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Diplomacy Al Dente

by Massimo D'Alema

In a few days I will travel to Washington with a simple and clear message. The new government in Rome is committed to building a stronger Euro-Atlantic community. The world has changed much since I visited the White House in March 1999. At the time I was Prime Minister of Italy and the issue was the need for humanitarian intervention in Kosovo. We did it together, Americans and Europeans, and successfully. Seven years later, the major challenge we face has shifted to the broader Middle East. The Western alliance has thus far not found the same common approach we forged in dealing with the Balkan tragedy of the 1990s. The results have been negative for all of us: divisions seriously reduce our collective effectiveness.

The Italian center-left opposed military intervention in Iraq in March 2003. This does not mean, however, that the new Prodi government will turn Italy into a less useful partner for Washington. The opposite may well prove true. The lessons learnt since 2003 are very clear: for the European Union, a sound transatlantic relationship is a condition to remain united; for the U.S., a united Europe proves more helpful than individual allies. The new Italian government – having more confidence than the previous one in the value of European integration – can help bring about what we all really need: a Euro-Atlantic community fully able to respond effectively to the post 9-11 world challenges.

It needs to be said that having supported or opposed the Iraq intervention in 2003 is not the litmus test of Atlanticism. Atlanticists, in the United States as much as in Europe, stood on both sides of this debate. Real allies discuss all matters of common concern in earnest -including when they differ. And, in earnest, I would like to state the new Italian government's position on Iraq.

Withdrawal of the Italian troops from Iraq is part of our electoral mandate. The Prodi government will manage it in an orderly way, in consultation with the Iraqi government and the coalition partners. We will guarantee that the modalities of the withdrawal do not exacerbate the problems facing the Iraqi government nor the security of the Multinational Force partners.

Our men and women in uniform have been serving with great pride and professionalism for nearly three years; young lives were lost. My government honours their commitment and their sacrifice. Italy has no intention of turning her back on the Iraqi people: we will withdraw our troops but not our support for the new democratically elected Iraqi government. I was in Baghdad a few days ago, discussing with the Iraqi authorities the optimal Italian contribution to the future of the country – from training of the Iraqi police to a new package of civilian and economic help.

We share a common interest in the future stability of a democratic and united Iraq. We will continue to contribute to it, although with different means.

Looking beyond Iraq, Italy will prove steadfast in supporting peace, stability and reconstruction through multinational endeavours in conflict torn regions: Afghanistan, the Balkans, Africa. Responsibility to protect has too often remained an empty slogan.

The Euro-Atlantic community I have in mind remains grounded on NATO but must also rely on a strong and united Europe. I want to be clear where I stand on this issue.

- First, we need to work out a way for the EU to remain open, while solving the current institutional crisis. Italy is committed to the long-term effort to bring the Balkans and Turkey into the European mainstream.

- Second, a strong EU must be shaped as a partner of the U.S., not as a counterweight. Italy's foreign policy has historically achieved the best results when the link with the U.S. and European integration have reinforced each other – something the previous government forgot at times. A stronger Europe is the ally America needs in today's world when facing the threats of terrorism and nuclear proliferation.
- Third, promoting freedom and democracy, and fighting for development and against poverty in the world, is not only a moral duty for contemporary democracies, but also our best security policy. We Europeans too believe in "transformational diplomacy". However, the lessons we all learned the hard way since 2003, show the need for more effective strategies to favour change, including on the Israeli-Palestinian front.
- Finally, concrete progress in pacifying Iraq and Afghanistan will remain elusive if we do not reach out to neighbouring countries. This is an additional reason to welcome the recent U.S. stance on dealing with Iran. Europe urges Teheran to respond positively.

There is no ready-made recipe for the tangle of issues that hamper progress in the broader Middle East: but Europe and the U.S. can and should devise a regional strategy equally convincing to both sides of the Atlantic, and combine their resources in pursuit of shared visions.

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