

National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World After Iraq

Background Document

“A Divided Europe will be Easy for America to Rule”

- Philip Stephens, Financial Times

Among the most important geopolitical shifts of the past two years has been the US administration's judgment that its interest now lies in dividing rather than uniting Europe. Among the most depressing has been the way European governments have colluded in the fracturing of the continent. Washington's segregation of erstwhile allies into friends and enemies is intended as a blunt assertion of American primacy. In the long term the strategy will prove to be corrosive of US power. In the short term it has worked. Europe is in disarray.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was obvious well before the Iraq war that George W. Bush was set on abandoning the postwar policy of promoting European unity. The calculated snub to Nato immediately after September 11 2001 was an early harbinger. The new either/or approach to foreign policy was briefly obscured by Mr Bush's detour at the United Nations. But even as the president paid lip-service to the old multilateralism, the sheriff-and-posse model of selective alliances was hardening into strategic doctrine.

The new organising principle of US foreign policy is to assemble coalitions of the willing and of the coerced behind the projection of American power. It is laid out explicitly in Mr Bush's national security strategy. Seen from Washington, a cohesive Europe is one tempted to answer back. A divided one cannot challenge US power.

Distracted by a largely sterile debate about multipolar and unipolar worlds, Europeans have not properly understood the consequences. Iraq is still seen by many as the exception rather than the rule. Wounds can be salved, friendships rebuilt and the transatlantic alliance put back together again. That is a bad misreading of US intentions. The past is not recoverable.

By an accident of history, the enlargement of Nato and the European Union has made the US task that much easier. The former Soviet satellite states were always going to be more malleable than the bigger players of Old Europe. Washington calls it payback time.

We can see the US strategy in action in the punishments meted out to those who opposed the Iraq war. Friends are feted in the White House. Enemies - and, startlingly, these include Mexico and Chile as well as Germany and France - are frozen out. Each is ranked and the punitive response precisely calibrated.

Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security adviser, keeps the score. France is to be punished, Germany shunned and Russia brought back into the fold. When a middle-ranking US official recently travelled to Europe to press for the lifting of UN sanctions on Iraq he stopped off in Moscow and Berlin. But his instructions barred a visit to Paris. Persuading the French was left to the British. It gets worse. Colin

Powell can visit Berlin but Mr Bush still refuses to take a telephone call from Gerhard Schröder. Think about that last one: Iraq is in chaos, al-Qaeda has launched new attacks and the US president has not spoken to the leader of Europe's largest nation since November.

Tony Blair's answer to all this has been that the bridges must be rebuilt. The prime minister has urged Mr Bush to thaw the relationship with Germany. He has pressed France to return to the Atlanticist fold. And he was humiliated in Moscow in his efforts to persuade Vladimir Putin to make his peace with Mr Bush.

On one level, Mr Blair is tapping into the instincts of the European foreign policy establishment. A recurrent theme of last weekend's gathering of British and German policymakers at the annual Konigswinter conference was a reluctance to walk away from 50 years of Atlanticism. Even France seems anxious to de-escalate. Jacques Chirac is backing a new Security Council resolution on Iraq in spite of the fact that the text makes a mockery of US promises of a vital UN role.

Yet what struck me at Konigswinter was the countervailing undercurrent. Maybe, the private conversations said, the world has changed irrevocably. Maybe Europe should recognise that the past has been lost. The end of the cold war robbed the transatlantic alliance of an essential glue. America's transition from a status quo power to a revolutionary one has cut the threads of common understanding.

Up to now, the counter-argument has been that, whatever the periodic ups and downs, the relationship is sustained by its shared values. The mutual interest in things such as democracy, freedom and liberal capitalism will always count for more than any particular disagreement.

That is changing. Mr Bush's strategic doctrine has prompted Europeans to question the old assumptions. The international rule of law, concern for the global environment, multilateral rules and the universal application of human rights are all on Europe's list of values. None tops the charts in the White House. Aggressive US power is anathema to a continent deeply scarred by a history of nationalism. Preventative war is an alien concept. As for the superiority of the US economic model, well, think of Enron.

I am not sure what sort of world emerges from all this. Optimists say the mood will pass. Mr Bush will shed his extraordinary talent for turning friends into enemies. The US will rediscover the worth of "soft" alongside military power. Europe will see that the alliance can still be bound together by mutual interests.

But the old settlement cannot be remade. All sides of the present argument in Europe need to understand this. Nor will anything be gained from framing a new debate in terms of Mr Blair's unipolar versus Mr Chirac's multipolar worlds. The first speaks too much to the notion of British subservience to Washington, the second to the French instinct for rivalry at every turn.

Mr Blair is mistaken in seeking to reclaim the old alliance from the cold war era. So too is Mr Chirac in believing that the continent's interests are those of Charles de Gaulle. What Europe does need to do is to coolly reassess its strategic interests and to

write its own security doctrine: not in opposition to the US but independently of it. Europe has thus far allowed Washington to frame the terms of its own internal debates. It should start thinking for itself.

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