

ARTICLE FOR GLOBAL AGENDA

BY JAVIER SOLANA

Some see the re-election of President Bush as heralding four years of transatlantic tension and division. The pessimists paint a picture of diverging social values and irreconcilable world views generating a steady stream of policy differences. Are we set for terminal transatlantic drift? Is the most successful alliance in modern history entering its twilight years?

Well, as George Gershwin said, it ain't necessarily so. To be sure, an alliance stripped of the existential threat that acted as solid glue during the Cold War will need to manage its differences rather better in the future than in the recent past. Moreover, the constituent parts of the partnership are undergoing some rebalancing as the European Union becomes the central plank of the European side of the equation. But what we are seeing is the evolution of a partnership as circumstances change. The usefulness of that partnership remains beyond question and there is plenty of life in it yet.

The reality is that transatlantic relations are in better shape than they might seem on the surface. Iraq has been like a large tree hiding the wood behind. Iraq did represent a case of serious differences of view and policy. But even at the height of tensions, co-operation between the partners never stopped in the very many other policy areas.

The reason for this is not hard to find. Europe and the United States share many interests and objectives: to spread democracy, to keep markets open, to resolve regional conflicts, to stabilise failing states, to fight terrorism, to prevent the proliferation of WMD. We share core values, even though we sometimes use different labels: "freedom and democracy" are not the antitheses of "the rule of law and human rights". They are two strands of a fundamentally similar outlook.

The fundamentals remain right. But the relationship is still adjusting to a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. The end of the Cold War, the events of 9/11, and the development of the European Union do not spell the end of the transatlantic relationship. But they do require a new equilibrium to be found, one in which partners of choice bring together relevant capabilities to address contemporary challenges.

The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War did away with the Soviet threat and the division of the world into two hostile blocks. No one should feel too much nostalgia for the passing of an era of mutually assured destruction, but we must recognise that the removal of the external threat also took away some of the glue that bound us together.

Twelve years later, the events of 9/11 imposed on us a new conception of collective security. On both sides of the Atlantic the urgency of marrying state and human security is recognised. It is a central theme of both the US and the EU's security strategies, and more recently of the report of the High Level Panel commissioned by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. All three documents call for a broad and sophisticated approach to collective security. Military power remains important, of course. But sustainable solutions to most problems in the world require many more things, including aid, trade, political investment, and deployment of all the other civilian instruments we have to manage crises. The European Union can respond on all these fronts. By developing a full range of instruments, and by deploying these in a coherent fashion, the EU can prove itself to be a serious actor for security and stability.

The EU's internal developments have consequences for the transatlantic relationship. While NATO and bilateral relations remain important, direct EU-US links grow in importance. There are many things that can no longer be dealt with by our individual Member States. This has been the case for trade for some time, but is also increasingly true in other areas such as homeland security issues. And there are very many other areas where national action is still possible, but where the EU level adds a new dimension, notably in the field of crisis management. Recent European successes have on the whole been collective successes rather than national ones. That trend is set to continue.

In the foreign policy field the EU has long been criticised for relying too much on words and not enough on action. That is changing. In the past five years our objectives have become more focussed, our decision-making has become faster, and our capabilities have been enhanced. Much remains to be done, but the building blocks of a coherent foreign policy are beginning to fall into place.

Entry into force of the European Constitution will strengthen the EU as an effective international actor and partner for the United States. It establishes a new political foundation for a European Union that spans a continent and is ready to assume its global responsibilities. The Constitution puts order into the complex web of overlapping treaties that forms the basis of the EU. For the first time, the aims and powers of the Union are set out clearly in a single text. Decision-making procedures have also been streamlined so that the Union is better able to formulate policies and deliver them. Nowhere is this more the case than in the area of foreign policy. What the Single European Act did for the single market and the Maastricht Treaty did for the euro, the Constitution could do for Europe's role in the world.

The international contribution of the European Union can be a substantial one in a century that will be characterised by global inter-dependence. We want to work with our friends and partners to help deliver solutions to the many contemporary problems that defy borders. We want to work with the United States and others in promoting a new "can-do multilateralism".

The Constitution will help make Europe more operational still. Perhaps the most important innovation in the area of foreign policy is the creation of the post of Union Minister for Foreign Affairs. This will combine, in one person, my current post of High Representative for CFSP with that of the Vice President of the Commission, with responsibility for External Relations. The aim is to ensure that the different components of EU external relations, both political and economic in nature, come together and operate coherently. This is a huge challenge, which will fall to me, as the nominated future Minister, to take up.

We want to give EU external policies not only more focus – but also more consistency. That is why the Constitution proposes to abolish, in the area of foreign policy, the bewildering system of the rotating presidency, whereby a different country chairs the EU for six months. The presidency's tasks – representing the Union abroad and chairing the regular meetings of EU Foreign Ministers – will in future be entrusted to the Minister. This means that our partners will have one main interlocutor – something which is long overdue – and that there will be greater continuity in the EU policy-making system.

Finally, the Constitution foresees the creation of an EU External Action Service. This will bring together staff from different institutions which today shape and implement the EU's foreign policies. For the first time Europe will have a single team working under one roof and answerable to one person responsible for the full range of EU external relations.

As a Union of 25 states with over 450 million people producing a quarter of the world's GNP, the European Union is inevitably a global actor. The question remains only as to what kind of actor the Union will be. I am confident that the increasing convergence of European interests, the development of new capabilities and the greater focus and continuity offered by Constitution will allow us to be a credible and effective actor.

A more united and effective EU is manifestly in America's interest; and a close partnership with the US is the only way Europe can achieve its international ambitions. As the European Union's future Minister for Foreign Affairs I will do all I can to achieve these aims.

Javier Solana

European Union High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy