

By Andrew Rettman

BRATISLAVA - US academic and former statesman, Zbigniew Brzezinski, has said Western democracies should create a trans-Atlantic trade bloc to counterbalance Chinese power.

The 85-year-old, who was a US national security advisor at the height of the Cold War, spoke at the Globsec conference in Bratislava on Thursday (18 April) to an audience of central European VIPs.

He recalled drinking a beer in the Slovak capital with Czech artist-politician Vaclav Havel shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain and having "a kind of exuberant feeling" about the future of Europe and the emergence of the US as a benign superpower.

But he said Europe failed to fulfil its promise, while the US weakened itself by invading Iraq.

"Europe's main problem is that today's European Union is a Europe more of banks than of people, more of commercial convenience than an emotional commitment of the European peoples," he said.

He criticised the UK for putting the interests of The City above all else. He said some eastern countries treat the EU as "a piggy bank" of subsidies, while "complacent" and "self-indulgent" southern countries' top priority is to get bailouts from the north.

"In Western Europe today, there is a dearth of historical imagination and of global ambition. There is no Churchill, no De Gaulle, no Adenauer. Current political discourse is dominated by narrow perspectives," he noted, referring to Europe's post-WWII political giants.

"Europe's lack of global ambition makes for excessive reliance on America [as a security provider] and makes the American public more sceptical of Europe," he added.

On the US side, he said the \$3 trillion Iraq war hobbled its economy and delegitimised its authority.

"Just think of the recent UN vote on Palestine's status ... The Americans organised a worldwide diplomatic effort to prevent it from happening and out of 190 countries, it gained seven supporters," he said.

In the context of China's growing economic and military power, he said the creation of an EU-US free trade zone could revive trans-Atlantic relations and create a new geopolitical equilibrium.

"There is enormous promise in that concept," he said.

"It can create additional trans-Atlantic bonds ... It can shape a new balance between the Pacific and the Atlantic oceanic regions, while at the same time generating in the West a new vitality, more security and greater cohesion," he added.

For his part, Estonian President Toomas Ilves, speaking at the same event on Friday, shared Brzezinski's concerns.

"If the US is becoming less interested in Europe [in terms of providing security] ... it means we have to slap our faces, to wake up and say 'What are we going to do?' It's still a Hobbesian world out there," he said, referring to the 17th century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes and his vision of a dog-eat-dog world.

The EU commissioner for administrative affairs, Maros Sefcovic, also placed great hope in the potential EU-US trade deal.

He noted that it would give the two sides an economic advantage in terms of de facto control of global industrial standards. "If the Americans and the Europeans agree that this is the standard [for a given product] then that automatically becomes the world standard," he said.

He urged EU countries to adopt a negotiating mandate before July and said parts of the pact could be "initialled" before mid-2014.

Looking inwardly into the Union, he echoed Brzezinski's concern that EU institutions, national governments and average Europeans lack joint political will.

Noting that the European Commission will in future be able to veto member states' national budgets under the so-called European Semester laws, he said: "The commission in its history never had more power than it has now."

But he wondered what will happen when Brussels tries to wield its new instruments.

"In September or October, the commission will send letters to Estonia or to France saying: 'Show us your budgets. We want to see them first to see if they're sustainable.' Then we will have to have a conversation on how to combine this deeper integration with democratic scrutiny," he said.

"When I present this to the Bundestag ... people might say: 'Who is this man from Brussels telling us what to do?'," he noted.

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