

By Simon Serfaty
"Nineteen seventy-three," declared Henry Kissinger in late April of that year, "is the year of Europe" a time, he insisted, for the allies to join in "a fresh act of creation . . . equal to that undertaken by the postwar generation of leaders" on both sides of the Atlantic. Now, in 2008 the thirty-fifth year of "the year of Europe" conditions seem to be broadly met, at last, for an answer from the European states and their Union.

First, at the level of the nation-states, the replacement of worn-out and often discredited leaders in Germany, France, and even Britain has ended the political agony that surrounded their last years in office. Unusually high levels of public support for their successors, combined with an opposition that is either in disarray or feeble, suggest that Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Gordon Brown are likely to remain in place for the next six to ten years. On the whole, these new leaders are political pragmatists who can relate to each other and also appear ready to work with the United States as is confirmed by their open interest in engaging President George W. Bush even as each eagerly awaits the arrival of a new administration. With elections in Poland, Spain, and Italy as well as for the European Parliament due in 2008-2009, the political framework is being recast for all of Europe and its most significant interlocutors in the United States and Russia, both of which will hold presidential elections of their own in 2008.

Admittedly, these new leaders will have to bring some relief to a prolonged malaise that featured but was not limited to the sluggish state of economies and the cultural disarray of their respective societies. There is already some improvement, however, thanks, ironically enough, to legacies that have not received the credit they deserve: Gerhard Schroeder, who started the economic reforms that Merkel is now pursuing; Tony Blair, who confronted serious acts of post-9/11 terror in a European capital, the threat of which Brown is now also facing; and even Jacques Chirac's last prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, who introduced many of the policies his successor is now endorsing. With Germany acting again as the economic locomotive it is meant to be, France and the rest of continental Europe north of Spain are enjoying levels of growth not seen for at least a decade. In Germany, this year's budget is expected to show a surplus for the first time since 1989; in France, unemployment has fallen to its lowest level since 1982; in Britain, a streak of 40 consecutive quarters of economic expansion is not about to end, with growth for 2007 projected at nearly 3 percent still slightly above the projected average for the European Union, which grew 3.3 percent in 2006, a six-year high and more than one full percentage point ahead of the United States that year.

Politically more confident and economically more robust, the states of Europe are also institutionally more cohesive. For much of the past decade, the EU was a convenient alibi used by national governments to redirect their citizens' discontent, thus facilitating an institutional crisis that exploded when voters in France and the Netherlands rejected the constitutional treaty in mid-2005. That debate was settled last June with a so-called simplified treaty that was floor-managed by Merkel but prepared by Sarkozy and ultimately endorsed by Brown. Now at last, the EU can return to debating what it must do, as compared to discoursing over what it should be. That, too, will be tested in 2008, as the French prepare for, and assume, their six-month presidency of the EU.

The French presidency, which will be one of the last such EU presidencies, looms as the defining moment for Europe in 2008: much of what will follow will depend on what is achieved during those six months how (meaning, with whom) and to what ends (meaning, without or against whom). The Reform Treaty, which is scheduled for ratification by all EU members before the next European elections in June 2009, provides a good basis on which to build a European Union that can be a more assertive power in the world without failing to become a

more cooperative U.S. partner in a strong and cohesive Atlantic Alliance. The treaty includes a full-time president of the European Council, who will be able to serve for as long as five years and will gradually become the face of the 27-member Union, while a smaller Commission continues to act as a quasi legislative branch and a reinforced Parliament begins to reduce the current democratic deficit that has kept the EU institutions away from European citizens. On paper at least, the new regime moves the Union closer to becoming a virtual regional state whose rules of governance are not shaped by a constitution but by treaties meaning "We, the Heads of State and Government" rather than "We, the People," or, in Blair's old formula, "a superpower rather than a super state." Properly used, the Reform Treaty can be an effective conduit for new initiatives in the defense and security areas. As is well known, U.S.-EU and EU-NATO policy harmonization has repeatedly suffered from divisions within the EU, not only among EU members but also between (and within) its various institutions. The new "High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy" will combine the security responsibilities of the European Council and Commission into one person and one instrument, thus providing the United States but also NATO with the legendary single telephone number to call. Should such a phone call be placed at some appropriate time in 2009, what they might talk about, and how, will also be determined in 2008, with an early preview during the NATO summit scheduled in the spring. That summit, too, will have a significance that transcends the issue that is most likely to define it, namely another round of enlargement. As early as February 2008, the U.S. presidential primaries for both political parties will likely have delivered their verdict, thereby creating increasingly cacophonous sounds in a world that will find it difficult to listen to what outgoing President Bush says while trying to anticipate what either of his possible successors might do, or cease to do, a few months later. Under such circumstances, it will be useful to have a coherent and forceful European voice that, even (and especially) when speaking in French, can be heard speaking with an unusual American accent as, past Bush and beyond Iraq, the Europeans and their Union prepare for a new U.S. president. Admittedly, there have been many other moments when Europe, seemingly on the verge of "being back" with an Atlanticist disposition and global expectations, was in fact held back or taken away from its senior partner across the Atlantic. Whether this current moment will last during and beyond the coming year is not certain, herefore, and it may depend on circumstances over which neither the states of Europe nor their Union have much control. Nor, in this initial phase in 2008, is this moment alone likely to produce the "fresh act of creation" that Kissinger called for 35 years ago. But, at least, improved relations between the United States and France in NATO, and between Britain, France, and Germany in the EU, are a much-needed start. (c) Simin Serfaty 2008, Reproduced with permission