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OP-ED

Round 1 Goes to Mr. Big

By Josef Joffe

I**S** HAMBURG, Germany's the latest trans-Atlantic flare-up yet another "Whither NATO?" crisis, like those that have roiled the West for decades with the precision of a German cuckoo clock? No, this time it is war (and not the real war against Iraq, which hasn't even begun). In fact, it is two wars: one that pits Europe against Europe, and another that pits a French-German "axis" against the United States.

It's been a tough stretch for the leaders of the "old" Europe — Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany and President Jacques Chirac of France. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's presentation at the United Nations on Wednesday was found so damning by other leaders around the continent that 10 Eastern European countries — including five set to join NATO next year — issued a joint statement that they would "stand together to face the threat posed by the nexus of terrorism and dictators with weapons of mass destruction."

This statement came just days after a missive, splattered across the morning papers in Britain and Italy, Portugal and Spain, Denmark and Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, by those countries' leaders that ever so politely told Messrs. Chirac and Schröder to back off. In its diplomatese, that message said of the Iraqi threat: "Our goal is to safeguard world peace and security by ensuring that this regime gives up its weapons of mass destruction. Our governments have a common responsibility to face this threat."

Decoded, however, these two statements read, "We are not amused that Paris and Berlin are trying to gang up on the United States in the name of Europe." No, there was no explicit call to war against Baghdad. Nor did the "Euro 8" or the "Vilnius 10" cheer America's wider goals — regime change or democratization. But the message was clear: Saddam Hussein does have to be disarmed, if need be, by force.

For now, the French-German duo that spent the last few weeks trying

to isolate the United States is itself isolated. But this can change tomorrow, as history is accelerating. The real significance of the drama is the collapse of Europe's pretensions to an independent, let alone cohesive, foreign policy.

Essentially, the French and the Germans tried to harness a diplomatic coalition against the so-called hyperpower. They acted as if they viewed the exercise of American might as a greater threat than Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. This is curious, since if Iraq were given time to develop a North Korea-like program, its missiles could reach Berlin and Paris a lot sooner than the urban centers of America. But it makes perfect sense if we recall the great watershed of postwar Europe, Christmas Day 1991, when the Soviet Union committed suicide by self-dissolution.

Suddenly, there was nobody left to contain and constrain Mr. Big. This does not sit well with the Europeans, especially since George W. Bush told them again in his State of the Union address that the "course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others."

Naturally, the Europeans felt more comfortable in the past with Gulliver Bound, although it was nice to be able to untie him just in case the other superpower, the Soviet Union, turned nasty. But that strategic dependence, which used to squelch every "Whither NATO?" crisis in the past, is a decade gone.

No German chancellor would have dared provoke the United States while Soviet shock troops were ensconced 25 miles outside Hamburg. Nor would the French have brazenly threatened a veto in the Security Council while depending on the free security provided by six American divisions in Germany.

Still, as the messages from the rest of the continent indicate, today's Europe as a whole is not ready to balance Mr. Big. It is not yet willing to seek an identity apart from and against the United States. The Europeans know that they can't even clean up their own backyard — in Bosnia, in Kosovo — without help from the U.S. Cavalry. They also

know that Saddam Hussein is a real problem, as is North Korea.

And so it is quite useful to have Mr. Big in the game, even though he does throw his weight around a bit too much for comfort. Indeed, the more the Europeans pride themselves in having transcended Hobbesian politics in favor of "civilian power" and "friendly persuasion," the more they need American muscle and will as reinsurance. Europe's goodness depends not on the European Union, but on the Pentagon.

So has President Bush won the game? No, just one round. The Germans, who have defied Washington with the loudest "no" to the war, may lose for now because, as Mr. Schröder has conceded, he does "not know what the French will do." His good friend Mr. Chirac, leaving his options open, has dispatched the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the Middle East. Once the first American cruise missiles hit the bunkers of the Iraqi Republican Guard, France will surely join in.

Further down the road, however, the United States does face a problem: eventually the lesser nations aren't going to take it any more. What the administration fails to appreciate is the Spider-Man principle: "With great power comes great responsibility." The bigger Mr. Big gets, the more trust he must inspire in others. Just one practical point: once American power pushes Saddam Hussein out, who is going to win the peace in Iraq, if not a vast coalition of the willing ready to secure order and reconstruction?

This French-German attempt to gang up on Mr. Big seems to have backfired — undermined by the inconvenient fact that there still are at least 18 other European countries determined to have a voice. Yet the other major players will break ranks again unless the greatest power since Rome learns to respect a simple maxim: To lead is to heed. This is not the counsel of wimpishness, but of wisdom. □

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