

What Europe wants from President Obama

By Tomas Valasek

★ Barack Obama will have Europe's goodwill, and with it, an opportunity to restore transatlantic co-operation on key security issues. He has sketched out some changes that Europe will welcome, for example talking directly to Iran to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. But he has offered little detail on other important issues like Russia.

★ The economic crisis will shape Obama's presidency as well as transatlantic relations for the next few years. The new president should resist calls for bailouts and the protection of America's car industry. Europe and others would respond in kind and global trade would slow, further reducing economic growth.

★ If Obama handles the immense challenges before him effectively, and restores America's image in the world, the European Union will benefit. Europe's close historical links with Washington may well become one of the EU's strongest assets in its external relations.

Dear President Obama,

The election is over so we can speak freely: you were Europe's favourite candidate. We are delighted that the American people have chosen you on November 4th. You will have our goodwill and with it, a window of opportunity to restore transatlantic co-operation on key security issues.

From where we stand, we see an almost endless row of crises before you, from that in the financial markets to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We will be of little help to you on some, like stopping North Korea's nuclear programme. But on many others, from Iran to Russia to climate change, strong US-European co-operation will be essential if we are to make progress.

Whether you succeed in restoring transatlantic co-operation on foreign policy will depend in part on your willingness to try out new approaches to the challenges discussed in this letter.

Europe will expect you to transform the substance of US foreign policy as much as its style. On some issues,

like Iran and Afghanistan, you have sketched out how policy may change; on others, like Russia, you offered few new ideas during the campaign. We hope that you will think creatively on all fronts.

Europe and the US have grown estranged under your predecessor. Some of us have disagreed with him vehemently on Iraq. On other issues like Iran we felt we were not getting the support we needed from Washington. But if you show skill and wisdom in handling the crises before you, you will silence the US's critics in Europe and re-affirm your friends' faith in American leadership. We believe that Europe is stronger when working with the US on its side and we suspect that you, too, could use our help.

The challenges

No issue will shape transatlantic relations under your presidency as much as the economic crisis. Some of us have blamed the US for much of the current trouble (partly unfairly; we know European banks were only too happy to join the sub-prime rush). We hope that you will manage the crisis intelligently because our

own prosperity depends on it. But we worry that you may succumb to protectionist pressures.

You will inherit a set of terrible choices. What began as a wave of bank collapses has turned into a serious economic slowdown, which is dragging entire sectors of the economy towards bankruptcy. Indebted companies find it impossible to get new loans, just when diminishing consumer demand is reducing their income. One of your first tasks may be to decide whether to allow General Motors, and other icons of the US automobile industry, to disappear.

The public and the Democratic Congress will push you to pump money into failing companies and to protect them from 'unfair' competition. You must resist calls for protectionism. Should the US erect new barriers to imports, Europe and others would probably respond in kind. Trade, which has fuelled much of the global economic growth in recent decades, would slow down further. This is the last thing our economies need; the governments should be stimulating growth, not undermining it.

Widespread industrial bail-outs would be an equally bad idea. They will not save uncompetitive industries in the long run. Worse, they would squander US Treasury money at exactly the time when you will most need it. Instead, we would suggest that you save the money for a global co-ordinated round of tax cuts and government spending on infrastructure improvements, which will help boost future growth. We believe this to be the best response to the economic slowdown.

Climate change will be one of our top priorities for you and an area where we most fear disappointment. The December 2009 Copenhagen conference is due to produce a new global agreement on how to cut greenhouse gas emissions. We hope that you will live up to your election pledge to sign up to binding cuts in greenhouse gases. But we realise that the financial crisis has made your job all the more difficult; Congress will be reluctant to introduce any measures that impose new costs on struggling industries, as emissions controls would.

However, if the US fails to agree to binding cuts at Copenhagen, Europe will lose any chance of convincing India or China to join an agreement. And unless the world's most populous and fastest-growing economies try to curb emissions, we stand no chance of halting global warming. So we hope you will persevere. The climate keeps changing whether the politics of the moment favours environmentally-friendly measures or not. And as you said yourself, cutting oil and gas consumption would not only reduce greenhouse gases, it would also reduce your country's dependence on unsavoury regimes like the one in Venezuela.

We understand that Afghanistan will be uppermost in your priorities for Europe. You said that you would

put more troops in the country and expect Europe to do the same. And even though all European governments are short on troops and money, some of us will respond in kind.

But while a 'surge' worked in Iraq, more troops will not be a sufficient response to the trouble in Afghanistan. Western soldiers act as a magnet for terrorists from across the region, mostly Pakistan. So we will need a Pakistan strategy as much as an Afghanistan surge. In fact, we hope that you consider talking to the more moderate among Taliban leaders in Afghanistan, to build local alliances against the most radical insurgents coming from Pakistan.

We badly need to succeed in Afghanistan. The mission has become a fitness test of our military alliance, NATO. Should we fail in Afghanistan, the allies' faith in NATO will be shaken. That would be bad at any time, and even more so when Russia is becoming increasingly assertive.

On Iran, you said that you were willing to speak directly to the Tehran government. This would be a welcome change in US policy on Iran. The EU has been talking to Iran since 2003 but to little avail. We have offered various incentives – such as the lifting of trade sanctions and transfers of technology – but the Iranians tend to refuse any offer in which the US does not participate. So we fear that the talks will not succeed without the US joining in.

As you have indicated yourself, it is important that you do not just talk to Iran without getting something back. US diplomacy is the last card the West has to play. Talking to Ahmadinejad now could also strengthen him in presidential elections, which is not in the US or European interest. So you should show that you are willing to talk, but only at the right moment and under the right conditions.

We recognise that the diplomacy may not succeed anyway; Iran may be far too determined to acquire nuclear weapons. But even so, US participation in the talks would help build a transatlantic consensus around further steps like a tighter trade embargo. You may never win Europe's unconditional support for military strikes – too many of us oppose the use of force under any circumstances. But if vigorous US diplomacy preceded an eventual military strike, it would help to counter accusations in some European quarters that America was engaged in another 'adventure'.

On Russia, you will have a delicate task on your hands. Moscow's tactical game seems clear: it wants to divide the EU member-states and drive a wedge between the more Moscow-friendly European capitals and the United States. Your victory has not changed that policy: on the day US election results were announced, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev gave a speech criticising US "aggression" and "unilateralism" (though he has subsequently taken a softer line).

Your immediate priority should be to help to strengthen the EU consensus on Russia, and to bring Europe's and America's policies closer to one another. This requires two things. First, the US will need to convince Berlin, Paris, Rome and other capitals that Washington will not gratuitously provoke Moscow. So the US should stop pushing for a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine and Georgia. Instead of the MAP concept, which has become a red flag to not only Moscow but also to Berlin and Paris, NATO should use the special councils that it has with Ukraine and Georgia to expand security assistance to them, and to give them a clear set of criteria for future membership.

At the same time, you will need to reassure NATO allies near Russian borders that Washington will not abandon them in case of Moscow's aggression. To that end, the US government should work with other allies to assess NATO's readiness to defend its newest members. NATO may need new military plans and exercises for the region.

We hope that US-Russian bilateral relations will improve but doubt that there is much chance of that. Russia seems to have chosen, for domestic political reasons, to treat the US as its favourite bogeyman. Having said that, we trust that you will consult Russia diligently on your plans for missile defences in Europe. The prospect of their deployment in the Czech Republic and Poland has divided the Europeans as well as upset the Russians. The least we can do is to avoid giving Russia more reasons to be jumpy. You could also offer to postpone the deployment of missile defences until such time that Iran tests a missile capable of reaching Europe. And you should tell Moscow that if it helps you to persuade Tehran to drop its nuclear and missile programmes, you will cancel plans for missile defence bases in Europe.

Bosnia is not high on your list of priorities, and even the EU does not give it enough attention, but we should both think more about it. Years of 'hands-off' western policy have allowed hard-line nationalists to flourish. The US and Europe must urgently re-engage. The Office of the High Representative (HR, usually a senior European diplomat) will close soon, under Russian pressure. The HR has powers to rule Bosnia by decree, and past holders of the office frequently overruled local nationalists when the integrity of Bosnia was in danger.

When the Office of the High Representative closes next year, EU governments will use the prospect of EU membership to try to keep nationalist politicians from tearing the country apart. But we will need your help: the Bosnians listen to the US at least as attentively as they do to the Europeans. So from time to time we may call on you to help us get tough on Bosnia's quarrelling nationalists.

We are confident that you will also pay close attention to Turkey. Until recently, the country was on a firmly

pro-western course. But the Iraq war has caused Turkey to turn away from the US. We did not help things either: the EU's shrinking appetite for enlargement has left the Turks bitter towards Europe. This is bad news: Turkey is important. It has the power to influence the West's image in the Muslim world, help prevent conflicts in the South Caucasus, and reduce western dependence on Russian gas (by serving as an avenue for Caspian and possibly also Iranian gas).

Your victory will help to improve US-Turkish relations. Turkey will note that you opposed the war in Iraq. But the US government also needs to take seriously Ankara's worries about Kurdish militants. Turkey's security establishment believes that the US could do much more than it does to restrain Kurdish terrorism. It is true that in recent months US-Turkish co-operation on Kurdish terrorism has improved. But we hope that you will talk to Turkey about your plans for US withdrawal from Iraq. Ankara fears that a precipitous pullout may lead to the break up of Iraq, with the northern parts serving as a haven for Kurdish militants.

What will you mean for Europe?

We look at your forthcoming presidency with a lot of hope and some trepidation. You will force us to make uncomfortable decisions which we have thus far been able to avoid. As you know, your predecessor is very unpopular in Europe. So when he asked us to help, for example by sending more troops to Afghanistan, domestic politics discouraged us from responding positively. Most of us (with honourable exceptions) have not done a great deal to help in Afghanistan. And that, in a way, has been convenient: most European governments have not had to explain to their publics and parliaments why it is important to risk lives in Afghanistan. Without US leadership or pressure, we Europeans have been free to indulge our habitual temptations: insularity and short-sightedness. We took the initiative on some important common challenges like Iran and climate change, but shirked responsibility on others like Afghanistan.

But you are genuinely popular in Europe, and we will find it more difficult to say 'no' when you ask for help. So we will have to prepare to be tougher on Iran. If Tehran does not respond to your offer of talks, we will need to implement additional sanctions. We will also need to send more troops to Afghanistan and attach fewer limitations to how they operate. Some of us are getting cold feet on a climate change agreement but we will not be able to ask you to sign up to emissions cuts if we do not do so ourselves. On trade, too, some of us are tempted to respond to the financial crisis by protecting national industries. But we cannot ask you to be a good free-trader while we prop up Alitalia or Peugeot with government subsidies.

So your arrival will force us into politically difficult decisions, but not without bringing rewards. If you

succeed in restoring the US to its traditional role of a leader of the transatlantic community, we will benefit. Without you, we have found it impossible to convince Iran to drop its nuclear plans, or to get poorer countries to agree on binding cuts in greenhouse gases. These are important issues for us, so it is frustrating that we have failed to make real progress. We have, as one Downing Street staffer, quoted in the London *Guardian*, noted: “been operating with one hand tied behind our back for the past few years”.

The EU has also suffered from ‘guilt by association’. Whether we like it or not, much of the rest of the world equates Europe with the US. And when the world thinks poorly of the US, Europe finds it tough to sell its own ideas, too. As President Sarkozy is said to have remarked (according to the *New Yorker*) “It is difficult when the country that is the most powerful, the most successful – that is, of necessity, the leader of our side – is one of the most unpopular countries in the world. It presents overwhelming problems for [the US] and overwhelming problems for [its] allies.”

Some of us sought to take advantage of America’s poor global reputation in the early 2000s. The German, Belgian and French governments of the day saw it as an opportunity to strengthen Europe’s standing in the world. By portraying the EU as a more peace-loving, less aggressive alternative to America, they hoped to win the affection of the many governments around the world that were appalled at George Bush’s foreign policy. But even at the beginning of the Iraq war, when sentiments against the US ran strongest, this point of view did not gain a majority following among European governments. Anti-Americanism as a political force in Europe peaked in the early 2000s, and it has been on the decline since. A generation of politicians who were extremely sceptical about the US – epitomised by Gerhard Schröder and Jacques Chirac – has been replaced with more pragmatically-minded politicians like Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel.

Your victory now gives us the prospect of US and EU foreign policies becoming more closely aligned than at any time in this decade. Your predecessor deserves some of the credit: having spent the first term in power seemingly oblivious to his allies’ concerns, he has tried hard in recent years to re-build bridges with

Europe. We appreciate his support for the EU-led Iran talks, and note that he has also changed his mind on global warming. Even under the Bush presidency, some of us have moved closer to the US: France plans to re-integrate fully into NATO.

With you in the White House, the EU and the US are now in broad agreement on the toughest issues before us. We both are prepared to speak to Tehran about its nuclear programme. We are close to (although not yet in agreement on) a new global deal to curb carbon emissions. Of course, this is not to discount the possibility that our remaining differences may yet derail the transatlantic rapprochement. The first US-French attempt to re-integrate France fully into NATO, for example, fell apart in the mid-1990s because of a seemingly trivial disagreement on which command posts to assign to French officers. We realise that we expect a lot from you, perhaps too much, so there will inevitably be some disappointment.

Our hope is that the ‘Obama effect’ will strengthen Europe’s global reputation too. America’s image in the world has already improved with your election, and may improve further still if – as we expect – you manage some of the crises discussed in this letter adroitly. Europe’s close historical links with Washington could then become one of the EU’s strongest assets in its external relations. So long as the EU and its governments can become effective at concerting and projecting their foreign policies around the world, we may be the best partner available to you in tackling the many challenges you face.

Yours sincerely,



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