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Analysts: Bush-Chirac Meeting Unlikely to Resolve French-US Differences

By Lisa Bryant

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President Bush seems to have passed one of the toughest tests of his transatlantic, fence-mending visit this week: dining Monday in Brussels with French President Jacques Chirac, a top Iraq-war critic. Analysts in France doubt the meeting will fundamentally erase French-US differences.

It is hard not to enjoy the kind of menu served at the U.S. ambassador's elegant residence in Brussels. The French and American presidents dined on lobster risotto and filet of beef.

During a speech before NATO members in Brussels, President Chirac called for more transatlantic dialogue, describing Europe and the United States as real partners. But judging from some of the reactions in the French press to the dinner meeting, Mr. Bush and Mr. Chirac still have a long way to go before they see eye to eye on a number of international issues.

Defrosting on the surface is how France's conservative *Le Figaro* newspaper put it, "George W. Bush and Jacques Chirac are talking to each other," the newspaper wrote, "but that does not mean they are listening to each other".

An editorial in the more liberal *Le Monde* newspaper described relations between the United States and Europe as profoundly divided, starting with basic philosophical differences about how to view the world.

Paul Godt, a political science professor at the American University in Paris, doubts whether ties between Washington and Paris will improve significantly during Mr. Bush's second term.

"I do not think very much is going to change," he said. "The atmospheric might be improved and there might be less public jousting. But each country is pursuing its own national interests as its leaders see fit."

Mr. Bush's four-day trip to Europe includes visits to Germany and Slovakia, as well as Belgium. Improving relations with France is clearly a priority for the U.S. leader, who noted that his first official dinner in Europe was with Mr. Chirac.

Washington and Paris are working jointly to pressure Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. Both countries also collaborate closely in the fight against terrorism. Mr. Bush even joked Monday about inviting the French leader to his Texas ranch, saying he was "looking for a good cowboy."

But the two sides still disagree on such major issues as how to deal with China, Iran, and global warming. And a new poll published by the Associated Press indicates 84 percent of French believed the United States is more interested in promoting its commercial interests overseas than promoting democracy.

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