



EUROPE AND THE U.S. - DIFFERENT WORLD VIEWS?

Roger Svensson

Much newspaper copy, as well as serious analysis, has been spent on extolling the different approaches to foreign and security policy in the United States and in Europe. In this policy brief ISDP Senior Fellow Roger Svensson outlines the background and some of the key findings of the Transatlantic Trends 2011.

Among the most-quoted catchphrases capturing developments in recent years is Robert Kagan's assertion that "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus." His core argument is that the United States is more willing to resort to military force than Europe, where diplomacy and patience is the first and sometimes final option. It is easy to find examples that support Kagan's argument; Afghanistan and Iraq are the most obvious during the last decade. But there are also historic examples showing that the U.S. can be a very hesitant actor. One should not forget its late entry into the First World War and the fact that Japan prodded the U.S. into the Second World War. And lately, as I indicated in a previous Policy Brief ("Blindsided: The United States and North African Unrest," March 10, 2011), it was primarily France and Great Britain that managed to get the U.S. involved in the current Libyan intervention.

The economic crises and decade-long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq might have dramatically changed the U.S.'s appetite for an interventionist foreign policy. U.S. politics is more divided than it has been in a very long time. The approval rate for President Obama is now abysmally low, hovering around 45 percent and a staggering 80 percent disapprove of Congress, while a majority of the population (75 percent) think the country is heading in the wrong direction.

A Supportive Europe and the U.S Looking West

A recent survey, Transatlantic Trends, presented by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) clearly shows the similarities and dissimilarities between Europe and the U.S.

when it comes to the "state of the world" and how to handle a number of issues and problems. While only half of the Americans polled approved of the administration's handling of international politics, Obama got a European approval rate of 74 percent. The partisan divide in the U.S. survey is deep. Only in fighting international terrorism does President Obama get some credit from Republicans, where almost half approve of his policies. In handling international policies in general, four in five Republicans disapprove. The numbers for Democrats are much higher as might be expected, ca 85 percent of them approve. Maybe the president can find some relief in the fact that Independents tend to be twice as supportive as the Republicans. This is, in any case, a substantial shift. Since the Second World War, the Republican Party has been more oriented towards an active and interventionist foreign and security policy. But, we all know that there is also a history of isolationism in the Republican Party.

The geopolitical view of the world is changing too. In 2004 more than 50 percent of Americans thought Europe was the most important region to U.S. national interests; this year almost the same number think Asia is more important. Here there is an age divide; three out of four young Americans view Asia as more important than Europe. Meanwhile a majority of Europeans still think the U.S. is more important than Asia to their national interest.

One would hazard a guess that "Asia," to the majority of respondents means China and here the American majority see China as an economic threat; while most Europeans see it as an economic opportunity. In the same vein, most Americans see China as a military threat, while the majority of Europeans do not.



To the question whether it should be the role of the EU or the U.S. to help establish democracy in other countries, about a third of Europeans responded in the negative while only the same proportion of Americans support such a role. On the other hand, and here comes Robert Kagan's notion again, 75 percent of Americans think that war is sometimes necessary to obtain justice while only a third of Europeans have the same view.

A large majority of Swedes (83 percent) believe that democracy should be promoted even if it leads to instability, which is quite higher than the EU average of 61 percent. It is also substantially higher than the U.S. response, where only 45 percent supports democracy promotion that would result in instability.

Libya, being the latest example of international intervention for "democracy" and/or "justice," provides a telling picture. Some 58 percent of Americans approve of the intervention by international forces, while the EU average is 48 percent. However, the differences in Europe are great, spanning from two out of three Swedes approving compared to only 30 percent in Slovakia. (The survey was conducted before the most recent developments in Libya).

It might be surprising to find that support for reducing or withdrawing troops from Afghanistan is equally high in Europe and the U.S. - 66 percent. While the European numbers were the same in 2010, only 40 percent of Americans supported that notion just a year ago.

NATO is a cornerstone in North American and European security policy. Despite the permanent debate about the feasibility and utility of NATO, support for NATO has been stable, at around 60 percent for ten years, on both sides of the Atlantic. Sweden, a non-NATO country, tends to be evenly divided in thinking that cooperating closely with NATO is important for Sweden's security. In this context, a plurality of respondents in Europe as well as the United States think that

defense spending should be kept at the current level.

On the more specific international security issues there are also similarities. Three out of four Europeans and a similar number of Americans are concerned about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, but there is only single digit support for military action, economic incentives and/or economic sanctions being the preferred mode of operation.

The greatest divide between the U.S. and Europe, as well as within Europe, relates to the Arab-Israeli conflict. While a majority of Americans (53 percent) wants to put pressure on the Palestinians, only 38 percent of Europeans polled think that is the road forward for a solution. There are however big differences within Europe; 54 percent of Spaniards and Swedes believe in pressuring the Israelis, while fewer Poles (27 percent), Bulgarians (16 percent) and Romanians (10 percent) hold that view.

In conclusion one might assume that the run-up to next year's presidential election in the United States will be more or less exclusively about domestic issues. There is no one in the Republican field of contenders with experience or has shown serious interest in foreign policy. President Obama will want to continue the withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan to please his core voters. Unless things seriously blow up in, say, Pakistan or the Middle East, nobody really wants to discuss foreign or security policy.

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