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Europe, America and Tony Blair

Munir Majid

NOW, that's a headline British Prime Minister Tony Blair would like. Being grouped with continents, like he can move mountains.

But actually, what he has done, with the unadulterated support for American military action in Iraq, is to move Britain further west from somewhere in the mid-Atlantic.

Britain's search for a role after the loss of empire continues, hanging by the coat-tails of the Americans, despite the slap in the face during the Suez crisis in 1956 when, in a very clear first experience for the British since the Second World War, wider US interests in the Middle East forced them to climb down in their confrontation with Egyptian President Nasser. Subsequently, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden had to resign.

Yet the British continue to look to their American cousins, instead of to the French frogs and the German krauts. Before the Bolsheviks arrived in Russia in 1917, ties between the English king and his dear cousin, Tsar Nicholas, kept relations relatively warm. But now, even with the communists gone, relations with Russian leader Putin are decidedly frosty.

Just last week, on a fencemending mission in Moscow, Blair got such a severe tongue-lashing in Moscow from Putin that one wondered if he was going to break down and cry.

So, Putin said, have you discovered all those weapons of mass destruction, all those chemical weapons? Is Saddam Hussein sitting on them waiting to blow the whole place up?

Clearly, the Russians are not amused, as the Queen of England is often reputedly not. They have found the Anglo-American military attack on Iraq to be wholly driven by a calculation of geopolitical interest, which leaves the Russians on the negative side of the equation after having invested so much in the Saddam Hussein regime.

While not exactly moving mountains, what Tony Blair has done is to destroy the consensus that existed between Europe and America in the fight against international terrorism following the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks.

As Noam Chomsky observed shortly after 9-11 in 2001: "The horrifying atrocities of Sept 11 are something quite new in world affairs, not in their scale and character, but in the target.

"For the United States, this is the first time since the War of 1812 that the national territory has been under attack, or even threatened.

"During the past several hundred years the US annihilated the indigenous population (millions of people), conquered half of Mexico ...intervened violently in the surrounding region, conquered Hawaii and the Philippines (killing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos), and, in the past half century particularly, extended its resort to force throughout much of the world.

"The number of victims is colossal. For the first time, the guns have been directed the other way...

"The same is true, even more dramatically, of Europe. Europe has suffered murderous destruction, but from internal wars.

"Meanwhile European powers conquered much of the world with extreme brutality ...they were not under attack by their foreign victims.

"England was not attacked by India, nor Belgium by the Congo, not Italy by Ethiopia, nor France by Algeria. It is not surprising, therefore, that Europe should be utterly shocked by the terrorist crimes of Sept 11."

This consensus, this common reaction of horror, founded on a common heritage of doing horrible things to other people, cracked when military action was taken by the Americans, supported by the British, which violated spheres of influence and an assumed manner of doing things in international life, that accorded a recognition and a role to major powers, whether represented through consultation, institutionalised or not, or through international law.

Not under the name of act against terror you don't, and not close to my neck of the woods, in a region of vital geopolitical interest, one can almost hear the European leaders muttering.

Europe still counted. France, its second largest military power, with such a pervasive culture (even if at the US Congress they relegated French fries to Freedom fries, they still called the card from which you placed your food order the menu). Indeed the restaurant, recently voted the best in the world, is called the French Laundry (best of American imagination) in the Napa Valley, California, serving French food.

Germany, the world's third largest economy, 83 million people relatively newly reunified like they first were unified in 1871, an industrial powerhouse, leading the new Europe Union from 15 to 25 countries, with a common currency which would, in time, match the dollar, in alliance with the French.

And who was to play joker in the pack? The bloody British, of course. Blair, the villain of the piece, with all the Anglo-Saxon hang-ups and delusions of power. Sold Europe down the river, he did.

Now, how do you put it all together again, that distribution, if not quite balance, of power. Russia broods, a slumbering giant, still weak economically but rich in resources; Putin gives Blair a tongue-lashing.

German Chancellor Schroeder, sent to Coventry by President Bush, makes polite noises to the American Chamber of Commerce in Berlin. President Chirac gives Tony Blair six bottles of Chateau Mouton Rothschild '89, (with a crystal decanter), for the British Prime Minister's 50th birthday on May 6.

However, the quality is under question, with the British running to one of France's most trusted wine guides, Bettane and Desseauve, which says of the '89:

"Since 1986 it has weakened like a Samson victim of a Delilah. It continues to seduce some impressionable palates quick to fall under the charm of its prestigious label. But tasted blind it pales in front of its equals."

Clearly, Chirac will have to do better, or perhaps do different - a few gallons of ice beer? - (here maybe Schroeder could flush in) for President Bush's 57th birthday on July 6, to see through the long celebration from July 4.

Yes, there is so much to be done to put it all together again, and then some, and it won't be the same again. There has been a strategic shift against Europe, never mind the rest of us mere mortals.

The Americans and Europeans will find a new equilibrium, to US advantage, in part because of how the British played the game - or is it Europe? - out. We will see what happens at Evian, in France, when the G-8 meet next month.

How much of what Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has to say at the pre G-8 meeting to which he has been invited as chairman of NAM, will be carried forward, as the world's major powers, and its greatest power, set to work in reordering their relations and, it goes without saying, the world?

And Tony Blair? He'll be there, of course, standing tall, shoulder-to-shoulder even, spring in his step before, afterwards, he goes to Washington to collect, in Winston Churchill's footsteps, the Congressional

Gold Medal for his steadfast support of the US in its war against terror, or is it military attack on Iraq, or stab in the back for Europe - I don't remember which now.

Not bad, for a religious and spiritual man who last week was saying he had full faith in being able to justify his decision and action in the attack on Iraq.

And what are the rest of his countrymen saying? We don't do God!