

Josef Joffe

... America, That's Who

America can win wars on its own, but it needs friends to help it win the peace

CAN AMERICA LIVE WITHOUT ALLIES? OF COURSE IT CAN. IT can deter any comer with its multimegaton nuclear arsenal, and defend itself against conventional attack from any quarter. The U.S. can even prosecute offensive wars all by itself; to have the British and sundry others along in Afghanistan and Iraq was nice, but not decisive.

Nor will this predominance end anytime soon. If the Bush buildup proceeds as projected, the U.S. will spend almost as much on bombs and bullets by 2007 as the rest of the world combined. The downside of this vast and growing advantage is temptation: Why not go it alone, especially since allies can be such a nuisance? They tend to abandon you when you need them most, and they draw you into conflicts you would rather avoid. In between, their behavior ranges from the whiny to the haughty.

This temptation was boosted before and during the Iraq war. America's traditional allies, France and Germany, not only abandoned, but actively opposed the United States inside the U.N. Security Council and out. While Washington was trying desperately to win a war resolution, French and German emissaries fanned out across the world to mobilize naysayers against the nation that had protected them for a half-century. Was this the death knell for the Atlantic alliance, the longest-lived in history?

To draw this conclusion is tempting but misguided. True, the U.S. could live without its friends on the other side of the ocean—but not very well. Let's start with Iraq. Routing Saddam's armies was like slicing through Jell-O. But winning the peace would surely be easier with as many nations as possible helping—with reconstruction, policing and nation building. The legitimacy of the enterprise would be boosted, too. For the Baathist remnants, it would be far harder to depict the U.S. as an imperialist crusader if it acted in the name of a democratic coalition and with the blessing of the Security Council.

Euro-bashers would retort: couldn't be done! Didn't the French and Germans try their worst to stop us? But it *was* done in Iraq last time, during the 1991 war. James Baker, then Secretary of State, proved how far smart diplomacy could go in assembling an almost worldwide coalition against the conqueror of Kuwait. Apparently, Bush the Younger has caught on to this lesson, for he has called Baker back from retirement, putting that old fox in charge of

gathering international support for America's Iraq policy.

And why not? A cold-blooded look at American interests reveals the obvious: nary a one of them can be served without reliable allies. Defeating terrorism, securing free trade, stopping nuclear proliferation, repairing failed states, suppressing tribal slaughter, taming rising giants like China, civilizing neo-authoritarian Russia, defusing the Middle East—all these demand collaboration with the liberal democracies. Alas, most of those have a European address.

Again, Euro-critics would snap: yes, but their interests are not ours; they want to contain and constrain American might now that they no longer need our protection against the Soviet Union. So what? Good diplomacy—like good politicking at home—is never about sugar and spice, but about getting from others what they would rather not give. America should count its assets. Mr. Big has more chips on the table than France, Germany and Russia put together. This is why they are all trying to mend fences with Washington. The Bushies should take notice. Bearing grudges is the mark of bit players; a “hyperpower” should tally results, not resentments. Nor can the U.S. ignore the peculiar constraints of democratic foreign policy. For all its strength, the world's old-

est democracy must always secure popular support for wars that are not strictly defensive. Poll after poll shows that Americans are most comfortable with wars of choice when pursued with like-minded nations. They bridle at going it alone; they want others to reassure them that their cause is just. They want the legitimacy that comes from community. And community is more than Britain and Poland.

Where will the U.S. find that community? China and Russia might be occasional cohorts, but reliable allies are made from sterner stuff than the fleeting convergence of interests. The tie that binds is common values and outlooks—a commitment to a liberal-democratic world China and Russia must still acquire. Lord Palmerston may have preached that nations have neither eternal friends nor eternal enemies, only permanent interests. But in the democratic world, it is the other way round. Interests change, but America's partners, ornery as they may be, remain the same. ■

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MARIN SHAH—AFP

FRIENDS INDEED: A French soldier on patrol in the streets of Kabul