

Clinton Opts for Asia, Europe for Its Navel

by Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Frans-Paul van der Putten

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Only weeks after being sworn in as the United States' secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton completed her first foreign trip. Red carpets weren't rolled out in European capitals, however. For while the secretary of state's first visit traditionally is to Europe or the Middle East, Clinton decided to go to Asia. Remarkably, the significance of this choice escapes most Europeans. Illustrative of the lack of attention in Europe to the fundamental changes that the international order is undergoing, public debate on Clinton's emphasis on Asia is scant. It is high time for Europe to look outward again and to reconsider its strategic position in global affairs. Relations between the U.S. and other centers of global power are rapidly changing, but policymaking in Europe lags behind.

Clinton, as the top diplomat in the administration of President Barack Obama, toured Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China. Just prior to departing, at the Asia Society in New York, Clinton delivered her first major speech. She used the occasion to explain why she chose to go to Asia first. The region is of key strategic importance, she said: "[...] our capacity to solve a lot of the global challenges that we're confronting depends upon decisions that are made there." This implies that the strategic importance of other regions – Europe included – is considered to be less than Asia's. Clearly, the new administration's primary focus in foreign relations is on Asia. The fact that the U.S. secretary of state breaks with the longstanding tradition of going to Europe or the Middle East is yet another sign of Asia's rise.

This development is of great significance for Europeans, who have long been America's most important partners. Washington can choose from an increasing group of actors with whom to collaborate on global issues. This is a positive development for international cooperation, but it also means that Europe's influence in international affairs is on the wane. This is not a process that Europeans can or should try to stop, but it is something that they should note and respond to. Ultimately, the consequences for Europe may be as fundamental as the loss of colonial power and the rise of the United States was during the mid-20th century. The sooner this is recognized, the better Europe can prepare itself for this development.

To anticipate changing power relations in the world requires, first, an interest in developments in other parts of the

globe. In this respect, the fact that media attention in Europe has largely failed to address the reasoning and symbolism behind Clinton's trip is truly worrisome. News in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, for example, has generally been limited to factual reporting, rather than sound analysis.

Moreover, Clinton's decision to go to Asia on her first trip is interpreted primarily as a means of re-establishing ties with allies and underlining the growing importance of good relations with China. This suggests, erroneously, that Europe is of undiminished importance to the United States and that America is merely practicing symbolic politics by giving Asians the feeling that they are not being forgotten. Clinton's Asia Society speech showed, however, that such an interpretation is plain wrong: Clinton went to Asia because of the growing strategic weight of the region. Europe, in the meantime, is tangled up in internal matters, and does not seem capable – or willing – to see that the world will not wait until the European integration project is finished.

High-level talks in the four Asian capitals focused on the global and financial crisis, as well as climate change, security – primarily North Korea, Iran – and humanitarian issues such as Darfur. Europe has vast interests in all these issues, and European countries – individually and as a whole – have been important partners of the United States in all areas. This makes it all the more remarkable that the secretary of state chose to meet her counterparts in Asia before setting out for the European continent.

The new U.S. administration is shifting the focus of its foreign policy from trans-Atlantic to trans-Pacific relations. This should wake up European policymakers to the fact that the time has past when Asia was important merely for economic reasons. The strategic re-positioning of Europe in the world needs to be placed high on the agenda in Brussels as well as in European capitals. Now more than ever, unprecedented realism and a sense of urgency is required – even if this seems to go against the nature of “soft” and “normative” power in Europe.