



## **A Division of Labour in Transatlantic Relations\***

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Economic, political and military power is increasingly concentrated in Asia. The United States is consequently more and more preoccupied with China's rise and gives diminished priority to European affairs. The European Union (EU) thus risks being sidelined by US efforts to consolidate its ties with Asian allies and partners, by closer US–Russia relations, and by the emergence of a new multi-polar system that is shaped by great power relations in Asia. In order to respond to these challenges, Europe needs to focus on complementing the United States' role in the security sphere and promoting a division of labour across the Atlantic. While US attention is increasingly shifting towards traditional security issues and Asia, Europe needs to be able to address humanitarian crises in other regions. Only if Europe responds effectively to new risk-management tasks and security challenges by way of out-of-area operations, will it be able to protect its interests, maintain strong transatlantic ties and promote the continued relevance of Europe in a new international system and a new world order.

### **The US Focus on Asia and Russia**

President Obama's 'Asia first' policy shows that the United States is adapting to geopolitical shifts and the rise of China. The first foreign leader to be welcomed to the White House under Obama was the prime minister of Japan. In 2009, for the first time in nearly five years, the first foreign trip by a US secretary of state was to Asia. Also in 2009, President Obama shelved his plans to attend the celebration marking the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November. Instead, he travelled to Japan, where he stated on 14 November 2009 that: '[...] there must be no doubt: as America's first Pacific president, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world'. It is no wonder that Obama has been characterized as the first 'post-Atlanticist president'.

The United States has acknowledged for many years that China is the country with the greatest potential to challenge US power and status. Preoccupation with China's rise and a transition towards either a bipolar or multi-polar system that is concentrated on great power relations in Asia means that the United States will seek to consolidate ties with its Asian allies and partners. Improved US–Russian relations also enhance US efforts in dealing with a rising China. Two factors make Russia a potentially more important and comparatively more attractive partner for the United States than the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) if the United States seeks to contain China in a bipolar system in the future. First, Russia has a realist view of world affairs, shares US concerns about a rising China and is focused on traditional security issues and great power politics. Second, Russia's geographical position and influence in Central Asia allow it to apply pressure on China.

A formal military alliance between the United States and Russia would be unthinkable. Still, it cannot be ruled out that Washington might play a 'Russia card' in the future if rivalry with China intensifies, similar to how the United States played a 'China card' during the Cold War. Increased Russian leverage could compromise European interests and strain transatlantic ties. Conversely, Russia will be concerned about a two-front scenario and needs to accommodate and maintain benign relations with the EU and NATO in order to devote its resources eastward to preserve its interests and position itself against China's rising influence in Asia.

### **Challenges for Europe**

A multi-polar system concentrated around great power relations in Asia is another factor that could marginalize the EU and European countries. Leading European powers such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom have often prioritized bilateral ties with China and other Asian powers to promote their interests, protect their diplomatic autonomy, and increase their status and prestige. This has facilitated a Chinese strategy that often seeks to play the EU member states against each other. As power shifts towards Asia and the Asian continent becomes the centre for great power politics, European powers may acknowledge that they are too weak and too distant to advance their interests individually. This might push the EU member states towards greater cooperation and could lead to a more robust Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This could help to ensure that European interests are safeguarded, but it could also have negative consequences for the transatlantic alliance. A more cohesive CSDP could duplicate planning capabilities with NATO, and the EU may become—or be perceived as—a bloc within NATO, which might weaken Europe's alliance with the United States.

Inevitably, the increasing focus on Asia will lead to a decrease in the United States' attention to European affairs. Nonetheless, it is premature to conclude that Europe is history. The United States has always been both an Atlantic and a Pacific power and is still committed to NATO and Europe through institutional ties, shared history, democratic values and cultural factors. Peace and stability in Europe—largely promoted through NATO, the EU and US presence in Europe—are essential to the US objective of preventing a two-front situation as the United States focuses on China's rise. However, maintaining stability in Europe can also be advanced through closer ties with Russia, which again may undermine European interests.

### **Towards a Division of Labour in US and EU Roles**

US and EU responses to China's rise, geopolitical shifts and the emergence of a new polarity offer more challenges than opportunities for transatlantic ties. A division of labour might become crucial in order to prevent the US and EU from taking diverging paths. Tension and disagreement in transatlantic relations is nothing new. The new and important development, however, is that China and other new powers are emerging. The United States can no longer take its eye off the 'China ball' or afford to overstretch itself by engaging in second-order risk-management tasks. However, potential balancing against China is not a priority in Europe.

The current situation in Libya demonstrates how the United States seeks to prioritize more traditional security tasks and focus its attention on Asia and China's rise, while it simultaneously expects NATO and European powers to manage humanitarian crises and new security challenges. The United States needs to prepare for a more threatening environment where US balancing of China might be required, while NATO and the EU continue to conduct risk-management tasks in a division of labour across the Atlantic. Asian allies and Russia are more likely to be the United States' preferred partners in addressing the challenges of China's rise. Accordingly, European states may need to take the lead in expeditionary tasks and out-of-area operations that deliver security, whether in Africa, Eastern Europe or the Middle East, or in safeguarding sea lanes of communications. Doing so would help to preserve firm transatlantic ties, complement US strategic priorities and assure Europe's influence in a potentially more bipolar or multi-polar world.

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