Anglo-American tensions over Afghanistan and Iraq

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Britain's foreign policy is in a state of utter confusion. This week it appeared that Prime Minister Tony Blair had achieved a small victory, when US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Number 10 and praised Britain for offering to lead an international military force in Afghanistan to enable the setting up of a Western proxy government.

Powell had declared that he was "pleased the United Kingdom is willing to step forward and volunteer for a leadership role." Far from welcoming Powell's comments, however, Downing Street's response was decidedly cool, with a spokesman insisting, "It is important there is genuine consensus among those involved, including the United Nations (UN), the interim administration in Afghanistan and our allies, including the US." Earlier the Ministry of Defence (MoD) dismissed as "absolutely without foundation" reports that the UK had accepted the task of leading a multinational force in Afghanistan. The MoD said that, although the UK had offered to help, such assistance depended on many things and agreement was a long way off.

The Northern Alliance is fiercely opposed to any sizeable international force being deployed in Afghanistan, but this is not the main reason for Blair's hesitancy. Rather, for the first time since President Bush declared his "war on terrorism", there are open divisions between the US and Britain, as well as serious differences over policy within each country's ruling elites. The prime minister did not welcome Powell's support for a British-led force because he simply does not know what he is letting himself in for. With no agreed mandate for such a force, he fears being handed a poisoned chalice that bogs down Britain's armed forces in Afghanistan, while leaving America clear to prepare a military offensive against Iraq.

Just prior to Powell's visit, the head of the UK's armed forces, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, gave a lecture to the Royal United Services Institute where he referred to "some slight difference of emphasis between the US and the UK". Terrorism, he insisted, could only be defeated by winning "hearts and minds". His remarks lent implicit support to those demanding a concerted effort to stabilise Afghanistan and cautioning against launching a fresh war against Iraq. The UK, he said, had to make a choice that it could not evade: either broadening the war or concentrating on aid and rebuilding Afghanistan.

Boyce's candid remarks about US-UK divisions are highly unusual for such a senior military figure, but they only confirm what had rapidly become public knowledge following the collapse of Taliban resistance in Kabul.

On November 15, 100 troops from Britain's Special Boat Services (SBS) seized control of Bagram airbase, outside Kabul. The deployment of SBS personnel was initially mooted as the advance guard of a force comprising up to 6,000 troops from Britain, France, Australia, Canada, Italy and several Muslim countries, including Turkey. However Northern Alliance leaders in Kabul immediately opposed such an intervention.

London's actions had the support of both the Southern Pashtun leaders and the Pakistan government, who wanted to ensure that the Northern Alliance—which is allied with India—would not control the capital. But the Northern Alliance was able to carry the day, thanks to tacit US backing. According to the *New York Times*, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz both opposed a British presence. The *Independen*t newspaper spoke openly of a "dangerous rift" between London and Washington. It quoted an unnamed source as saying, "The State Department appears to be pushing its own agenda in Afghanistan and there is certainly a feeling among both American servicemen and officials on the ground that they do not want to see large numbers of British troops there."

Immediately following the September 11 attacks, Blair sought to position Britain as America's key ally in the "war on terrorism". He hoped to renew the relationship he had enjoyed with Clinton, enabling Britain to punch above its weight internationally, and especially with respect to its major European rivals, Germany and France. Blair saw an opportunity to push forward Britain's interests, memorably stating that the kaleidoscope of world politics had been shaken and the pieces had not yet come to rest.

Having been publicly humiliated by the US and forced to abandon plans to send more troops, therefore, Blair was subjected to a flood of criticism by a previously supportive media—who now accused him of selling Britain's birthright for a mess of pottage—and confronted deep divisions within his own cabinet.

On November 21, International Development Secretary Clare Short attacked the US for dropping "jam and crackers and peanut butter" while failing to back what she portrayed as a "humanitarian mission", naturally led by Britain. On November 22, Short directly linked her anti-US remarks with a pro-European position. She told the *BBC*, "We and the French were ready to go ... there has been a delay and that is regrettable."

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw sought to smooth things over, praising America's humanitarian work and insisting London was united with Washington on military strategy. "They are as committed as we are to the three-pronged strategy—military action, the political process and humanitarian support."

A more frank assessment came from Simon Jenkins of the *Times* on November 21. His piece, like many others, was characterised by strident opposition to the US. He fulminated, "Tony Blair declared in his Brighton speech last month that he 'would not walk away from Afghanistan'. It was his *quid pro quo* for bombing it. He pledged that Britain would restore stability to that country and rebuild its political life 'with all groups represented'. It sounded great but he forgot to ask if Big Boy agreed. Big Boy does not agree."

The *Independent* of November 21 noted, "The conduct of the war in Afghanistan is still very much a show made in America.... The situation at Bagram illustrates starkly that the constraints on any British action are as much political and diplomatic as they are military—and they are much tighter than Mr Blair anticipated."

Two days later, the *Guardian* condemned the speech given by Bush to

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troops of the 101st Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky for being "notably bellicose in tone and unrestrained in its ambition.... Here was the US commander-in-chief once again asserting the moral right to use any means, including military force, to destroy anybody he might arbitrarily deem to be a terrorist, terrorist sympathiser, or otherwise an enemy of America, at home or abroad."

Writing in the same paper on November 27, Hugo Young noted Bush's specific threats towards, Iraq and Saddam Hussein and warned, "The president is mobilising an American national will such as we have not recently seen.... What looks like a speedy victory in Afghanistan is galvanising US ambitions to be the world's super-enforcer.... It's impossible to write the speech one could believe Blair might give to defend his withdrawal of support. Maybe he wouldn't want to. But, helplessly drawn along, we will not walk taller in the world."

If the Blair government is at odds over Afghanistan, this is nothing compared to the conflicts that are raging beneath the surface over whether to support a US intervention against Iraq. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon has consistently made clear that his reluctance to becoming embroiled in an extended policing operation in Afghanistan is bound up with a fear of missing the boat should a war break out against Iraq. In contrast, one unnamed British minister was cited in the *Telegraph* as saying, "We're in Afghanistan—we're not interested in some crusade by right-wing Americans. It is obvious that the hawks are just looking for a casus belli to attack Iraq, but there is absolutely no evidence that Iraq is currently engaged in terrorist activity."

The US is fully aware of these divisions. A senior member of Bush's military planning team told the same newspaper, "Do you know what Jack Straw said when he was over here? I quote: 'The problem we have with Iraq is 250 bodies—on the Labour Party backbenches'."

Whether or not to target Iraq has also become the primary focus of the divergent interests of the US and other European powers. Germany, France and Russia have all strenuously opposed military action against Baghdad. On November 28, Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schröder urged the United States not to widen the war to "targets in the Middle East", an apparent reference to Iraq. "We should be very cautious in particular about talking about new targets in the Middle East. We could take on more than any of us is capable of handling." Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer told the *Bundestag*: "All European nations would view a broadening of the conflict to include Iraq highly sceptically—and that is putting it diplomatically."

The Putin regime in Moscow said it understood that the focus against terrorism could move outside Afghanistan, but hinted that Russia would pull out of the international coalition if Iraq were attacked. Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Saltanov said an unprovoked strike on Iraq would "make it difficult to preserve the unity of the coalition against terrorism" and would have "a very negative impact on the situation in the Middle East."

It is on this question, therefore, that Blair's efforts to straddle between a military alliance with US imperialism and a commitment towards the development of a European trade and military block threatens to finally come unstuck—with potentially devastating consequences for his government and for the strategic interests of British imperialism.

The *Independent* summed up the prime minister's dilemma as follows: Blair "knows that the coalition would almost certainly fall apart, not only in the Muslim world, but in much of Western Europe—notably France. The question of whether he forfeits his place as the US administration's most valued ally, or influence in Europe and quite possibly much further afield, becomes a much sharper one. In such circumstances, in the words of one of his colleagues, it would be 'very difficult' to back the US, 'very hard' not to."

In typical weathercock fashion, Blair's answer has been to attempt to face both ways. Simultaneously with the US rebuff at Bagram, he addressed the conference of Germany's ruling Social Democrats, registering his support for the renewal of German militarism under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. "It is a time for boldness, courage and strength.... Post-11 September, the need for enhanced European [military] effectiveness is more urgent still."

On November 29, Blair and French President Chirac met in Downing Street and issued what was described by the press as a joint warning to hardliners in the US against launching a war against Iraq, with Chirac saying, "intervention would have serious consequences for the international coalition against terrorism." British officials were reported to be relying on the support of Powell and his ability to hold back a hawkish faction grouped around the Pentagon, and including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Bush advisor Richard Perle, retired General Wayne A. Downing, the president's counter-terrorism chief, and I. Lewis Libby, the vice president's chief of staff. One British source told the press, "The real rift is not across the Atlantic but across the Potomac river in Washington. We take every chance to support Powell and ensure that cool heads prevail."

On December 3, however, Blair made a volte-face and declared that British troops could take part in a military offensive against Iraq. Domestically he clearly felt pressurised by the efforts of Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith to steal his clothes as America's most loyal political ally, following the Tory leader's trip to Washington on November 28, where he met with Bush and many senior figures and gave his full support to a US war against Iraq.

But what must have finally decided Blair were the ever-more vocal threats being made by the US against Iraq and his calculation that the Pentagon hawks will sooner or later win the day. When asked whether Britain could join the US in a war on Baghdad, Blair abandoned his previous reticence and replied, "The international coalition is a coalition against terrorism ... in all its forms."

It is in light of his expectation of a war against Iraq that Blair's cool response to the question of a British troop presence in Afghanistan should be understood. In the same interview, he added, "You can't determine exactly the precise moment when our role ends, but it's not our job—through troops—to reconstruct Afghanistan."

Following Blair's statement, the government machinery went into overdrive preparing for a possible attack on Baghdad. On December 6, Straw told the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee that Britain was prepared to take "pre-emptive" action against countries representing an alleged "terrorist" threat. He indicated that Iraq's development of "weapons of mass destruction" was a primary cause for concern, and that "action must be taken". At the same time, Defence Secretary Hoon, speaking at the Centre for Defence Studies, said Britain must be prepared to launch pre-emptive armed strikes, coerce states and conduct search-and-destroy missions against terrorists and those harbouring them around the world. Military doctrine showed it was often best "to engage the enemy at longer range, before the enemy gets the opportunity to attack," he said.

Once again, Blair has jumped to the tune being played in Washington, in the hope that he will be rewarded with a share of the spoils. But there is no reason to believe his wishes will be fulfilled. Contrary to his own inflated sense of self-worth, he is not held in especially high regard on Capitol Hill. Few in Washington think he is owed any special favours. Ironically, it seems that it will be left to the US to teach Blair the true meaning of Lord Palmerstone's remark that nations have no permanent allies, only permanent interests.

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