



Bedtime for the Neo-Cons: the President and the EU need to talk

by Asle Toje

2003 was a rough year in transatlantic relations. The US neocons and the anti-American left in Europe managed to pass themselves off as mainstream. The transatlantic dialogue that ensued had all the sophistication and heart-throb excitement of a school yard show-down.

Some initiatives, like re-branding french fries 'freedom fries' in order to punish France, were silly. Oth-

ers, like insulting some of America's oldest allies by branding them yesterday's news were just plain stupid. Ham-handed diplomacy shattered the global 'war against terror'-coalition, leaving only the very loyal and the very dependant leaders to support US foreign policy. In Europe an unholy alliance comprising everything from 'dark-age revival' Islamists to the ever-present unreformed left took centre stage with

MAIN POINTS

The transatlantic relationship has deteriorated. On both sides extremists have hijacked the debate. There is a need for mutual learning and improved communication. The US would benefit from rejecting the neocons and taking the EU more seriously rather than insisting on NATO's primacy.

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their one-tune repertoire of America-bashing. The result was, predictably, a lot of noise while the broad European opposition to US Iraq-policy crumbled under the conflicting short term interest of the EU states. So much for a Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Meanwhile in Washington: When a new government takes office the newcomers are usually excited – ready to go out there; stir things up; make a difference. Change the country. Then they come into contact with reality. A bureaucracy that operates in certain ways, unexpected events, policies that don't work out the way they were intended. So the administration learns the do's and don'ts of the trade. They learn that the world can't be changed in a day, but that results can be achieved if one works with the system, not against it. This also goes for the international system which is not what the neo-cons postulate. It is not Hobbsian anarchy where Nietzschean powers are predestined to clash in a Darwinian struggle. If that had been the case the cold war would have ended differently.

The Bush-administrations have admittedly been slow learners. But lessons have indeed been learned. For instance they now seem to realise that certain members of the administration should

under no circumstances be sent abroad unless the specific aim is to offend the hosts. The administration has wisely stepped back from pre-emptive strikes against Iran's nuclear programme – and they seem to have realised that much of the world, rightly or wrongly, attribute Israeli policies to the US. In a way they are beginning to see that a policy arsenal consisting of unilateral exceptionalism and carrying a very big stick will not do. But do they realise that all the support they want may only be one little word away?

Imagine, sitting down and talking shop with the Europeans without them trying to score cheap points. Just think about it. The world's largest economic bloc opening their wallets and help throwing together a proper Marshall plan for Iraq, not the Halliburtonian measures currently in place. Imagine also the world's most experienced peace keepers heading for Iraq. It is not as impossible as it may sound. The best way for the US to help mend transatlantic relations is simply to ask for help.

There is not a huge difference in the bottom line in the Clinton-administration's message that it would act "multilateral when possible, unilateral when necessary" and the "you're either with us or

with the terrorists" approach of Mr Bush. But the impact has been very different. Respectful treatment should not only be reserved for nuke-totting dictators in Asia. The Bush administration should, when dealing with its friends and allies, remind itself that the magic word is "please". It is not only what you say, but also how you say it that determines the response. Another important factor is who you say it to. It is remarkable how the US over the past half-decade has ignored the EU in security matters.

Today the EU is the right address if one wants to speak to Europe. It is time that Washington realise that bilateral relationships and NATO is no longer enough to manage the West. Only when the EU is acknowledged as a player can the Europeans become what the US needs, namely strong and able partners. And, to pre-empt the neo-cons; no - this will not create a strategic competitor to the US. The European states like their sovereignty just as much as the US. The 'super state' is off the menu in all European capitals. Without US tough love the EU security policy may well end up as the Lisbon-process – an overburdened, under-focused scholastic exercise. Unless the US helps the Europeans pull together they are destined to fall short of what the West need to uphold the global order -

which it is clearly in the interest of both parties to uphold.

Meanwhile the neo-cons remain unrepentant: The fruits of their labour was perhaps best summarised by former vice president Al Gore when he a year after September 11 pointed out that the US had "squandered a world of good will". The renewed efforts to shut out those who opposed the Iraq war from the restructuring contracts is but one example where US interests had been better served by pragmatism over ideology. In continuing to drive a wedge between the US and its allies in Europe the neo-cons are doing the US bad service. Those European states that did go along with the US to Iraq generally did so at great political cost at home. The US should make life easier for them, not more difficult. That is why nonsense, like comparing Germany to Libya and branding France the "enemy" of the US, is a bad long-term strategy. The two countries carry a lot of sway in the EU, which in turn is more important to most European states than the transatlantic connection.

All powerful administrations like to have their court thinkers. Not a bad word said about having a Machiavelli or a von Clausewitz hanging around. But when these thinkers are insisting on a map that

does not correspond with the landscape, it's time to cut them loose. In Europe, the unreformed-left are kept at safe distance from where decisions are made. The Bush administration may want to create a similar distance to the neocons. They should also face up to the fact that NATO is not happening. If a new transatlantic security order is to come about, the EU will need to be engaged.

Whether Bush is re-elected or not, bedtime is closing on the "American century"-visionaries. The US does not have the goodwill or the pocket to go it alone. The EU doesn't have the incentives or strategic culture to act efficiently and will continue to need American advice and input. It is time for the Bush administration to accept that they need their allies as much as their allies need them. The time has come to talk.

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