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NOVEMBER
2010

TEA TIME FOR OBAMA Is The Shellacking of the Democrats an Opportunity for the European International Agenda?

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In these times of interdependence, the Republican advance in the American mid-term elections means a setback for Europe and its hopes of being able to count on an American partner in tune with its foreign policy interests. Or maybe not. In any case, given the extremely complex international agenda, rapport between Hillary Clinton and Lady Ashton will be more necessary than ever.

It is possible that people thought that in the post-Bush era everything would be easier. The heightened expectations in Europe as a result of candidate Obama's speech to the enthusiastic crowd gathered in Berlin's Tiergarten now seem like a faraway dream. On 24 July 2008 the then Senator from Illinois concluded his address to the sound of applause, "People of Berlin – and people of the world – the scale of our challenge is great. The road ahead will be long. But I come before you to say that we are heirs to a struggle for freedom. We are a people of improbable hope. Let us [...] seize our common destiny, and once again engage in that noble struggle to bring peace and justice to our world." Then came the dazzling election, the executive order to close Guantánamo, and hope, which crystallised in June 2009 with the ground-breaking speech in Cairo that everyone described as historic. "*Assalaam alaykum*", he said, "I have come here to seek a new beginning". Next was the international accolade, just a year ago, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech in Oslo, President Obama observed that, "America's commitment to global security will never waver. But in a world in which threats are more diffuse, and missions more complex, America cannot act alone." All of this, the desire to strengthen ties with Europe and establish the international order on new foundations of freedom and respect for human rights, reconciliation with Muslims and peace and the Middle East, and leaving unilateralism behind, could be lost in the second stretch of his first – and maybe last – mandate if the wishes of today's euphoric Republican majority are granted.

The disappointment that appears to have infused the United States and part of Europe comes from something that was as well known as quickly forgotten: the higher the expectations, the harder reality hits. Great projects are not accomplished in one day, or even in twenty-two months. Making progress with health care reform or reviving finance markets struck down by a heart attack on Wall Street would not seem sufficient. US-style exceptionalism might be on the way

back if Barack Obama himself should turn out to be an exception, a brief excursus, which is what many of his fellow citizens now seem to be wanting.

The international agenda has been absent in an aggressive campaign focused on domestic issues headed by an unsteady economic situation and a nationalist ultra-right that channels the frustrations (mostly economic) of many citizens and, depending on the tea being served at the table, revealing its isolationist or aggressively militarist stripes. However, the items on the United States' international agenda are inescapable and they coincide with those on the European agenda. It seems that the signing – pending ratification by the Congress – of the new Moscow-Washington Strategic Arms Reduction (START) Treaty is not in danger and this is good news for Europe and the world in general. The withdrawal from Iraq, pushed by the President, has been a relief for everyone, and even more so after the revelations of the Wikileaks documents have once again opened people's eyes to the horrors of the war. In the case of Iran, despite good coordination with Brussels when it comes to imposing sanctions, there is a growing feeling that cornering Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may not be the best political strategy. In Afghanistan, things go on as just they were, which is to say that nobody knows whether for better or worse. With more troops on the ground and NATO allies holding steady though with the shared desire to get back home fast, and with a Hamid Karzai weakened by corruption and tribal commitments that cannot be confessed, the light at the end of the tunnel is at best intermittent. Neither has the new peace initiative in the Middle East borne fruit. Meanwhile, the cranes are back on the job in the East Jerusalem settlements, while Hamas and Hezbollah are still on the alert, waiting for the fall of Abu Mazen. Again, the relationship with a China that is increasingly assertive in the region is very complex. In Europe we see how the dollar-yuan battle is affecting the euro while Beijing keeps buying up sovereign debts in Greece, Spain and, now, Portugal. Satisfactory progress is absent in matters such as consensus vis-à-vis the G-20 over a joint strategy for coming out of the crisis, and is also missing when it comes to establishing a European-American strategy on climate change for the Cancún Summit.

Yet there is hope. Faced with a hostile Congress the President can always resort to the power to veto. This is an arm that he could use in his own favour. Perhaps, as has happened on so many other occasions, a president weakened at home is stronger abroad, seeking successes that give him international kudos while demonstrating to voters that the "commander in chief" is a world leader worthy of the American nation. The problem is that Obama has inherited from the Republicans not only a bankrupt economy but a country that is ethically discredited beyond its own borders and a world that is much more complex and difficult to manage, with more multipolar than multilateral proclivities. It is a world full of grey zones where chances of winning points in foreign policy are few and far between.

Europe must support the president who has been best disposed towards its interests in recent history, and make him shine as much as possible so as to ensure that a second mandate in 2012 will manage to consolidate some international solutions for the shared agenda. His successes will also help towards the success of the new European Foreign Service (European External Action Service), the implementation of which is also essential for transatlantic interests. To begin with, more frequent meetings between Clinton and Ashton would be a good idea, not only to sip tea, but to make decisions and, given the extremely complex agenda that concerns us, to move swiftly into action in the international sphere. This shellacking of the Democrats might be the last chance for a long time.