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When neglect isn't benign

A quiz for geopoliticians: What do these eminences have in common—the British defense secretary, the Spanish king and the prime minister of Turkey? Their honor besmirched, they all feel grievously mistreated by the White House. Malcolm Rifkind, the Briton, could not make it past the guards at a White House reception. Juan Carlos of Spain, eager to pay the Clintons a visit, didn't get his phone calls returned. Tansu Ciller, in town from Ankara, gave a dinner and nobody came.

In the olden days, lesser offenses would have unleashed war. But what do these foreigners know? Unaware that chaos rather than conspiracy reigns in Washington, they might think these snubs add up to One Big Insult. The truth, alas, is worse. The problem America's old allies face is not injury but indifference.

Not long ago, Clinton's corporate counsel Warren Christopher, who masquerades as secretary of state, made it official: "Western Europe is no longer the dominant area of the world." Though he has not been denied access to No. 10 Downing Street, he, too, seems miffed. For he peevishly added: "There is a lot of criticism coming from Western Europe, but I don't . . . hear that coming from Asia."

It was high time for a spot of Valium, and at last, Dr. Christopher wrote out the prescription. Preparing for his trip to Europe this week, he delivered a benevolent message to several European correspondents:

Europe "remains at the center of our concerns," adding that his boss would go to Europe three times next year.

Sobering up. So far, so good. But it will take more than tranquilizers to soothe ruffled tempers over the longer haul. A sober look at the Euro-American relationship—the linchpin of U.S. foreign policy since World War II—reveals the obvious. The cold war is over, and that is rapidly corroding the shackles of two-way dependence.

The old verities were simple enough. In the shadow of Soviet power, Western Europe was America's indispensable forward bastion, and the United States was Western Europe's indispensable protector. Dependence concentrated the minds, contained tensions and defused crises.

In those days, France would not have turned a penny ante game for agricultural export subsidies into high-stakes poker with the United States. The issue is hardly one of life and death for French peasants, but merely the modest reduction of some export premiums. Never mind that the European Union and America signed off on the deal a year

ago in order to unblock the road toward worldwide trade liberalization. France insists that the package be reopened, or it will continue to hold world trade hostage.

Such fits of sheer orneriness would have been unimaginable while Soviet power was ensconced in the heart of Europe. Nor would an American administration have treated the Europeans with that blend of absentmindedness and exasperation typical of the Clinton team.

Sure, the world has changed, and only rank sentimentalists would banker for the not so good old days of the cold war. American leadership now trades at a discount because the Europeans no longer feel the prod of dependence. Similarly, the price the United States once paid for European loyalty has plummeted like shares of IBM.

The new buzzwords inside the beltway are "geo-economics," NAFTA and APEC. Who needs Europe if we have Japan, China and (look it up) Brunei? The short answer is: There is a lot more to the world and America's role in it than "the economy, stupid!"

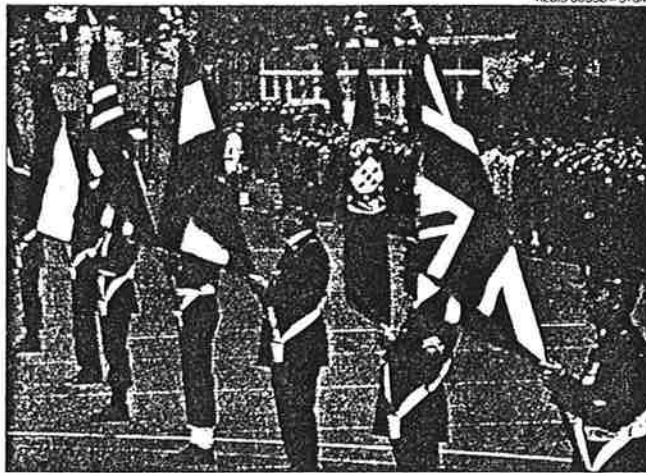
The longer answer goes like this: Russia is in Europe, and it will remain a problem for the West—whether Russia is weak or strong. Ukraine, a country the size of France but with many more nuclear weapons, is also in Europe. The relationship between Kiev and Moscow resembles that between a powder keg and a short fuse. To prevent the explosion, or to deter Russia from recon-

quering Ukraine, we would need a solid Euro-American alliance. But we already have one. Its name is NATO.

A bit farther afield, an arc of crisis extends from the Maghreb to the gulf. In this area vital to the United States and Western Europe, friendly regimes are beset by Islamic fundamentalism. And unfriendly regimes are angling for nuclear weapons. To deal with this threat, wouldn't it be nice to have a smooth-running alliance in place?

Let's also talk about trade. With East Asia, the United States is running a \$92 billion deficit; with Europe, it is roughly in balance. That's not bad, considering that Japan, China, et al. are not exactly aching to open their markets in order to please the United States.

Apropos of Japan and China, the two rising giants of the Orient, Christopher has pointed out that the Asians are so much more polite than the unruly Europeans. But try to turn politesse into an enduring friendship. The United States might find that France, an old-time tormentor, suddenly looks like a long-lost lover. ■



The Clinton team treats Europe with absentmindedness and exasperation.