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MICHAEL MACLAY

## At last, a chance for Europe to get its act together

**T**omorrow's tripartite summit in Berlin represents an opportunity for Europe's big powers to show the leadership the continent needs. Predictably, there are cries that the meeting between the French, German and UK leaders shows big-power arrogance and betrays the traditional European way of doing things. These miss the point. This could in future be recognised as the moment Europe began to get its act together.

It is easy to see why the European Union is looking ragged to outsiders. The integration process symbolised by the euro and supposedly buttressed by the Lisbon reform process has not begun to tackle Europe's economic and demographic fragility. The collapse of efforts to agree a constitutional treaty is rightly seen as a political debacle. On the foreign policy issues that count, Europe's performance has been at best peripheral and at worst self-destructive over the past 18 months.

But tomorrow's encounter of three very different political leaders is a promising departure. For the first time they will be accompanied by senior cabinet ministers, discussing a far broader agenda than ever before. The meeting will go well beyond foreign and defence questions, traditionally tolerated as areas for big power co-operation by other EU members, to economic reform, education, immigration - even the EU constitution.

This is absolutely right. It is beginning to sink in that May's expansion of the Union to 25 members will dramatically increase the chances of discord and deadlock. Harmonisation of strategy among the three leading countries will be essential if anything at all is to be achieved. Majority votes alone will never solve problems that touch on the vital interests of member states. The EU must develop much further the model of consensus-building that has served it so well.

It will do so best on the basis of real co-operation among the three - which

happen to have the most votes.

The three are well aware that they have no chance of functioning as a *directoire*. If they seek to operate in an exclusive way, they will not get far. The Spaniards and the Poles have shown that they will not be taken for granted by a Franco-German duo, an "old Europe" core with them on the periphery or any other combination. The Benelux states and the Nordic countries are by now confident enough to prevent any railroading of the agenda. The Italians will eventually be back as a serious force.

On a more positive note, the special links that France has with southern Europe, Germany with the countries to the east and Britain with a mix of sceptical Nordics and proud new entrants will make them more representative of the new whole than they are of the Union of 15. But they will have to find better ways of dealing with other member states - and with the EU itself. The initiative on Iran, for example, that relaunched tripartite co-operation was brilliant in its effect and there were reasons for its being done so secretly. In future, though, initiatives should be conducted with Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, and the EU Council secretariat being involved wherever possible.

On defence, the three are making a practical difference to Europe's capabilities. Mobile, small-scale military units for deployment in failed states - the initiative announced last week by France and the UK - fill a real gap in the international armoury, playing to European strengths without affronting America. There will be other areas of European activity, internal as well as external, where the three can strike a better balance between traditional collective idealism and the capacities of individual states. On the constitution, they should not try to steal the role of the Irish or the Dutch presidency. But they can make it much easier for the presidency to achieve a lasting deal.

At the barest minimum, the three can prevent different starting points from crippling their ability to work together. Looking outwards, this means sharing threat assessments, creating early warning systems and working out a common approach to the US. Internally, it means cutting the rhetoric and the grandstanding and establishing light structures of co-operation within and between the three governments. These will have to extend beyond heads of government and their private offices, making this co-operation routine without generating new bureaucracy.

It could just work. Europe could have a real chance of a fresh start.

*The writer is executive director of the Franco-German-British Club of Three, which he helped establish with Lord Weidenfeld in the mid-1990s*