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Diplomacy by resolution is Europe's weakness

Depending on whom you believe, the Iraq crisis has either killed off altogether the idea of a European Union common foreign and security policy (CFSP) or left the EU with only one option: to become an adversarial rival to the US. I believe these polarised views are wrong.

Britain wants the EU to play a powerful global role. The EU is of crucial strategic importance. We contribute more than half the world's overseas aid. We negotiate as equals with the US over trade. But the CFSP has been less successful, save for the Balkans where Javier Solana, our high representative, has brought Europe real credibility, and the Middle East where his expertise and drive has brought hard-won influence.

Britain wants Europe to punch its weight in global diplomacy. But that means abandoning the habit of diplomacy by resolution. Attending EU council meetings, I was struck by how some foreign ministers would state their positions and then rush outside to repeat them in ringing tones to the

waiting microphones. Having invariably told their domestic audiences what they wanted to hear, they would return to the meeting satisfied.

Typically, however, nothing would change as a result in the world's trouble-spots, above all the Middle

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East. Passing resolutions is one thing, exerting real influence is quite another.

To be a real global force as Britain wants, Europe must get real about the CFSP. That means countries walking the walk as well as talking the talk. France and Britain - and to a lesser extent Spain, Italy and the Netherlands - have armed forces that can be

deployed worldwide. The Germans have made significant contributions to peacekeeping in Afghanistan and the Balkans. The remaining countries either do not have a significant military capability or are neutral. Yet there is a righteous tendency among some EU members to strike rhetorical positions that would mean other countries' soldiers carrying the can.

Foreign policy is, and must remain, a matter for national governments. The CFSP is just one instrument in national diplomatic armouries. That is why there can be no question of handing over responsibility for foreign policy to the European Commission and European parliament. Instead, we need to improve our decision-making structures in the EU. One such reform is strengthening the position of the EU's high representative by giving him more authority over some of the resources the Commission controls.

Another is electing a full-time chairman of the European Council (of heads of government) so ending the farce of the six-month rotating presidency. This system may have worked for the origi-

nal six member states but it does not now with 15 and cannot with 25. If we expect a US president to take the EU seriously, we cannot provide him with a different interlocutor every six months.

Such reforms will help to make Europe a serious global operator and a force for progressive internationalism: not so much a rival to the US, as a force the US can reckon with. Europe should always seek to work in partnership with America. This does not mean always toeing the Washington line. The EU, Britain included, supports the Kyoto protocol on climate change, the International Criminal Court and the comprehensive test ban treaty on nuclear weapons. The Bush administration does not. Important policy disagreements remain but they are best resolved by dialogue, rather than confrontation.

Europe must speak more effectively to the world and co-ordinate more coherent foreign policies. This will depend not only on putting institutional structures in place but also on the will and capacity of the member

states to act. Had they been in place, would these structures have ensured a common European position on Iraq? I cannot say. What Iraq shows is that there will always be limits to CFSP when fundamental national interests are at stake. But that is no reason to write it off. On the contrary, Iraq shows that we should strengthen it in the ways I have set out.

For the foreseeable future, the US will be the only superpower. But China will increasingly assert itself diplomatically and economically. So will India and Russia. In this multi-polar world, Europe has a crucial and potentially pivotal role to play in moving towards a global consensus through a new and dynamic CFSP. It is unthinkable for the richest and most advanced economic bloc in the world not to play a substantial strategic role in global affairs, promoting our values of democracy, human rights and social justice.

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