

The Middle East fault line in a transatlantic rift

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When the leaders of Europe met on the Agora in Athens last week to sign the treaties of accession with 10 new members, US military commanders had gathered in the Abu Ghraib palace in Baghdad to celebrate their victory. The two meetings provided an unusually vivid illustration of how the US and Europe are drifting apart because of diverging agendas, different powers and a lack of determination to bridge the gap.

Europe's agenda was set in 1989. It is the creation of a new structure of peace and security for the continent that during the last century brought the world two global conflicts and two totalitarian ideologies. The method is to share sovereignty, and gradually to build a federation of nation states encompassing virtually all of the nations to the west of Russia and the Ukraine. With the ceremony on the Agora and the effort to draft the first constitutional treaty of the evolving federation, Europe is halfway to its goal.

The US agenda was set by September 11 2001. George W. Bush was suddenly thrown into a role nobody had foreseen. The priority that now unites large parts of US society is to counter the threats posed by global terrorism and the accelerating proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Although war is over in Iraq, the US is already making noises about Syria. Everyone knows that we are only at the beginning of the agenda.

While the method of Europe in building peace is to share sovereignty on a regional basis, the method of the US in seeking security is to exercise sovereignty on a global scale. After having been united for a generation by a common threat, and having failed to develop a common vision during the last decade, the policy perspectives of Europe and the US are now diverging with increasing speed. But the agendas of 1989 and 2001 are not necessarily incompatible. The task of true statesmanship on both sides of the Atlantic is to bring them together.

Some in Washington now gloat over the divergences we see in Europe, and tend to see Europe as little more than a couple of airstrips useful for power projection missions elsewhere. President Bush would be wise to remind them of his speech to the Bundestag in Berlin less than a year ago, in which he remarked that "when Europe grows in unity, Europe and America grow in security" and that "the new world has succeeded by holding on to the values of the old". A Europe in disarray cannot be the partner in a turbulent world that the US will sooner or later need.

The Middle East may soon show that the US cannot do everything by itself everywhere. The region is Europe's "near abroad" and any implosions and explosions there will affect an expanded Europe even more than the US. The liberation of Iraq from tyranny and the liberation of Palestine from occupation must go hand in hand. If a year from now there are American tanks on the streets of Baghdad and Israeli tanks on the streets of Hebron and Ramallah, we might enter a confrontation with the 250m inhabitants of the Arab world that can never truly be won. And we would have endangered that peace and security for Israel that is fundamental for us all.

The idea that Mesopotamia can be turned into a US military and political protectorate is a dangerous illusion. In Japan after 1945, there was an emperor with a legitimacy given by Heaven rather than US Pacific Command. In Germany after 1945, it was the presence of Stalin more than anything else that endeared the US to the Germans after the horrors of having their cities pulverised. The modern US record of peacekeeping and state-building operations is dismal.

The European Union must now come together to produce a vision of the future of Mesopotamia and the greater Middle East that can then be developed and implemented in partnership with the US. European nations should have no interest in leaving the US in a quagmire in the Middle East, and they must not allow themselves to be marginalised in a neighbouring region.

Europe and the US must bring together their 1989 and 2001 agendas. First, President Bush must return to his words in Berlin, and speak them loud and clear in Washington. Second, President Jacques Chirac and Britain's Tony Blair must look beyond the disputes of the past few weeks and revive the partnership created at St Malo in 1998. When it comes to a foreign policy, a willingness to use military power, only these two men can give Europe the leadership it needs. And without greater agreement on the threats we face, and the part military power can play, Europe's disarray will worsen.

The road to a better future for the Middle East passes through Berlin and St Malo.

The writer is a former prime minister of Sweden