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## Events in North Africa and the transatlantic system

**For the past few months we have been observing events that should give a new dynamic to transatlantic relations, or at least serve as an acknowledgment of the value and importance of this political system - not just for its members, but also for the closer and further neighborhood. The revolts in North Africa and the Middle East, the intervention of several NATO member states in Libya, the American President's visit to the European continent in May, and finally, the farewell speech of the Pentagon chief in Brussels in June - these are only the most important events, that not only engaged the attention of politicians and analysts, but also had - each in its own way - a transatlantic dimension.**

Let us start by evaluating the most recent facts. Barack Obama's visit to several European countries was undoubtedly related to the transatlantic system. It was an attempt to show that Europe remains an important and valuable ally in the thoughts of the current administration. That was the tone of President Obama's speech, especially in the British Parliament, but also of his friendly gestures addressed to the hosts in Ireland, France and Poland. These events were important, especially taking into account the recently sour mood in the USA-EU relations. The atmosphere was not as bad as the one left by George W. Bush, but a certain degree of disenchantment was discernible on both sides of the Atlantic.

Europe expected President Obama to appreciate the weight and importance of the alliance with the Old World and at the same time restore the well-deserved position of European countries in American politics. It was not just about friendly gestures or the need for consultation, but about giving European matters more time and deeper involvement. American priorities, however, were concentrated primarily on internal affairs, which was a natural consequence of the economic and financial crisis; they were also focused on regions other than Europe. President Obama's visits to the European continent were reduced to the necessary minimum. Even this relatively short list was trimmed, as an important meeting during the 2009 EU-USA summit was removed from it.

The Obama administration, on the other hand, counted on more involvement in solving problems and overcoming challenges on the part of the Europeans. Europe's willingness to take more responsibility for the course of events in the world, including sending more troops to Afghanistan, started to become a precondition for strengthening its position in Washington. These expectations have not yet been fulfilled. Even though NATO managed to employ a new strategic doctrine, Afghanistan – from the American perspective – exposed the weak points of the Alliance, the lack of determination and sense of joint responsibility of some of its members. The shortages of materials and personnel, as well as operational deficiencies, had to be smoothed out by the Americans, which surely did not have a positive influence on Europe's position in Washington. The same can be said of the protracted formation process of EU diplomacy, as well as the development of a common foreign and security policy.

The speech of the United States Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, in Brussels on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011, during a NATO member states' defense ministers meeting, was the firmest confirmation of this state of affairs. The European NATO members were harshly criticized for – generally speaking – the lack of willingness to increase their contribution (also financial) to defense and safety. The countries that are less prone to take on the burden of their commitments towards their allies and instead become active spectators at the same time enjoying full security guarantee, did not avoid scolding. As unfair as the accusations may seem, e.g. those against Poland, they generally convey the essence of the matter – Europe's responses to security challenges are not commensurate with its capabilities and the expectations of the Americans.

Ironically, Gates' accusations were voiced at the time when the European members of the Alliance initiated and became the driving force of the military operation in Libya. For various reasons, NATO's military mission in Col Muammar Gaddafi's country is an unprecedented event. First of all, unlike the majority of the Alliance's armed interventions so far, it was not initiated by the USA, but by several European countries, mainly France supported by Great Britain. Washington was, in a way, forced to participate. Secondly, it was Paris and London – which also makes it different from similar previous situations – that coerced the Security Council into passing a resolution legitimizing the creation and supervision of a *no-fly* zone over Libya and, as a matter of fact, military intervention. Thirdly, even though it was the USA that led the initial stage of the operation in Libya, at the end of March 2011 it was taken over by NATO and the USA became simply a member of an armed coalition. It does not change the fact that the American military reserves play a role of utmost importance in the mission. Still, this is the first military operation of NATO which is not led, defined and shaped by the Americans, who this time remain more in the background.



Moreover, our own aspect of this issue is also visible – Poland, which was previously America’s loyal partner and a very compliant member of NATO, displayed a degree of assertiveness by not taking part in the operation in Libya, along with Germany and Turkey. This might suggest that the famous words of Donald Rumsfeld from 2003, dividing Europe into “old” – less favorably inclined towards America and representing Venus and “new” – strongly pro-American and exhibiting traits of Mars, lost some of their relevance. In other words, some of the NATO member states seem to have switched places and roles during the operation in Libya. It is clearly visible when we compare it to the intervention in Iraq in spring 2003 together with all the accompanying circumstances.

So how would we specify the importance of the mission in Libya for the transatlantic system? Could it make it stronger or rather – by exposing all its weaknesses – strain it even further? If one takes into consideration the effectiveness of NATO’s actions in Libya, the grade will be rather poor. No spectacular gains in an operation which has already lasted over 3 months, Col Gaddafi remains deaf to the demands of the intervening countries, while the participating European nations, realizing the weakness of their military potential once again proving America irreplaceable. To make matters worse, the strained reserves of some of the countries taking part in the operation in Libya even further weaken their willingness to continue the mission (such symptoms are visible in Norway and even in Great Britain). This proves that Gates, the Secretary of Defense, was right when warning about the consequences of reducing the budget expenditure on defenses by the Europeans.

One might have certain reservations as to the common foreign and security policy of the EU, as the actions were inspired by two European capitals, to be even more precise, by President Nicolas Sarkozy, not by the EU diplomacy chief Catherine Ashton. Even though it seemed that the Treaty of Lisbon would provide EU diplomacy with the necessary tools to use in situations such as the one in Libya, as well as the earlier revolt in North Africa and the Middle East, to unite the member states to face a serious task in the area of foreign affairs, this test did not end well for the EU. It can be said without much exaggeration that national policy still dominates in Europe (some analysts even claim that a renationalization of political life is taking place) at the expense of the common EU strategy. It may not be so bad by itself, but together with the lack of evidence for distinct EU diplomacy, this trend might prove to be dangerous. It seems that Henry Kissinger needs to wait some more for that common European phone number the Americans could call in case of an emergency. These are the negative conclusions that can be formulated “on the spot”.

A more in-depth analysis of the circumstances accompanying the events in North Africa leads to certain positive conclusions or at least helps outline better perspectives for transatlantic relations. The mere fact that Paris decided to undertake military



actions, or even initiate them, has certain significance. Even if we take into consideration the election-related motivation of President Sarkozy, thinking about his next term of office in the Élysée Palace, the determination of France and its willingness to use force still remains a fact. Not only does it undermine the famous thesis by Robert Kagan about Europe from Venus and America from Mars, but most importantly provides hope that the USA, performing the function of “the Policeman of the World”, can count on some support. This European cooperation in fulfilling this mission seems to be the factor which reinforces the transatlantic system. It helps, to some degree, to meet the expectations of Washington, that the burden of world leadership will be shared with European allies.

A new factor giving meaning to the existence and operation of the transatlantic union can be the Arab revolt itself. However, it is difficult to resist the impression that neither the USA nor the European pillar of the transatlantic system did initially take on this challenge in an optimal way. The “confusion” of many Western governments and politicians in the face of the events taking place in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as other Middle Eastern countries, was not the only thing that could have been considered striking. However, by its involvement in this part of the world, the transatlantic system can now create for itself a new and immensely important ground for cooperation. The future of the Arab countries, especially those that entered the path of transformation, depends largely on external political and economic support. The USA can cooperate with the EU in providing help to the countries of the region. Besides, as far as the USA is concerned, such declarations were made on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2011, in the famous speech by President Obama to the Arab world (e.g. forgiveness of a part of the Egyptian debt to America, more loans to strengthen the local economy).

Europeans can also play their part in the process of transforming the Arab countries in a practical way: share their technology, coordinate and finance various programs and provide political counsel. Wide and diverse experience in the transformation process and democracy building constitute an indisputable asset of European countries, especially those from “new” Europe. What used to be the domain of America – the spreading of democracy, will now become a challenge for the whole transatlantic union, creating a new justification for its very existence and binding material for its operation. It will also help erase the negative associations created in this region by Europe’s colonial past and America’s alliance with authoritarian regimes. Determination, consistency and the spirit of solidarity and responsibility are necessary to handle these tasks – the attributes that the transatlantic system has lacked at times. The time has come to reinstate these values. The North African region can provide an excellent test.

