

Only unified can the West defend itself. But first it must heal the transatlantic rift.

By Toomas Hendrik Ilves

Of all the international issues that will demand President Barack Obama's attention, two will be increasingly urgent: restoring the still-fragile relationship with Europe and addressing the collapse of the continent's post-1991 security architecture.

Washington will have to figure out a way to continue defending the liberal democratic values that ended the cold war while working with a resurgent, authoritarian and resentful Russia. Balancing these objectives won't be easy, and it will be tempting to give in to realpolitik, simply conceding to Russia a sphere of influence along its borders. Indeed, this idea already has strong purchase in some quarters of the West. Some don't see defending democratic principles as a high priority when countries are worried about securing foreign markets or ensuring their energy supplies.

But the United States must not abandon its principles and should proactively restore its close ties to Europe. Otherwise, 2008 could go down in history as the year when the fundamental assumptions of the post-cold-war world ceased to apply. These assumptions include the ideas that aggression is unacceptable, that borders cannot be changed by force and that democratically elected governments and the rule of law should not be forsaken for pragmatic concerns. Such ideas represent a commitment to the advance of liberal democracy in the post-communist world.

The past seven years have been a difficult time for U.S.-European relations. For a while—as long as economies did well and Europe seemed secure—the transatlantic rift looked like a luxury we could afford. Some even begin to talk about Europe becoming a middle ground between a democratic America and an autocratic Russia.

The second half of 2008 changed all that. We now find ourselves in a new security situation, one that threatens to reverse the advances of the past two decades. This world is one where

authoritarian capitalism and massive oil wealth could become a plausible alternative to liberal democracy.

Obama need not accept that world. He has the opportunity to start anew, restoring ties with Europe that were damaged by the Iraq War and the economic crisis. He will also, however, have to face several realities.

The most important of these is the new, economically powerful and assertive Russia. This Russia showed the world on Aug. 8 that it is willing to use force to change borders and demand regime change in a democratically elected government on its border.

It's not yet clear that everyone in Europe understands the gravity of this change. Speaking before the European Parliament this past fall, a senior European Commission official said that the EU needs to treat Russia "as it is," not as "we would wish it to be." That means recognizing that Russia now ranks 147th in the world in fighting corruption (according to Transparency International) and 141st in freedom of the press (according to Reporters Without Borders), and in 2008 was downgraded by Freedom House from "partially free" to "not free." In this Russia, neither the Parliament nor the president was elected in fair elections.

Despite all the rhetoric of its economic resurgence, this Russia's GDP is still just the size of Belgium's, the Netherlands' and Luxembourg's combined. While its economy may be small, however, this Russia is powerful in other ways, and neither the United States nor Europe is equipped to deal with it alone. Together, however, we can make great progress. Europe can be effective when it chooses. The European Union's exemplary role in stopping the Russian-Georgian war was a major step forward. France's President Nicolas Sarkozy and Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner showed that Europe is capable of decisive leadership.

Still, much more remains to be done. Countries like Ukraine and Georgia, which have embraced democracy—and whose relations with Russia have soured as a result—now need support from both Europe and the United States. So far such support has been less than effective. Brussels and Washington need to do better.

Of course, it will always be necessary to deal with authoritarian regimes. Europe and the United States have done so in the past, working together to address problems like terrorism and drug

smuggling. The red line, however, must remain democracy and the rule of law. If we begin to compromise on these, if we accept the creation of what Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev has called a "zone of privileged interests" covering the democratic countries on Russia's borders, we will lose the gains of the past generation, a development no one can afford.

All the more reason, then, for the United States and Europe to restore their good relationship; only together can they remain critical bulwarks of democracy and the rule of law in a threatening world.

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