

WHAT'S A NEW TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE FOR ?

American troops are hardly pausing in their bombing campaigns in Iraq. The rest of the world cannot stop crying -without doing anything- about Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's hatred and violence in the Occupied Territories. And the Transatlantic Alliance rift is with us again. Among well-intentioned people on both sides of the Atlantic, a common position these days is that a new alliance should be built: the alliance, in the doldrums as a result of the Iraq war, should be restored. The present position of the alliance does not call for any further comments, with everyone following their own route. There are no more allies; only poodles or foes. If United States President George W. Bush needs to show American voters that he still enjoys support in Europe, his action, as he recently did on a two-hour stop in Ireland, will be limited to a pre-written declaration that cares as much about European positions as the Halliburton does about open-market conditions. As for the rest, agriculture, aeronautics, defense industries or culture, Europe and the US seem to be at odds. The logical question, then, is whether shared values and remaining common interests outweigh the many points of difference. "The Transatlantic divide must not be allowed to widen" many analysts and politicians say. Their solutions to put an end to the Transatlantic rift, to sum-up, are as follows. On the American side, it could be time for a change of tune. For instance, not automatically regarding as an enemy anyone who is not in full agreement with the Bush policy. America should also stop believing that it can run Iraq alone and try to be more balanced in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lastly, it could review its position on multilateral treaties, start restoring law, as it has not been doing in Guantanamo, and ultimately, try and have about Islam and the Arab world a view that is not that of its Jewish community. On the opposite side, it would also be time for a change, especially with the French whose 'anti-Americanism' is tantamount to a national element of culture such as the cooking of snails or frogs legs. Europe should also show it is prepared to lend a hand in rebuilding Iraq and put more forces into the international fight against terrorism, including the search for MDW's. It should applaud Sharon's decision to evacuate the Gaza strip. Lastly, it should take all necessary means to develop a strong European defense force aimed at eliminating the American burden within NATO.

All this, however, has little to do with the harsh realities of the international situation for at least three reasons.

The first is that the concept of an Atlantic Alliance that everyone has known since 1945 died after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and remains to be defined further as a result of the Sep. 11th attacks. The intensive and fast moving international flow of persons or technologies has also changed the horizon. The second reason is that an alliance is normally built against something or somebody. In the days of Communism and the Soviet bloc, it was meaningful. But what about today? Even though limited solely to the fight against terrorism, it is no longer pertinent because no strategy can be limited to that. Which state would be ready today to sponsor terrorism officially? Furthermore, the sharing of similar values against terrorism goes far beyond the limits of an alliance between, say, America and Europe. It extends to nearly all the rest of the world. Thirdly, it seems that the Transatlantic Alliance issue has now changed from 'America-Europe' into 'America-rest of the world'. And the situation in this respect is not particularly bright

for the US, at least according to a group of former US diplomats and military leaders who recently released a document saying that the US has never been so isolated in the world and so feared. Besides Iraq, the Bush administration's ineffectiveness in its approach to the world is also cited for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "The damage we've done to key and valuable alliances is going to take a long time to fix" said Ronald Spiers, a former US ambassador to Pakistan and Turkey. "What you now have is a collapse of trust" concluded Professor Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland, further to recent polls commissioned by the Arab American Institute, which believes the war in Iraq will result in more chaos and more terrorism against the US and less democracy in the world.

This is why any new alliance in the future must firstly be defined between the partners. Yet, how could it be when people like the American Foreign Relations Council chairman Richard Hass dare write that "it is not possible ... that Europe defines itself as (an) equal or a competitor of the US" and that the only interest of Europe developing its military capacity is "to be able to intervene along (with) the US but not be comparable to the US"? The US is an obvious partner of Europe as a result of the shared values but, as the French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier recently said, "the Atlantic Alliance is no more a necessity, it has become a choice".

Luc Debievre, August 16th, 2004