What is bad (or good) for the EU is good for the United States?

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Uncorking the champagne and speeding up the 4th of July fireworks has started in the White House in celebration of the “no” vote on the EU Constitution given by the French and Dutch electorates. Since Bush’s first election, and most especially after Iraq, any factor that contributes to the weakening of the European integration process and the development of an independent foreign and defense policy has been welcome in Washington.

Bush had enough with the Franco-German axis and Rumsfeld slapped them with the term “Old Europe”. All rules were valid to debilitate the European coalition. They included the use of new EU members as Trojan horses, pressure to get Turkey into the EU quickly, and slamming down the brakes on an autonomous defense policy under the argument that it weakens NATO.

After Bush’s reelection, however, troubles in Iraq and the sinking of the US image in the world pressured him to make peace with the Europeans, electing a diplomatic strategy delegated to Condoleezza Rice. However, the latent sentiment of distrust and fear towards Europe was waiting for an opportunity to resurface.

Liberation came with the one-two punch executed by the French and Dutch. The smile in the White House was evident. The Europeans (called “euros” in some offices) don’t know where they are headed. The United States will, again, divide and conquer them.

This temporary satisfaction, however, may turn to preoccupation when considering the sources of the “no” and the consequences of potential EU disintegration. Believing that a marooned Europe will be friendlier to U.S. interests is an illusory calculation from a political and strategic angle. It is also damaging for the national security of the United States. The last thing Bush needs now is a debilitated and introspected Europe.
In the first place, the negative vote may give the impression that it is actually a rejection of a regulatory EU that wants to control the market, and a support for the welfare state, and an enemy of foreign investors. On the contrary, a notable part of the “no” vote believes that the design proposed in the Constitution is too business-oriented. Now the EU leadership will receive the heat to side with the people.

On the other hand, an important sector on the right has rejected the project for nationalistic reasons. It is fearful of immigration and opposed to EU enlargement, especially to Turkey. This sector will capture once again the anti-US. sentiment, with a more damaging impact than the one emanating from the left. This racist and ultra nationalist band will extend to the United States the accusation of the alleged loss of national identity.

Whatever their actual numbers, the fact is that the opposition are very vocal, are able to pull all the populist triggers, and can control public demonstrations. In sum, they can afford to be intransigent and intolerant to guarantee, for example, the rigidity of the markets, not exactly in the best interest of U.S. investment.

Within this panorama, the moderate sectors that form the grand coalition (social democrats and centrist conservatives) that has made the current EU possible will feel intimidated. They will then elect to back national interests, not always coinciding with the U.S. From Airbus subsidies, support in Iraq, ideological battles such as the International Criminal Court, dispute clashes at the WTO, and cultural confrontation, all may become a weapon in times of confrontation.

Although it is too early for safe predictions, it is nonetheless certain that the pressure to leap forward will be strong for the formation of a series of European “reinforced cooperation” schemes (in foreign policy and defense especially), because they will respond to the nationalist pressure from the electorate. This is not exactly what the White House was expecting, waiting for a slow and consensual process, installed in a constitutional text that would take time to be fully implemented.
To paraphrase Calvin Coolidge, the ones who believe that what is bad (or good) for Europe is good for America may get a shock. In sum, Bush lost the referendum, too.

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