

Meeting on 'Current Issues in Euro-American Relations'

On 14 June 2007 Dr. Ronald Asmus, Executive Director of the German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Centre in Brussels, spoke during a lunch meeting to the Netherlands Atlantic Association and discussed the current issues in Euro-American relations.

Only a decade ago people in Europe and America considered the European-American relationship "the best global relationship" both continents could ever have. Some years ago this situation deteriorated. Issues like the war in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and the secret CIA prisons in Eastern Europe gave Europeans the feeling that America was less and less of a trustworthy ally. Many Europeans became very sceptical about the relationship with the Americans.

Asmus stressed that we have to realize that the relationship between Europe and America is of central importance for both continents, and that we have to figure out a way to improve it. On the political level Asmus already signalled a change. In Europe, pro-Atlanticist political leaders are taking over from very sceptical ones. In Germany, for instance, Chancellor Schröder was replaced by Angela Merkel. In France President Sarkozy has formed the most pro-Atlantic cabinet in years. And in Great Britain the power change from Prime Minister Tony Blair to Gordon Brown will not noticeably affect the strong relationship that exists between the two countries.

America and Europe must not forget that for the most part they share the same values, Asmus stressed. They need to realize that the world has become a much more unsafe place in the last few years. Only when they work together they can face the threats and problems that will arise in the coming years. For instance, what is our stance towards the rise of China, and how do we deal with energy problems, or with the 'cold war' rhetoric from Russia? Or, more urgently, how do we face the nuclear aspirations of Iran? Diplomacy alone does not seem to be able to solve all problems, so how do Europe and America have to react then?

All these challenges cannot wait for two more years when a new U.S. President will take office. Action has to be taken now, according to Asmus. Therefore the relationship needs to be improved, something that is already happening on a political level. Asmus said that when you talk privately to European leaders they will say that the Bush Administration is doing everything that they ask for. The problem is that publicly, they will never say such a thing. Public opinion in Western Europe has largely taken an anti-Bush stance. No political leader is willing to tie up too closely with the present U.S. Administration, being afraid of the negative influence it might have on opinion polls. This way the relationship between Europe and the United States still does not get the attention it needs.

The new European leaders cannot allow themselves to wait two more years to formulate a new strategy towards America. This needs to be done now and it needs to be done quickly. The problem is that no one knows who the new U.S. President is going to be. The only thing that is certain is that he or she will follow a different path than the Bush Administration has done. No one is eager to continue the Bush legacy, according to Asmus.

Of the Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton has the most outspoken foreign policy agenda, but, as Asmus put it: she is a "slightly boring candidate". Barack Obama is told to be the new 'JFK', but we do not know much yet of his foreign policy agenda. His problem might be that his popularity might have peaked too soon. Asmus thought John Edwards to be the most likely Democratic candidate, mostly because of the failure of the other two.

On the Republican side, John McCain seemed to have the biggest chance of becoming the presidential candidate, but his right-wing speeches thus far were not very appealing to the public and worked rather self-destructive. Rudy Giuliani is very popular with the public, but his views differ very much from those of the more conservative Republican wing. It will not be easy for him to unite the whole Republican Party behind him. Finally Mitt Romney has a chance of becoming the Republican presidential candidate, but will the public accept a Mormon as their president?

If we take into account the uncertainty about who is going to be the new U.S. President and what his or her foreign policy approach will be, combined with the necessity of a quick and strong answer to the problems mentioned, Europe has to accept the fact that it will have to do business with the Bush Administration. They need to work on a common response towards third players and to the challenges of our time.

Bart Vervoort