



Time for a Threesome

EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP AND AMERICA **Klaus Larres**

Much to the displeasure of Europe's smaller countries, trilateral meetings of the European Union's 'Big Three' – Britain, France and Germany – occur with increasing frequency. In fact, an informal triple leadership has emerged. The collapse of the European constitution project at the November Rome summit and the imminent admission of ten new members has focused minds in Paris and Berlin. Regular Franco-German meetings developed in the early years of the European Economic Community in the 1950s, but Britain's presence in Europe's most exclusive club is a more recent development.

THE NEW CLOSENESS GOES BACK TO OCTOBER 2001 when the three leaders attempted to coordinate their response to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Most other European Union (EU) member states were not amused. They gatecrashed a Downing Street dinner the following month which British Prime Minister Tony Blair intended for his two leadership partners. Italy, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands angrily insisted on being invited.

The emergence of a genuine ménage à trois was delayed by both the strong hostility of medium-sized and small EU countries and bitter European divisions over the Iraq war. The personal antipathy between French President Jacques Chirac and Blair also played a role, as did Chirac's quite unrealistic flirtation with a wartime French-German-Russian alliance.

Previously, a narrow leadership core had been regarded as superfluous. It was expected that the new European constitution would introduce voting procedures that would give more weight to the relative size of member state populations. France and Germany relaxed in the expectation that this would tilt the balance of power decisively in their favour. Despite enlargement, the Franco-German leadership alliance would be preserved.

OVERCOMING EMOTION

Still, even last September, when emotions were running high over how to stabilise Iraq in the aftermath of the war and mutual distrust between France and Germany on the one hand and Britain, Italy, Spain and Poland on the other still dominated the agenda, progress was being made towards a European triumvirate and enhanced cooperation.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, Chirac and Blair managed to overcome their political difficulties and personal

animosities when they met in Berlin. They agreed to disagree over Iraq and managed to make progress with a common outlook on a future European defence policy. Much to the consternation of the smaller countries, they achieved consensus on simply ignoring the limits on national debts prescribed by the European Growth and Stability Pact. They also insisted on including new voting procedures within the Council of Ministers in the proposed European constitution, thus riding roughshod over the desires of the smaller nations.

Shortly afterwards the Big Three's foreign ministers went to Tehran to put pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons programme and allow international nuclear site inspections. Both Italy, then in charge of the rotating EU presidency, and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana were left in the dark about the initiative.

In late November, Paris, Berlin and London worked out a blueprint for a future European security and defence policy. They decided to downsize the proposed European military headquarters, which had been a bone of severe transatlantic contention, to a much smaller planning unit attached to the military staff in the Council of Ministers secretariat.

KIDNAPPING EUROPE

By late last year it looked as if an informal directorate of Europe's big three had more or less been established. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw confirmed in mid-January that with regard to the 'tangible signs' of cooperation, 'for Britain to form a partnership with the Franco-German motor' of the EU 'would be logical once Europe moves from 15 to 25 members.'

A month later, Schröder, Chirac and Blair met again in Berlin. This time they brought along four or five cabinet ministers each, including foreign ministers, and the afternoon sessions were convened much more formally. The three leaders insisted that their mini summit was 'to the advantage of all of Europe', and Blair emphasised that there was no 'need to be apologetic in any way, shape or form about' the trilateral meeting.

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Yet, emotions in some of the other 22 EU countries were running high. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi insisted that 'Europe doesn't need any directorate; it's just a big mess,' and the outspoken Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio proclaimed that 'nobody should be allowed to kidnap the general interest of Europe.'

Italy and Spain, as well as Poland, feared that the three had a hidden agenda and would take decisions on how to steer other members in controversial questions such as the way forward after the failure of the Rome summit, Turkish membership, and who would be Romano Prodi's successor as president of the European Commission.

While the three were careful to avoid these issues in public, they were all discussed. Subjects such as Europe's – and NATO's – contribution to the stabilisation of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East, Iran's nuclear policy, and progress with the European rapid reaction force were also analysed.

Despite protestation that the three were not creating 'some kind of inner leadership to stitch up everything,' the leaders did not hesitate to attempt giving 'a new impetus to Europe,' as Schröder put it. They sent an open letter to the Irish EU presidency outlining the need to address three major economic weaknesses.

Chirac, Blair and Schröder asked the Commission to publish a precise timetable for how to reduce EU bureaucracy and

Community, but hard-nosed realism and the clear pursuit of the national interest which has led to the emergence of a new ménage à trois. Instead of reuniting the continent, however, enlargement is already leading to a new differentiation between first and second tier countries.

DIFFICULT TO DOMINATE

Both Germany and France fear that enlargement to 25 members and continued decision-making under the complex regulations of the Nice treaty will undermine their traditional decisive role and change the balance of power. Since the foundation of the European Communities in the late 1950s, France and Germany have essentially been able to work out guidelines for important policies before formal summits. They usually managed to convince other members to follow.

After enlargement it will be much more difficult for any two countries to dominate. Chirac's and Schröder's dramatic failure to find support from most other European governments both during the Iraq war and over the constitution were telling signs. A looser, larger Europe with much weaker common institutions and an increased role for the national governments of medium-sized and small countries would rapidly change the character of the project.



regulations which were undermining international competitiveness and economic innovation; they called for the creation of a Commission vice-president – or a super-Commissioner as some journalists called it – 'to focus exclusively on economic reform'; and they asked member states to concentrate on economic innovation and international competitiveness and reform their product and labour markets.

Productivity in the Union is approximately twenty percent lower per capita than in America, but the three made clear that they still believed in the EU's rather ambitious Lisbon agenda – to elevate the Union to one of the globe's most dynamic economic areas by 2010. The big three wishes to set the right tone for the Union-wide economic conference in March.

BEING HELPFUL

What is behind this realignment? If the rhetoric about giving the EU a boost of economic and political dynamism and working for the common good is stripped away, two main factors remain: fear of the consequences of EU enlargement on the ability of France and Germany to decide on the main policy directions, not least in a common defence and foreign policy; and the insight that relations with America need to be patched up and put on a much more stable and enduring basis.

Britain, it is believed, can play a helpful role in achieving both objectives; in turn this is likely to strengthen its influence within the Union. It is not the mystic hankering after a Europe guided by a small cosy group of states as in the early years of the

The German and French dream of guiding an ever-closer Union towards more federalist arrangements and developing a significant European voice on the global stage threatens to become a thing of the past.

This is particularly alarming to Paris and Berlin with regard to foreign and defence policy; the big project for the coming years. It is the one highly complicated and expensive area that the Union needs to develop if it is to play a major world role.

Recent divisions between 'old' and 'new' Europe over the war in Iraq and Europe's inability to find a common policy on how to deal with US President George Bush's administration's aspirations for global dominance and designs for pre-emptive warfare are particularly disconcerting. The failed Rome summit saw a similar alignment of forces as that during the Iraq war. France and Germany encountered strong opposition from Poland, Spain and Italy. Most eastern European governments sided with the US.

CRUCIAL ROLE

It is here that Britain can play a crucial role. During the war Chirac blotted his copybook with eastern Europeans over their support for America when he proclaimed that they had 'missed a good chance to keep quiet.' Schröder's relations with Poland were severely damaged by his row with Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller, who refused to sign the new European constitution including voting procedures favouring large countries.

Britain, however, kept quiet and maintained a fairly neutral

position. Previously London had earned a lot of respect in eastern Europe for refusing to be bullied by Paris and Berlin into changing its position on alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, sticking to the Bush administration's unpopular line. Britain has thus emerged as an ideal mediator between old and new Europe.

The same applies to Blair's role as a confidant of Bush. Both Chirac's and Schröder's relations with the American administration have improved substantially but, despite the German chancellor's successful bridge-building visit in late February, neither he nor the French president enjoy the admiration and degree of influence that Blair commands in Washington.

OPEN ARMS

A European defence policy is also not feasible without the British. When, in April 2003, in the middle of the Iraq crisis, Belgium invited Germany, France and Luxembourg to a defence summit to consider setting up an independent European force and pointedly excluded London, there was disbelief and ridicule. After all, the defence field is the only, but increasingly crucial, area where Britain, with its highly developed professional army and global expertise in guerrilla warfare and weapons

TANGIBLE BENEFITS

Similarly, the Blair government realises that Britain's influence in world affairs will benefit if the EU becomes a more important international player. It has not escaped Blair's attention that despite his supposedly excellent relations with both Presidents Bill Clinton and Bush, his real influence on American decision-making remains severely limited. The hoped-for economic benefits and more elusive perceived advantages of increasing Britain's great power status by fighting side-by-side with America have not materialised.

Turning the Franco-German leadership club into a threesome promises tangible advantages, not merely with public opinion at home. Britain might well be able to increase substantially its influence within the Union, which would greatly benefit its global position. It may even eventually lead to the adoption of the euro. As *The Economist* has pointed out, if big three cooperation proves difficult, Blair, unlike Chirac and Schröder, is in the fortunate position of being able to fall back on an alternative European alliance with Italy, Spain and Poland, comrades-in-arms from the Iraq war. However, since the Spanish elections the new government may move closer to the German and French position on Iraq.

A hard core of leadership countries has certainly begun



development, is way ahead of its European partners.

Grudgingly even French, and more admiringly US, forces respect British professionalism and expertise in defence. With the partial exception of France, such skills cannot be found in any other European country. If the EU intends to focus on a common foreign and defence policy, it cannot avoid allocating a leading role to Britain.

Together with London's ability to mediate with both eastern Europe and the US, this led Berlin and Paris to welcome London to their fairly exclusive bilateral relationship. A certain caution remains, however. After all, Britain is still not a member of the eurozone, has not signed the Schengen agreement on passport-free travel within the EU and continues to insist on its national veto on tax, defence and foreign policy.

There are other problems, largely of perception. Despite Blair's more constructive policy towards Europe compared with almost all his predecessors, traditionally lukewarm attitudes to integration have not been forgotten. The long-standing impression, confirmed again during the Iraq war, that London values the 'special relationship' with Washington more than its European links, and may even act as America's Trojan horse within the EU, is a serious concern in both Paris and Berlin.

Yet, neither a substantial European defence policy nor a genuine rapprochement with the US appears feasible without British involvement. And in the aftermath of the Iraq war and perceived American unilateralism, Germany and France regard both as a priority if a unipolar world is to be prevented.

to emerge in the enlarged Union and can be expected to play a crucial role. However, it would be wise to adopt a more transparent and consultative approach to avoid the resentment and suspicion of the other members. Unless this is done, there is a real danger that enlarging the Union may lead to an irreversible split.

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's desperate request in the 1970s for a telephone number if he wished to call Europe may be about to be answered. However, his successors will have to be content with three numbers connected to the Elysée Palace, the Chancellery and Downing Street.

In Washington's eyes this would be a constructive development much to be preferred to the current diffusion of power within the EU. It would give the Union a more coherent and flexible leadership, with Britain tempering any radical ideas from Paris or Berlin. And if transatlantic difficulties arise, the US would still have the well-practised option of dealing bilaterally with each of the big three, in particular Britain. This might also be helpful in undermining any too intransigent position.

The development of Europe's threesome is regarded as a win-win situation by all the big powers on both sides of the Atlantic. However, the Union's small and medium-sized countries feel left out and strenuous efforts to integrate and cooperate with them, rather than dictate policy, ought to be made in the interest of a functioning European Union and a flourishing transatlantic relationship.

