A meeting with Dan Hamilton:
‘Rebalancing the Transatlantic Relationship’
Thursday 21 March, 2013 – Pulchri Studio, The Hague

On the 21 March, some fifty people had the opportunity to listen to Dan Hamilton, the Director of the Centre for Transatlantic Relations at the Johns Hopkins University. The Netherlands Atlantic Association had organized an evening with Hamilton on the future of the transatlantic relationship. Hamilton spoke about his vision for the future of the relationship and was open to elaborate questioning on the topic. He shared his insights with us, not only as an expert on the topic, but also as an American. The meeting, that was moderated by diplomatic expert Robert van de Roer, was held in Pulchri Studion in The Hague.

Hamilton started his short lecture on the transatlantic relationship with what would turn out to be one of the central ideas of the evening. He pointed out that Europe has to deal with its interior problems before expecting the rest of the world, not least the United States, to be interested in partnerships with it. Hamilton meant not only that Europe should fix the financial problems the crisis has brought. It’s problems, to him, are of a more general nature. The focus here lies too much on ‘Europe’ in a limited sense, and not enough on the world at large. Before expecting others to cooperate with Europe or to want to follow its example, Europeans should ‘get their act together’. Europe should focus less on dealing with the crisis and focus more broadly on its future in this world.

Hamilton stated that in order to head into the future, the transatlantic partnership has to be repositioned in three ways. The changes that are to be made are in defense, in broader political and economic relations, and in the geographical focus of the partnership. Elaborating on the first, Hamilton pointed out that the sense of what NATO’s modern functions are is not always clear to all. NATO was initially defined as a security partnership
against a Cold War background, but this security model might be reassessed. Europe is facing some challenges on its eastern borders, and the American view of these issues is that Europe must have the capacity to deal with them by itself.

The second point at which Hamilton advises repositioning NATO is broader than defense. He talked about the nature of the partnership between Northern America and Europe, and the fact that it has become broader and deeper over the years. It is understandable that defense cuts are seen as cuts on NATO, but the interest in an economic treaty between NATO-countries across the Atlantic Ocean must be seen as a political signal of re-investment. We are each others’ most important market, and the fact that both North American and European countries have service economies is the strongest potential link between us. An economic treaty would make use of that link to the fullest. That is the difference between U.S.’ relations with other parts of the world, and the difference between investment and trade. If sharing one market, we would invest in this ‘investment market’ and show that we stand up for our principles.

The third point Hamilton discussed as a way for the partnership to move forward was the move from a Cold War agenda on stabilizing Europe to a new, as yet rather unclear agenda. He proposed a switch from a transatlantic to a global focus. America is changing its pivots, but it is not losing sight of Europe. Europe should open its eyes and pivot with the U.S. instead of knocking at doors in Washington, asking whether they have forgotten their old ally. A relationship that is focused on being the core of possible worldwide coalitions that actually get things done, that is what Hamilton can see the NATO become. Right now, NATO is ‘indispensable but insufficient’. Hamilton sees the transatlantic relationship as having great potential. But as he finished his speech he remarked that not everybody seems ready for it.

A generous amount of time was reserved for a Q&A with the speaker, and the public, grey-haired or student, took this opportunity with both hands. Through the questions it again became apparent that Europeans are worried about the transatlantic relationship, and whether the United States are still interested in having Europe as a partner. Hamilton stressed his determination that a possible strain on the relationship between the United States and Europe would stem from a lack of vision in European politics, not from an American choice to look to the Pacific (also). The fear that the U.S. is losing interest in Europe says more about
Europeans that about Americans. Hamilton was eager to stress the United States’ continued interest in strong ties with Europe. The debate about the pivot to Asia and whether it will affect relations with Europe severely was finally best answered by the hope Americans have that Europe will pivot with it to face the world. Europe is now focusing so much on its own ‘petty affairs’ that it forgets the bigger picture, and leaves America facing a Pacific future on its own.

All in all, Hamilton presented the United States as a flexible power, and one that looks to the future. Europe seems less flexible, and stuck in problems that seem consequential but might occupy decision makers for such a long time that they forget to busy themselves with what is going to be important in twenty or thirty years’ time. Hamilton looks to NATO and Europe as useful institutions with a future that would be very promising if only it was invested in. That investment would have to be psychological more than anything; if people act on the belief these institutions have a future, then they will.

Lisa Glasbergen and Katy Hofstede