

Diplomacy's new muscle un

AS her first job hosting a large international gathering as secretary of state drew to a close, Condoleezza Rice turned to her cohost, Jean Asselborn of the European Union, and beamed, "Good job, Jean!" She then jumped up and gave a warm hug and encouraging words to another at the head table, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, whose country was the focus of last week's meeting here.

The Iraq conference drew top diplomats from dozens of countries and key international groups and put Secretary Rice - already referred to by many here as simply "Condi" - right where she wanted to be: refocusing the foreign policy of George W. Bush on diplomacy.

Less than half a year at her post, Rice has taken the Bush administration beyond the divisions that marked the first term's

foreign policy, confidently filling the shoes that never seemed to fit so well on Colin Powell. In these initial months, two features stand out: First, she has bridged the divide that separated the Bush White House from the State Department, remaining the president's top foreign-policy adviser - and sounding board - even after the transfer to Foggy Bottom.

Second, as she talks to the world about America's global mission of democratization and the spread of freedom as envisioned by her boss, she is deftly using a life story that rings true and genuine even to America's skeptics. For many students who heard her February speech in Paris, or Arab intellectuals who attended last week's talk in Cairo, the tale of an African-American girl from segregated Alabama who rose through a changing society is

opening ears and casting the US in a different light.

What has struck foreign diplomats is how Rice has put herself in control of a new building and bureaucracy at the State Department, without giving up much of the power she wielded at the White House as the president's national security adviser.

"She has taken control of the State Department, and she is still in charge [of foreign policy] back at the White House. For her there is no border, no door between the State Department and the [National Security Council]," says a high-ranking European diplomat in Washington. "She is probably the most powerful secretary of State in decades."

At the same time, the Brussels meeting allowed a glimpse of another, tougher side - some say even stubbornly undiplomatic at

times. In public remarks, she singled out Syria among neighboring countries that she said need to do more to help stabilize Iraq, then later pulled no punches at a televised press conference when again fingering Syria as responsible for failing to stop extremists from crossing its border into Iraq to kill innocent Iraqis - and American troops.

It was Condi the diplomat, accented by a little reminder of Condi the tough cookie. And it's a combination that is capturing the world's attention.

"We Europeans see that Condi Rice has convinced the president that diplomacy should be tried before other means, and as secretary of State she is pursuing that conviction on a wide variety of issues," says Guillaume Parmentier, who heads the French Center on the United

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States in Paris. "We also see that she can take a tough line: She has a tough line on Iran; she is tough on Russia."

Like others, the diplomat says that one of Rice's strengths is the strong team she has assembled. At the top of the list he puts Robert Zoellick, who was willing to drop down a notch from his posting as US trade representative to join Rice as her deputy, and Philip Zelikow, former executive director of the 9/11 commission who joined Rice as the State Department's counselor or senior policy adviser.

But it is Rice's relationship with President Bush that makes her stand out, and that above all separates her from the disappointing experience that foreign governments had with Mr. Powell.

"The Europeans liked Colin Powell, but that didn't matter so

much once they realized he wasn't going to be able to deliver the president. But she can," says Ronald Asmus, executive director of the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Center in Brussels.

The list of specific issues that are being handled differently - with more consultation and a higher priority on finding common ground - is significant, foreign diplomats say, beginning with Iraq and Iran and extending to the approach to militant groups playing a role in Middle East political reform.

Pointing to Mr. Bush's recent suggestion that the US could work with groups that forswear violence to enter electoral politics, the high-ranking diplomat says, "I do think it stems from Condi."

-*Courtesy Christian Science Monitor*