

EU Risks Losing Political Niches in Asia to G-2

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Brussels needs to reflect seriously on several messages that US President Barack Obama's eight-day trip to Asia in mid-November 2009 sent to the world. For one, the visit signalled that the United States is becoming increasingly active and successful in policy areas where the EU used to take the lead, such as climate change and Myanmar. Obama skilfully managed to reframe the global debate on these issues and proved, once again, that he knows how to get the credits. Overall, President Obama's high-profile visit to Asia indicated that the United States still is, and aims to remain, the leading foreign power in the region and that international politics will from now on be largely dominated by the United States and China, the *de facto* G-2. Newly elected 'EU President' Herman Van Rompuy and EU 'Minister for Foreign Affairs' Catherine Ashton should address these developments or risk losing the European Union's political niches in Asia. Not just Europe, but the rest of the world too, would stand to lose from marginalization of the EU, as world politics has only to gain from a stronger European voice that will preclude domination by the G-2.

Europe's Niches: Climate and Myanmar

Since the second half of the 1980s, the European Union has positioned itself as a leader and agenda-setter in the area of climate change. It is still at the forefront of the industrialized countries where emission targets and technology are concerned. But while the world was waiting for Europe to take the lead on the road to the climate change conference in Copenhagen from 7–18 December 2009, Obama used his visit to Asia to grab the initiative and reframe the global discussion on climate change. Aiming to avoid isolation as a rich, industrialized country that fails to commit to robust and binding emission targets, the United States skilfully framed a joint position on Copenhagen with major countries in the Asia–Pacific region. The US president and his counterparts in the Asia Pacific Forum on Economic Cooperation (APEC) agreed on a 'one agreement, two steps' strategy for Copenhagen, which will postpone a binding deal on emission cuts to a later phase. This agreement between a group of countries that includes the two biggest CO₂ emitters—China and the United States—sidelines the European Union with its long-term efforts towards a framework agreement with clear commitments and firm timetables. And while the EU failed for months to provide clarity on its financial support to developing countries for climate change mitigation and adaptation, Obama signed a series of cooperative agreements on clean energy and climate change technology with China.

A second field in which Obama eclipsed the EU is diplomacy towards Myanmar. The European Union used to take the lead on Myanmar with a programme that combines sanctions towards the regime with support for the population, whereas the United States until recently opted for complete isolation of Myanmar. The new US administration, however, changed course. It announced a new approach of sustained engagement and cooperation with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in dealing with the regime in Myanmar. This step paved the way for the first ever US–ASEAN meeting in Singapore. Whereas hopes for such a leaders' summit previously foundered on Washington's refusal to sit down with members of Myanmar's junta, US President Obama and Myanmar's Prime Minister General Thein Sein now sat four seats apart. During the meeting, Obama reportedly called directly on his Myanmar counterpart to free political prisoners. Moreover, two weeks earlier, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell had made the headlines with a diplomatic success *vis-à-vis* Myanmar, when he was allowed to meet with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest. All of a sudden, it is the United States that forges ahead in persuading Myanmar's government to improve its human rights record.

US Charm Offensive

While gracefully stealing away long-standing EU niches in global affairs, the US president also provided food for thought for those interested in the art of diplomacy and the importance of diplomatic style. Obama understands that Washington is no longer in a position to force Asia to concur with US demands, so he used his trip to build up much-needed trust and goodwill.

In his first speech on US foreign policy towards Asia in Tokyo on 14 November 2009, Obama referred to himself as 'America's first Pacific president', as someone who knows and understands the region. He matched these words by behaving like an Asian leader: adopting a modest attitude; seeking common ground; and hitting the right tone of openness and respect for his Asian counterparts. The most striking example of Obama's diplomatic gestures was his deep bow for the Japanese emperor. The president was criticized back home for this bold act, where it was seen as grovelling before a foreign leader. It was applauded in Asia, however, as a sign of cultural sensitivity and a step away from the 'cowboy diplomacy' of the Bush administration.

Obama was also sure to please China's leadership and population. By reserving most time for the China leg of his Asian trip, Washington conveyed the message that it regards US ties with China as the most important relationship in the Asia-Pacific, if not the world. This message was reinforced by the sightseeing trips to Beijing's Forbidden City and the Great Wall, whereby Obama publicly paid respect to China's history and culture. More generally, the US president reached out to the Asian people by giving a public speech in Tokyo, holding a town hall meeting with students in Shanghai, giving several press conferences and an interview to a Chinese weekly magazine.

The sense of respect and equality that the US president conveyed to his Asian counterparts exemplifies Obama's diplomatic style as much as it symbolizes the evolving political balance of power. In addition, however, it may also be the first signal of changes in the cultural balance of power, where Western diplomatic style and etiquette are no longer necessarily the standard.

Asia Means Business

Although these developments show how the focus of US foreign policy has shifted to the East, not everything looks gloomy for the EU. If there is one field where the US currently lags behind the EU, it is economic and trade policy. Already during the US presidential campaign there were doubts about the Democrats' commitment to trade, and the new US president has so far done little to rebuff these concerns. Obama's comments in Tokyo and Singapore were big on economic rhetoric but seemingly at odds with reality. US calls for a new strategy to reform Asian financial systems and reduce long-term deficits and borrowing raised eyebrows, as these came from a country that is widely seen as having caused the financial crisis in the first place. Obama's talk of the importance of open markets sounded unconvincing in light of his 'Buy American' provision as well. Equally lacking in credibility was his appeal for an 'ambitious and balanced Doha agreement' and for trade agreements in the region. After almost ten months in office, the Obama administration has yet to indicate if and when it will send the draft implementing bill of the US-South Korea free trade agreement (FTA) to the US Congress. Seen in this light, Obama's ambiguous call for a Trans-Pacific Partnership—echoed in clearer words by his trade representative Ron Kirk during the APEC meeting in Singapore—will not be easy. This may give Europe an opportunity to move ahead of the United States in trade policy towards Asia. The EU is making headway in forging trade agreements with South Korea and India and is engaged in negotiations for an FTA with ASEAN. If the newly elected European president and foreign minister manage to pull the EU's economic weight together and make better (political) use of it, the area of economics and trade may provide the European bloc with considerable influence in the Asian region. Moreover, it would provide the EU with the sort of leverage that it needs in this era of shifting power balances.

While Washington increasingly looks to the Asia-Pacific region instead of to its Western allies to tackle global issues, the European Union continues to depend on the transatlantic relationship. The EU seems unable to deal with the slow but steady move towards a world in which the United States and China dominate global affairs. What is more, the EU is relinquishing opportunities to assert its role in Asia, even in those fields where it has previously taken the lead. Europe should have no illusions about being a political match for the United States or China. But it should take more advantage of its

economic weight and certainly not allow a de facto G-2 to cut a dash with issues where the EU has been showing clear vision and is making a valuable contribution to world affairs.

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