

# European foreign ministers attack Bush's policy

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Two weeks after President Bush's State of the Union speech an open conflict has erupted between the US and the European Union over international policies. While at first only the European media voiced somewhat muted criticism of Bush's address, and politicians exercised diplomatic restraint, now more and more leading European politicians are sharply criticising US foreign policy, with the media following suit.

European politicians have said they oppose the unilateral orientation of US foreign policy, its one-sided emphasis on military means, its support for Sharon in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and Bush's threatening gestures against Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

On February 5, Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Piqué became the first high-ranking European politician to insist that the European Union would continue its negotiations with Teheran despite the American accusations against Iran. Spain is currently occupying the presidency of the European Union.

Two days later, Piqué's French opposite number, Hubert Védrine, sharply denounced the unilateral approach taken by the Bush administration. "We are currently threatened by a simplified approach which reduces all problems of the world to the mere struggle against terrorism," he said in an interview with *France Inter*. "This is an ill-considered conception which we cannot accept," he declared, and went on to say, "The Americans are acting on a unilateral basis, without consulting anyone else, and their decisions are guided exclusively by their own individual views and interests."

Chris Patten, EU commissioner for foreign affairs, attacked Bush's line in a similar vein. In an interview with the British *Guardian* newspaper published February 9, the former general secretary of the British Tories and one-time governor of Hong Kong accused the US government of an "absolutist and simplistic" stance towards the rest of the world. It was time, he said, for European governments to speak up and stop Washington before it goes into "unilateralist overdrive." He added, "Gulliver can't go it alone, and I don't think it's helpful if we regard ourselves as so Lilliputian that we can't speak up and say it."

In Germany, Deputy Secretary of State Ludger Vollmer, referring to the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, accused Bush of using the fight against terrorism as a pretext to "settle old accounts" with Iraq. The spokesperson of the conservative Christian Democratic Union's parliamentary faction, Karl Lamers, commented in an interview with the *Spiegel* magazine that he did not condone the "astonishing silence" of the German government regarding the war preparations against Iraq. "In the event of an escalation of the situation followed by concrete preparations for an attack, the chancellor and the foreign minister are obliged to speak out," he said.

Last weekend, the foreign ministers of all 15 EU member states assembled for an informal meeting in the Spanish town of Cáceres. While no official decisions were taken, it was sufficiently clear that all of them agreed, in one form or another, in their criticism of the US. None of those attending opposed Patten's harsh remarks.

Javier Solana, the high representative for EU foreign policy, joined

those cautioning the US against succumbing "to the dangers of global unilateralism." German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer criticised Bush's thesis of an "axis of evil". This conception, he said, was "not in accordance with our political ethos." His French counterpart Védrine regretted that "we now have to speak up loudly to make ourselves heard." And British Home Secretary Jack Straw spoke of "differences of positions" between the US and the EU.

The EU foreign ministers were particularly concerned with the situation in the Middle East. It was, Fischer said, "part and parcel of European security." Being an "immediate neighbour" to this region, Europe could not afford to "idly stand by," he said.

Védrine proposed a European peace initiative emphasising the speedy recognition of a Palestinian state and early elections that would strengthen Arafat's position. However, his European colleagues were sceptical. The US immediately rejected Védrine's proposal as "unhelpful." In any event, the Europeans have no intention of giving up their engagement in the Middle East. Jack Straw and Joschka Fischer are visiting the region this week.

The eruption of sharp conflicts between the US and the European Union does not come as a surprise, but points toward the real motivations behind the "war against terror". While the recent military operations in Central Asia were triggered by the attacks of September 11, they had been in preparation for at least 10 years, since the Gulf War. What is at stake is control of the oil and gas resources in the Gulf region and the Caspian basin.

The demise of the Soviet Union has deprived the transatlantic alliance of its *raison d'être* and created the prerequisites for a new division of global power and influence among the major imperialist nations. Europe and America, each of which makes up a third of the global economy, are emerging as natural rivals. The ruling class in Europe will not stand by as America establishes its military presence and political domination in a region containing the largest energy resources of the world—reserves that are indispensable for Europe's own economic survival.

Within just six months, the real issues at stake in this conflict have emerged out of the dust and ruins of the World Trade Center. Many European media outlets are now openly accusing the US of imperialist ambitions. For example, on February 4 the national radio program Deutschlandfunk accused the US of igniting a "geopolitical powder keg" and "inadvertently turning into a de facto threat to world peace". The *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper spoke of George Bush engaging in "sabre-rattling war rhetoric."

According to the British *Observer* (February 10), the latest rise in US defence spending showed that "America at the beginning of the 21st century is already not so much a superpower as a behemoth on the world stage." The newspaper continued: "Economically dominant, it enjoys military and cultural power unrivalled since the days of the Roman emperors.... Typically, it has been left to the French, traditionally suspicious of US global hegemony, to find the best words to describe it."

*Gigantisme militaire* they call it, in a phrase that describes both the scale of America's ambitions and also a pathological condition: an organism grown so large it is sick."

The *Observer* went on to say: "The question the rest of the world is asking itself is: Who is the enemy America is arming itself so against? And why?" The answer was given by a British specialist on issues of war and peace: "The war on terrorism is simply a euphemism for extending US control in the world, whether by projecting force through its carriers or building new military bases in central Asia."

Much to the annoyance of the political elite, Europe is far behind the US as far as military power is concerned. With the coming rise in its military budget, the US plans to spend \$379 billion on defence this year, while all the other NATO states taken together will spend merely \$140 billion. The technological gap has widened over the past decade. In those areas that are decisive for modern warfare—reconnaissance, communication, high-tech-weapons and mobility—the US equipment is an entire generation ahead, making it virtually impossible for Europe to catch up.

In his interview with the *Guardian* quoted above, Chris Patten voiced the Europeans' frustration over this state of affairs: "President Bush has just announced a \$48 billion increase in defence spending," he said. "Now, if you mark the significance of Europe's relations with America by how much we're prepared to spend on defence, forget it! We can't even pay the entrance fee!"

"There is not a political party in Europe," he continued, "that would campaign for a 14 percent increase in defence spending, which is what it would take for the EU to match Mr. Bush."

For the present, the European governments are trying to gain international influence by posing as a peace-loving counterpole to a bellicose US, and feigning concern over global inequality and injustice.

"Frankly, smart bombs have their place, but smart development assistance seems to me even more significant," Patten said, and pointed out that Europe provides 55 percent of development assistance in the world and two thirds of grant aid. "So when it comes to what the Americans call the 'soft end of security'—which I happen to think is the hard end of security—we have a huge amount to contribute."

This was the tenor of numerous statements by the European foreign ministers assembled in Cárcares.

Significantly, it is above all the left-liberal press that has pressured the European governments towards an international diplomatic offensive against the US. Thus, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* on February 11 suggested that the "unilateralism of the US" provided "the Europeans with a chance to define more clearly and to strengthen their own international policy."

"The European position that the ongoing conflicts are complex, that there is a connection between oppression, backwardness, poverty, injustice, violence and terror, does not find an audience in Washington these days," the *Rundschau* wrote. Against this backdrop, it was "in fact an advantage that the Americans, by going it alone, are forcing the Europeans to clearly define the difference in conceptions. Resignation or waiting for better times are not options for the EU. It is too big for that, after all. If it does not make use of the present situation in order to define and strengthen its own international policy, this would signify a historical failure."

The commentary warned of a "ruinous armaments race with the US" and concluded with the remark: "The strength of Europe lies in its distrust of simple solutions and military answers.... And if this can be realised only by delineating ourselves from the US at the moment, so be it."

The pacifist and social-minded phraseology employed by the *Rundschau* is deceptive. In essence, it proposes that Europe launch an international political offensive in order to isolate the US and assert its own global interests. This is fully in line with the intentions of European governments, and they make no qualms about it. French colonial policy,

as a case in point, played a decisive role in bringing about the mass slaughter in Rwanda. Likewise, German foreign policy in Yugoslavia stirred up Croatian nationalism and created the preconditions for the ensuing ethnic carnage.

Other voices in Europe still warn of any confrontation with the US. The differences of opinion on the course to be taken cut straight across the traditional political camps.

In Britain, the Tory opposition officially proposes to close ranks with the Bush administration. Thus, shadow Defence Secretary Bernard Jenkins accused Prime Minister Tony Blair, who straddles the fence between Bush and his critics, of an appeasement policy towards terrorism comparable to his predecessor Chamberlain's position toward Hitler. Great Britain's traditional role as a "bridge" between the continents is becoming untenable, given the growing gulf between Europe and America.

The political differences on the continent are tactical in character. For a long time, the foreign policy establishment placed its bets on the more moderate wing of the American government around Secretary of State Colin Powell and refrained from any sharp criticism so as to avoid irritating the hawks around Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Now, however, there is growing agreement that an open conflict will prove inevitable.

As far as the people of Europe are concerned, an offensive of international European policy along these lines can only have negative consequences. An imperialist military venture abroad would be inseparably bound up with attacks on democratic and social rights at home. This is evident from the sweeping attacks on civil rights undertaken by all European governments in reaction to the events of September 11. Neither does an international political offensive constitute an alternative to a ruinous armaments race, as the *Rundschau* claims. Both options complement one another, as demonstrated by intensive European efforts to create an army independent of the US.

There is only one alternative to the militarisation of international relations: forging the unity of the European and American working class in a common struggle against world imperialism and militarism and in defence of their democratic rights and social gains.



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