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Stressing French connections

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MY near-full marks in history class on the French and American Revolutions made me anxious to study in either country. I ended up going to the United States and Britain, chiefly because of language. I took private tuition in French, but didn't do too well. Despite that, my affection for France has never left me.

By the time you read this article, I will be in London, about to cross to Paris via the Channel Tunnel, and eventually to Algeria, a French colony granted independence in 1962 after a conflict which brought Charles de Gaulle back to power and ushered in the Fifth Republic.

De Gaulle's mantle, and the task of taking France into a forward position in world affairs, has been assumed by Jacques Chirac. The French President is hugely popular at home, winning landslide elections for a second term in office in May last year.

In the summery climate of international relations after the Cold War, it has become very impolite for any of the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council to exercise a veto. France, hardly renowned for a lack of manners, therefore deserved extra applause for its stand on Iraq. By threatening to wield its veto and risking a deep rift in the Atlantic Alliance, Chirac forced the Anglo-American axis to go to war on its own.

I don't know if many Americans are still pouring French wine down their toilets. But that is the price for having principles, which must be paid whenever it is most inconvenient to hold on to them.

Some of the damage to UN unity was repaired by a follow-up unanimous resolution leaving most of the responsibility for the post-war reconstruction of Iraq to the then-victorious US.

Now that the situation in Iraq has grown precarious, France can look back with less regret at the costs it bore on behalf of the antiwar stance of a majority of the world community.

As in everything they do, from food and fashion to culture and politics, the French have raised anti-Americanism to a high art. It was fomented in earnest by the westward shift in global power after the Second World War and de Gaulle, who resented the loss of Indochina to the US in the 1950s.

The feelings are so deep that I sometimes think France has never been able to forgive the Americans for having their revolution 14 years before it did in 1789.

Nevertheless, the storming of the Bastille was probably the most epochal event in modern times, sending French influence tearing across the globe. Contemporary notions of nationalism and patriotism would not have been sparked without the rallying cry of "liberty, equality and fraternity".

Even when it joined the imperialist race, it did so more on the principle of the superiority of its culture than barefaced greed.

The French Revolution was a triumph of the people over the tyranny of their own monarch, and French history from then on was tempered as much as by victory as by defeat.

Unlike the more commercially-driven British and Dutch, French colonialism tried harder to create its domains in the image and by the values of the republic. France thus had a tough time disengaging and decolonising, fighting bloody insurgencies in Vietnam and Algeria.

Because France tried harder to hang on, the lessons it learnt from the failure of imperialism were more humbling. Of all the big powers, France

is probably the most inclined to listen, the least disposed to judge.

With the defeat of the Soviet Union, it is perhaps the only political brake, and a French-led Europe the only economic counterweight, against global American hegemony.

Japan, the East Asian power that small countries in the region look up to for leadership, is still too timid under its US strategic umbrella to rise to that position.

President Chirac listens attentively to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has been outspoken in his warnings of a resurgence in Western imperialism and an impending clash of civilisations.

The French leader's whirlwind visit to Malaysia yesterday was an acknowledgement of the common ground between the two countries, made broader by their united opposition to the invasion of Iraq.

The France-Malaysia relationship could be a lot closer but for France's pre-occupation with the European Union and the lack of linguistic, cultural and historical ties between the two countries. Post-colonial Third World nations take time to unravel the apron strings that keep them attached to their former imperial masters.

Malaysia has done better than most to break away from a sycophantic dependence on any major power and open its doors to partnerships with all who seek mutual benefit.

France hasn't been idle, either. There are more than 170 French companies in Malaysia, employing some 22,000 workers. Total trade has ticked up to RM9.43 billion but still too little for the world's fourth largest economy.

Chirac also invited Malaysia to take part in the rebuilding of Lebanon, a Muslim country racked by civil war, for which it pledged a loan of US\$300 million (RM1.14 billion), to equal France's own contribution. Lebanon was a French mandate at the end of the First World War and its example could echo that of another fragment of the Ottoman Empire now under duress - Iraq.

Iraq is shaping up into another Vietnam - a former colony that embroiled both France and the US. The UN has warned that the window of opportunity for bringing Iraq back up on its feet is closing rapidly, both by continuing dissent at US occupation and by growing doubts over the intelligence assessments that fed the case for war.

Weapons of mass destruction - the Anglo-Americans' ill-omened *casus belli* - have not been found and probably never will be. This is the practical core of our antagonism to the war in Iraq - not that we liked Saddam Hussein at all, but that a flimsy American effort could lead to worse.

France will surely see our point. Gallic solidarity with the Third World is a welcome relief to the arrogance of the Anglo-Saxons. But the future of the world's poor awaits substantial rather than moral support.

French and European alacrity in opening their markets to free trade, particularly in agriculture, would benefit them more than any amount of political or intellectual sympathy.

Chirac's visit and that of German Chancellor Gerhard Shroeder is telling for Malaysia. Though we have had a longer relationship with Britain than any other European country, the only British prime minister to have visited the country - and the last time the two saw eye to eye - was Margaret Thatcher two decades ago.

Tony Blair will be too engrossed in hot soup over Iraq to take up where the Iron Lady left off.