

GLOBAL EYES

On climate change and Afghanistan, Brussels and Washington are an ocean apart, writes David Rennie

Is Europe now fly-over country for American leaders: a landscape glimpsed from 38,000 feet as they fly somewhere more important? It certainly felt that way in November.

First there was a slightly wretched EU-US summit in Washington DC, at which the hosts wanted mostly to talk about things like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, while the Europeans wanted to talk about financial regulation and climate change. With the two sides seemingly intent on talking past each other, it is small wonder the European summiteers secured a mere 90 minutes of face time with Barack Obama (and lunch with Vice-President Joe Biden). Less than a week later, President Obama did not attend the 20th anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall, instead completing last-minute homework for a big trip to Asia.

Depending on whether you favour arguments of the heart or the head, it is possible to believe the current mood of transatlantic drift matters a lot, or is not as serious as all that. The head says to be optimistic, and look at the long list of issues which the EU and America want to work on together. But the heart notes that things are not going well. In private conversations, European diplomats talk of their high expectations after the Obama administration took office. A year on, they say, on tricky dossiers from Iranian nuclear weapons to Russian relations with NATO, they have little real idea what America's strategy is.

American officials, meanwhile, talk about their commitment to multi-lateralism as a gamble, which Europeans must soon repay with help on tougher Iranian sanctions, unity on Russia or more police trainers in Afghanistan, if America is not going to be tempted to go it alone.

What is going on? Here is a third, final theory, and it is not that cheery: a greater willingness to cooperate is not enough to fix some of the present differences in transatlantic opinion. Take

two issues that loom larger than most: the war in Afghanistan, and efforts to limit man-made global warming. If you believe the public statements of leaders in Europe and America, these are essentially quantitative differences of opinion. If Europe could only promise x-thousand extra troops or policemen for Afghanistan, they seem to suggest, and if America could only bind itself to this or that percentage cut in its carbon emissions, all would be well.

Alas, on these two issues the differences between Europe and America are qualitative, not just quantitative. At least in its public rhetoric, the American government calls the fragility of Afghanistan/Pakistan an existential threat, meaning a threat to the survival of the American people and their way of life (as opposed to the sort of existentialism that sends people to the Deux Magots for coffee, a Gauloise, and a brood about pointlessness). This sense of threat dates back to the September 11 2001 attacks.

Back then, Europeans declared "we are all Americans now". But in truth, most felt that terrorism was an important problem, not one that threatened their existence or their way of life. That divide is still there, eight years later. Talk to senior European officials, and many admit that their governments have troops in Afghanistan not because they really believe that victory for the Taliban threatens their national security. They sent troops to Afghanistan mainly for the sake of their relations with America. (Britain is probably closer to the existential camp than most in Europe, because of its large Pakistani communities).

The problem is precisely reversed when it comes to climate change. Lots of Europeans think of global warming as an existential threat: at least some of the time, they believe that the future of the planet and their grandchildren's future welfare is at stake (the rest of the time, they still like driving cars and taking



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low-cost flights, but there you are). The Obama administration appears to believe that global warming is important but not an imminent threat to existence. At least that is the conclusion that Europeans draw when they learn that it is politically impossible to stick a few dollars more tax on a gallon of gasoline to penalise gas-guzzlers, or they read that Congress cannot be pushed to tackle carbon emissions until it is done with healthcare.

What does this mean? It means these disputes will get worse if they are left unresolved: people who think they face an existential threat become impatient and intolerant if others refuse to listen.

None of this will be easy to fix: Americans and Europeans cannot easily change the way they think. On Afghanistan and climate change, it would be a start for both sides to realise how far they remain apart.

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