

It's not the demise of the West but its rise



There's much talk of the decline of both America and Europe as Asia's economic super-powers begin to flex their muscles. But **Karl-Heinz Kamp** points to four long-term trends that he believes argue strongly for the continuing leadership of the West

Decline-o-mania is back! Talk of America's diminished weight, a "non-polar world" and the rise of Asia's new superpowers to overtake the West dominates political and academic debate on both sides of the Atlantic. Recollections of Paul Kennedy's "Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" published 20 years ago are rife, raising questionmarks over the status of the US just as in the closing years of Ronald Reagan's Administration. The end of a controversial presidency seems to spur new thinking on America's role in the world, and President George W. Bush's swansong has certainly resurrected concerns about American overstretch and of a world to come that will no longer benefit from Washington's benign hegemony.

There are, of course, different kinds of doomsayers. Predictions of decline vary from forecasts that the US will be overtaken by Europe, that the European Union will

itself fail because of the laggard nature of many of its members, or that NATO will fall into second place behind the Vienna-based Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) if it does not disappear altogether. The fact that these speculations have little connection with reality has never daunted some pundits. Others like Fareed Zakharia in his recent book on "The Post-American World", have produced much more sophisticated arguments. His thesis is not so much America's decline but the rise of everyone else. China's staggering growth, India's dramatic economic turnaround, Russia's soaring oil wealth and Iran's petrodollar-fuelled sponsorship of international terrorism will all alter the international balance of power and will thus restrain America's ability to act as the world's sole superpower.

Europeans tend to observe these debates with mixed feelings. Those who see

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international relations as a zero sum game might hope that America's decline – whether relative or absolute – will translate into a European ascendancy. Others note with concern that decreasing American power will inevitably curb the United States' role as guarantor of the international order. This sort of thinking raises two questions: How likely is America's decay, and how should Europe, as its closest partner, react to any fundamental changes in the international system?

When assessing the validity of the decline thesis we should remind ourselves that judgments of America's role in the world are likely to be influenced by its tarnished international image. With the US reputation so marked by catchwords like Iraq, Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib, doomsday scenarios far outweigh optimistic ones.

It would make better sense, therefore, to identify trends that can be regarded as a cultural, political or historical "givens" in America's foreseeable future. There are four of these givens.

- US military dominance is not going to wane in the coming decades. With a navy larger than the next 50 biggest navies in the world together, American military might remain unchallenged. Economically, even today's gigantic sums of well over \$1bn a day by America on defence seem to be sustainable because in relation to its gross domestic product the US defence budget is smaller than in the late 1980s. That said, America's military dominance is not a silver bullet that can resolve political problems, but rather it is one element in the whole spectrum of statecraft. Weaponry can help enforce

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By Hans Mouritzen

The West will never be a unified actor

While I can sign up to most of the assumptions behind Karl-Heinz Kamp's analysis, I still disagree with his hopeful conclusion that the West can become a "unified strategic actor." I think there's hardly one chance in a hundred that will happen! Apart from a short honeymoon with the new US administration, the prospects for Atlantic relations are poor.

On the question of US decline, I think the US will probably lose its post-Cold War position of supremacy and instead become a *primus inter pares*, with China its most serious competitor. Be this as it may, I take issue with Kamp's premise that cultural dominance can be translated into policy gains. Even if a US way of life is mimicked in much of the world, this does not make national foreign policies more pro-American. There are plenty of examples from Latin America, Europe and Canada of past intransigence vis-à-vis the US which endorse my view. State interests, not cultural affinities, determine foreign policy.

Even so, America will surely continue to be the salient great power as far as Europe is concerned. This is likely to be true under the next US president as much as before. So how will Atlantic relations develop? Basically, Europe will always be the reactive party in the relationship, at least in terms of high politics. It will also have a much shorter geographical reach and its orientation will remain more

political and diplomatic developments, but it cannot build a lasting peace. Indeed, when used unwisely, as in Iraq, the net results of military superiority can prove disastrous. But military force is also a means to make other tools more effective. Without America's undisputed military dominance it could not act as a guarantor of international order with the credibility needed to maintain stability in Asia, the Middle East or the Balkans.

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- The US economy's leading role has also hardly been challenged. Despite the present banking and financial markets turmoil, or its deeply troubled automobile industry, the US still ranks as the world's most competitive economy, says the Geneva-based World Economic Forum. It remains dominant in cutting-edge future technologies like nanotechnology and biotechnology, and America still trains more engineers per capita than any of the Asian giants, some of which sugarcoat the statistics by counting car mechanics and servicemen as engineers.
- Soft power – even if culpably neglected by the Bush Administration – is nonetheless a major asset in determining America's

role in the world. The Western (American) way of life is still very attractive, and particularly for those societies that purport to be anti-American. The reasons for this go far beyond the desirability of Starbucks coffee or blue jeans. It is the universality of American mass culture combined with US dominance in communications through the Internet, scientific leadership in which its universities account for eight of the worlds' top ten and the global supremacy of the English language. America's soft power is a rich mix of Hollywood and Harvard, McDonalds and Microsoft.

- America is set to go on being the champion of transformation and progress. The US is not a status quo power, but rather one that regards itself as called to promote change – whether it be political, economic or cultural, and both inside and outside its own borders. This anti-status quo orientation goes hand in hand with two other features of the US culture; the firm belief that democracy is the only legitimate form of government and the imperturbable confidence of Americans in their own exceptionalism. It was President Bill Clinton who coined the term of the US as "the indispensable nation", and which other country would dare to characterise itself in that way? As long ago as 1817, president-to-be John Quincy Adams remarked that Europeans would regard the United States as a "dangerous nation".

Today's reality is that America's position as the only hyper-power is not going to change. In our globalised world, supremacy may no longer automatically translate into omnipotence, so power has instead to be transformed into consensus if it is to confer

true leadership. Allies have to be convinced that the leader is not only pursuing its own interests, but is acting on their behalf as well.

Washington has in recent years failed miserably on this score. The bizarre contradiction has been that never in history was the United States' physical power greater than after the demise of the Soviet Union, yet never was America's legitimacy lower than during the two administrations of George W. Bush. Even the "sympathy factor" the US enjoyed after 9/11 was quickly gambled away.

This is where the Euro-Atlantic relationship comes in. Europe and the United States are natural partners and form a true "community of values" – outmoded as this term may sound to some ears. Advocates of a transatlantic "divorce" like to emphasise the things that separate Europe from the US, for instance the death penalty or the role of religion in society and politics. Nevertheless, there is no other region of the world with America has so much in common, for nowhere else is the overlap in values, interests and concerns larger.

Euro-Atlantic relations are also indispensable from an entirely pragmatic point of view. Strengths on either side of the Atlantic can compensate for the weaknesses on the other. Europe is wealthy, social, liberal and exerts a tremendous economic and cultural attraction. Yet regardless of its ambitions, the European Union is not going to become a true strategic actor anytime soon – not least because, as German journalist Josef Joffe puts it, Europe lacks the "E Pluribus Unum" factor. Its geographic horizon barely extends beyond

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multilateralist. What will be decisive for the substance of Atlantic relations, however, will be external events. I believe there are four main (and not unlikely) scenarios that would have profound ramifications for relations in the West.

First, a terrorist attack against the US or its closest allies, or an overt US-Iranian conflict, would push the US in a unilateralist direction as Washington would quickly lose patience with the push-me-pull-you of multilateralism. This would both harm US relations with the more multilateralist Europeans and also create divisions in Europe.

Next, a conflict along the Russian perimeter in Georgia, Transdnistria or Belarus, or in Kosovo, would again split the US from Europe and also divide Europe internally. Europeans have different interests and legacies in their relations with Russia which prevent them forming a united front.

A possible US conflict with China in the Taiwan straits would also harm Atlantic relations, since the Europeans – from an American viewpoint – would keep a disappointingly low profile. While being economically crucial, China is of modest geo-political importance to Europe.

Lastly, continued military setbacks in Afghanistan (not to mention defeat) will surely strain Atlantic relations by further underlining the issue of uneven burden-sharing.

The best prospects for Atlantic relations arise if none of these scenarios occur. This would allow the 2009 honeymoon to be extended, perhaps long enough to last over the UN climate summit in Copenhagen in December.

the Mediterranean and its hinterland, and its strategic operations, whether in Afghanistan or in the Balkans, can only be mounted in tandem with US capabilities.

America, in turn, may not need European soldiers or aircraft to act in international crises, but it desperately needs the consent of democratically legitimate allies in support of its political or military actions. This is all the more true because in certain regions of the world the European image is so much more positive than that of America. European support is therefore key to the success of any common action. Nor should the EU's expertise be underestimated when it comes to non-military stabilisation and peace-keeping operations or crisis management. Nation-building efforts in Afghanistan have shown

how very relevant the combination of military stabilisation and civil reconstruction is.

Transatlantic cooperation should not be limited to Europe and the United States, but should also include other like-minded and democratic nations. Australia, New Zealand or Japan might not be "transatlantic" in geographic terms, but, politically, economically and with regard to values they certainly are. Along with the Euro-Atlantic community, they constitute a category that has regrettably almost vanished, namely "the West" as a term that describes the unique combination of freedom, democracy, market economy, pluralism and the rule of law. This group, or category, is already a fact of life and does not need institutionalisation as a "League of Democracies", even if that

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has been debated during this year's US presidential campaigns.

What chance does the "West" have to function as a unified strategic actor? The short answer is better than ever before. Washington has learned the lessons of hubris and imperial temptation, and has paid a high price. Europe has, in turn, understood the need for close transatlantic ties and for American reassurance. Gone are the times where European statesmen spoke of building the EU as a counterweight to America and when some intellectuals believed the Iraq crisis foretold "the Renaissance of Europe". France, once a fierce critic of America's role in the world, is now fundamentally redefining its transatlantic policy, while, in turn, Washington is enthusiastically welcoming the EU's efforts to strengthen its civil and military capabilities for common action. Countries like Australia are fighting side by side with NATO troops in Afghanistan, and supporting the EU's civil reconstruction efforts in the Hindu Kush. This may not always guarantee transatlantic and Western harmony, but it shows that EU, NATO and others can get their act together.

To return to the questions of whether American power and influence is in decline, the jury is still out, but very probably it is not. How might other would-be Goliaths in Asia and elsewhere cope with such challenges as scarcity of energy, food shortages and the general threat of recession? A unified West, composed of a strong Europe, and a more internationally responsible America, together with liberal democracies elsewhere, is definitively on the rise. □

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That would give top decision-makers on both sides of the Atlantic (and elsewhere) the time and energy to devote to the environmental and other issues of climate change, which is potentially a unifying topic. Europe could then seize an historically unique opportunity to take a global lead on a subject of high politics. If the EU could pull the foot-dragging US along with them, it would indeed represent an accomplishment for Atlantic cooperation. This rosy prognosis, however, requires almost as much wishful thinking as Karl-Heinz Kamp's conclusion.

Realistically, one must expect the divisive external environment to prevail. And a politically-split West is the very opposite of a "unified strategic actor." Even if the Western economy remains the world's biggest, and a Western way of life dominates the globe, the countries of the West – the US, Europe and the rest – cannot act together, let alone strategically. Different geo-political circumstances and diverse historical legacies prevent this unity from happening; it's a lesson the EU can teach. At best, I believe the West will be able to compromise and, at times, raise their lowest common denominator. □

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