

The Old Nations' Axis

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US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, irritated by the fact France and Germany would not blindly accept the US policy in Iraq, made some disparaging remarks on "old Europe". A few days later during his intervention in the Security Council, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Dominique de Villepin answered him: *"It is an old nation like mine, France, an old continent like mine, Europe, who speaks to you today, a nation who has known wars, occupation, barbarism. A nation who does not forget and who knows what it owes to the fighters for liberty who came from America and elsewhere, and who still has always stood in front of History and Men. Faithful to its values, this nation wants resolutely to act with all the members of the international community. This nation believes in our capacity to create a better world."*

The same week, a few thousand kilometers away, the head of another "old" nation, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had similar words. At the end of 13th NAM summit, he said India would not support any unilateral action against Iraq and that the international community must ensure that it did not follow double standards regarding weapons of mass destruction. He added that Iraq should dismantle weapons of mass destruction, if it had any.

Reading the two quotes together, one feels that these two "old" civilisations could really give a lead for a third position towards a fairer, more diverse and humane world. Have not India and France, who share many cultural and civilisational principles, stood for millennia for certain universal values such as "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity"? How will our planet survive the 21st century if mankind does not respect and practice these ideals? The problem with a unipolar world is that though it may promote liberty, it will never be able to preserve the concepts of equality and fraternity.

For more than 2,000 years, while the Indian subcontinent was composed of a myriad of small republics and principalities, the concept of diversity, within a large cultural family, flourished. Around the same time, the Gaulish tribes refused to accept the diktat of a

mighty empire which had decided to remodel the world its own image. Why should the Gaul have been a Roman clone?

Twenty centuries later during the Cold War, both nations, in their own ways, advocated the concept of a multipolar world. The 1960s saw President de Gaulle promoting his fiercely independent foreign policy in Europe. In Asia, India participated in the Non - Aligned Movement. In this bipolar world, both nations strove to keep an independent vision in their own bloc. Recently, France was one of the very few Western countries which did not criticise India after the nuclear tests in May 1998. Paris understood the legitimate need for Delhi to build a deterrent nuclear policy.

During the last few months, France and India have rediscovered that they have been sharing these 'old' ideals a long time. When Prime Minister Vajpayee visited France last year, he and his French counterpart gave a concrete shape to a strategic dialogue between France and India. The French side admitted: "There is no doubt that India is a major player on the international scene and has an acute sense of its international responsibilities." Since then, a dialogue has been held regularly, particularly through a series of diplomatic visits.

In December, National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra, while returning from Washington, decided to stop-over in Paris to meet Mr Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, the Diplomatic Adviser to President Chirac. Mr Gourdault, a former student of the School of Oriental Languages knows India well and is even said to speak good Hindi. During this meeting India was congratulated for the fairness of the elections in Kashmir and Paris noted that all de-escalation measures had come from India despite continued Pakistan -sponsored terrorist activity in Kashmir.

Further, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani visited Paris in January to sign an Indo- French extradition treaty. This visit also paved the way for the visit of Mr Raffarin, the French Prime Minister, to India in February. The main interest of these high level visits is perhaps not in exchanging views on America's Baghdad adventure, but on the role that the two countries want to play in tomorrow's world. The impending conflict in Iraq indicates that the time has come for nations like France and India to create a new strategic axis which will firmly oppose "rogue" states wherever they are, while also giving space to each one to express its own genius in a world no longer guided by force, but by values. Latest comment: *"As long as the kashmiris do not show wholehearted inclination to remain with India, it is unlikely that India would go out of way to abrogate the treaty and incur the wrath of the international community. Risk has to be commensurate with the reward!"*