

# OBAMA'S EXCELLENT EUROPEAN ADVENTURE

Jeremy Kinsman

Not since John F. Kennedy toured European capitals in 1961 has an American president's debut on the world stage been as anticipated as Barack Obama's week-long tour of Europe in April, beginning with the G20 in London, followed by the NATO Summit in Strasbourg and the US-EU Summit in Prague, with side trips to France, Germany and Turkey. The new US president held a dizzying 18 bilateral meetings with heads of government. As for Canada's role on the summit stage, Jeremy Kinsman writes that Stephen Harper did well at NATO, scolding the Afghan government for its law limiting the rights of women, but that on economic issues he seemed almost smug, seemingly content to say how well Canada was doing compared to other countries.

Depuis la tournée des capitales européennes effectuée par John F. Kennedy en 1961, jamais on n'avait tant attendu l'entrée en scène d'un président américain sur l'échiquier mondial. Longue d'une semaine, la tournée d'avril de Barack Obama a commencé par la rencontre du G20 à Londres et s'est poursuivie à Strasbourg avec le sommet de l'OTAN, puis à Prague avec le sommet UE-États-Unis, sans compter des excursions en France, en Allemagne et en Turquie. Le nouveau président a tenu pas moins de 18 réunions bilatérales avec des chefs d'État. Pour ce qui est du rôle du Canada, Jeremy Kinsman estime que Stephen Harper a fait bonne figure au sommet de l'OTAN lorsqu'il a réprimandé le gouvernement afghan pour sa loi violant les droits des femmes, mais qu'il a affiché une certaine suffisance sur les questions économiques dans sa façon de souligner que le Canada se tire mieux que les autres de la crise financière.

**N**ever had a visit across the Atlantic by an American president raised such hopeful expectations. John Kennedy's first visit as president, in 1961, when he memorably told a press conference, "I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it," was a stylistic success at a time when relations were good and European leaders were themselves world figures. But Nikita Khrushchev gave him a rough time in Vienna the next day. Leaving Vienna for London, Kennedy said, "It will be a cold winter."

No one dared give Barack Obama a rough time to his face on his international debut beyond his own neighbourhood, when he traveled to London last month for the G20 Summit, Strasbourg for NATO's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit, Prague for a US-EU Summit, on to Turkey for fence-mending with a great Muslim democracy, and then a flash visit to Iraq. As to impressive wives being part of the story, Michelle Obama took Europeans' breath away.

The comparatively brighter expectations for Obama came partly from relief that he has replaced a president deeply unpopular in Europe, as opposed to the liberator of

Europe Dwight Eisenhower. It is hard to convey the depth of prolonged European despondency over the George Bush presidency, especially after Americans re-elected him in 2004, even though in fairness he and Condoleezza Rice tried in the second term to reach out over the Atlantic. It was partly his style — "Texas" does not travel well. But the divisive themes of "for us or against us" and the ethical excesses of a war on terror that undid America's reputation had most Europeans counting the days until he and his policies were gone.

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**B**ut wherever I went in Europe during the Obama-McCain campaign last fall I found skepticism that Obama could actually get elected. McCain had support in Prague, Warsaw and the Baltics, where a centre-right political atmosphere combines with psychological preoccupation with Russia, but it was assumed elsewhere against hope that Americans would

not in the end elect a president of colour. When Europeans realized they had in effect confused their own situation with America's, US prestige received a shot in the arm from the election that was also a partial antidote to European anger felt over the finan-

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cial crisis, which, outside London, was largely laid at the door of the United States. Americans had been patronizing Europeans for a couple of decades with advice to change their tax codes, lighten their social safety nets and deregulate. Meanwhile, US banks — and London's — were reaching new heights of profit-taking and stretching the rules in the financial sector, which in Europe, as in the US, had been taking a greater and greater portion of the economy.

By the time Obama travelled to Europe he had taken a fierce enough stand over bankers' irresponsibility to have separated himself personally from the cause of the crisis. Commentators who had complained that Obama was just a pretty speech were left to explain the most active and boldly decisive first few months in presidential history.

A central feature was the financial stimulus plan to reinvigorate the US economy, whose deficit financing troubled fiscally conservative continental Europeans deeply. Germans saw in the huge US deficits another, possibly graver example of a culture lacking discipline about credit. The Czech prime minister, whose country held the still-rotating EU presidency, called it "the way to hell," a politically incompetent statement a week before Obama was to visit his country, but one that the centre-right in Europe, as in North America, could relate to.

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rhetoric, President Nicolas Sarkozy railed against the dangers of an "Anglo-Saxon" world. He darkly warned he might stalk out of the London-hosted G20 Summit if Obama pushed deficit spending instead of the Franco-German emphasis on more

intrusive and comprehensive international supervision and even regulation of wayward financial sectors.

So the potential for Obama to have a rough time on his trip therefore seemed high, going in, especially since from London, he was going on to the NATO Summit, where the US — and Canada — would try again to hold European feet to the fire on another very unpopular task, sending more troops to the more dangerous parts of Afghanistan.

In terms of personal performance, Obama came to Europe for a week under the spotlight of opinion, and he conquered. He had scaled back beforehand US expectations of any dramatic forward movement in unison on substance, so when the G20 London Summit "showed grit," as the *Economist* put it, it raised confidence levels enough to spark a global stock market rally lasting a couple of weeks and brought some cheer at a gloomy time. But the jury is out on the longer-term impact of the week's work.

The public opinion tsunami Obama creates makes it politically mandatory for European leaders — and even Hu Jintao or Lula of Brazil — to try to attract some of the glow back onto themselves. In Europe anyway, no elected political leader is sitting in a particularly secure position except, ironically, Silvio Berlusconi, whose centre-left opposition has imploded in obscure Italian ways. Europeans contrast Obama's big and seemingly decisive style to fractious politicking and lack of transparency in their own polit-

ical cultures. They compare the strength of the new US message of outreach with the quarrelling in a European Union divided into parochially self-involved national political constituencies. But they are at least now looking up at America rather than down, no small accomplishment if you're from Washington.

In many respects, the holding of the G20 Summit was its own reward, signalling a potentially vastly important and overdue correction in world governance. First, it sent a substantive message that an international regime of financial supervision would supplant the US-dominated "Washington consensus" on the uncontested regency of market forces that had dominated international finance since the Bretton Woods Agreements in 1944; and second, it said that the G8 was over as a decision-making body of importance in favour of a wider grouping more reflective of global roles as they really are today. Delusional vested interests on the part of the G8's most marginally qualified members, Italy and Canada, the next two hosts, may mean it will stagger on for a few years yet, with ever more complicated formulas for half-day and extra-day admissions for important outsiders, but it no longer has merit nor significance as a grouping.

It is worth noting that Gordon Brown was an apt self-nominated host for this leaders' G20, which was the first one of substance following a desultory debut under lame duck Bush in Washington in November. Bush's only accomplishment was to call for the April "real" meeting in London.

The chance the meeting would be real was in part rooted in Brown's long experience as UK chancellor of the exchequer, which, along with the City of London's prominence in international finance, gave him profile and an edge out of the gate when the financial crisis broke last fall.

Brown had been in at the creation of the G20 as a finance ministers'



Jason Ransom, PMO

**President Obama and Prime Minister Harper were in step at their bilateral meeting in Ottawa in February. But the London Summit of the G20 and the NATO Summit in April were larger global stages, and for Obama, his debut on the world stage. Jeremy Kinsman appraises their performances.**

grouping in the late 1990s and had supported Canadian finance minister Paul Martin's efforts to create a leaders' G20 with the same rationales: to get around a single table the most important economies in the world to discuss economic and financial issues that were demonstrably global, including replacing the tired mantra of the Washington consensus that open markets and growth solved all problems, in favour of more focus on fiscal incentives to critical infrastructure such as education and health care. Using the same membership list as the finance G20, with a bit of tweaking to add

Spain, the Netherlands, ASEAN chairman Thailand and the European Commission, avoided arguments over representation, though there are some contested anomalies still.

As the communiqué warned, the London meeting faced "the greatest challenge to the world economy in modern times," though the disagreement between France and Germany on one hand and the US on the other on fiscal stimulus packages could not be bridged. Psychological reservations about public debt especially in Germany are a politically resonant fact. There was some "bandying about

big numbers" (*Economist*) that conveyed the impression there had been a fiscal commitment of an extra \$5 trillion, but on closer examination it seems this startling sum would be the value of fiscal savings if the whole effort to recapture growth works.

In effect, Europeans are hoping the massive US fiscal package of about \$10 trillion will be an engine of growth globally. It is not a hypocritical position. The European economies are in effect providing stimulus with their greater social safety nets (that Americans had jibed for years were irresponsibly rich). As far as additional

money in the system is concerned, the G20 Summit focused on beefing up by \$1.1 trillion the capacity of the International Monetary Fund to assist countries hard strapped by the global crisis, especially in the developing world, and this time without the IMF's and World Bank's heavy-handed insistence on socially disruptive measures of mandatory structural adjustment common to the methods of the 1990's "Washington consensus."

The French and Germans and Gordon Brown did get from the US some measures for strengthened financial supervision and regulation, whose inadequacies the communiqué judged to be "major failures" of international governance. A Financial Stability Board will be given authority to regulate hedge funds and other elusive instruments in the "shadow" financial system.

The London meeting also made some ritual-sounding pledges to resist protectionism. What may give them enduring credibility is the decision to meet again before the end of the year to review progress on these and other undertakings in a G20 Summit in New York. It is obviously a forum with a long-term future.

So "Long live the G20!" The G8 should be taken off life-support and merged into the wider grouping without further ado. It is a different world in which the US knows it cannot call all the shots, and Obama is transiting to more effective global governance with a sense of balance and responsibility, though as he said in his closing press conference, it isn't an easy forum from which to evoke consensus. "If it's just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a brandy — that's an easier negotiation. But that's not the world we live in. It's not a loss for America."

Media feasted on the margins of the meeting. There were rioting anti-globalists, and the usual complaints over police handling. Stephen Harper missed the first class photo, apparent-

ly because he was in the washroom. Berlusconi missed the reshoot. Michelle Obama dominated the tabloids with her intelligent personal narrative of success through study before a multiracial gathering of young British girls. The First Lady then rattled protocol-obsessed royalists by putting her arm around the Queen at a reception. It was a gesture so warm yet touchingly deferential from this strong young American woman to the ever-smaller and older monarch, that the Queen seemed to reciprocate in the human terms that those of us from "realms" abroad who have had to spent time in the palaces have longed to see from her. But no one other than Michelle Obama should try it for a while. And certainly not Berlusconi: when the Queen was overheard at the group photo session asking sniffily, "Why can't he be quiet?" she was playing out an antipathy she picked up on her royal visit to Italy in 2000 when the about-to-be-prime-minister-again stepped out of line to address her as a quasi-equal. Just not done; Michelle Obama is in a club of one.

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to the attack by al-Qaeda from there on the United States. The increasingly prevalent European view is that al-Qaeda was put out of Afghanistan and what is going on there now is a civil war among Afghans.

Europeans have always been less convinced the Taliban can be defeated militarily, at least by outside forces, and have been more severe about the costs of aligning with Afghan governance that is illiberal and corrupt. These are positions that have lately become Canada's, and Harper made much in Strasbourg of the law recently introduced and signed by President Karzai severely restricting the rights of women.

The US has the view that this is still a crucial engagement against jihadism, whose nodes are in the tribal areas of Pakistan, and the Obama approach has been to try to deal with the issues as being regional in dimension. To the extent that it is also in parts a civil war, the US will encourage accommodation and hopes a new and more credible Afghan government will emerge in elections in the autumn to reach out more effectively to Afghanistan's traditionally independent-minded regions. But in sending 21,000 more combat troops to

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Cold War past. The question, which has been put aptly in the last six months by first Peter MacKay and then Prime Minister Harper, is whether it has much of a future.

NATO's difficulty in putting its members' soldiers in harm's way in the more dangerous and decisive places in Afghanistan reflects the unpopularity among European publics of the war. NATO is present in Afghanistan as an alliance, in response

aid military stabilization, the US had hoped European NATO allies would partner the effort with meaningful gestures of their own, especially as Canada will be pulling back from dangerous Kandahar in 2011, after five years of exposure that has chewed up the army and cost, as at this writing, 119 Canadian lives. There were few takers, which was disappointing for Obama, who is by force of commitment increasingly making the Afghanistan war his own, as opposed

to the Iraq war he is trying to exit, and it is important that the Afghan "surge" not be seen as the one that falls short.

So it was a 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary that has not settled the big questions about NATO's contemporary purpose.

The summit rightly celebrated the decision by Sarkozy that France will re-join NATO's integrated military com-

ings with foreign leaders, helicoptering over the border to Germany for a sit-down with an obviously charmed Chancellor Angela Merkel. The French had their chance to swoon over the American star couple, who constructed a bilateral half-day with Sarkozy and his own diva wife Carla Bruni, which went well enough to make one forget

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mand, which it had quit in 1966 under President Charles De Gaulle, who considered NATO an instrument of US policy.

NATO members also agreed in Strasbourg to the appointment of a new secretary general — who is not Canada's Peter MacKay. The Canadian minister of defence was a very long shot, given the tradition of having a European in that job to balance the Supreme Allied Commander being an American. When John Manley had a bit of a run last time in 2003, the European candidates were less strong. This time the field had thoroughbreds headed by Anders Fogh Rasmussen, successful PM of Denmark, and photogenic. (When Berlusconi's wife was rumoured to be having an affair with the bohemian and dishevelled mayor of Venice, Berlusconi, standing beside Rasmussen at a press conference asked rhetorically, "Why isn't she with *this* guy?") There was Radek Sikorski, intellectual foreign minister of Poland. After some Turkish resistance because of the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy — which Obama overcame with personal persuasion — Rasmussen got the job, which is what the US wanted in the first place.

But Canada won some respect on the day, on top of recognition for its duty in Kandahar, and it played well for Peter MacKay.

During the London and Strasbourg summits, Obama had several first meet-

ings with foreign leaders, helicoptering over the border to Germany for a sit-down with an obviously charmed Chancellor Angela Merkel. The French had their chance to swoon over the American star couple, who constructed a bilateral half-day with Sarkozy and his own diva wife Carla Bruni, which went well enough to make one forget

The most key sessions were with the Russians and the Chinese in London. With all the talk about the need to cut to the chase and get down to a G2 for really important issues, the get-acquainted meeting with Hu Jintao was in its potential one of the most important events of the trip. Obama initiated with China a cabinet-level ongoing strategic and economic dialogue. Just as with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, getting into a constructive working relationship with the Chinese on international issues is vital.

With Medvedev, it was about fence-mending, and the "reset" went swimmingly. Good chemistry with Medvedev is vital to effective personal diplomacy, although the role of Vladimir Putin remains an ambiguity to be clarified. Perhaps it will be when Obama visits Moscow in July. The Russians like nothing better than one-on-one discussions with Americans about strategic nuclear weapons, and they are going to have them in spades as a result of engagement to try to get down to 1,000 warheads each. But whether such activity, a pause in talk of bringing Georgia and Ukraine into NATO and better tone will be enough to wean the Russians from their

obstreperous role as UN Security Council spoilers on key debates, over next steps on Sudan or Iran or Myanmar, remains to be seen.

The controversial anti-ballistic-missile system near Russia's borders also seems to be on ice as the US tries to coax cooperation from Russia in persuading Iran to forgo nuclear weapons, difficult just when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is using nuclear patriotism as a key message of his re-election campaign, despite US outreach to Iran on their bilateral relationship. A wake-up call of sorts occurred when

North Korea launched its multi-stage missile in what was seen as a cry for attention. The rocket more or less fizzled in its attempt to put a satellite in orbit, but its implications trouble North Korea's neighbours greatly. Initially, the Russians and Chinese balked at a US draft of Security Council condemnations, though one was adopted after a week or so of work together, which is perhaps a promising new start for big power consultations in the Obama reset era.

The Prague visit was mainly for the US-EU annual summit. Europe would be represented by the usual gang of several presidents, a confusing condition that the Lisbon Treaty, which the Irish perversely failed to ratify, was meant to correct. So the EU Czech president in office and the Swedish next president joined President of the Commission José Manuel Barroso, with the last president in office, Sarkozy, also looming in the background. Adding to the baroque quality of the show was the fact that the Czech prime minister (he who had a week earlier suggested Obama was on the "way to hell") had himself been defeated in a confidence vote and was on his way out. Frankly, Obama didn't have the European partners he merited. However, though clearly it was anything but, Barroso called the half-day summit "a very

important event.” It should have been because there are important strategic issues of economic cooperation between the two most inter-invested economies on earth, such as regulatory convergence, and this transatlantic strategic dialogue too will be on the coming years’ agenda.

Outside the meeting, Obama was again a huge hit. He addressed a vast crowd in the square outside Prague Castle with a big-picture speech that served to remind the people of the small-minded myopia of politicians at

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home. Interestingly, it featured a presentation on nuclear weapons in which Obama said his long-term goal, probably not to succeed in his lifetime, would be a world without them. The notion of “getting to zero” earned criticism from the *Globe and Mail* for overreaching when his mind should be focused on the here and now, and from Newt Gingrich (“a dangerous fantasy”), but cheers from such obvious non-fantasists as George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, who, recalling Cold Warrior Ronald Reagan himself, have been calling for just such a goal for a couple of years.

Honest critics miss the point of the positive content: it is an inspirational theme, because humanity needs inspiration. But more to the point, it is an essential presentational framework as Obama’s team rejoins critical proliferation negotiations, including the Non Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in 2010, in which the self-satisfied position of the established nuclear powers is a source of great resentment, especially as they committed to such a long-range goal in the founding documents. Afghanistan and Iraq may dominate our sense of trou-

ble today, but the larger threat long-term is the fact that the world’s nuclear proliferation condition is at its most dangerous in a quarter-century.

Czech television covered the visit’s every moment with almost as much speculation about such topics as what the Obamas had ordered from room service (the North Korean missile launch had spoiled their plans for a romantic night out on the town) as CBC anchors devoted to Obama’s purchase of Beaver Tails in the Ottawa market. What was clear was that the US president makes and dominates the

news, in every room or plaza he enters.

Obama’s trip to Turkey was to enable the crafting of a message of outreach to Muslims, taking particular note of Turkey’s status as a rare enough Muslim democracy. Turkey had also become one of the countries most hostile to the US in recent years, with a Pew Centre poll showing only 12 percent of Turks had a favourable view of their long-standing American ally. Obama spoke effectively to his parliamentary audience, though his reassuring remarks raised hackles elsewhere. An Israeli minister close to hard-line prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu commented on by now routine American support for a two-state solution that “Israel doesn’t take orders from Obama,” a remark churlish enough to portend troubled waters ahead between Likud Israel and Obama Washington. Also, Sarkozy predictably reacted sarcastically to Obama’s support for Turkey’s candidacy to join the EU, a familiar American position but one without practical meaning except to comfort the Turks, who feel offended by seemingly existential antipathy to their membership on the part of many in the union.

A flash trip to Iraq closed the week. It showed Obama as commander-in-chief of forces he wouldn’t have sent there but whose work he made clear he supports today, though there is still firmness on time-lines for withdrawal.

Despite a laudable effort by Prime Minister Harper to showcase in several foreign media interviews the relevance of Canada’s role on the main issues at the G20 and NATO summits, Canada didn’t make much of a splash. The foreign interviews earned more playback waves in navel-gazing Canada than attention abroad. Nonetheless, he was entitled to point out that Canada represented the “force of example,” on NATO Afghan commitment, and as the IMF put it, the “solid footing” retained

by the Canadian economy, especially the relatively unscathed Canadian system of well-regulated and well-managed Canadian chartered banks. He is also entitled to point to language in the G20 communiqué committing participants to stand still on new trade barriers as insulation against further US protection such as “Buy America” provisions. His warnings on Afghanistan and NATO have been justified, if somewhat belated.

However, Harper’s approach in international affairs is essentially minimalist, defensive and rather smug. He claims that Canada has already exceeded commitments on stimulus made at the G20 meeting in November, but both the OECD and the IMF say that Canada is undersubscribed. There is an engagement to contribute \$12 billion to the IMF \$500-billion facility for poor countries affected by the global crisis, but as Canadian comment put it, the “search for consensus appeared to nudge Mr. Harper toward embracing the more drastic measures for poor countries.”

Over the years, Canadians were represented at such summits by leaders able to argue against their own type-casting as a developed country: Pierre Trudeau on power-sharing with poorer

countries (what the G20 is about) and nuclear issues, Brian Mulroney on support for ending the Cold War and South African white minority rule, Jean Chrétien on Africa and Paul Martin for creating a leaders' G20. Harper seems content to show up and mostly tell the world how well Canada is doing compared to others. That claim is itself debated in Canada, given predictions we can expect a 3 to 4 percent drop in GDP this year, but the bigger question is whether his sort of international complacency is what best reflects Canadians' internationalist instincts.

Obama's principal achievement on the trip was his personal performance, especially in the 16 side meetings he held with world leaders, countries key to resolving in concert issues of international peace and security. In his public discourse, he demonstrated a grasp of issues, pragmatism and an intelligent sense of nuance, but also a very good ear. Most important, he acted out the reality of a US that

has re-embraced multilateral diplomacy after eight years of what seemed like military-centric unilateral hyperbole. He is comfortable with the notion the US must operate in a multipolar world. It seems obvious, but when Jacques Chirac suggested it several years ago, the White House mess renamed the French fries.

Nor was Obama all about soft power. This new young president has the same leadership need as Kennedy: to show that he would lead the US with the necessary resolve when required. He was served up a useful demonstration opportunity on his return by the decisive intervention to end a hostage taking by Somali bandits of an American cargo ship skipper. It was in some respects a telegenic cable news sideshow but in others an example of distressing signs of international anarchy needing a firm American hand.

Obama's already high poll numbers were even higher at the week's end, especially in foreign policy, and

still more especially on his determination to improve relations with Muslim nations.

Of course, the jury is out on many issues. There is a difference between politics and governance, though success in one can help the other. Gideon Rachman in the *Financial Times* called the Obama week in Europe "all a dream." Recognizing he is an "unusually gifted and intelligent politician" is easy enough. "But that does not mean he will succeed."

Of course not. But it would also have been easy to spot a failure — and there wasn't one.

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