

The EU Delegation Goes to Washington

A CONVERSATION WITH
AMBASSADOR JOÃO VALE DE ALMEIDA

FLETCHER FORUM: *The Lisbon Treaty introduced a Common Security and Foreign Policy (CSFP) that requires, at least in theory, member states to be on the same page. Are there any topics that you personally feel should be addressed but on which a lack of EU consensus handicaps action?*

AMBASSADOR JOÃO VALE DE ALMEIDA: We don't pretend that all member states have exactly the same positions about every issue of foreign policy. That is not in the cards. And we very much respect diversity, the fact that countries have different interests and come from different starting points, and the fact that they have different relationships with different parts of the world. For us, this is an asset, not a liability. But we aim at having a common message on as many issues as possible. That message is carried out by Cathy Ashton but also by each member state individually, which carries its own nuances, its own accents, but fundamentally projects

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the same message. The purpose is to enlarge the scope of issues on which we have a common position so that we are more effective on the world scene.

FORUM: *You have said that it will be a process to move the European External Action Service (EEAS) toward full operating capacity, but in your mind, what needs to happen early on to bolster its credibility?*

VALE DE ALMEIDA: I think we have already started, including what we've done in the delegations since the beginning of 2010. In Washington, I now represent the European Union—not only the European Commission—and I cooperate actively with my fellow ambassadors from the member states to project the image of the European Union. We are already changing on the ground.

High Representative Catherine Ashton has been extremely energetic in the months since her appointment to promote a new way of dealing with foreign policy in Europe. And the EEAS will be the last stage and the last element we add to this apparatus to make the EU work even better. It will not be effective immediately—we should not expect overnight to have a full-blown European diplomatic service, but it is a work in progress and will be launched with real determination by Cathy Ashton. I'm sure it will reach cruising speed very soon.

FORUM: *As the first EU Ambassador to the United States, how have you approached building the EU's reputation as a U.S. dialogue partner?*

VALE DE ALMEIDA: My fundamental message to my U.S. partners is that the transatlantic relationship is by far the most solid and the most important bilateral relationship in the world, a relationship based on shared values and a strong fundamental belief in democratic government, the rule of law, human rights, and the market economy. The United States invests nine times as much in the Netherlands as it invests in China. The trade value between the United States and the EU is one billion dollars a day. These figures give you a dimension of the magnitude of the economic basis of this relationship. So, the first point is that the United States and European Union have a solid relationship based on common values and on strong economic interconnection.

The second message is that member states individually are important partners of the United States and so they should remain; the two levels, national and European, should be seen together. As the European Union deepens its integration process and becomes a bigger actor on the international scene, the more reasons there are for the United States to engage also with the European Union as a single entity.

The changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty—including the creation of new posts such as the permanent Council president and the high representative, as well as the new External Action Service and EU delegations that are replacing European Commission delegations—provide evidence that we are changing and becoming an even more reliable, credible, and effective partner of the United States.

FORUM: *How has your reception been in Washington so far?*

VALE DE ALMEDIA: Great. I have gotten an extremely warm welcome from all my American colleagues, including those in the State Department, the White House, Congress, and all the other governmental departments. I think there's a genuine willingness and interest in cooperation with Europe. Of course, they expect us to be a real partner and to deliver. But that's a challenge for us that I am willing to take on.

FORUM: *What do you see as the ideal balance of U.S.-EU cooperation on global issues like climate change and terrorism, considering that other strategic EU partners may view the U.S. role less enthusiastically?*

VALE DE ALMEIDA: Well, I don't think that global challenges know borders or distinguish between countries. Global challenges are there, full stop. Be it climate change, terrorism, immigration, or scarcity of natural resources—these challenges are there and we have to tackle them. The question is whether we choose to tackle them separately or together. If we are to be more effective in our response to these challenges, we have to tackle them in partnership.

I think that both the EU and United States, as industrialized countries confronting competition from emerging powers, have fundamentally the same concerns. Both need to incorporate and integrate immigrant populations. The EU and United States also have common fiscal and budgetary concerns, with both fighting to come out of economic and financial crises. I think we have a lot in common, on top of the values and economic interconnection, to make the case for solid cooperation as we deal with global challenges.

I see a great potential for U.S.-EU relations and I think we can do much more not only in our bilateral cooperation, but also as global leaders. The world today requires stronger initiatives from both the European Union and the United States.

FORUM: *Let's turn to the Balkans. How do you envision the upcoming talks between Pristina and Belgrade?*

VALE DE ALMEIDA: Well, I think the starting point is that Cathy Ashton was instrumental in creating the conditions for a consensual resolution in the United Nations context; she was also influential in creating the conditions for Kosovo and Serbia to start talking. The parties, with our support, now need to build on this.

FORUM: *Dovetailing on that, how would you respond to criticism that the EU is offering Serbia a huge carrot with potential EU membership pending its cooperation in the talks, but that perhaps Kosovo stands to gain far less?*

VALE DE ALMEIDA: The prospect of European Union membership is

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open to all Balkan countries, provided all the conditions are met that concern different aspects and stages of the process. But for now, we are reassuring these countries that they are part of Europe. They are not in [the Union], and will not be in tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but the possibility is there. This same principle is valid for Kosovo.

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of countries. Assuming that the CSFP takes root and the EEAS is successful, what's next for Europe?

FORUM: *You have spoken previously of the EU's efforts to help break down communication barriers and provide a base of common values for a large group*

VALE DE ALMEIDA: The European Union has been a great historical success. This is a continent that had been in civil war for decades, if not centuries, and that was separated by an Iron Curtain for a few decades. This continent has also defeated dictatorships inspired by both the left and the right and provided 500 million people with security, stability, and prosperity. This is a great achievement.

So, what's next? Just as it would have been difficult in the 1950s and 1960s to predict where we are today, it's very difficult for me to predict 25 years ahead. If you look at the challenges that our societies face today, one chief issue is the integration of immigrant populations. We will continue to have immigration because our demography requires it, but we need to make sure that integration is successful, or we will have tensions in our societies.

We also need to reform our systems, to introduce strong and solid fiscal sustainability measures, and to guarantee that we have the conditions for economic growth, including creating jobs and remaining competitive in the world economy while fighting climate change and protecting our environment.

Foreign policy is also crucial if the EU is to survive. This regional grouping has to project itself as a global actor in order to defend its interests and promote its values. And then there is the issue of security and defense. There is already an evolving security dimension to the EU's engagement with the rest of the world to support its foreign policy goals and promote its outside interests.

Of course, I think the fundamental asset of the European Union today—and in the past—is the set of values that we stand for: human rights, rule of law, democracy, and freedom. These values are the bedrock of our project. ■