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Foreign-policy wisdom and folly

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Even if it spoke with one voice, how much would Europe really count?



HERE are three pieces of conventional wisdom that trigger head-nodding and murmured assent wherever Brussels grandees gather. The first is that, as economic and political clout flows away from the West, Europe can be a driving force only if it learns to speak with one voice and to defend common European interests. As the European Union's new foreign-policy chief, Baroness Ashton, told members of the European Parliament, "if we pull together, we can safeguard our interests. If not, others will make decisions for us."

The second is that Barack Obama has learned from the mistakes of his predecessor, and is pursuing a more European foreign policy. For a faultless exposition of this view, try a new paper on transatlantic policy produced by a group of former presidents of the European Commission, ex-prime ministers and EU commissioners, senior MEPs and two living prophets of Euro-integration, Jacques Delors and Joschka Fischer. Their paper (published by Notre Europe, a pro-European group) declares that "the American president is again admired in Europe", after embracing principles like multilateralism, dialogue and negotiation, "by which the Europeans set such store".

The third observation is less happy. Mr Obama's policy of outreach has met with rebuffs as well as results. Notwithstanding the conclusion of a nuclear arms deal with Russia, other areas of the world are proving hard to manage. Spurning America's offering of hands, Iran has stepped up its nuclear work and its repression. China subjected Mr

Obama to slights in Beijing and at the climate talks in Copenhagen. Russia is playing tough on missile defence. Even nice and democratic Brazil has announced that it does not favour sanctions on Iran. When Mr Obama's vice-president, Joe Biden, was welcomed to Israel with an announcement of new building in East Jerusalem, European newspapers churned out articles on the weakness of Mr Obama's diplomacy.

Among Euro-grandeers, George Bush still bears much of the blame. Mr Obama is "labouring to repair a decade of misguided policy", the Notre Europe paper argues. It adds that America is living in a world where "military strength has become less important", after Iraq taught everybody that "legitimacy of power" counts as much as power projection.

There is another way to ponder Europe's conventional wisdom on foreign policy, and it is less comfortable for the Euro-establishment. Their big bet is that if the EU, with 500m citizens and a large, if declining, share of the world's wealth, can speak with one voice and agree upon some common interests, it will count in the new world order. But Mr Obama's administration does speak with one voice and in defence of agreed American interests. And yet other world powers seem not always to care.

There is room for some quibbling here. America's unity of diplomatic approach is not total. The Middle East is a notably hard nut to crack. Nobody is quite sure what to do about the rise of China. But the equation still merits reflection. Europeans will have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams if they ever achieve half of America's unity of purpose and presentation. America is also a military superpower, which still matters. (It is self-serving for Europeans to say that military strength counts for little these days. Iraq may have made the use of force trickier, but its possession still gets others' attention.) Yet even America finds multilateralism and dialogue hard going. What does this mean for Europe, a squabbling, ageing continent that increasingly shuns military force?

Some in Europe used to dream that the rise of rival powers would weaken the American hegemon. Now they find themselves living in a tough new world inhabited by swaggering nation-states, in which collective solutions are harder, not easier, to achieve (European opinion was especially jolted by the Copenhagen climate talks, at which the EU barely registered).

John Hulsman, an American writer on foreign policy, recently noted that rising powers such as China, Russia, India and Brazil are, if anything, even more hostile to the idea of binding rules or treaties that impinge on their sovereignty than the Americans are. Citizens of these powers "see much of the current international architecture as a confidence trick designed to keep their country from assuming its proper place in the world," Mr Hulsman commented.

The rise and fall of little voice

Does this mean the Euro-establishment is wrong about the benefits of speaking with a coherent message and forming alliances to get things done? That would be to go too far. If Mr Obama finds multilateralism hard work, that does not necessarily mean that unilateral swagger would be more effective. Nor would cacophony give the EU more clout than speaking with one voice. But Europeans need to be less starry-eyed about what they can achieve through dialogue and political integration. Some still dream that the EU's pooled sovereignty can serve as a "model" for systems of global governance, transcending the nation-state. Right now, that looks like a fantasy. The 21st century is instead shaping up to be a brutal testing ground for relative power.

Here are some unglamorous things that Europe can do to count in this new world. Stick to the rule of law: being predictable is a source of strength. Whether negotiating free-trade pacts, or the accession of such neighbours as Turkey, the EU bureaucracy is designed to keep making the same demands, over and over again. Foreign partners that comply know their rewards will be market access, entry to the EU and so on. Above all, stay rich: so Europe must find new sources of growth. It does not matter whether a declining Europe speaks with dozens of voices or one: nobody will listen.

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