

Forward Again? The Transatlantic Agenda: Points for Europeans and Americans

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Overcoming suspicion is a hard job for Americans and Europeans alike.

After three years of US-European bickering, transatlantic relations are officially being smoothed. The visit of newly-appointed Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, to Europe, paving the way for President Bush's European tour, and the affable welcome by the European officials, make die-hard Atlanticists optimistic again.

But this amicable atmosphere belies structural alterations in the relationship. It also veils numerous issues which have yet to be addressed by the partners, including the institutional complexity of an alliance today, and the lingering mood of disapproval towards this administration on the part of the European public.

Suspicion

Let's start with the last constituent of the transatlantic portrait. A very recent poll by the German Marshall Fund (Post Election Study 2004) is a powerful indicator of European apprehension against this US administration: 62% of French and 59% of German interviewees "disapprove very much" with the way the President of the United States is handling international politics. Adding to this the 26% and 28%, respectively, of those who "disapprove somewhat" brings the number of critics close to 90%. In terms of public opinion, we are still experiencing a 60-year low point in US-European relations. That is grist to the mills of those who want to build a "strategic Europe"

separated from the U.S. and a temptation for all politicians facing an election.

And indeed, there are some who build on the fact that history has closed the Fulda gap and, with it, the massive strategic dependence of Europe on the Americans. They also regard Russia as a comrade, China a distant power and the possible threat of Iranian nuclear missiles as something they can only deal with diplomatically. The larger part of the European strategic community, however, knows that Europe and the world are much better off with a strong transatlantic connection and wish to tie the knots again.

The Secretary of State's friendly welcome in Europe is an indication of its endeavour. This is not only a matter of making the world a safer place. It is also a conflict-avoiding measure for Europeans themselves, who cannot afford a repeat of a European "breaking-off" as seen in the Iraqi affair, when dissenters and supporters of U.S. policy not only ran the European-US truck, but also ran the European car into a ditch.

Hard Business

The re-establishment of a truly productive relationship is, however, a tough business. Condoleezza Rice has only made the first steps in this job, indicating that the U.S. needs Europe and the European states as partners, not as bystanders or active opponents. And at least some political events help her to do her job by making the European side less self-confident in their approaches to world affairs and more wary of critique against the U.S.

No doubt, President Bush has been playing with fire in the Iraqi affair, and the bloody consequences are still in

the news. In addition, in a certain tragic turn, the decision to follow the European path leaving Iran and North Korea rather undeterred, and to take on the relatively weak Iraq, he may have sent the wrong message to these two countries and to other dictatorships: Get yourselves some nukes and the U.S. won't bother you.

Nevertheless, the Europeans should not blame the Americans for coming closer to European positions: The world is not built on "good European" and "bad American" approaches. Of course, Europeans know that voting in Iraq alone cannot guarantee liberty's blessings, and American optimism with regard to the elections might finally be frustrated.

Indeed, the courage of Iraqi citizens to go to the ballot boxes and to practice democracy even under the threat of life, is no less than startling. And it is also an indication that the President's powerful second-term inauguration statement that freedom is "a fire in the minds of men", is not just blunt and misleading idealism. European critics face an uphill struggle in this regard.

The same holds true for the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy. There was much criticism in Europe of the American position, that Yasser Arafat represented

a barrier on the road to a sustainable peace in the region. But only after his death did a new chance for settlement arise.

There is a clear message in these events

for both sides of the Atlantic: forget about past wrongs and rights, and do the right thing today. In both cases, there is a great need for European-American togetherness.

EU and UN

Regardless of today's partnership

Fortsetzung ->

Fortsetzung

rhetoric, there is still suspicion in the Bush administration over the European aim for a so-called "effective multilateralism", with the United Nations as the central player. Indeed, to a certain extent, this guiding principle of European policy is a too to bypass and balance American power. Nevertheless, balance of power is at the heart of the American political system. Washington should not be too afraid in this regard.

Another point should curb American faultfinding in the new EU-UN relationship. The decision to build up 13 so-called highly mobile and fast deployable battle groups of about 1500 troops is mainly intended to support the UN in the organization's primary battleground: Africa. If Europe finds a way to bring some more stability to this continent, so full of bloody strifes and failing states, it should and would fit into a United States, concentrating currently on the Middle East.

A relaxed attitude should guide America's approach to the reform of the UN's Security Council as well as the German strive for a permanent seat. Americans should see a positive chance in having Germany, together with the UK and France at the Security Council's table. This way, the U.S. would have somebody to talk to in New York.

Moreover, a threefold European representation would lower the chances of the U.S. getting dangerously lost in the intricate European foreign and security policy structure. Indeed, open support for Germany's would certainly give some boost to German-America friendship.

This advice for a relaxed reaction is also valid for some European partners chastising Germany's new cases of a "tall stance" as some sort of "un-European" behaviour. The German poet Gottfried Benn once wrote that the opposite of good is not bad, but well-meant. And indeed, the European Security Strategy's plea for a more muscular Union and a unified and cohesive foreign and security policy has a good side, but also raises the dangers of "well-meant". That is because the desire to stand tall in the world might not be supported by the decision-making realities of the enlarging Union of 25 and more member states, or by adequate resources for security and defence. The Europeans should not over-estimate their capacities. Concerning the German seat, European critics should recognize that there is no chance for a European seat under the current UN Charter, and the not-yet-ratified EU Treaty does not anticipate such a suggestion.

EU and NATO

A last critical point concerns NATO, the traditional corner pillar of the transatlantic communion, and its relationship with the Union's Common Foreign and Security and Defence Policy.

In the framework of the Iraqi affair, there was a lot of backchat in Europe on the suspicion that the U.S. regards NATO as a toolbox only. In reading the European Security Strategy of December last year, however, one only finds occasional references to NATO. And when the precise structure of EU-NATO relations finally comes up, the document gives in to the "NATO-as-EU toolbox" mindset too.

This is not a sound way of handling the relationship. We should not give in to both tendencies founded on the evidence that any formalized multilateral European-American operation is best handled in the NATO framework. New contingencies could soon arise, requiring a joint European-American military approach.

Policy-makers should adapt their political rhetoric to this reality, rather than giving into a tendency in some European circles, that NATO should be marginalized or even fade away sooner or later.

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