

Transatlantic Workshop

***“Making Transatlantic Relations Work
in the Post-Lisbon Era”***

Event summary

Washington, DC, June 1, 2010

This paper summarizes discussions held during a day-long workshop at the Brookings Institution, organized jointly with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Bertelsmann Foundation and the European Council on Foreign Relations. The purpose of the workshop was to analyze the impact of the Lisbon Treaty on critical security issues affecting the transatlantic relationship between the United States and the EU. Participants included policy-makers and top-level civil servants from both sides of the Atlantic, as well as journalists and members of the DC-area think tank community. The workshop focused on four topics: Russia; Iran; China and “AfPak.” The meeting was conducted under Chatham House rules.

Russia: the challenge of finding the right (common) balance

Panel participants reviewed three main issues: Russian domestic politics and the relevance of Russia’s “modernization agenda” for transatlantic relations; European and American engagement with Russia; and the U.S. “reset” policy towards Russia.

Panelists stressed that “modernization” in some form was now seen as a necessity in Moscow, not just as a “buzzword,” given the context of the global economic downturn and the rise of countries such as China and India, all of which had eroded Russia’s economic and political standing internationally. Workshop participants were, however, uncertain if Moscow’s stress on modernization would be translated into action.

Some participants expressed confidence in President Medvedev’s genuine dedication to modernization, while others were more skeptical, noting the continued flow of revenues from Russia’s vast commodities sectors removed many of the incentives to embark on a

costly economic modernization process. Furthermore, participants highlighted that there is no clear definition of what “modernization” is or should be in Russia, even though they noted the consensus among the Russian political and economic elite that infrastructure and industry, along with public health and other related social sectors, needed reforming. None of the participants thought that the modernization of Russian political institutions was likely to be part of Moscow’s agenda. Participants also suggested that the apparent absence of partnership between government and society and the tendency to focus exclusively on the political leadership as the driver of reforms would pose a major stumbling block for any modernization efforts. Moscow would be better served, some participants argued, by putting its emphasis on reforming and upgrading critical institutions related to the business environment and the rule of law, and by expanding trade with neighboring countries.

Participants pointed to some signals that Moscow might be acknowledging new realities and gradually moving in the direction of embracing closer partnerships with both Europe and the United States. These included, the Russian foreign ministry document, leaked to the Russian press in May 2010, which encourages a range of regional and bilateral engagements with Europe, the CIS, North America, and the Asia-Pacific region; and the recent improvement in both the tone and content of Russia’s relations with the United States and the West in general.

In this context, panelists and participants assessed the Obama Administration’s “reset” policy with Russia and discussed how the nature of U.S.-Russian relations might have changed as a result. Panelists noted that the premise of the “reset” policy was based on the fact that the United States and Russia have shared interests and the best way to achieve these interests was through cooperation on a set of mutually important issues to create “win-win” situations. Three components of U.S. engagement with Russia were singled out—high-level diplomacy with officials, direct engagement with Russian society, and de-linking the various elements of the bilateral relationship.

Panelists noted that the policy had resulted in a series of achievements, ranging from securing Russian help in transit of critical supplies to Afghanistan, to Russian support for an enhanced UN resolution on Iran, to making significant progress on nuclear arms control. The panelists also acknowledged there had been less success in other areas, including pressing Moscow on Georgia and rolling back the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and persistent issues related to Russian domestic political freedoms and democratization. The criticism that the United States is ignoring Eastern European allies while focusing on “resetting” the relationship with Russia was rejected by most participants, who suggested that Brussels and Washington should engage in more direct consultations at different levels to develop a common and multilateral strategy for managing relations with Russia. Regular consultations would help clear the air on various transatlantic, and also intra-European, differences of perspective.

In terms of improving transatlantic engagement with Russia, participants advocated putting more emphasis on the substance and content of engagement rather than on institutions and mechanisms. Rather than moving quickly to re-invigorate the Russia-

NATO Council, for example, efforts should focus first on establishing an actual agenda for NATO-Russia consultations, including transparency in decision-making, crisis prevention mechanisms, and the scope of issues to be addressed beyond missile defense. Other suggestions included emphasizing the European Union's direct engagement with Russia's regions on reform processes and offering technical assistance and other practical lessons learned from Europe's own regional, national, and sub-national reform and modernization experiences.

Iran's double challenge to Europe and the United States

Participant discussions focused on understanding the role of Iranian domestic politics in shaping the nuclear challenge, and on the various options facing the international and transatlantic communities in responding to the different security and political aspects of the challenge.

Panelists stressed that the drivers of Tehran's foreign policy are often opaque. There was considerable debate over the motivations of Iranian leaders, the nature of Iranian domestic politics, and whether any significant internal political divisions exist over the nuclear program. Panelists argued that the prevailing view of Iran as an irrational actor, dominated by an impassioned leader, was inaccurate, despite the difficulties in predicting Iran's behavior. They stressed that there was great continuity in the regime over time. Participants cautioned that, at least in some aspects of its foreign policy, the Iranian regime was still "revolutionary," resorting to unconventional means and tactics, including supporting terrorism. However, the Iranian leadership was generally traditional, risk-averse, and capable of being influenced by the international community—though the interaction will not always result in desired outcomes.

Participants discussed Iran's shift to a post-theocratic political system, whereby members of the clerical system no longer enter the political class. The current political class is searching for ways to survive, while a new "second generation" of power with close ties to the military apparatus enters the ranks. This "post-theocratic" class has grown in importance as a social and economic force and shares the goal of realizing Iran's potential to become the dominant regional power in the Persian Gulf. Participants also reviewed the significant changes in Iranian society, including the June 2009 political protests and their aftermath. There was general consensus that the nature of Iranian politics was changing. However, any consequential policy changes are not likely to occur within the timeframe set by the international community to deal with Iranian nuclear and security issues.

Participants agreed that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would most likely pave the way for a destabilizing arms race in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and perhaps Turkey, thereby rendering a fatal blow to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Panelists also stressed that after a period of considerable division, there was now a general transatlantic consensus to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon—but to do so in a way that would not jeopardize the chances of peaceful change from within. The "military option" was deemed to be still on the table for the United States and Israel, but

there was general agreement that it would not be successful in resolving the full range of political and security issues. The alternative was containment, but participants also questioned whether this could be credible and effective without the threat of military intervention to back it up. Panelists stressed that sanctions were also a limited tool. Their significance lies not in their content, but in the political statement they make about international solidarity in opposition to the Iranian nuclear program. Moreover, sanctions need to be targeted to bring the Iranian leadership back to the negotiating table, not to cripple the Iranian population.

Panelists reviewed the slow progress in forming a unitary international front against Iran, and Tehran's concerted efforts to capitalize on divisions and policy differences to stave-off sanctions. Some participants wondered if Iran's true willingness to reach a negotiated solution to the nuclear question had ever been fully-tested. Other participants cautioned against self-congratulation on the latest UN sanctions resolution. Past experience shows Iran is well able to withstand the application of sanctions. China and other states that have signed on to the UN resolution could still easily undermine the effectiveness of the sanctions and break Iran's international isolation. And time is of the essence—given the critical 2011 date for the U.S. administration to review progress in both Afghanistan and Iraq (both with implications for dealing with Iran).

Participants all agreed that dual-track approaches toward Iran, deploying both carrots and sticks, were very difficult to implement. They also reiterated in conclusion that the most important element for a successful sanctions policy and eventual solution to the “Iranian problem” was strong international cooperation, especially between Europe and the United States—although transatlantic efforts would be insufficient if rising powers like India, China, or Russia took a different tack.

The triangular relationship: United States-Europe-China

The discussions in this panel centered around the U.S.-China and EU-China bilateral relationships, the nature of these interactions, their consequences and potential developments, and whether a triangular dynamic existed within the different sets of relations.

U.S. panelists stressed that there were five dimensions to U.S. policy on China. First, the larger U.S. policy toward Asia—i.e. “getting China right is getting Asia right”—which involves building and modernizing regional alliances. Second, finding the right balance between cooperation and competition, since the U.S. administration fully appreciates the complexity of the challenges posed by a rising China. Third, acknowledging interdependence given the number of overlapping U.S. and Chinese regional and international interests. Fourth, factoring China into other global challenges, such as climate change, anti-piracy and counter-terrorism, and looking for ways to engage China in finding solutions. And finally, seeking to reduce mistrust and create mechanisms to talk to Beijing and gain a better understanding of China's intentions and capabilities.

European panelists noted that China is perceived differently on the other side of the Atlantic, and European positions towards China vary depending on the issue. There is acute awareness in the EU of the importance of China and a move towards better coordination of China policy in Brussels. In Europe, just as in the United States, China's economic weight and future potential have been major factors in shaping approaches, and business interests have mitigated negative political discourses against China over the past fifteen years. However, China is seen as much less of a security threat to Europe—given its distance from the Asia-Pacific arena—and there has been a limited strategic dimension in EU talks with China. Beijing has pointedly avoided discussing critical security issues with Brussels.

Participants from both the United States and the EU concurred that China has at times played the United States and Europe off against each other, exploiting the differences in perspective. However, Washington and Brussels are now more often than not aligned in their policies toward China and in their desire to have Beijing take more responsibility on critical transnational issues. Participants also agreed that any U.S. and European cooperation with China would develop slowly, given China's past experiences with and suspicions of Western imperialism, and that China would inevitably develop an autonomous agenda for cooperation with Europe and the United States. There was also a great deal of discussion about the sustainability of China's authoritarian regime in light of economic growth, social mobility, advancing telecommunications, and burgeoning two-way tourism.

Participants advocated putting China on the agenda for EU-U.S. annual summits, and looking for ways to coordinate policy towards China, such as initiatives on climate change, energy security and clean energy, trade and finance, rule of law and intellectual property rights, international development and assistance (especially in Africa), and international security issues. Frequent informal, but high-level, transatlantic dialogues were suggested as a mechanism for furthering cooperation outside the summit format, and for pulling in other countries with interests that might affect the triangular relationship, such as Japan, South Korea, and Russia.

AfPak: how to avoid a transatlantic divorce

Discussion centered on the American and European positions on Afghanistan, the role of Pakistan, the definition of "success" in Afghanistan, and the strains exerted on the transatlantic alliance by the intensity and duration of the military operation in Afghanistan.

All panelists noted that U.S. politics related to the war in Afghanistan are very different from those in Europe. In the United States, President Obama's Afghanistan policy enjoys wide bipartisan support, while opposition to the war is widespread in Europe. In part this is a result of fundamentally different understandings of the role of the military and the application of military force on the two sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, the military is seen as the embodiment of public service, a prestigious institution, a positive force, and a legitimate tool for dealing with critical international threats to U.S. interests.

This is not the case in Europe—given prevailing negative public attitudes toward “militarization” and the use of force in the wake of two devastating continent-wide 20th Century wars and more recent conflicts in the Balkans.

Participants also discussed the fact that, as 9/11 has faded from memory, European politicians have not been able to find compelling political justification for a continued European military presence in Afghanistan. The war in Iraq—and the resulting shift in U.S. focus away from Afghanistan after 2003—badly damaged the transatlantic alliance and U.S. credibility on its commitment to Afghanistan. These factors have significant consequences for the future of the war in Afghanistan, especially given huge Europe-wide budget cuts in the wake of the economic crisis. Most participants expected Europeans to weaken their commitments to the mission as July 2011 approaches, and they noted the general European misunderstanding about the 2011 deadline. At the grassroots level, Europeans believe the United States will withdraw from Afghanistan in 2011, in spite of U.S. protests to the contrary and mounting evidence that—unlike in Bosnia—the United States will remain on the ground in Afghanistan for some time to come.

Panelists pointed out that Europeans are now mostly engaged in Afghanistan in technical—but not political—terms. Europeans tend to favor a negotiated solution to the conflict and to look for pathways to promote dialogue with the Taliban. EU and bilateral European efforts to engage Kabul focus on providing technical support and training on the ground for the Afghan military and police forces, reconstructing critical infrastructure, and helping the Afghan government tackle corruption and provide basic services. Panelists noted that the international community was better coordinated on these kinds of development issues in Afghanistan than ever before, in spite of the over-arching differences.

All participants agreed, in conclusion, that one of the most crucial problems for the mission in Afghanistan was lack of clarity on intermediate decisions—such as terms for any kind of dialogue with the Taliban and the modalities and extent of engagement with neighbors like Iran and Pakistan—and final objectives. Participants stressed that any definition of success in Afghanistan would ultimately have to include securing a stable Pakistan. European and U.S. panelists all argued that if Pakistan becomes overwhelmed by its internal security challenges and fails, then Afghanistan will be unmanageable. Participants recommended that, instead of focusing on getting Pakistan engaged militarily in Afghanistan, the United States and Europe should concentrate on helping Pakistan to get its own house in order. This will require addressing Pakistan’s fundamental lack of trust in the international community and coordinated outreach. All participants stressed the importance of having Pakistan on the transatlantic agenda for future high-level dialogues and direct EU-U.S. collaboration—and not just as part of an “AfPak” formula.