

[Comment] Europe can talk, the US can act

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Mr President, as you sit through the elegantly choreographed presentation of the European Union's foreign policy positions, with one member state popping up after another to say a few words about the subject closest to its heart, you may wonder whether it is all strictly necessary.

Many of us Europeans are wondering the same thing. Does thousand island dressing really need all those islands? Does it need 25 different voices to communicate European foreign policy?

There seems to be an inverse correlation between the amount of talking and the amount of action. Whatever else it might be, the EU's foreign policy system at present is strong on the talking. The Europeans can talk: you can act.

The memory of the Iraq war shows what happens when the EU talks amongst itself and fails to act. Tony Blair tried to enlist the rest of the EU to support your plans for war. Jacques Chirac tried to enlist them to prevent it. Neither succeeded. You attacked Iraq without overall European support. The Europeans helplessly watched it happen. Nobody was happy.

Maybe the passage of three elections – the Iraqis', last month; yours, last November; ours, last June – means that we can start afresh. Isn't that what elections in democracies are meant to make possible?

Making a difference

So, if we can start again, what do we want to achieve?

First, we need to re-invigorate the Jeffersonian idea of a republic of laws as opposed to a republic of men. Jean Monnet spoke of the wisdom of institutions that outlasted the wisdom of the politicians who inhabited them. International relations based on the idea that good statesmen and women can reach sensible agreements between themselves makes no long-term sense. We cannot rely on the goodwill of any particular country or political leader. After all, Saddam Hussein was on our side, once.

Secondly, we need to cement the ideas of free people and free markets into our politics. Too many people are victims of despots whose secret police forces keep them in subjection. The same is true of the people who are the victims of protectionists, whose trade barriers have much the same effect. Together, Europe and America can make a difference. If either should try to act alone, it will fail.

Warning to the Europeans

And lastly, a word of warning. This is a warning to the Europeans, not to President Bush.

We Europeans sometimes worry about the millenarian nature of American political rhetoric. The city on the hill, the arsenal of democracy, the model of government to which the rest of the world should aspire. To European ears, language like that sounds these days, frankly, worrying. But listen to what the Europeans are saying in return.

That the European Union is model for the world. Other regions should copy its model of integration. That Europe is somehow a pioneer for humanity. It doesn't sound so very different, does it?

That's not to say that the Europeans are wrong, nor even that the Americans are wrong.

Merely that each should try to listen to their own words through the ears of the other. It may sound great on our own side of the Atlantic – but what difference does five thousand kilometres of ocean make?

And, more importantly still, how does it sound to the five-sixths of the world that is not part of NATO or the immediate American military alliance?

Europe can talk - US can act

The East-West paradigm that dominated the world for forty years has gone. It is not yet replaced, but its replacement will be something much less orderly or predictable.

Half the world's population lives in south and east Asia, a half which is currently much poorer than America and its closest friends. Maybe that's a tenable arrangement for the long term, maybe not, but it will become the dominant factor in world politics regardless.

In the face of the environmental and social threats of the future, the disagreements between Europe and America are going to be rather small in comparison. Both sides need to understand this.

But, at present, only one of those two sides has the constitution that allows for leadership on issues like this. Europe can talk: you can act. Welcome to Europe, Mr President. We need you.

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