

Solana: US, EU must embrace shift to East

EU foreign policy chief optimistic about potential for cooperation, progress

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It was a challenging day for Javier Solana to take the stage at an American university. The European Commission's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy addressed a packed Yenching Auditorium just hours after President Barack Obama '91 announced that the United States was cancelling its plans for missile interceptors to be installed in Poland and the Czech Republic, a move that alienated many in an East Central Europe that was already skeptical of the new American president. In light of these complications, Solana could have avoided or deferred the issue: but he had his talking points prepared before many in the room had even heard about the shift: he welcomed it.

However much that sentiment may have rattled governments in Warsaw or Prague, who are fearful the American policy reversal has cost them both face and security, the E.U. foreign policy chief displayed no hesitancy. As Kennedy School of Government professor Stephen Walt put it after hearing Solana's address, "it is clear that Europe at least has a foreign policy agenda".

Not long ago, the concept was unthinkable. The Iraq War saw retrenchment of fundamental foreign policy differences among European states, and the E.U. "pillar" of Common Foreign and Security Policy seemed relatively hollow. But, five years after the failure of European voters to approve an E.U. Constitution, the Lisbon Treaty, designed to improve the efficacy of the supranational body along many of the same lines the Constitution proposed -and in foreign policy, in particular appears likely to clear the ratification process. Solana is scheduled to step down from his post, which he has occupied since 1999, next month. But if the Lisbon Treaty comes into effect, his successor will be able to come even closer to representing the realization of Henry Kissinger's dream: having "a phone number for Europe".

Viewed in this light, Solana's address shed important light on Europe's evolving foreign policy. He began by warning that other powers could not be isolated, and the world dominated, by a U.S.-E.U. "G2": the West "can no longer," he intoned, "run the world as we used to". Moreover, he observed that a globalized world required effective governance.

To be effective, however, such governance would have to be reformed. The post-1945 world order was "under stress," due partly to the declining influence of states versus non-state actors, and partly because of a shift in power away from traditional heavyweights, both of which implied a need to "mobilize broad coalitions to bring everyone on board". In this context, Solana said that "the rise of China and its integration into the system is the most important trend in global politics". But he also warned that a U.S.-Europe partnership could not be replaced by a U.S.-China one, since other emerging powers, such as Brazil and India, demanded a share of global decision-making.

Tackling the Mideast, Afghanistan, Russia, and Climate Change

A united Europe was essential to Solana's multilateral vision, and he observed that the U.S.-E.U. partnership, while it ought not completely dominate world politics, could still be very productive. The E.U.'s Common Foreign and Security Policy was "making a difference where it matters," he asserted, particularly through its engagement in "crisis management" in "the European way". He went on to highlight a variety of areas in which U.S.-E.U. cooperation was vital, including the Mideast peace process, Afghanistan, engagement with Russia, and climate change.

In the Mideast, Solana's optimism mostly stemmed from his perception of the Obama administration's commitment to the issue, particularly its appointment of George Mitchell, who proved instrumental in the Northern Irish peace process, as the White House's special envoy to the region. Solana said that he hoped this week's U.N. General Assembly meeting would result in a "new dynamic" for stalled peace talks, and called on the General Assembly to proclaim its support for the two state solution, as well take stands on thorny issues like the Palestinian state's borders, Palestinian refugees, and Jerusalem.

Solana also argued that both U.S. and E.U. security depended on a "functioning Afghan state". He said that the two entities would need to forge a new compact with the Afghan government that emerged from the country's elections, that jobs needed to be found for and deals made with the middle ranks of the Taliban. Solana, who was chief of NATO prior to his stint as the E.U.'s foreign policy head, noted that one of the challenges the alliance faced in its Afghan operations was the abandonment of a format for close cooperation with the EU that had proven effective in other contexts.

Security for Europe, Solana said, would also depend on "Russia finding its proper place". Unlike the U.S., Solana observed, the E.U. had a "postmodern DNA" which made it unable to play "great power politics" with Moscow. Its close geographic proximity to the country also meant that "cooperation was essential". But Solana also said that Western decision-making had erred with regard to Europe's eastern neighbor - unlike in Soviet times, he said, policymakers should take into account that Russia was now driven by a "logic of risk," and would not make brash decisions. He is hopeful that the country will sign a new START treaty on the reduction of nuclear weapons later this year.

The end of 2009 also presented a looming deadline for action on climate change, Solana noted, arguing that "a comprehensive deal at the end of the year" during a summit on the issue at Copenhagen "is essential". He called on the U.S. to take leadership on the issue, but noted that the desire to improve living standards in developing countries such as China and India was no excuse for their inaction.

When asked about the E.U. role in talks with Iran over its nuclear program, Solana expressed only

the most cautious optimism: "what I expect from the first meeting is only that there will be a second," he said.

EU Expansion and the Balkans

Solana answered questions from an audience that appeared deeply interested in future E.U. expansion and the body's presence in the Balkans. He felt "frustrated" by the Ukraine: "now is not really [a] splendid" time, he said, for its relations with the E.U. A close partnership with the former Soviet republic was likely to continue, he said, but membership was "unforeseeable". And although the E.U. is the only organization on the ground in Georgia, he said, he could not see membership in its future, either.

Turkey's candidacy was still being evaluated, he said, though admittedly "not at the speed of light," but warned that Turkey's high population growth was a factor in evaluating its eligibility for membership, and expressed concern that it would have disproportionate influence within the E.U. if admitted. He stressed that membership in the E.U. involved deep integration into political institutions, and that it was "not [like membership in NAFTA, but] a completely different jump". He had to defer to the U.N. on the tricky question of Northern Cyprus, a state that was carved out of now-E.U. member Cyprus in the 1970s after a Turkish invasion, and protected by the Turkish military today - but was hopeful that an agreement could be reached on that issue by the end of the year, as well.

Solana did make what one senior Harvard professor of government called "a surprisingly candid remark" about the probability of Albania's admission: while many of its Balkan neighbors were not soon likely to become part of NATO, he said, Albania had, against expectations, managed to join the alliance. He also expressed optimism about E.U. relations with Belarus, whose autocratic leader is known for being close to Russia. The E.U.'s mobilization of credit for the Belarussian government in the wake of the financial crisis, he said, The High Representative refused to admit many E.U. mistakes in its dealings with Bosnia or Serbia, blaming the "traumatic" Kosovo War for setbacks, as well as the intransigence of Bosnian officials, who, he said, had been given "clear roadmaps" for the improvement of the situation in that country, but were "not moving," even after such signs of commitment as a joint visit from himself and U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden. He was more upbeat about Serbia, where, he said, "my face has been burned in the streets thousands of times," but where he has been able to work with the government many times since.

Solana's retirement and the restructuring of his post into an EU Foreign Ministry might add a new and more powerful voice to the world stage. The Treaty's ratification would pave the way for a European diplomatic corps, enhancing the supranational entity's soft power worldwide. If Europe appears disunited at times, Solana's unambiguous address provided at least a rhetorical counterweight - and a preview of what to expect from an assertive and empowered Brussels.