

Bush's European tour signals fracturing of Atlantic Alliance

Bill Vann
19 June 2001

George W. Bush's European tour has highlighted a rupture between the United States and its erstwhile NATO allies that is unprecedented in the post-World War II period. The US president's debut on the European stage (only the second time ever that this multimillionaire son of an ex-president has visited the continent) has confirmed that American foreign policy, in the hands of the Republican right, has assumed a more extreme unilateralist and militarist character.

While the media has focused on the diplomatic formalities that comprise the outward form of such events—the “body language” between Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin, or the efforts of the US president to make a “positive impression” and avoid his usual verbal contortions and *faux pas*—the ominous substance of the new strategic approach that the US administration spelled out to the Europeans was unmistakable.

The trip was preceded by a series of provocative declarations from Washington centering on the administration's determination to deploy a nuclear missile defense system—reprising the “Star Wars” strategy developed by the Reagan administration nearly 20 years ago—and scrap the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the linchpin of international efforts to contain the nuclear arms race for the past three decades.

At the same time, the administration reneged on its promise to impose limits on power plant emissions to reduce global warming—a pledge relayed to European ministers during a trip to the continent earlier this year by Environmental Protection Agency chief Christine Todd Whitman. Following a concerted lobbying campaign by the oil and natural gas industry, which contributed some \$10 million to Bush's campaign, the president announced that the science on global warming was “incomplete” and repudiated Washington's support for the Kyoto Protocol, which mandates sharp reductions in greenhouse gas emission levels.

Relations between Washington and Western Europe have further deteriorated as the result of actions taken by European powers angered and frustrated by the increasingly unilateral character of US foreign policy. These included last month's vote ousting the United States from the UN Commission on Human Rights after three European governments—France, Sweden and Austria—vied for the three seats reserved for the Western bloc, leaving Washington out in the cold and fuming. The UN Security Council, meanwhile, delayed a US-British proposal on Iraqi sanctions, reflecting discord over Washington's demand for an aggressive policy against so-called “rogue states,” some of which are the source of lucrative trade and investment for European-based corporations.

In another extraordinary rebuke to Washington, the NATO Council of Ministers rejected an appeal by US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on the eve of Bush's trip for a resolution supporting American plans to deploy a missile defense system.

At the same time, the European states have reiterated their intention to build up a rapid reaction force capable of deploying 60,000 troops as a counterweight to the US-dominated NATO. The move toward military

independence reflects mounting transatlantic economic tensions. The new European currency, the euro, is set to go into circulation in 12 countries by the end of this year, creating a powerful rival to the US dollar, and a host of disagreements have emerged in global trade negotiations and on specific issues ranging from steel imports, to aircraft subsidies and hormone-fed beef.

The European Union rejected the US call for a nuclear missile defense system, taking the highly unusual action of condemning the policy of an American president in the midst of his state visit. Meeting in Sweden, European leaders backed a resolution drafted by French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder committing the EU to strengthening “the international norms and the political instruments for preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.” The thrust of this declaration was aimed less at Iran, Iraq or North Korea, than at the US itself.

Shortly before playing host to the American president, Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson described the European Union as “one of the few institutions we can develop as a balance to US world domination.”

The visit provoked mass protests wherever Bush went, reflecting growing anti-American sentiment in Europe and internationally. In addition to the specter of a renewed nuclear arms race and the environmental threat posed by American policies, the US federal government's revival of the death penalty against Timothy McVeigh provoked particular revulsion. In Spain, the first stop on Bush's trip, this sentiment was heightened by the recent release of a Spanish citizen who had been held on death row in Florida. The inmate was acquitted when it emerged that evidence had been fabricated in his case. In Spain, capital punishment is seen as a throwback to the barbarism of the Franco dictatorship, supported today only by a minuscule fascist party.

Bush and his aides portrayed the trip as an attempt to hear out European concerns. “I hope the notion of unilateralism died in some people's minds here today,” he said after meeting with NATO leaders in Brussels. “Unilateralists don't come around the table to listen to others and to share opinions.”

This attempt to cast the European tour as a respectful dialogue—a US president sharing his ideas with his European counterparts—was aimed at deflecting criticism not only in Europe, but from within Washington's own foreign policy establishment, where the new administration's policies are viewed by some as reckless and dangerous.

Even within the Republican Party and the Bush administration itself there are divisions over the new approach to international relations. To no small degree, concern over the shift in US foreign policy and a desire to rein in the hawks in the Bush administration underlay the defection of Vermont Senator James Jeffords and the resulting transfer of the Senate from Republican to Democratic control.

Whatever efforts Bush and his entourage made to feign a conciliatory image, the policy spelled out in the course of the five-day tour amounted to a provocation. Bush dismissed the ABM treaty, defended by both

Western Europe and Russia as the cornerstone of nuclear disarmament, as a “relic of the past” that must be scrapped.

“It prevents freedom-loving people from exploring the future; and that’s why we’ve got to lay it aside,” declared the US president at a joint news conference with Spanish president Jose Maria Aznar. Since its inception at the end of the nineteenth century, American imperialism has exhibited the peculiar feature of cloaking the pursuit of its own strategic interests in the mantle of fighting for the freedom and democratic aspirations of all. Bush has managed to reduce this pretense to the level of the absurd. No one in his administration has attempted to explain how turning outer space into a new theater of nuclear warfare manifests the love of freedom and the desire to peacefully explore the future.

If Bush and his entourage had been speaking frankly, they would have said that the treaty impeded the use of US military supremacy as a means of extorting economic concessions from Washington’s rivals and extending US geo-strategic domination to every part of the world, and that it hindered profit-loving American defense contractors from exploring the outer limits of future Pentagon appropriations.

The White House, Pentagon and State Department have shrugged off warnings that the deployment of such a system will only exacerbate an already unstable nuclear weapons balance between the US and the badly deteriorated forces of the former Soviet Union. Russia’s fears that it could not survive a US first strike would only increase, giving it a greater incentive to place its missile force on a hair-trigger. China would similarly seek to bolster its nuclear arsenal to counteract American missile defenses.

On the eve of his meeting with Russian President Putin in Slovenia, Bush declared his intention to expand NATO “from the Baltic to the Black Sea,” rolling the US-led military alliance up to Russia’s borders and into the former Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Further poisoning relations, Bush used his visit to Poland to denounce Russia for providing Iran with materials that could be used to produce nuclear weapons.

Despite emphasis on the outwardly cordial encounter between Putin and Bush, the Russian president was forced to express Russia’s sharp concerns over Bush’s policies. “Look, this is a military organization,” he said, when asked of US plans for NATO expansion. “It’s moving towards our border. Why?” At the same time, he reiterated Russia’s view that the ABM treaty is the “cornerstone” of nuclear weapons control and reduction.

Even more significant than what Putin said was the fact that he came to his first summit with the new US president directly from Shanghai. There, together with leaders of four former Soviet Central Asian republics, he signed a joint agreement with Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Ostensibly the pact was aimed at furthering economic cooperation and combating Islamic insurgency (both the Russian and Chinese leader felt compelled to deny that it had any military implications).

Yet the pact was widely understood as a bid by Russia and China to counter US and Western European attempts to seize control of strategic oil, natural gas and mineral reserves in the region. Zemin said that the pact heralded creation of a “brand new multilateral cooperation organization on the Eurasian continent,” that would foster “world multi-polarization.”

The predominant foreign policy view within the Bush administration was spelled out in blunt terms in a recent issue of the *Weekly Standard*, an ideological organ of extreme right-wing factions within the Republican Party. An article by Charles Krauthammer published on the eve of the Bush tour asserted that the Bush administration had merely recognized the reality that the US was the sole superpower and had to assert its hegemony. This realization, the article claimed, was hindered for a decade following the Soviet Union’s collapse by concerns of deteriorating US economic power and the persistence of the “Vietnam syndrome,” dissuading those within the Clinton administration from forcefully exerting US military superiority.

“Ten years later, the fog has cleared,” wrote Krauthammer. “No one is saying that Japan will overtake the United States economically, or Europe will overtake the United States diplomatically, or that some new anti-American coalition of powers will rise to replace the Communist bloc militarily. Today, the United States remains the preeminent economic, military, diplomatic, and cultural power on a scale not seen since the fall of the Roman Empire.”

The new foreign policy, the article declared, eschewed adherence to international treaties and obligations in the interests of “maintaining, augmenting, and exploiting the American predominance.”

Spelling out the essential message that Bush brought to Europe, Krauthammer continued: “Henceforth, the United States would build nuclear weapons, both offensive and defensive, to suit its needs—regardless of what others, particularly the Russians, thought. Sure, there would be consultation—no need to be impolite. Humble unilateralism, the oxymoron that best describes this approach, requires it: Be nice, be understanding. But, in the end, be undeterred.”

As for those who warn that the attempt to erect a missile defense system will spark a new arms race: “The response of the Bush administration is: So what? If the Russians want to waste what little remains of their economy on such weapons, let them...”

The article concluded: “The Bush administration ... welcomes the US role of, well, hyperpower. In its first few months, its policies have reflected a comfort with the unipolarity of the world today, a desire to maintain and enhance it, and a willingness to act unilaterally to do so. It is a vision of America’s role very different from that elaborated in the first post-Cold War decade—and far more radical than has generally been noted.”

This outlook, that the US has carte blanche in the unilateral use of “overwhelming American power” to achieve its aims internationally, is an expression of the explosive eruption of American imperialism. A broad lobby within the American ruling elite, in particular the oil and arms industry—so well represented in the Bush cabinet—sees a window of opportunity opened up with the collapse of the USSR for the US to use its military might to seize advantages on the world market.

Immediately within its sights are the vast oil reserves of the Caspian Sea, widely seen as the key to strategic energy needs in the next period. The scramble to lay hold of these resources brings Washington into direct conflict not only with Russia and China, but also with its nominal allies in Western Europe.

More fundamentally, the ruling faction in Washington sees the possibility of realizing the “American Century” that Soviet power curtailed in the aftermath of World War II. Within this context, not only the protocols of Cold War nuclear disarmament are seen as an impediment, but the entire bilateral approach that Washington took toward Western Europe for more than half a century is seen as a relic of the past.

As the Bush administration seeks to radically alter the relations that flowed from the policy of anti-Soviet “containment”—including the legal and political restraints on the deployment and ultimately the use of nuclear weapons—Western Europe, Russia, China and Japan are searching for new means to contain the aggressive expansion of US imperialism.

The resistance which Bush encountered within European ruling circles to US plans to assert global hegemony is the palest warning of the vast crisis that the scrapping of postwar relations and the launching of a new arms race must open up, not least of all within the United States itself.

Inevitably the policy of military escalation and world domination upon which Washington is embarked has catastrophic implications, including a growing threat of nuclear annihilation. These policies no doubt have a social base, particularly among the economic elite that supported Bush’s installation in the White House as a means of removing all impediments to its further enrichment. At the same time there exist within American ruling circles sharp divisions and clear signs of political disorientation.

Among the broad mass of working people, the resurgence of US militarism will inevitably provoke deep opposition. Working people will be forced to pay for the vast new military expenditures that this administration is contemplating in the form of deeper cuts in social services, a further erosion of living standards and more flagrant attacks on democratic rights, while stockholders of the major arms manufacturers enjoy a windfall.

Under the impact of deepening social polarization and the growing threat of military adventures, the illegitimate character of the Bush administration and its deeply reactionary policies will come to the fore. While exulting in its supposed status as the world's indomitable superpower, the ruling faction in Washington is steadily creating the conditions for intense social unrest and the emergence of a new movement of the working class into political and social struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact