ISRAEL-PALESTINE

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The title of our session this morning is “Israel-Palestine,” but it’s clear from Dominique Moïsi’s remarks and the events in the region that it is necessary we look at the question of Israel and the Palestinians in the context of broader developments. In my remarks this morning, I want to focus on the Trilateral dimension of these challenges. This is appropriate not only because of the profound interest we all have in the future of the region, but in particular because of the upcoming G-8, NATO and U.S.-EU summits which provide an opportunity for our leaders to try to develop an urgently needed common strategy to address the ongoing crises in the region.

U.S.-EU Common Interests, Different Views

Now, I’ve said that we have common interests, but to listen to the transatlantic debate this may not be so apparent. Leaders on both sides claim that the differences are largely about means, but in reality the divergences run much deeper. It is important to recognise that there are differences on each side of the Atlantic as well as between the United States and Europe. I’m not here today as a spokesman for the Administration, but it is equally important for our European and Asian friends to understand perspectives that unite most Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike, as well as the issues on which Americans may differ among themselves.

As I have said, it is true that Americans and Europeans appear to have a common interest in the Middle East: stemming terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, assuring stable, affordable supplies of energy, and promoting economic and political reform.

At the same time, it is also fair to say that our interests are not identical. These differences are a function of history, geography and demographics as well as distinctive strategic cultures. The United States in recent years has been far more focused on the Middle East as an exporter of terrorism while Europeans are more focused on instability and economic stagnation that can directly affect European societies either through the radicalization of their own Muslim populations or by triggering new waves of immigration. Close historic ties, as Dominique has said, have colored many Europeans’ views towards Arab states and the Palestinians while the United States has functioned as the principal bulwark behind Israel’s security. Japan too has been deeply but more quietly involved in the region, both because of its strong economic interests and its humanitarian contributions.

To be sure, things have changed since the terrorist attack in Madrid, at least in refocusing Europeans to some degree on the clear and present danger of terrorism. But even after Madrid, important differences remain about priorities and in particular about two key issues that Dominique has identified: first, the implications of the invasion of Iraq for regional peace and security; and, second, the relationship between the Middle East peace process, the threat of terrorism and the prospects for reform. Europeans tend to focus on the lack of progress on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a spur to terrorism and as a barrier to reform. They argue that movement on this front is an essential precondition to achieving all our other goals. Many, but not all, insist that the invasion of Iraq set back the cause of regional reform and acted as a spur, rather than a retardant, to terror.
Americans, by contrast, including many Democrats who have been sharply critical of the Bush Administration’s disengaged approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, tend to reject this linkage between progress on the peace process and progress on terror and reform. They note that the Al Qaeda threat grew during a period of the greatest progress in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and question whether a two-state solution would change the goals of those who bombed New York, Washington, Casablanca and Madrid. They argue that the lack of Middle East peace is a convenient excuse for those who resist reform, but doubt whether the underlying dynamic would be changed if the Israelis and Palestinians did reach an agreement. Indeed, they argue that only when Arab leaders embrace reform and condemn violence is there any real hope for Middle East peace. On Iraq, although Democrats have been divided, most believe that a well-executed follow up to the initial well-executed military campaign offers the prospect of a more pluralist Iraq, which in turn could have collateral benefits throughout the region, even though many of us question the plausibility of the full-blown democratic system cited by the Administration’s more zealous proponents.

In shorthand, Europeans have argued that the road to peace, security and democratic reform in the region lay through Jerusalem; while many Americans, particularly in the Administration, believe that the road to Jerusalem, that is, a lasting Israel-Palestinian peace, begins with a democratic Iraq and a reforming Arab world.

The intensity of our transatlantic differences has been compounded in recent weeks by growing European criticism of U.S. policy in Iraq and anger at the Sharon government’s plan for unilateral disengagement from Gaza and parts of the West Bank, backed up by President Bush’s letter to Sharon which was seen by Europeans and Arabs as unilaterally altering the agreed international framework for resolving the conflict, undermining the Road Map and therefore derailing any hopes for peace. Most Americans, I would venture, see it differently—the plan for unilateral disengagement a necessary response to the failure of the Palestinians to produce a credible negotiating partner and a welcome effort to break the obviously unsustainable status quo. While some of us would argue that the present plans of Ariel Sharon should have been consulted more closely with the Quartet and our Arab partners, the substance itself is not the central problem. Even the Clinton and Geneva plans have recognized the realities identified by President Bush, and President Bush’s letter to Sharon explicitly states that, “any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes.”

On Iraq, even before the unspeakable revelations about the treatment of Iraqi prisoners, it had become increasingly clear that the United States was in grave danger of losing the support of the Iraqi people, the sine qua non of a successful outcome, and that only with the assistance of the wider international community—Europe, NATO, other Arab states and the United Nations—could both the political and security situation be stabilised. Yet the administration’s half-hearted efforts to engage the international community have met with an equally half-hearted response from Europeans, who perhaps understandably are reluctant to take responsibility for a mess they did not create and in many cases strenuously opposed.

The Trilateral Challenge: The U.S. and EU’s Choices

The twin crises brought on by prisoner abuses in Iraq and the Likud vote demand an urgent agreed response by the Trilateral partners that will require a willingness to put aside past differences and recriminations to avoid an outcome that would plunge the region into a deeper confrontation and jeopardize our common interests for years to come. If—and I reiterate the if as we watch to see what decisions the Prime Minister makes—Ariel Sharon is persuaded to stay the course of complete withdrawal from Gaza, as called for in the Quartet statement, then the Palestinians will have an opportunity, and the responsibility, to help put back on track the negotiations by seizing the opportunity to govern Gaza in a way that benefits its residents and assures the security of Israelis.
But this is only likely to happen if the United States and Europe play key complementary roles. Europeans must make clear to the Palestinians that violence does not provide leverage against Israel to achieve the Palestinian objectives. Quite the contrary, Europeans must make clear that support for Palestinian aspirations depends on a convincing commitment to end the war and to resort exclusively to peaceful means. The United States, in turn, must make clear that by renouncing violence Palestinians gain, not lose, leverage by bringing the United States as an active partner to assure that the unilateral pull-out from Gaza is not a way station to a rump, unviable state but rather guarantees a meaningful outcome. The problem with President Bush’s letter to Sharon was not what it said, but what it did not say, a defect that the Quartet statement and the meeting with King Abdullah have begun to correct.

On Iraq, it is clear that American credibility has suffered a body blow which risks fatally undermining the Iraqi consent, which is the *sine qua non* for a continued U.S. presence. Yet no one in Europe or Asia can wish for a result that leads to a humiliating U.S. withdrawal followed by prolonged civil strife in Iraq that could spill over to neighboring countries and undermine prospects for a transformed Middle East which is so essential to our common long-term interests. The United States must make clear once and for all that our aim is to empower the Iraqis themselves—even if it means political outcomes that are not entirely to Washington’s liking—so long as the new Iraqi government poses no serious threat to its neighbors, including through the possession of weapons of mass destruction, offers no sanctuary to terrorists and observes basic human rights for its citizens. To demonstrate this commitment, the Administration must be prepared to share responsibility for the political transition with all the other interested countries that have a stake in Iraq’s future: Europe, Asia and, not least, the countries in the region.

But our European partners must, in turn, get off the sidelines and accept to play a more active role, including contributing security forces to help stabilize Iraq during the political transition until indigenous forces can provide meaningful security. Our Japanese and Korean partners can play a helpful role in bringing about this reconciliation of the U.S. and European views. Through their steadfast support of the U.S. efforts to stabilize Iraq, they have unique credibility in Washington; through their long experience in the region, they are respected by Arab leaders; and through their commitment to strengthen the international system and the rule of law, their views will be welcomed in Europe.

In short, in my view the path to a common strategy is straightforward. The road to Baghdad leads through Baghdad and the road to Jerusalem leads through Jerusalem. Meeting each of the challenges is essential to the security of the Trilateral partners, and together we must be equally serious about resolving them both.

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