them. Yet two similarities stand out across the region : 1) there is a new economic model which is a mix of state intervention and capitalism ; 2) the West must now deal with legitimate islamist political forces. There is a diversity inside islamism and the West could have a much more stable region if it engages with the Islamists, the panellist advised. We need to separate democracy from secularism and islamism from terrorism. In this context the West has to do its part of the job and it becomes apparent that a new concept is needed: western commitment towards a successful democratic transition and a just peace between Israel and Palestine.

The second speaker reflected on the US sincere commitment to helping towards democratisation in the region. But ultimately Egyptian and Tunisian transitions will be achieved by Egyptians and Tunisians, with the US and EU only able to have some leverage in the margins. The truth is that the pivot to Asia is about the Middle East and less about Europe the speaker remarked. But American foreign policy was not waiting for the Presidential election outcome the panellist argued, and we should therefore expect the same kind of foreign policy towards the Middle East in the next few years.

The third speaker prompted the participants not to consider the Arab Spring as finished business. There is a growing consciousness across the region that something is still happening and we cannot close the chapter. Especially when you look at the situation in Syria with children in refugee camps with no education for over two years. It is in Europe's interest not to let this happen. The panellist also voiced some concern about « fortress Europe ». Western attitudes towards Syria are shaped by three « I » s: Islam, Immigration and Iran. Beyond the current blooming interaction between Middle-Eastern bloggers and western ones, Europe needs to open up to the region.

During the Q&A session participants challenged the speakers on the issue of the protection of minorities and women. One panellist suggested that Egypt doesn't have a minority right problem but is rather facing a more urgent challenge in trying to establish the rule of law and putting in place an administration that can protect everyone. Another participant urged the EU and the US not to give way to the Iranian worldview which regards the Arab spring as an « islamic uprising ».

Conclusion on « introvert Europe »

Regarding the Balkans, foreign policy dynamics have changed so much in the last five years that we cannot count anymore on Western interest alone to help improve regional economic and security prospects. The partnership does not seem to work with Turkey either and a joint US-EU strategy towards Turkey is now a remote prospect. Finally, the EU is unfortunately not so relevant in the Middle East and the Europeans risk getting back to a technocratic approach of the region. As Dimitar Bechev put it in his concluding remarks, « introvert Europe is lost in partnerships ».