

War in Afghanistan gives rise to tensions in France

Peter Schwarz
18 October 2001

France, alongside Britain, Germany and Australia, is one of the four countries that has offered unlimited support to the US government in its “war against terrorism”, including military assistance.

At present, about 4,000 French soldiers are stationed in Africa and the Persian Gulf, but so far, according to official statements, they have not taken part in the war against Afghanistan. According to Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine, only two of France’s most modern ships, the supply tanker *Var* and the frigate *Courbet*, have been made available for the war. The direct participation of the French armed forces in the attacks on Afghanistan also seems unlikely, since the country has neither combat aircraft with sufficient range nor the appropriate cruise missiles. The French navy’s only aircraft carrier, *Charles de Gaulle*, is presently undergoing a refit.

This situation could change, however, if the war is expanded to other countries, such as the Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania or Yemen. They would lie within the range of French forces, which maintain a base in Djibouti, East Africa with 2,500 soldiers, as well as further military bases in Dakar, Libreville, Ndjamena and Abidjan.

The French secret services are substantially more important for the present war than direct military support. Several dozen agents belonging to the DGSE and the DRM (France’s foreign and military secret service organisations) are presently in Afghanistan, where they are cooperating closely with the opposition Northern Alliance, whose recently murdered leader Shah Massud visited Paris in April and agreed to cooperate.

The French secret services have over 20 years experience in Afghanistan. “Since the end of the 1970s”, the newspaper *Libération* writes, “the secret services... were strongly involved in support for the Mujaheddin against the Soviets. One of the greatest successes of the ‘swimming pool’, the nickname of the DGSE, consisted of the fact that it was the first to announce the Soviet invasion of 1979. French agents, who were infiltrated directly into the country or who used less respectable methods in working under the cover of NGOs [Non Governmental Organisations], know the country far better than their American colleagues.”

The Gaullist President Jacques Chirac, who determines France’s foreign policy and exercises supreme command over the armed forces, has distinguished himself with declarations of solidarity and offers of support to the American government.

In an interview with CNN two days after the attacks in New York and Washington, Chirac promised France’s “total solidarity” and was one of the first foreign heads of state to visit President Bush in Washington on September 18. On the evening of October 7, as the first bombs fell on Kabul, he announced in a television address that the French armed forces would participate strongly on America’s side.

Support for the policies of the US government sounds substantially more restrained from the government camp, which beside the Socialist Party of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin also includes the Greens and the Communist Party. They also stress “solidarity in the fight against terrorism”, but this

is combined with a series of reservations and conditions.

While Chirac was still in Washington, Jospin announced in Paris that military participation in support of the US would only be possible following a parliamentary vote. French solidarity with the US did not mean renouncing one’s own judgement and sovereignty. And following the French president’s speech on October 7, circles close to the prime minister let it be known that Jospin was angry with Chirac for giving his American counterpart a “blank cheque”. Speaking to the National Assembly (parliament), Jospin warned of a chain reaction of events and stressed: “If the developments in Afghanistan should pull us into a maelstrom that threatens to submerge our interests, then I would not support participation.”

Last week, in a speech to the French Senate, Jospin clearly delineated himself from the direction being taken by US foreign policy. One must always be conscious, he stressed, “that there are unresolved conflicts in the world, there is the misery and disappointment particularly of the peoples in the Arab-Muslim world, there are many inequalities of development, which if we do not pay attention to them could lead to radical, destructive minority movements being united, that are motivated only by their hatred of others and a death wish.”

He expressed the desire “that reactions in this conflict remain in proportion to the intended goals. We want to retain our ability to continue further dialogue with the Arab countries, not only with their leaders, but also with other opinions.” The big themes of French diplomacy, according to Jospin, are reducing inequalities between North and South, resolving problems on a multilateral basis instead of unilaterally, the will, in face of the unfolding process of globalisation, to introduce an element of regulation and thus organisation and - naturally in close contact with the European partners - the idea that in international crises France possesses its own message.

The different accents provided by Chirac and Jospin are in part due to the presidential elections being held next spring, which they will both probably contest. In the meantime, nearly every question of French domestic and foreign policy is becoming a source of conflict between the two contenders.

While Chirac presents himself as a sovereign statesman, who bears responsibility for world events alongside Bush, Blair and Schroeder, Jospin reacts more sensitively to oppositional tendencies in the population. At the same time, he has to take into consideration the tensions inside his own government coalition and its constantly falling popularity. The war has brought his two most important coalition partners, the Greens and the Communist Party (PCF), under enormous strain.

The war has divided the Greens. The party, which emerged successfully as the second-strongest government party in March’s local elections, withdrew its presidential candidate Alain Lipietz last Saturday, because he had only managed to achieve a two percent rating in public opinion polls. Lipietz’s decline had started long before September 11, but an article he wrote for *Le Monde*, in which he adapted in a lyrical and sentimental way

to the prevailing war sentiments, proved decisive in his being removed as the Green's candidate.

On the other hand, Noel Mamère, originally considered as a replacement for Lipietz, condemned US actions as an "act of war against the Afghan people". Since then, Mamère has declined to stand as a candidate, so that the Greens are without any leadership. He justified his refusal by saying he did not wish to be the candidate of a "balkanised", i.e. a completely fractured, party.

Communist Party Chairman Robert Hue is trying hard to hold his party together behind Jospin. He eagerly praises the "sense of responsibility, which the authorities in our country have demonstrated in this affair". But close collaboration with the US is difficult in a party whose entire membership was shaped by the Cold War. Hue therefore sees himself forced again and again to express criticism of the US government. He criticised the war in Afghanistan, saying he sees the "serious dangers of an uncontrolled spiral of violence". PCF parliamentary deputy Jean Pierre Brard was more open: "It should not appear as if France were an appendage of the United States, which makes the decisions for the entire world".

The tensions between Chirac and Jospin not only have domestic political causes, they are also an expression of deep strategic differences within the French ruling elite.

France has long held considerable political and economic interests in the disputed regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. In the nineteenth century, France participated in the plundering and division of the Ottoman Empire, and at the conclusion of the First World War held a colonial mandate over Syria, including the Lebanon. France's close economic and financial links with this region continue to exist. The French elite cannot be indifferent if the US deploys its military in this region and launches a war, whose extent and conclusion is still an unknown. This is even less the case, given that the greatest part of the world's known and unexplored oil and gas reserves lie in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

With the assistance of the state-owned oil company Elf, which functioned under President Mitterrand as a kind of second Foreign Ministry, France has long pursued its own plans concerning the exploitation of Middle Eastern and Central Asian energy sources. These are often diametrically opposed to British and American conceptions. An example is the project for a gas pipeline connecting Central Asia with Turkey via Iran, which is presently boycotted by the US.

There is little dispute in French ruling circles that France cannot stand idly by in the war against Afghanistan. The tensions concern the question, with which means should France best pursue its own influence? The rightwing bourgeois parties, who stand united in this question behind Chirac, see the only possibility being active military participation beside the US. The Liberals leader, Alain Madelin, thinks Chirac is not going far enough, saying, "Our present contribution doesn't correspond to the scale of the threat."

Alternatively, Jospin thinks France, in close cooperation with the European Union, should favour establishing its own alliance with sections of the elite in the region. The intensive shuttle diplomacy by nearly all the European governments, and the grotesque tug-of-war for influence with the Northern Alliance and the ageing ex-King Zahir Shah, in which France is taking part, must be seen in this context. Each government is trying to establish its own stooges in the region for the period following the war.

This aim is also behind the six-point plan that the French government submitted on October 2 as a resolution to the upcoming EU Foreign Ministers conference. Long before the first bombs had fallen on Kabul, France was developing a plan for the political reconstruction of Afghanistan after the Taliban had been driven out—under the leadership of the United Nations and the EU, and not the US.

This action plan, which also includes among other things providing

humanitarian aide and the formation of new political structures under the supervision of the United Nations, has several goals, according to *Le Monde*: "Getting Europe back into a game from which it has been excluded in the military phase of the crisis (with the exception of GB [Great Britain]); not to give the impression of an international community ready to accept that Afghanistan should be the stamping ground of the great powers; re-situate the solution of the crisis in the framework of the UN; insist on associating the Afghans in the defining of their future whatever the designs of neighbouring states; give to the EU the role for which it has the greatest 'expertise', which is helping in the reconstruction."

So far, the European foreign ministers have been unable to unite behind this plan. On Friday it will again be submitted to the EU special summit in Gent in a considerably amended form.

Another question that divides the French elite is their future attitude towards Europe. The attack on the World Trade Center and America's "war against terrorism" has found the EU in an unfortunate position. Although European efforts towards economic and political union have made some progress over the past years, the EU is still far from having a common foreign policy, let alone joint armed forces with which it could compete with the US. The first 60,000-strong EU rapid reaction force would only be operational at the end of 2003, at the earliest, but is presently being blocked by NATO member Turkey, with US backing.

The haste with which the British government has sought to closely ally itself with Washington militarily has pulled the rug from under any joint European position from the start. Instead, each European government is endeavouring independently to establish better relations with the US administration. "Who is the best friend of the USA? In the past weeks, the race by the European states for the Americans' favour has divided the Europeans once again", Germany's *Der Spiegel* newsweekly commented in its recent edition.

Particularly in Germany, this has unleashed renewed efforts towards an accelerated integration of Europe. "If we remain divided, the Europeans will be marginalised in the new world order", warned Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in front of the *Bundestag* (parliament). During the same parliamentary session Chancellor Schroeder announced that the stage of German post-war politics, in which Germany only took part in an "auxiliary capacity" in international military actions belonged "irretrievably to the past". Germany would "meet its international responsibilities in a new way, a responsibility that corresponds to our role as an important European and transatlantic partner, and also as a strong democracy and strong economy in the heart of Europe."

Such Great Power rumblings from the other side of the Rhine inevitably unleash the French elite's old fears concerning their former enemies in war. This could also be one of the reasons why the bourgeois right, including the Gaullists who are traditionally critical of America, are inclining closely towards the US. Jospin, on the other hand, is holding firm to the perspective of developing Europe as a counterweight to the US and is trying to bring in sections of the former protest movement by employing appeals to social and cultural traditions. In the long run, the growth of differences between Europe and America can lead only to new and sharper international conflicts.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact