

//Notas de Análisis//

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: Obama in Europe

**By Maria L. Fornella*

President Obama travelled to Europe this week for a one-day summit of the G-20 in London and a NATO summit in Strasbourg and Kehl. He then went to Prague to deliver a non-proliferation speech, which, with exquisite timing on the part of the North Koreans, came on the same day as that country tested a ballistic missile delivery system over Japan. In both the G-20 and the NATO summit, protestors took to the streets, in some cases becoming quite destructive.

Obama's performance in Europe is being debated in the strongest terms in the United States: did he deliver? While many were again moved by his ability to dazzle European audiences, a consensus seems to be emerging that he is coming back home empty-handed.

It would be easy to dismiss this divergence of views as politics as usual, with the Republicans criticizing him harshly while his own party lavishes praise on his performance, but it is somewhat more complicated than that: the question today is how much his popularity and charisma translate into getting palpable results that meet US interests.

Dominique Moïsi recently commented on the risks of ignoring the dichotomy between Obama's essence (who he is) and his performance (what he does). For the rest of the world in general, and for Europeans in particular, his electoral triumph has evoked enthusiasm and restored confidence in the resilience and vitality of American democracy, which many had come to doubt. With Obama, the man himself *is* the message. They like *who he is*, but will they also like *what he does* to protect American interests around the world?

Changes in foreign policy are often less about grand declarations than they are about alterations in tone, outlook and priorities. However, underlying the rhetoric and the diplomatic dialogue, there are always the nation's interests which are much more immutable than changes in leadership. Obama has already changed the tone and texture of American diplomacy, but transforming the substance of US foreign policy will take much longer and will be much more difficult to achieve.

Speaking to a spell-bound audience of French and German students in Strasbourg, France, he urged Europeans to join in a common effort to restructure the global economy and renew the trans-Atlantic alliance. In his cool yet direct way, Obama managed to talk to Europeans in some pretty harsh terms about the strained relationship. He had a difficult message to convey. To soften it, he first confessed America's own hubris:

“In America there is a failure to appreciate Europe's leading

role in the world. Instead of celebrating your dynamic union...there have been times when America has shown arrogance and been dismissive and even derisive...

Then it was Europe's turn:

"...But in Europe there is an anti-Americanism that is... casual but that can also be insidious...there have been times when Europeans choose to blame America for much of what is bad...these attitudes have become too common. They are not wise. They do not represent the truth... They fail to acknowledge that America cannot confront the challenges of this century alone but that Europe cannot confront them without America."

He then reminded them that Islamic extremism is a threat to Europe as much as it is a threat to the United States. He pointed out some changes his administration has already made to bring it more in line with international sentiment: the closing of Guantánamo, the outlawing of torture, abandoning the use of the terms "enemy combatant" and "the war on terror." "America is changing but it cannot be America alone that changes," he said. He pledged a united front to tackle the Afghanistan war, the Palestinian conflict and the global crisis. Now it is up to Europe to do more, he implied.

His speech brought applause from the crowd at several instances. Unfortunately, he was less effective in obtaining what he wanted from European decision-makers. This led pundits here to comment acidly that while Obama's aura and Michelle's grace are both national assets, they are not enough to persuade allies to do what is in the American interest. His harshest critics in the US said that in order to conquer their sympathies, Obama deferred to the European agenda and conceded too much: his *mea culpa* about American arrogance was too much for the opposition party to swallow.

The truth is that he had two very difficult cases to make: first he had to persuade European leaders to increase their fiscal stimulus to 2% of their GDP; then he had to coax them into contributing more troops to the Afghan war. He was rebuffed on both fronts.

On the economic front, it was a demand Europeans were not ready to make, given that, unlike the US, these social democracies already are financing large welfare states. Also in contrast with the US, Europe still has room left to use monetary policy to stimulate their economies. However, Obama was successful in starting to rebuild frayed relations not only with Europe but also with Russia and China. The G-20 communiqué contains several important steps toward strengthening international financial regulation, and it includes a directive to triple the IMF resources to 750 billion dollars to help distressed countries as well as a new trade finance initiative of 250 billion by the World Bank. An extra 100 billion in aid for the poorest countries will be raised from capital

markets rather than the embers themselves. For a one-day summit, this is indeed progress: Obama is moving the ball down the line without turning it over to the other side. Later down the road, if and when the global economy needs further stimulus, he will be in a good position to make the case for more.

In the case of NATO, his success was even perhaps more modest: he got a token increase in European troops for Afghanistan, but these are temporary only and will be deployed to train Afghan police and military, not in a fighting capacity. However, Obama used the forum to redefine America's intention there in much narrower terms, away from the unrealistic goal of establishing a Jeffersonian-style democracy and towards a new focus on rebuilding relations with the native population and containing Al Qaeda. He is also going to travel to Turkey next, to assuage fears in the Muslim world about American intentions toward them.

In spite of the new commitment to increase the numbers of boots on the ground, it is clear that the Europeans are looking for an exit strategy in Afghanistan and that Americans, now more than ever, **own** that war: Obama is increasing the number of troops from 35,000 to 68,000 and has widened the theater of operations to include Pakistan. It is undoubtedly now an American war, a decision that may haunt him for years to come.

The lost irony here is that Europeans have been very strident in opposing American unilateralism in Iraq, but when asked for a multilateral effort in Afghanistan, this one being the "legal" war that was approved by the UN Security Council, their response is a tepid 5,000 troops with no permission to engage, only to train Afghan military and police. Europe today has neither the stomach nor the resources for any type of war.

In Prague, Obama outlined his vision for a world free of nuclear weapons. He warned that the non-proliferation regime is breaking down and called for a global summit on nuclear security. He said he hoped to negotiate a new treaty to end the production of fissile materials. On the deployment of a missile defense system in Eastern Europe, he opened two big loopholes: he said the US will deploy it "if it is effective" and "if Iran does not change its behavior." This is a major change of policy from the Bush years. It was very well received by the Russians but Obama will be severely criticized if his efforts to change the course in Iran fall flat, which is the most likely scenario.

Ironically, while Obama's Prague speech on non-proliferation focused on preventing Iran and North Korea to develop nuclear weapons and delivery systems, Pakistan, a US ally, is not only a nuclear state itself, in possession of around five dozen nuclear weapons, but has a pathetically weak government that lacks the most rudimentary capacity of a modern state: it cannot control its own territory, its institutions are shaky and it is therefore very close to becoming a failed state. For now, it seems that the administration's best bet is to take a minimalist posture of what success

here would look like: setting the bar for victory in the region lower, for example to the more modest goals of denying Al Qaeda safe havens and preventing the total collapse of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Otherwise, the US runs again the risk of being trapped in a quagmire with no end in sight.

The greatest paradox of the present world crisis is that among steep criticism of the American model and proposals to “rethink the American paradigm”, the rest of the world is still looking to the United States to save them. No other power or world order is emerging to take its place and there is immense yearning and expectation that Obama will deliver a miracle and restore growth, prosperity and order around the world. However, under the new reality of dispersion of power, which is already becoming the defining trait of the 21st century, conflicts will at best be managed by concerted action among allies, but no longer solved by the absolute power and domination of the United States.

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Geography
Director, ODU Model United Nations Program Old Dominion
University, Norfolk, Virginia*