

Déjà Vu All Over Again

BY ANDREW MORAVCSIK

RECENTLY I ATTENDED THE BRUSSELS FORUM, A NEW Davos-like event organized by the German Marshall Fund. The idea was to bring Europeans and Americans back together after all the insults traded over Iraq. It was just the sort of event that helped keep the West unified during the tough years of the cold war—a place where politicians and pundits could meet in a swank setting to drink French wine, speak non-native English and spend German money.

Everyone was on their best behavior. EU foreign-policy czar Javier Solana, with NATO chief Jaap de Hoop Scheffer sitting cozily beside him, proclaimed that current U.S. relations were “perfect.” Sen. John McCain, testing his presidential wings, said they’d “never been better.” Diplomat Daniel Fried, in charge of Eurasian affairs for Condoleezza Rice’s State Department, dismissed splits over Iraq. “So 2003,” he scoffed. It was almost enough to make me believe in the good old days of the transatlantic alliance—until people began to speak their minds. When they did, Americans and Europeans found themselves further apart than ever.

The issue was Iran. McCain sounded the alarm. Iranian nuclear weapons are “the greatest single threat outside of the war on terror,” he said, comparing “failed” European negotiations to the Paris peace talks on Vietnam, “bogged down over the size of the table.” “There is only one thing worse than military action,” he thundered, “and that is a nuclear-armed Iran.” Lest you think this a purely Republican point of view, he was seconded in full by Richard Holbrooke, something of a Democratic shadow secretary of State, who declared that Iran would be “the test case” for transatlantic dialogue.

Europeans were stunned. Could it possibly be that the next American president would be even more adventurous in the Middle East than George W. Bush? The parallels to Iraq seemed obvious. Once again, Europeans fear they are the caboose on a runaway train to war.

Like three years ago, rumors of a U.S. military strike are rife. Clifford Kupchan, a former State Department official and Iran expert at the Eurasia Group, puts the odds of an attack on Iran at more than 50 percent.

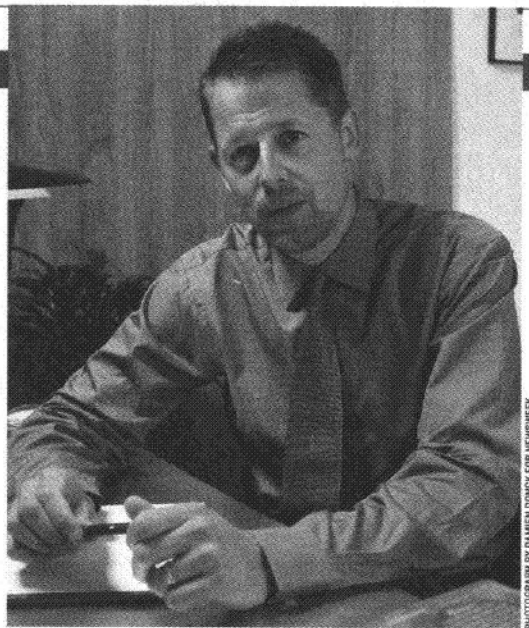
John Bolton, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was widely reported to have told British parliamentarians that a U.S. military strike could halt or hold back Iran’s nuclear program—something he now denies having said. Just as before the Iraq war, Washington recently requested—and was refused—rights to use air bases in Turkey, a likely launching pad for any strike.

Most European diplomats and politicians believe that they were proved right in their skepticism of the Iraq invasion, and wonder why Americans like McCain don’t see it that way. A new war would quash any hope of democratization in Iran. Former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer fears it

As before, Europeans fear Washington is forgoing opportunities to resolve the Iran crisis.

would be a “cataclysm” for the Middle East after Iran responded by destabilizing Iraq or striking Israel. They suspect Americans of again being misled by émigré groups, as they were by Iraqi exiles in years past.

Europeans distrust the moralizing tone of American policy. They remember how President Bush threw down the gantlet over Iraq: “Those who are not for us are against us.” Now comes McCain proclaiming that Iranian nuclear weapons are a “moral issue” on which we must be uncompromising. And not just Iran. McCain outlined an agenda reminiscent of the early days of the Bush administration. The overall imperative is to spread democracy. To that end we must increase U.S. troop numbers in Iraq, strengthen NATO forces in Afghanistan, force a halt to the slaughter in Darfur, press



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAMIEN DONCK FOR NEWSWEEK

Putin’s Russia on its domestic and international behavior, push for regime change in Belarus, stabilize the Balkans and expand the EU to include Turkey and Serbia, while extending NATO through Ukraine all the way to Georgia.

Also as before, Europeans fear Washington is forgoing diplomatic opportunities to resolve the Iran crisis. Every time one comes up, the Bush administration shoots it down. In 2003, Iran signaled its willingness to launch comprehensive talks on nuclear policy, Israel, the unfreezing of Iranian assets and the “Axis of Evil” designation—a policy agenda negotiated through back channels and, according to a senior Iranian official, still on the table. Flush from an apparent victory in Iraq, the United States not only declined the offer but criticized the Swiss diplomats who delivered it.

That deal may still be negotiable, Europeans say, and Washington should try. During her recent visit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was the model diplomat, getting chummy with W and expressing solidarity with U.S. efforts to pressure Iran. But her compatriots are franker. Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier calls for direct U.S.-Iran talks. Even in Britain, America’s traditional partner, politicians are openly skeptical. Lord William Wallace, foreign-policy spokesman for the British Liberal Democratic Party, warns of “suspicions over here that the Americans refuse to talk just because Iran has been the Great Satan since 1979.” If the Americans precipitously strike Iran, he said after hearing McCain, it’s possible that no European government, not even the British, would back them.

Hardly a transatlantic reconciliation.

Moravcsik is director of the European Union Program at Princeton University.