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Editorial

Shifting Atlantic Alliance; Europe and the U.S. have learned that they need each other.

Josef Joffe

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The war between "Old Europe" and America is over, but the old friendship, sonorously invoked for decades, is history, too.

The new secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, came, saw and cooed, but she did not conquer. How could she? While Berlin and Paris, the anti-American duo of 2002 and 2003, gave her a very warm welcome, while she said all the right stateswoman-like things to smooth ruffled vanities, she could not crack the hard realities that feed the underlying conflict.

These derive from the new tectonics of the Atlantic relationship, not from name-calling. Briefly, the real culprit is the Soviet Union, which called it quits on Christmas Day 1991. As a result, three portentous things happened. One, the Western Europeans no longer needed America's strategic protection. Two, the United States no longer needed the critical strategic real estate that was Western Europe during the Cold War. And, three, the American Gulliver was suddenly unbound. No longer contained and constrained by another superpower, the United States, quite naturally, began to wield its unmatched clout more liberally than ever. With an intact Soviet Union in the wings, the United States would not have attacked Iraq or Afghanistan -- two countries so close to the underbelly of the fallen giant.

These three factors have changed steady cooperation (and dependence) into intermittent competition. The Franco-German game is to put the ropes back on Gulliver; the American one is to evade them. Worried about unbridled U.S. power, the Europeans did their worst to stop the American war against Iraq; no longer compelled to make nice, Americans such as Don Rumsfeld suddenly lectured that "the mission determines the coalition, and the coalition must not determine the mission." And the United States went to war, never mind that the U.N. Security Council withheld its blessing.

The Franco-German "axis" will continue to oppose the American behemoth, and it will seek to recruit other players such as China and Russia into the neo-containment game. These are the ways of international politics when power is so grievously unbalanced in favor of a single giant.

But there is plenty of good news, too, as Rice's heartening sweep through Europe showed. Let's call it the "Great Sobering-Up." America's adversaries in Europe have learned that they can defy, but not dethrone, the "last remaining superpower." Mr. Big has learned that he can slice through Iraqi armies like a hot butter knife but that he cannot win the peace all by himself.

Indeed, the most interesting purposes of U.S. policy demand partners. How shall we count the ways? Fighting terrorism, remaking the Middle East, defanging the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea, dollar stability, free trade, global catastrophes such as the Asian tsunami, the collapse of Africa.

And the Europeans? France is an economy-class power always looking for an upgrade. Germany is also experimenting with an expansive role, but its economy keeps sputtering while its army keeps shrinking. Britain will not submit to the dictates of either. Yet all of Europe has learned over the past three years that its ambitions exceed its reach. Europe's medium powers can stymie Mr. Big; they cannot do without him.

So this is a good time to get down to business. With Rice's advance team having smoothed the road, the president, as he visits Europe later in the month, can count on allies/adversaries who are desperately seeking to close ranks again.

Take the "Greater Middle East" and imagine Europe and the United States working in tandem rather than vying with each other for influence. Imagine a well-choreographed "good cop, bad cop" tack on Iran, with the United States providing the muscle, lack of which has consistently stultified the Europeans as they tried to sweet-talk Tehran into abandoning the bomb. Or Israel/Palestine. In the past, the United States and France have worked at cross-purposes, with Paris keener on competing than on collaborating with Washington in the Middle East. Together, the European Union and the United States could ensure that this promising post-Arafat moment does not vanish once more in the roar of terrorist bombs.

Or Iraq, where a valiant electorate has defied both the terrorists at home and the cynics abroad. People flocked to the polls at a rate -- 58 percent -- that exceeded voter participation in most recent U.S. presidential elections. The consensus in Berlin and Paris now reads like this: "We hated the war and the Bushies, but we can no longer cold-shoulder the Iraqis." There is a joint agenda here that cries out to be written.

Who needs friendship when there are so many interests that beg to be harnessed? This is why the new secretary of state did the right thing when she chose Europe for her first foray abroad. It was a beau geste and a smart one, to boot. Less Rummy, more Rice -- that is a promising curtain-raiser for the president's second term.

The writer is editor of the German weekly Die Zeit and the Abramowitz Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, where he is also a visiting professor of political science.

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