

"The U.S. and Europe: Quasi-Allies"

George W. Bush, having failed to intimidate Europe in his first term of office, has decided to try another tactic. First, Condoleeza Rice, then Donald Rumsfeld, then Bush himself traveled to Europe on a charm offensive. They all said essentially the same three things. Let's forget our quarrels over Iraq; the U.S. considers Europe its allies; and let's discuss what the U.S. wants now and what we can do together. But they all added a fourth thing: The U.S. will still do what it wants, if the Europeans won't go along. In a press conference in Europe, Bush said about the debate with Europeans concerning Iran: "The notion that the United States is getting ready to attack Iran is simply ridiculous. Having said that, all options are on the table."

The list of issues on which the U.S. and Europe disagree in important ways is impressively long: the Iraq war and current relations with the Iraqi regime; the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo; the policy to be pursued on Israel/Palestine; how to handle the issue of nuclear proliferation in Iran, and in North Korea; whether to maintain the arms embargo on China; the Cuba embargo; whether NATO should continue to be the primary structure within which U.S.-Europe relations occur, as opposed to the U.S. dealing with the European Union; Galileo versus the GPS as satellite navigational systems; the urgency of climate change and the Kyoto Protocol; support for the International Criminal Court; mutual complaints (and threats of reprisals) concerning industrial subsidies; the genetic modifications of agricultural seed; rivalry of Boeing and Airbus; and last but not least the rise of the euro as a potential world reserve currency.

There are several things to note about this list. They include just about every immediately important geopolitical issue. They include a large number of the central issues of the world-economy. They are almost all issues on which the disagreements go back many years now. They are almost all issues on which the divergence of positions is quite large. They are all issues about which both sides feel very strongly, and on which it is difficult to see too much room for compromise. And one last thing to notice. If one asks what the position of Russia is on these issues, in most cases, Russia takes the same position as Europe.

So, in what sense can one say that the United States and Europe continue to be allies? Well, they do share some important interests in common. They are both major centers of capital accumulation. They are both concerned with maintaining the stability of the world-economy. They are both wary of the growing demands of countries of the South in the North-South negotiations within the framework of the World Trade Organization. In short, neither wants to see any radical transformation of the world-system in which we are living. These concerns were the basis of the historic alliance between the U.S. and Europe, and they haven't disappeared.

So, one could argue that the discord is merely an argument over strategy, in which both sides share common goals. And, in a sense, this is what European leaders have been arguing for some time. But they haven't seemed to persuade the United States of this. The U.S. is not used to debating strategy with its allies. It has been used to deciding upon strategy and merely discussing marginal tactical issues with its allies, who used to be not truly allies but rather loyal followers. The combination of the economic decline of the United States, the end of the Cold War, and the fiasco in Iraq has undermined the entire bargaining power of the United States.

The Bush administration still cannot believe that this has really happened. The charm offensive has been just that - sweet words. One prominent observer has seen this clearly. William Cohen, longtime Republican Senator from Maine and Secretary of Defense under Clinton, attended one of the many occasions in recent days in which the U.S. was peddling its new line in Europe. He said, "The tone was different, but the tune was the same." Nor have the Europeans been fooled. Jacques Chirac smiled demurely at Bush and conceded to the U.S. one of its important demands, that the military trainers for the Iraqi forces be under NATO command. France assigned *one* officer to this task. Vladimir Putin responded to his gentle chiding by George Bush by confirming Russia's commitment to furnish enriched nuclear material to Iran and advanced surface-to-air missiles to Syria.

In September of 2004, I wrote a commentary entitled "Neither Feared Nor Loved?" in which I suggested that the U.S. may have to deal realistically with disposing of neither advantage. I am happy to report that this theme has now been taken up by one of the mainstream journals of the U.S., Time Magazine. In its Feb. 21, 2005 issue, Tony Karon writes: "the reality is that the Bush administration is neither loved nor feared in growing sectors of the international community - increasingly, it is simply being ignored."

Neither Europe nor Russia nor for that matter China wants to engage in open, bloody fights with the United States. But neither do any of them want to concede important ground to the increasingly bizarre positions of the United States. Europe is settling into the position of a quasi-ally, an indulgent cousin which humors the United States when it must and ignores it most of the rest of the time. And the U.S. must now decide whether it will react petulantly (and dangerously) by demonstrating that it still has powerful military toys by striking out with them, or retreat into a shell, or consider maturely what are its real options in the twenty-first century. Under Bush, I would not bet on the last option.

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