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Seeking a concerted role for Europe's big three

With Britain, France and Germany having taken such widely divergent paths over war with Iraq, can they do better in working together in pursuit of peace? More to the point, are the three big powers in the European Union capable of providing the lead Europe needs if it is ever to count for more than the sum of its parts?

For this to happen there will need to be a more systematic attempt among the three to pool strategic judgments, wise up to international realities and concert policies ahead of rather than in the wake of crisis. Above all, there needs to be an honest reckoning about how best to promote our shared European interest with respect to the US, whether we see the Americans as a wayward *hyperpuissance* or a country with values very close to our own that possesses far more military clout, many times over, than the rest of us put together.

Here are three action points for France, Britain and Germany, starting with Iraq but moving to the questions they are tackling together daily.

The three should first make clear that they will only provide EU financial support to a postwar settlement that has been worked out through some form of multilateral process. But then they should show a maximum of flexibility in the form of United Nations involvement, as they did for the peace settlements in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. In reality, the French and the Germans would not want to play a leading security role in the first few months. And they know that the Americans will not be able to afford the manpower or the funding to see the process through on their own. It would help if one of the many experienced European administrators, a Carl Bildt, a Bernard Kouchner, or a Paddy Ashdown, were put in charge of the international operation that will be necessary in the medium-term, before

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the Iraqis are ready to take on the full burden of running their own state.

Second, the three must seek a new deal with the US for the future handling of global security issues. This should involve a respectful understanding of each other's differing points of view. There used to be a way of managing tensions between the US, UK, France and Germany called the Quadrilateral, based on their co-operation over Berlin at the height of the cold war. There is no reason not to revive it as an active inter-governmental alliance for peace, including the Russians where possible. It would be informal and would not overlap with the Security Council, whose scope would be more legally based and reach more global. The three would have to show other EU members that it was not a *directoire* by reporting back regularly through the usual channels of political co-operation and common foreign and security policy (CFSP). The countries of "new" Europe who supported the US stance on Iraq, such as Spain and Poland, are no more enthusiastic about choosing between the Anglo-Saxons and the Franco-Germans than "old" Europe. Good co-ordination between the British, French and Germans would be to their benefit.

Third, there needs to be a new forward-planning unit reporting back to the three heads of government and to their foreign offices that is not rooted in snail's pace EU discussion of the future of CFSP. Its explicit aim must be to remove the possibility of a situation like that of the past six months where the three leading European powers could sign up to as apparently unambiguous a decision as Security Council Resolution 1441, and then maintain months later that they had entirely different expectations of, and maybe intentions for, an agreed text. There is already the European Council Secretariat, operating under Javier Solana. But there has not been the will on the part of the three states that count to give it the intelligence component, the manpower or the political leverage to make the difference. A new planning unit would be informal, compact and discreet.

These three proposals aim to bring Europe's evolving foreign policy into line with real relationships among the key member states and across the Atlantic. Without such changes and a new determination at the highest level to work together, the three will not just fall out irrevocably with the US, but will drift away from each other, away from the other EU members - "new" and "old" - and into irrelevance.