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EU licks its wounds at Athens summit

Summit harmony cannot disguise the difficulties ahead

With Europe's wounds over the war in Iraq still raw, yesterday's signing in Athens of the accession treaty between the European Union and 10 countries due to join on May 1 2004 could hardly have been more poignant. The leaders were laying to rest Europe's cold war schism just as they faced the consequences of today's damaging rift.

An effort is being made to draw a line under recent differences. Germany and France, which opposed the US-led military action, do not seem to have the stomach for another fight over the postwar settlement. On Tuesday Jacques Chirac called President George W. Bush to promise France would play a "pragmatic" role in Iraq; yesterday he had a friendly 25-minute meeting with Tony Blair, the British prime minister.

Divisions between pro- and anti-war countries will not be easily healed. They went far beyond the rights and wrongs of the conflict. They encompassed the way EU countries relate to each other, to the US and to the rest of the world.

The signing ceremony at the foot of the Acropolis - scarcely imaginable 20 years ago - was a reminder that time can heal the bitterest enmities. But the war has raised serious questions about efforts to create a common foreign and security policy. Ideas being discussed in Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's convention - such as an EU foreign minister, majority voting on foreign affairs and a full-time president for the European Council, representing government heads - will achieve little if the political will to act in harmony is missing.

That does not mean the EU should give up on foreign affairs. Things come about slowly in the Union. It took 30 years, for example, to create a single European currency. A common foreign policy has been on the agenda for just 11 years, and a common defence policy for little more than four.

The EU is making progress, notably over peacekeeping in the Balkans. It is united over issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, and has a common interest, despite the Iraq debacle, in the authority of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. It must, though, be realistic about the limits of a common policy. When the chips are down, national interests prevail.

Just as problematic are differing views about Europe's role. Mr Chirac, despite his new pragmatism, is unlikely to bury his vision of the EU as a counterweight to US power. Yesterday he reminded the mostly ex-communist new members, which backed Washington over Iraq, of the need for shared disciplines and solidarity in the "European family".

Some believe new members will line up with Britain, Spain and Italy in a US-leaning, free-market, "new Europe" block. It is likely to be more complicated. Alliances will vary: yesterday most joined other small countries to oppose the creation of an EU president, favoured by Britain, France and Spain.

The majority of countries will, nonetheless, rightly want to see a continued transatlantic relationship. There is no future for an EU that defines itself in opposition to the US.

Annan seeks consensus in Europe on UN role in Iraq

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By Kerin Hope in Athens

Kofi Annan, United Nations secretary-general, was last night trying to forge a common position with European countries on the UN's political role in postwar Iraq.

Mr Annan held a meeting with the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Russia, Spain and the UK following the European Union summit in Athens and accession-signing treaty for the 10 new member states.

A UN spokesman said the aim was to "define the UN's role and work out how to get unity in the Security Council" following a US proposal that the UN should appoint a special representative for Iraq.

"We need a job description for this position. When we have it, it becomes possible to choose the right person," the spokesman said.

Last night's meeting was arranged by Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, after Mr Annan spent the day in bilateral talks with EU leaders, who are keen to make a significant contribution to rebuilding Iraq.

Mr Annan earlier met Tony Blair, the UK prime minister, to seek clarification on the UN representative's mandate. He said afterwards: "I'm confident that the UN will play an important role, and as we move ahead in the next few weeks that role will become much clearer."

Mr Blair said he thought it was possible for the US and the EU to work together on rebuilding Iraq. "It requires give and take on both sides but I believe that goodwill exists," he said.

The five foreign ministers were expected to issue a joint statement that would overcome differences caused by weeks of division over the war, opening the way for discussion on a UN Security Council resolution that

would be required to endorse the special representative's appointment.

But diplomats said it would probably take several months before the special representative was in place in Baghdad. Meanwhile, UN agencies would provide humanitarian aid for Iraq as this could be done without a Security Council resolution.

But decisions will be needed within weeks on pressing issues concerning Iraq. The oil for food programme has been extended only until May 12, and a Security Council resolution would be required to deter-

'It requires give and take from the US and Europe over Iraq but I believe that goodwill exists'

mine its future status. Also, UN weapons inspectors are waiting to hear whether they will return to Iraq to resume the search for weapons of mass destruction following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Another question to be addressed is the lifting of UN economic sanctions against Iraq that have been in place since the first Gulf war. "The Security Council has to take these decisions, so we have to move forward," one diplomat said.

Mr Annan was due to stay in Athens for further talks today with foreign ministers attending a "wider Europe" conference on the EU's relations with countries that have expressed an interest in joining the union - such as Ukraine and Moldova - and with the broader Mediterranean region.

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FRENCH PRESIDENT HOLDS TALKS WITH BLAIR ● 10 COUNTRIES SIGN EU TREATY ● WARNING OVER LOYALTY ● AIRLIFT UNVEILED FOR INJURED CHILDREN

Chirac spearheads EU effort to end divisions over Iraq



Jacques Chirac (left) and Gerhard Schröder yesterday. Diplomats believe France and Germany are moving away from their anti-war position Reuters

By George Parker, Cathy Newman and Kerin Hope in Athens

Jacques Chirac, French president, yesterday led efforts by Europe's leaders to end weeks of division over Iraq, acknowledging that the US and Britain have a vital role to play in stabilising the country.

Mr Chirac held talks with Tony Blair, his British counterpart, to discuss the reconstruction of Iraq, and announced a European Union airlift to bring injured children to western hospitals.

His positive stance was interpreted by EU diplomats as evidence that France, like Germany, was starting to move away from its strong anti-war position of the past few months to avoid possible isolation in an enlarged European Union.

Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, held talks with Mr Blair on Tuesday night, which British diplomats described as "excellent" and a sign he was coming back into the Atlanticist fold.

Mr Chirac's sense of potential isolation will have been heightened at yesterday's summit when

10 new countries, most of them pro-US former communist states, signed a historic treaty to unite the two halves of the continent by bringing them into the European Union.

But it appeared clear that Europe's deep ideological divide over Iraq will take some time to heal, with Mr Chirac continuing to push his wish to create an EU pole as a counterbalance to US power.

At the treaty signing ceremony he issued a fresh warning to the new member states that their first loyalties in future should lie in Europe and not with the US.

"Europe is about a collective ambition, shared disciplines, firm solidarity and naturally looking to the European family," he said.

The warning develops the theme Mr Chirac first expounded in February, when he described the east Europeans as "badly brought up" and "insulting" for signing a letter of support for the US over Iraq.

In the first meeting with Mr Blair since the beginning of the war, the two leaders held what were described as "serious but amiable" talks in the courtyard of the 19th century Zappelon Hall.

Among the items on the agenda was the role of the UN. "Issue by issue, we have to find the right balance between the role of the United Nations, which must be the essential role, and the role of American and British forces on the ground," said Mr Chirac's spokeswoman.

Foreign ministers from Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Russia last night met Kofi Annan, United Nations secretary-general, but the meeting ended without a statement on a detailed plan of action for the UN.

Yesterday's official summit business focused on the signing of the EU accession treaty, which marks the culmination of the EU

enlargement process that began almost immediately after the historic collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia,

Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus and Malta will join the EU in May 2004 after the treaty has been ratified.

But the accession of the new member states, nearly all of them

small in terms of population, has opened up the prospect of a new divide opening up in Europe between the biggest and smallest countries.

In talks on the future of Europe

yesterday, virtually all of the "smalls" spoke out strongly against the idea of creating a powerful new EU president, although the idea is backed by all of the "biggs".

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