

EU 'Supremos' anxiously await the Kissinger call

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"Who do I call if I want to call Europe?" The question that has been haunting Europe for over 30 years now, seems to be a rhetoric question no more. Following the EU extraordinary summit of November 19th – where EU heads of state and government unanimously backed Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy as the first permanent EU President and former Trade Commissioner Baroness Catherine Ashton as High Representative for Foreign Affairs – the renowned former US Secretary of State question seems to have been resolved. The EU has now got the answer to the Kissinger question... Or does it?

In the run-up to the European Council summit, hearsay had it that high-profile political figures were to be the 'destined' ones. UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband even spoke about prominent candidates who would have the ability to "stop the traffic in Beijing and Moscow". Contrary to such expectations, however, the new EU 'supremos' who have filled the top EU jobs and are now assigned the taxing task of revamping the EU to forcefully bring it to the forefront of world diplomacy and global affairs, are no other than two discrete politicians. The Belgian consensus-builder and the British labour party steadfast 'devotee' with a far less than modest CV to say the least, are anything but the flamboyant political figures the world had been waiting for.

Both Van Rompuy and Ashton had something to say in defence of their low-key profiles on the night of their (s)election. "There have been many speculations on what the permanent President's profile should look like, but only one profile is possible. A profile characterised by dialogue, unity and action," said the Flemish Christian Democrat, who gained substantial support as a candidate for the Presidential post after holding together an attention-grabbing coalition at home and settling disputes between the linguistically divided Dutch and French-speaking communities of Belgium. Ashton, in turn, resorted to a diplomatic, "judge me on what I do and I think you'll be pleased with the outcome", as a way of defending her poor credentials.

In any case, these are today the new faces of EU diplomacy. They are the faces that eight years of 'wondering' have generated as the most apt for the jobs. Eight bumpy years – which began with the Laeken Declaration, the Constitutional Treaty and the abortive ratification process, were then topped with a self-styled 'period of reflection' and two referendum rounds in Ireland, and were finally garnished with a Czech 'parody' – came to a climax on November 19th. So, 11 days before the Lisbon Treaty's entry into force, Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton found their European 'counterparts', who, according to Van Rompuy are "anxiously waiting for the first call."

But what kind of message is the EU trying to send to the world by these two choices (aside that of a gender balance in their top jobs)? Many commentators have argued that the proclaimed federalist Van Rompuy option, which was zealously backed by Merkel and Sarkozy, is intended to send the message of deeper integration and unity in Europe. With the European Council lacking however the legislative powers of other EU institutions, the Presidential post is more of a 'decorative' nature.

So the discussion essentially boils down to the much more astute question relating to the Ashton option. What kind of message is the choice of a Baroness, with less than limited foreign policy experience and a career filled with various middle-ranking governmental posts, prior to her appointment as Mandelson's successor last year, trying to convey? Is the message which we receive, at the end of the day, the one that the Franco-German axis has been hoping for? That of reliance, in other words, on the Union's concerted power, rather than on the power of a glamorous individual with a loud voice? Or are we receiving the message that the EU will now be effectively run by the British Foreign Office? So while Solana is preparing to step down and make way for the Lady, is the dream of a 'federal state' about to make way for a 'puppet state'? Whatever the answers to our questions may be, the undeniable fact of the matter is that the new developments have irrefutably been a diplomatic victory for the British.

It is therefore doubtful whether any European elite figure is even concerned with the fact that Baroness Ashton is hardly the person that can see eye-to-eye with Ms. Clinton, or with the fact that she is a virtual unknown, who will be striving to get her name heard and known (while at the same time Van Rompuy will still be trying to first get the media have his name correctly pronounced). So, while these new EU 'Supremos' will be anxiously waiting for that legendary first call, the traffic in Beijing and Moscow will continue to run unstoppable and so will also the British Foreign Office influence over EU Affairs.