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The US Smart Power Approach: A Challenge for the Euro-Med Space?

President Obama's mandate has signaled a new era in US foreign policy. Coined "smart power", the new American approach towards external relations combines the traditional hard power tools of armed force with soft power tools of diplomacy, aid, and the externalization of liberal norms. Yet, how effective will this strategy be in managing the complex set of relations and intractable conflicts of the Euro-Med space? This Policy Paper is the outcome of the ninth workshop of the Expert Advisory Group (EAG) - European and South Mediterranean Actors - Partners in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, held in Washington DC, United States from October 16 - 19, 2009.

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Introduction

by Sarah Anne Rennick

On June 4th, 2009, President Obama delivered an eloquent and powerful speech in Cairo with the intention of launching a new era in US-Middle Eastern relations based on increased cooperation and understanding. This event figured into the wider foreign policy approach of the new administration, characterized by the use of "smart power". This edition of the EAG Policy Paper series evaluates the smart power approach and its reception from various perspectives. In his paper on the Maghreb, Fouad M. Ammor discusses the most pressing needs of the North Africa region in terms of US foreign policy and assistance, placing emphasis on both the potential role of the US in the resolution of the Western Sahara

conflict but also the importance of promoting economic growth and the democratic transition. Emily B. Landau, in her article, questions smart power's effectiveness in confronting the Iran nuclear issue, concluding that multilateral diplomatic efforts are not the best approach. In her contribution, Eleni Fotiou explores US-Turkish relations and shows that although the smart power approach corresponds to Turkey's foreign policy vision, a strategic pursuit of common interests is necessary in order to successfully pursue peace in the region. In the final article, Carlo Masala looks at the EU's reception of the new administration's foreign policy approach, stating that the failure of the Union to clearly convey its own expectations and potential zones of intervention to President Obama is partially responsible for the lackluster nature of US-EU relations.

"The crux of the matter is still, one year after the presidential elections, how will US foreign policy actually fulfill the promise of the slogan [smart power]."

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Four Shortcomings in the United States' Smart Power Approach

by Antje Nötzold and Alessandro Quarenghi

Although the concept of smart power is a relatively recent addition to the diplomatic phrasebook, its content is nothing new. The smart power approach, which was first developed by Joseph Nye and then accepted as the new policy framework for the US administration, would combine hard power tools – to coerce by military or other means – with soft ones to convince and persuade through trade, diplomacy, aid, and the spread of liberal democratic (or American) values. According to this approach, in order to accomplish its objectives US foreign policy should rely less on ideology, be more pragmatic, and pick from the full range of tools at its disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural – choosing the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation.

At the moment, however, smart power is nothing more than a catchphrase that has enabled the new administration to distance itself from the controversial foreign policies of the previous one. The crux of the matter is still, one year after the presidential elections, how US foreign policy will actually fulfill the promise of the slogan. It is disconcerting to realize that even in Washington, neither US institutions nor think tank representatives – or, at least, those consulted,¹ – are exactly sure what the new smart power approach has brought: the new administration raised expectations by announcing this new strategic concept but has not yet delivered. In order to shed a bit of light on the uncertainties of the actual content of smart power it is essential to address some of the following shortcomings and difficulties.

Firstly, before acting abroad, the US administration needs to start focusing on its

own doorstep. While hard power tools are concentrated at the White House and the Pentagon, many soft power instruments – development assistance, public diplomacy, exchange programs, broadcasting, disaster relief, military-to-military and people-to-people contacts – are scattered across the whole US government. Furthermore, civil society is essential to making soft power and images of the US effective instruments of foreign policy. For a real and effective smart power approach, an overarching policy is needed, in particular one that integrates all governmental instruments into a comprehensive and coherent national strategy.

Secondly, the very nature of smart power – a combination of hard and soft power – brings us to another shortcoming: which combination? This needs to be judged separately in every individual case; however, the end result of such a "tailor-made approach" can mean inconsistency overall. As a consequence, strategies can be judged only on their effectiveness – which appears to be a welcome return in US foreign policy. Yet, which effectiveness – today's or tomorrow's? The smart power approach seems to combine short-term realism with medium- and long-term liberalism; however, these do not always mix well and in some cases do not mix at all. To give a prime example: the liberal long-term objective of democratization in the Middle East versus the realist support of autocratic regimes in the pursuit of greater stability.

Thirdly, smart power as a new approach can be understood as a simple change of tools: is smart power therefore just old wine in new bottles? US foreign policy still pursues the same traditional objectives with regard to the Middle East and as such the US exposes itself to the criticism and non-cooperation of regional actors. The proposal of the long-term liberal ideal could raise excessively high expectations that could, if not confirmed by enough success stories, destroy the administration's, and particularly the president's, credibility. At the time of writing, President Obama has, particularly in the Middle East, delivered symbolic speeches and marked symbolic discontinuities,

¹ Representatives of various US institutions and research centers were consulted on this issue during the EAG meeting held in Washington in October 2009.

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but his policies have achieved mixed results at best.

Finally, in regard to multilateral cooperation and international institutions, the new administration wants US foreign policy to be smarter by leading political processes while attempting to avoid exposure to international criticism. But acting within and through institutions in order to shape their "bias system" means such international institutions and the US have to share similar or at least compatible values. This is unlikely to always be the case. Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to bring all actors into the political process and it is very hard indeed to have everybody agree on policies. In other words, participating in US-led multilateral processes or institutions could be the best way for states that are unwilling to cooperate to delay policies and results.

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Smart Power and Maghreb Expectations

by Fouad M. Ammor

President Obama's speech in Cairo marked the political will to establish a new relationship with the Arab and Muslim world based on mutual respect and cooperation. To a certain extent, the speech was an attempt to curb anti-Americanism in the region, which reached its peak during George W. Bush's mandate. Far more importantly, however, this event signaled the launch of smart power in the Middle East, a liberal alternative to previous policies.

In the Maghreb countries – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya - public opinion is skeptical towards the ability of a US president (whomever he may be) to change traditional American behavior regarding the region and its protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, though, North Africans still bear in mind the effective US mediation in the Perejil/Leila Island conflict that broke out in July 2002 between Spain and Morocco. This was the first direct, strong, and peaceful US involvement in the Maghreb and ever since there is a general belief that the US

is the only actor with the ability to sort out "impossible" issues in the region.

The Maghreb is facing urgent issues where smart power could prove to be a more active and operational approach. The increasing feeling among the region's people is that the project of a united Maghreb is merely a dream. The sentiment is that, with the exception of shared geography and some shared cultural components (language, religion, and certain historical experiences), everything separates the region's five countries from one another. The Maghreb countries are currently facing four big challenges: a) economic backwardness (poverty, slow international market integration, low levels of direct foreign investment); b) identity ambivalence (modernism vs. traditionalism); c) ghastly governance (corruption, violation of human rights); and d) the enduring Western Sahara conflict between Algeria and Morocco.

Because some US interests coincide with these regional issues, there is a possibility for the Obama administration's approach to be effective. It is well known that the Algerian-Moroccan border is an uncontrollable zone through which many unidentified groups circulate without any institutional constraints. The absence of cooperation between Algeria and Moroccan paves the way for these groups to move freely, provoking a real threat of terrorist recruitment of vulnerable people fleeing the instable Sahel area. Only the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict could lead to real cooperation between the two states and, subsequently, enhance economic and political cooperation in the region. Resolution of this issue is thus a key expectation of the administration's new foreign policy approach. Likewise, the area's vulnerability stems from the fact that a huge percentage of North African states dedicate their budgets to an arms race instead of tackling economic and social issues able to alleviate the precariousness of poor people. The US's recent economic and trade treaties with the three main states in the region (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) may serve as a counterbalance.

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Nonetheless, it is geo-strategically wrong to confer priority to stability at the expense of enhancing democratic practices in the region. The region needs transitional reform towards democracy, increased civil society participation, and transparency in ruling public affairs. Good governance in these countries would also likely encourage foreign investors to come and explore investment opportunities. To cope with the increasing unemployment rate in the Maghreb countries, an economic growth rate of around 6-7% per year is needed. Only cooperation between the Maghreb countries, with the help of outside actors such as the US via its smart power approach, could help stabilize this sensitive part of the Mediterranean area.

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Is Smart Power Smart Enough? Negotiating with Iran on the Nuclear Issue

by Emily B. Landau

"The US must understand the importance of coming into the negotiation with a strong hand. If Iran senses weakness, negotiations will fail."

Smart power for the new US administration's foreign policy agenda supposedly implies the addition of a strong element of diplomacy to the current toolbox. If so, in its attitude toward Iran, the administration is certainly talking the talk. But is this enough? Surely Obama cannot be satisfied merely to proclaim his preference for embracing diplomacy with Iran; he needs to demonstrate his ability to carry out negotiations with effect. The key is to demonstrate that the US can do a better job than others that have tried. But there is little to indicate that this is the case: US smart power has so far not been very smart.

In fact, initial US attempts have not been qualitatively different than the failed EU-3 efforts from 2003-2005. Where the US has been particularly weak is in displaying leadership toward Iran. Rather than taking the reins in its own hands, the US has endorsed a path that has enabled Iran to take the lead, especially as far as dictating the pace of negotiations.

This has played out in the tendency of the US (and P5+1 more generally) to devise

"tests" of Iran's nuclear intentions in order to clarify them "once and for all." The P5+1 seem oblivious to the fact that these tests have never succeeded in achieving such clarification in the past. What has many times been presented as a clever move to press Iran to expose its true colors has invariably backfired. The lesson is that placing the ball in Iran's court should be avoided at all cost, for it not only does not make Iran more willing to cooperate, but enables it to keep the ball there for as long as possible.

A related problem is the P5+1 pronouncement of various red lines and deadlines. A good example was the nuclear fuel deal offered to Iran in October. Determined statements were issued to the effect that this was the only offer on the table, that there was no other, and that the P5+1 did not intend to wait very long for an answer. But then weeks went by before Iran's negative answer was issued. Were there dire consequences? Not yet.

Having made diplomacy and negotiations the hallmark of his presidency, Obama must demonstrate that he is actually doing it right. Campaign-like slogans presenting Obama as being everything that Bush was not are no longer tenable. Evidence of lessons learned in negotiations with Iran is essential. Most importantly, the US must understand the importance of coming into the negotiation with a strong hand. If Iran senses weakness, negotiations will fail.

What can help the US is to acknowledge that it already has enough information regarding Iran's nuclear intentions – on the basis of IAEA reports, and Deputy Secretary-General Olli Heinonen's statements from February 2008. El Baradei's lamentations in the days before leaving his post are further testimony of this. There is no longer any need for clarifications of where Iran is going – this only gives it the opportunity to stall for time, and push its program forward.

Diplomacy must focus on finding out whether there is a deal that Iran is interested in. Unfortunately, the P5+1 may not be the most appropriate format for this as the six states are not on the same page as far as Iran

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is concerned. Russia in particular enjoys being able to play both sides in the Iranian nuclear crisis, thereby gaining stature on all fronts with minimal cost. Smart diplomacy means understanding that being on board regarding sanctions simply does not serve Russia's broader strategic interest. The US would do better to pursue an Iranian deal in a bilateral format.

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Smart Power and US-Turkish Relations

by Eleni Fotiou

The US administration's recent rhetoric on the use of smart power towards the Middle East has created a heated debate over the future of US-Turkish relations and Turkey's success in becoming a regional soft power. Smart power seems to comply with Turkey's foreign policy vision, which in turn creates a trend in the international environment and eventually serves Turkey's foreign policy goals. The principles of the Foreign Minister Davutoglu's "strategic depth" theory (balance between democracy and security; zero problems with neighbors; development of regional initiatives and mediation efforts) present the willingness to develop a multilateral approach based on a cooperative culture, which in combination with Turkey's military capabilities and capacity to exert hard power (i.e. towards Iraq or Syria) is in line with the US approach. Moreover, the US's overture to the Middle East and intention to put an end to the "clash of civilizations" fits with Turkey's efforts to increase its leverage on its Muslim neighbors.

At the same time, the fact that the US benefits from Turkey being the only Muslim member of NATO, and Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU, legitimize its eagerness to improve its position in the Middle East. Turkey is fully aware that its regional weight derives from its relationship with the West. Thus, its leadership aspirations overlap with American interest in Turkey serving as a "bridge" between the East and the West, serving as a model of democracy coinciding with Islam. Furthermore, it can prove to be an important energy partner and contributor to security in

the Black Sea and Central Asia (especially Afghanistan and Pakistan), an actor in a position to counterbalance Russia's resurgence, and a determinant factor for the future of NATO – ESDP dialogue.

The current US administration's decision to withdraw from Iraq and refocus on the wider region has altered Turkey's policy towards Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government, and has precipitated the resolution of the internal Kurdish issue. In the case of Iran, smart power concurs with the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement and Turkey's ambition to become a mediator between Iran and the West. The US overture to Syria also agrees with Ankara's policy to engage the country in cooperation. Even the American administration's priority of achieving a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict corresponds to Turkey's mediation efforts.

Thus the smart power approach increases Turkey's strategic importance to NATO and the weight of its rhetoric towards the EU. It also expands the ground for a regional leadership role for Turkey, and upgrades US-Turkish relations in the Euro-Atlantic setting as a whole. Nonetheless, Turkey's future orientation and role largely depend on the US. It is necessary for the US to engage in strategic thinking and to implement a differentiated strategy along the lines of common interests. The issue of the PKK and Armenian-Turkish relations remain wild cards, whereas a viable solution in the Middle East – with or without Turkey – requires a sophisticated use of smart power, a clarification of US goals to Ankara, and a balanced rhetoric towards all actors. Turkey's rising self-confidence and persistent endorsement of an "independent" foreign policy may put its image in the West at stake, given that the country's political and social realities have become more complicated for Western policy makers to evaluate. There is therefore a need for the US to cooperate with the AKP government in order to avoid unintentional misunderstandings. Finally, the US should take into account EU perceptions of the country as well as the acceptance of Turkey's leadership role by its neighbors; otherwise, distorted communication and misperceptions

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may exacerbate peace prospects in the Eastern Mediterranean basin.

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Transatlantic Relations and the Obama Administration: Europe Missed an Opportunity (again!)

by Carlo Masala

During the last presidential campaign in the US, hopes were high in Europe (amongst public opinion as well as the political elite) that an Obama victory would allow transatlantic relations to get back on track and that the good old times of cooperation and coordination between Europe and the US would experience a renaissance. Now, almost a year after Obama's inauguration, skepticism about US foreign policy is creeping back into the debate. The decision to deploy more troops into Afghanistan and thereby to Americanize the war, the hesitations the administration shows on reducing climate change, the lack of coordination with regard to the Iranian file, and the general notion that Obama himself is more about brilliant rhetoric rather than action has led to a general feeling that transatlantic relations have not changed much. This paper argues that the lack of coordination between the US and Europe can be partly explained by the attitudes European governments held towards the change in the Oval Office: rather than embrace it pro-actively, they adopted (and are still sticking to) a "wait and see" approach. As a result, they missed an opportunity to get the US back to transatlantic multilateralism as a foreign policy cornerstone.

The following argument I will present starts from the hypothetical "what would have happened if..." scenario. My argument is that the governments of Europe, within the EU framework, could have drafted a paper presenting their expectations of the new US administration as well as what they were ready to do in order to tackle common challenges. Such a paper would have also given them the opportunity to communicate to the incoming administration their "lines in the sand." Of course, the legitimate question that could be raised regarding this scenario is: "would this have

changed anything?" My response is yes. It probably would not have changed the substance of transatlantic relations as we see them today but conveying a clear message to the new administration on what Europe would and would not be ready to do would have signaled to the US clearly where and when they can rely on Europe as a partner.

One good example of how the delivery of such a paper in advance could have changed European-American relations and expectations concerns the Guantanamo prisoner issue. Most European governments have been very clear (even during the Bush Administration) that the prison for "unlawful combatants" in Guantanamo Bay has to be closed. If at the same time these governments had told the incoming US administration that although they consider the closing of Guantanamo a top priority they were not ready (most of them at least) to take some of the current prisoners in their own countries, the Obama administration probably would not have asked European governments to help them on this dossier. This in return would probably not have led to disappointment by the American administration with those European governments who adamantly opposed the idea of helping the US with the prisoner issue.

To sum up, blame for the fact that the new US administration leaves European governments aside on a variety of issues should only partly be put on the American side. Partial blame has to be put on the European governments themselves for not having been able to communicate to Washington far in advance what they were and were not ready to do. In that respect Europe missed (again!) an opportunity to engage the US and to present itself to Washington as a reliable partner. Apparently history repeats itself quite often: as a farce.

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About the Expert Advisory Group (EAG)

This project aims to explore a constructive and sustained relationship between European and South Mediterranean actors in Conflict Prevention and Resolution, in the context of past and present collaborative efforts in the Middle East and North Africa. The main objective is to create a knowledge-based network in order to advise relevant actors from both shores of the Mediterranean on current political and security developments on an ad-hoc basis.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the members of the group agree with the general thrust of this policy paper but not necessarily with every individual statement. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in this policy paper rests exclusively with the contributors and their interpretations do not reflect the views or the policy of the publishers.

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