



## Did Obama “Snub” the European Union?

*Jacob Funk Kirkegaard explains how the Lisbon Treaty reconstituting the European Union made it less essential for President Obama to attend a US-EU summit in May.*

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Steve Weisman: Did President Obama snub the European Union and is the European Union justified in being upset about his decision to skip the EU-US Summit this spring?

This is Steve Weisman at the Peterson Institute for International Economics with Jacob Kirkegaard, a research fellow at the Institute, to answer that question. Thanks, Jacob.

Jacob Kirkegaard: Well, glad to be here.

Steve Weisman: President Obama’s decision to skip a US-EU Summit in Madrid in May has apparently caused the cancellation of said summit. I guess you can’t have a summit if the major player doesn’t show up. What’s this all about?

Jacob Kirkegaard: I think that there is this whole aspect of a sort of diplomatic expectation of continuing what was clearly during the Bush administration a recurring process with these bi-annual summits between the EU leaders and then-President Bush. And it was always a question whether that would continue under the Obama administration because it’s not something that is written down anywhere. It just became something that the governments felt was useful and clearly now, the Obama administration has decided, “Well, frankly, we have got other and more urgent priorities to attend to and therefore, we won’t go to this particular summit.” Are the Europeans miffed? I think first and foremost, the Spaniards will be miffed because—

Steve Weisman: Because the prime minister of Spain has just rotated in to be the head of the European Union.

Jacob Kirkegaard: That’s correct. Spain is now hosting the EU presidency for the first half of 2010, and that actually is a very interesting period in the European Union because this is the first rotating EU presidency that occurs during or after the Lisbon Treaty came into force. And what that means is that you now have, in some regards, a little bit of an awkward situation because one of the things that the Lisbon Treaty created was an attempt to basically generate more continuity externally for the European Union and basically establish a person who should you call when you want to dial Europe. The treaty establishes what’s called a permanent president for the European Council or basically the Council of European leaders, and they elected the former prime minister of Belgium for that position. And he, however, is based in Brussels on a permanent basis.

So you could argue, and many in Europe in fact have argued, that it would be more appropriate to host the US-EU Summit or any other summit that the European Union in fact has with its external partners in Brussels so that it could be led by the new permanent president of the council. But of course, the problem is that those member states [that] previously had a six-month window of opportunity to shine on the global diplomatic scene if you like, they obviously don't want to lose that opportunity.

And it is almost a little ironic that Spain is the first country because Spain is sort of a midsized European country, clearly not among the four big EU countries: Italy, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. But at the same time, not one of the really small EU countries either and clearly a country with linguistic ties to Latin America and a grandiose history and therefore, clearly perhaps a self-perception of itself as a great nation.

So I think it'll be fair to say that the Spaniards are likely to be particularly prickly that they perhaps now seem likely to lose the opportunity to host President Obama in Madrid because clearly that would have provided the Spanish prime minister with a very great photo opportunity because Obama is very popular in Europe. So everybody would truly like to host him.

Steve Weisman: The White House is saying that this president has been very attentive to Europe and in his first year has visited a number of times.

Jacob Kirkegaard: Oh, yes. Absolutely, that's very reasonable. He has been in Europe I think five or six times during the first year, which I would certainly argue is paying due attention to any transatlantic relationship and at the same time, I mean, it needs to be always kept in mind that President Obama is a crisis-time president. He really does have a lot on his plate. And at the end of the day—and I think this is a good thing—the transatlantic agenda is not one of the immediately explosive subject areas that Obama has to deal with here and now.

So the fact that he chooses to prioritize, that perhaps the upcoming EU-US Summit would be rather weak on substance, I think it's not particularly surprising. And I would just basically say to the Europeans and the Spanish in particular to get over it and be realistic. Do we even know what they were supposed to do at the summit? What were they supposed to come up with?

I think this basically also reflects that just as the United States has a very large domestic policy reform agenda, so do many of the European countries. They are in the same kind of domestic economic crisis mode that I certainly don't see in a timeframe of May this year any large-scale new transatlantic policy initiatives that basically could be spearheaded or promoted by the summit. Certainly not, considering that all the foreign policy and national security related issues are likely to be covered during the NATO Summit, which will also be held in Europe but later this year. As far as I know, Obama is attending [the NATO summit].

Steve Weisman: Jacob, thanks for joining us.

