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US, EU Aim to Rebuild Transatlantic Ties

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The head of the European Commission and a senior U.S. lawmaker agree that President Bush's visit next month to European Union headquarters in Brussels will help rebuild transatlantic relations after a long rift over Iraq. Both Europe and the United States are sending signals that they are eager to renew ties as Mr. Bush begins his second term.

The top Republican in the U.S. Senate, Bill Frist of Tennessee, was the latest U.S. envoy to visit Brussels since President Bush's re-election.

Incoming National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley was in the Belgian capital in December, and outgoing Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge visited Brussels this week to seek closer coordination in the war on terror.

For its part, the European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, was in Washington last week. And EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner was in the U.S. capital this week stressing the need for both sides to focus on what unites them rather than what divides them.

Jose Manuel Durao Barroso, the head of the EU's executive body, says he is looking forward to President Bush's visit to the EU on February 22.

"And I really expressed my hope that we can re-launch this very important relation between the European Union, the European Commission, and the United States of America," he said. "We have a lot to do in common, namely in terms of freedom, of security and peace. We can do a lot together, the United States and Europe."

For his part, Mr. Frist, the Senate Majority leader, says there is a momentum in Washington to renew a dialogue with the EU and put aside past disagreements.

"There is a genuine excitement about the president of the United States coming to continue that dialogue," said Senator Frist. "The rebuilding, in many ways, of relationships is something that we all look forward to, we all will continue to participate in a very aggressive manner."

Both Washington and Brussels are accentuating the positive. This week, the United States and the EU announced, for example, that they will try to settle a dispute over subsidies paid to their major aircraft manufacturers instead of taking it to the World Trade Organization.

The focus in Brussels has shifted away from disagreements over Iraq, where there is no European enthusiasm to share the U.S. burden, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. European officials like Mr. Barroso say the true test of easier trans-Atlantic ties will be stepped up U.S. engagement to restore the peace process.

"We believe there is now an opportunity to re-launch the peace process in the Middle East, and that is surely one of the points we are going to discuss with President Bush when he comes to Brussels next month," he said.

An EU foreign policy official says, as far as Brussels is concerned, the key question in the Middle East is whether Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon sees withdrawal from the Gaza Strip as a tactical move to strengthen his country's hold on large parts of the West Bank or as a real start on the road to a two-state solution.