

Transatlantic Relations: Bridging the Divide

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US President George W Bush's whirlwind tour of Europe – Belgium, Germany and Slovakia – between February 21 and 24, can be seen as an attempt to bridge the transatlantic divide and iron out differences, so as to make a fresh start to working with the European allies rather than against them. The transatlantic rift had surfaced in 2003 when the Europeans disagreed with America's unilateralist approach in Iraq.

President Bush's visit followed the elections in Iraq, where voters opened the doors of democracy in the country. Bolstered by this positive development, Bush's visit, dubbed as a "listening visit", sought to lend an ear to his European counterparts on certain irritant issues which were disturbing the cohesiveness of the alliance, particularly those related to security concerns. In order to chart the future course of transatlantic relations, two significant issues need to be put into perspective. First, the emerging trends in US-NATO relations and second, the European Union (EU) ties.

US-NATO Relations

As part of his itinerary, President Bush attended the Heads of State and Government meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The agenda of the summit included NATO's participation in the 'training operations' in Iraq; the ongoing expansion of NATO's presence in Afghanistan as well as enhanced cooperation and coordination with the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom; NATO's commitment to the Balkans; and its engagement in the Middle East¹. However, this was overshadowed by the discussion on German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's speech at the 41st Annual Munich Conference on Security Policy on February 12. In his address, Schröder called into question the usefulness of NATO and chided Washington for failing to recognise the interests of Germany and Europe, and indicated quite clearly an overhaul of the alliance.² He said, "I believe that the transatlantic partnership must take such changes into consideration. And, to be

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honest, it does so insufficiently at present. This becomes clear when we look at the institutions which are supposed to serve this partnership. The admission of new members is proof that NATO continues to be attractive. And NATO's presence in Afghanistan has highlighted how helpful its military organisation can be even in distant crises. However, it is no longer the primary venue where transatlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies."³

Schröder's remarks can be viewed as an effort to underplay NATO vis-à-vis European unity and, in particular, the EU's emergence as an independent military bloc in the post-9/11 security environment. While it found due favour with French President Jacques Chirac; the US and the UK, however, were clearly more circumspect on the suggested shift from NATO to the EU in the transatlantic relations.⁴ Interestingly, the NAC endorsed the importance of giving NATO a stronger political role. On this issue, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer agreed to forward specific proposals for enhancing NATO's political agenda.⁵

In an effort to weed away prejudices and misconceptions, President Bush welcomed the decision taken by the 26-member NATO to set aside differences over Iraq and contribute to the organisation's training of Iraqi security forces, either in or outside Iraq, through financial contributions or donations of equipment.⁶ However, there is a caveat, which Bush has to contend with and which in a sense reflects his anxiety to bury the hatchet over the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and simultaneously forging a 'united commitment' to his administration's declared priorities of fighting terrorism and spreading democracy in the Middle East. The Germans will not be training the Iraqis on their soil but will conduct such programmes in the UAE⁷ and France's participation will remain confined to donations – up to €2 million (\$2.6 million) – rather than any active participation. Interestingly, France has committed just one official from its NATO office, though it is still unclear whether it will be a part of the mission in Iraq, for the stability and pursuit of the political process laid down in UN Resolution 1546.⁸ It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that the European initiatives are more symbolic in nature and will do little to alleviate the immense pressure on the US military in Iraq. That Bush was grateful to the alliance partners' commitment in providing help for the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) as well as the upcoming parliamentary elections in Afghanistan⁹ demonstrates Washington's awakening to the political reality in Europe and crucially, a willingness to shed some of its assertiveness. Two years ago, millions took to the streets of Europe to express anguish, dismay and anger over US military aggression against Iraq, leading to bitter hostility between the two.

US-EU Ties

President Bush also visited the EU headquarters in Brussels and showed optimism on the success of the European project of 'integration'. Indeed, a stronger Europe, as an ally of the US, will always increase the potential of the transatlantic alliance. Bush showed willingness in setting aside differences with the EU and working on a partnership of equals, rather than a relationship of dependence so as to "forge ahead for a stronger partnership in the areas of commerce and trade."¹⁰ Echoing the attitude of "let bygones be bygones" expressed by Bush, the European leaders, while acknowledging that the US invasion of Iraq had clearly divided Europe and America, however, retreated from an open confrontation over the Republican Administration's foreign policy.

Behind the rhetoric of the 'new era in transatlantic relations', economic and geopolitical tensions quite clearly persist; and these were acutely reflected over the issue of lifting arms embargo on China. Even Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had raised concerns over this issue when she toured Europe and a few weeks prior to Bush's visit, the House of Representative had voted 401 to 3 for a resolution condemning the EU for pledging to lift the arms embargo to China, which has been in effect since 1989 following the events in Tiananmen Square.¹¹ At the start of his tour, Bush conveyed in no uncertain terms the grievances of his administration to the Europeans over EU's rapprochement moves with China. Clearly for Washington, transfer of weapons and technology to China will disturb the military balance between China and Taiwan. Beyond this immediate concern, however, is the fear that closer economic ties between the EU and China will pose an immense challenge to the US economy. Transatlantic relations will truly be tested in the coming months over the decision of lifting the embargo. It has the potential to even split the Europeans. The French and Germans, in particular, have been pressing the EU to reconsider lifting the arms embargo. Maintaining the cohesiveness of the Union will depend on the next presidency, which will be Britain's, a task not easy given its close association with the US.

On the Iranian nuclear issue, while both the Americans and Europeans agree to the dangers of proliferation, the difference has been in the approach to resolving the crisis. The Europeans have refused to join Washington's bellicose threats against Iran, preferring diplomacy to aggression. The European are not only sceptical but question Washington's policy to wage unprovoked "preventive" war. Germany, along with France and Britain, is working together to "persuade" Iran not to develop nuclear weapons.¹²

In contrast, there is clear convergence on the Israeli-Palestine issue. The Europeans are willing to play a proactive role and use their influence and good offices to push for a negotiated settlement and also help bring stability in the region.¹³ Both the Americans and the Europeans accept that the prospects for peace are better than ever before and are willing to work together for a negotiated, two-State solution, as defined in the Middle East road map.¹⁴

Onward Ho!

Bush has clearly learnt from his “listening visit” – the first in his second term – that he carries a heavy burden of his go-it-alone foreign policy. Not surprisingly, therefore, Bush softened his language, if not completely diluting his conservative agenda, and propped up the diplomacy of consultation on contentious issues. In spite of some irritants, particularly on China, the Republican Administration has adopted a conciliatory approach and at this juncture, transatlantic relations at the tactical level look bridged. The European Presidency and NATO Secretary General along with the US President repeatedly shared the views of a strong Atlantic Alliance based on shared values and common purpose.

A significant trend that emerged from Bush’s visit was the transformation of NATO from a military organisation to a politico-military organisation. However, for the US, NATO and EU have clear-cut roles. NATO is looked upon as an organisation dealing with the problems related to security and EU is seen as an arrangement for the better working of European nations amongst themselves on trade and economic related issues.

Except on the issue of China, President Bush was successful in getting European support, particularly on NATO training missions in Iraq. With ‘Atlanticists’ like Jaap de Hoop Scheffer as the Secretary General of NATO – he has persuasively argued for a stronger NATO and warned against duplication with the formation of a separate European Security Arrangement – Bush can, for the time being, be assured that NATO will survive the attacks of the ‘Europeanists’. For Bush, given the fiscal crisis back home, it is paramount that NATO takes on a greater role in Afghanistan and Iraq. But with France and Germany not participating wholeheartedly, success is still doubtful.

Both, President Bush and the European leaders made it abundantly clear that transatlantic relations serve the economic, political as well as military interests of both sides. Bush has clearly realised that unilateralism cuts both way and that in an interdependent international system, such alliances are essential in creating a framework to tackle a host of problems and security threats.

References/Endnotes

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- ² See, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's speech on February 12, 2005, at the 41st Munich Conference on Security Policy, at http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2005=&menu_konferenz...
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ See, article by Roger Wilkison, "NATO agrees to train Iraqis, but split about its future" dated February 22, 2005, on <http://www.voanews.com/english/2005-02-22-voa29.cfm?>
- ⁵ See the opening statement by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the press conference following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the levels of Heads of State and Government on February 22, 2005, at <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2005/s050222i.htm>
- ⁶ no.1.
- ⁷ Refer "NATO trumpets accord on Iraq mission" dated February 22, 2005, at <http://www.turkishpress.com/news.asp?ID=37630>
- ⁸ Refer to the speech by French President Jacques Chirac at the Atlantic Alliance Summit dated February 22, 2005, at <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2005/s050222c.htm>
- ⁹ Refer to opening statement by US President George W. Bush at the press conference following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government dated February 22, 2005, at <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2005/s050222j.htm>
- ¹⁰ Refer to President Bush's remarks in Joint Press Availability dated February 22, 2005, at <http://tokyo.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-20050223-12.html>
- ¹¹ Refer, "New Divisions Emerge in Bush visit" by Stefania Bianchi, at <http://www.ipsnews.net/africa/interna.asp?idnews=27595>
- ¹² Refer, "Bush and Schröder reaffirm 'partnership'" at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/02/23/ubush.xml&sSheet=/portal/2005/02/23/ixportaltop.html>
- ¹³ no.11.
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