

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Bon Voyage, Mr. President: Expectations for President Obama's Trip to Europe

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Q1: Are European expectations of Barack Obama reasonable?

A1: President Obama remains an extraordinarily popular figure in Europe. In 2008, he was seen as the educator in chief, as the United States seemed to be giving the world lessons in democracy that were the envy of Europe's democracies. In 2009, he is still viewed as the kind of political leader the people of Europe no longer feel able to produce: personally charismatic, intellectually capable, and politically credible.

Memories of John F. Kennedy's first visit to Europe in 1961 linger: the excitement, the adulation, and even the sense of Euro-Atlantic intimacy that seemed to prevail then. Admittedly, this might look a bit unreasonable on this side of the Atlantic, but as was the case with Kennedy, the president's wife, Michelle Obama, will likely steal the show and add further to the aura of a new president who is reintroducing the America that Europeans have always liked but which had seemed to desert them during the past eight years.

Q2: Can Obama's popularity facilitate convergence on issues?

A2: Admittedly, personalities matter, but they do not always matter decisively. Paradoxically, Europe's expectation that the U.S. president is "more like us" may argue against the need for the Europeans to move closer to U.S. policies that are themselves expected to move steadily closer to those of Europe. Still, unlike his predecessor, Obama at least provides for a spontaneous willingness to get along even if he alone cannot produce a shared willingness to go along. There is a will now, even if the way is not always self-evident.

In London first, every member of the G-20 understands the need for a show of harmony and collegiality—meaning, a balanced package that will reinforce prospects for more broadly shared growth and seek a new regime of global regulations and structural reforms. Talk of a philosophical divide between the United States and the states of Europe, or among them (especially Britain, France, and Germany), are exaggerated. Still, deep down, Europe's Obamanic faith in the new U.S. president creates unrealistic expectations of a quick recovery of the U.S. economy, which will help avoid the additional stimulus programs that Europe resists and the United States seeks. Meanwhile, although talks of a so-called Bretton-Woods II are mostly gone, expectations that a reformed and reregulated system is around the corner are equally exaggerated. Even God needed one week to make the world, and the 20 heads of state and government will have to agree to meet again soon, within the year, to adapt gradually the words they use in London and their respective capitals to the realities they will be facing then.

After London, the 60th anniversary of NATO will provide Obama with an opportunity to resume his pitch on Afghanistan, after an appropriate celebration of France's full return to the integrated military organization it left in 1966. But that pitch is likely to be fouled back; there is no taste for more war at this time or any other time soon, whether there, in Afghanistan, or anywhere else, like Iran. This is especially true for Germany where Angela Merkel is more than ever the captive of her constituencies, including those found in the coalition government she hopes to change later this year. In the meantime, Obama's expectations for Afghanistan should therefore be kept low: do tell, if you must, but don't ask, because you can't. In this context, Defense Secretary Robert Gates' absence from the NATO summit is not a bad thing if it suggests a U.S. discourse on Afghanistan that downplays the military and covers the nonmilitary dimensions of stabilization and reconstruction in the region, including Pakistan, about which the continental Europeans know little and do not care enough.

Q3: But beyond Obama, then isn't Europe in a moment of weakness, and doesn't that make it ripe for concessions to U.S. leadership?

A3: That depends on what Europe's alleged weakness amounts to. Surely, the neocon view of the gap between U.S. power and European weakness has been discredited. The Euro-Atlantic couple is united by both its power and its weaknesses:

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whatever hard, soft, or smart power is lacking on one side of the Atlantic can hopefully be completed by the capacities found on the other side.

Admittedly, Obama cannot fail to notice troubling signs of tensions within the EU institutions—of political turbulence in most of the European countries, of bilateral rifts between several of the most significant EU members, and of economic disarray and anxiety everywhere. Exposure to Europe's issues of concern will be provided through Obama's visit to the European Parliament (a wise inclusion in his tour) and even more so during his brief stay in Prague, where he will be able to dialogue with the entire EU lineup of 27 nations that are struggling to become one.

Hopefully, the think tankers that populate the new administration will have briefed the president about these matters so that he can address them appropriately and as warranted. This is no longer a time when the U.S. president needs to tell Europe what to do for America, but it is surely a time when the European heads of state and government can be asked to tell what they can do with America, not only on some of Europe's priority issues—like energy cooperation, climate change, and international law—but also on some vital geopolitical issues that demand a Euro-Atlantic “resetting” of sort—including Iran, the Middle East, and, of course, Russia.

In the end, for Obama, as for any of his predecessors, Europe remains the United States' partner of choice: talks of an allegedly decisive G-2 between the United States and China, for example, are at best premature and at worse self-deceptive and even self-defeating. What is new and significant with Obama relative to his most immediate predecessor is that his popularity reinforces the United States' political, economic, institutional, and cultural intimacy with Europe; if nothing else, his trip will reinforce the public perception and understanding of that intimacy.

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