



CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

opinion

Europe's new political geography

By Charles Grant

Last year the Iraq war split Europe into two hostile camps: one led by France and Germany, and the other led by Britain, Italy, Poland and Spain. Yesterday's summit in Berlin between Britain's Tony Blair, France's Jacques Chirac and Germany's Gerhard Schröder shows that Europe's political geography is changing. Their declaration on economic reform was predictable. More important was their decision to go on meeting regularly. The three leaders believe that such summits will provide some backbone to the enlarged European Union of 25 countries.

In the old days, when France and Germany reached an accord the rest of the EU generally followed. But no longer. On subjects such as the stability pact's budgetary rules, or the draft EU constitution, France and Germany have tried to lead – sometimes arrogantly – yet others have refused to follow. Chirac and Schröder now understand that they cannot steer Europe without the help of Blair, who is highly regarded by many of the Nordic and Eastern European governments.

Blair sees that a *menage à trois* can serve British interests. After the Iraq war many Europeans judged the UK to be an American poodle. Trilateral summits create a different image, one of Britain engaged at the heart of Europe. And there are practical benefits: France and Germany have more military, diplomatic and economic clout than Spain, Italy or Poland. The French and the Germans can therefore be more useful to Britain in the negotiations on, say, EU institutions or the future EU budget.

Blair, Chirac and Schröder fear that the EU will find it hard to take decisions when there are 25 countries sitting around the table. They believe that if the big three can hammer out a common position in advance, the Council of Ministers is more likely to reach an agreement. Trilateral leadership has already shown that it can deliver

results on foreign and defence policy. Thus last October the big three forged a common EU policy on Iran – to offer a trade agreement in return for Iran putting its nuclear facilities under international supervision. And this month the three have worked together on making rapid-reaction military forces available to the United Nations. But on economic issues, where the other member-states and the EU institutions have much more weight, the benefits of big three leadership are less evident.

The Berlin summit has upset some people, and none more than the Italians, who think they should be part of any leadership group. Spain, Poland and several smaller member-states are also miffed at their exclusion. However, some of the smaller countries – including the Czech Republic, Ireland and Sweden – are relaxed about big three co-operation. They did not like it when the London, Paris and Berlin fell out over Iraq, and they fear that when the big elephants argue, little states may get crushed between them. They also hope that if the UK gets closer to France and Germany it will be able to moderate their protectionist and anti-American tendencies.

Blair, Chirac and Schröder will have to work hard to convince their partners that these summits are legitimate. They must be open about what they decide, to avoid the impression of a cabal. And the three should involve EU institutions: the small countries respect them and trust them to represent their interests.

Blair is keen to maintain his friendships in Rome, Madrid and Warsaw. But in the new Europe he and other leaders will be promiscuous, with alliances shifting from subject to subject. On many of the big issues Blair's first choice partners will be France and Germany.

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