EU summit in Barcelona: silence over US war plans against Iraq

Peter Schwarz
25 March 2002

The semi-annual summits of European government heads are considered milestones in determining the development of the European Union (EU). Despite the numerous institutions and the enormous apparatus that the EU possesses, real decision-making lies with the governments of the 15 member states. Only these summits are able to make pioneering political decisions.

There are summits whose venues become the synonyms for such decisions. This was the case with the Maastricht summit of 1992, which laid down the move to European monetary union and also considered long-term plans for political union. Others, like the Nice summit in December 2000, became a symbol for the impasse of the European Union due to the rivalries between its most powerful members, in this case Germany and France. Yet others have become mired in petty quarrels and passed into oblivion as soon as the delegations had left.

Rarely, however, has there been a European Union summit at which what was discussed and decided upon by the participants stood in such glaring contrast to the actual problems they confronted as at the March 15-16 meeting in Barcelona. If the future prospects of the European Union were measured by its ability to confront core political questions and answer them, then it is clearly in a state of advanced paralysis.

The question that has recently occupied European politics like no other—US war preparations against Iraq—remained a taboo in Barcelona. Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, who hosted the summit, prevented every attempt to place the topic on the agenda. When Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt sought to raise it during an official meal, the subject was politely but definitely rejected. According to diplomatic circles, Aznar feared that the unbridgeable gulf between London, on one side, and Brussels and the neutral EU members, on the other, could split the summit.

European government attitudes concerning America's war plans could not be more different. So far, only the British prime minister, Tony Blair, has expressed himself more or less openly in favour of a military strike against Iraq. From all the other European capitals, unmistakable reservations were to be heard, while striving to avoid if possible an open conflict with Washington.

Among government officials in Berlin and Paris, it is feared that a new Gulf War could destabilise the entire Middle East—with unpredictable consequences for the economic and political stability of the world. They recall with anxiety the oil price shock of 1973, which contributed to one of the deepest recessions of the post-war period.

Moreover, despite the NATO alliance and constant close contacts, the European governments (with the possible exception of Britain) do not know what the Bush government actually intends to do. "When it comes to America's Iraq policy and its consequences for the Germans," one German daily paper noted recently, "they are groping around in the fog. From the chancellor down to the most minor parliamentary representative, they are working with assumptions rather than reliable knowledge."

While the "two most urgent foreign policy questions that Europe confronts—the transatlantic relationship and the prospect of an American action against Iraq," as one EU official put it, remained taboo in Barcelona, they were discussed all the more eagerly in the corridors during breaks in the proceedings.

It would seem that the EU is slowly getting accustomed to the idea that the Bush administration will not let itself be diverted by European reservations. Towards the end of the summit, the rumour circulated that an agreement had been reached to accept a "limited and well-directed" military strike by Washington. According to reports, the delegations of the smaller EU countries concluded that the "big ones" (i.e., Germany, France and Britain) had arrived at a corresponding agreement, so that if the US military action was successful, they would not have to eat humble pie.

This was immediately repudiated. "We did not discuss the possibility of a military intervention," French President Jacques Chirac said. And Chancellor Schröder added, "Nobody was forced to take a particular line." Prime Minister Blair was less categorical: naturally, Iraq was discussed "peripherally", he said, only the EU did "not arrive at any decision at this point".

In the week before the summit, however, the German government had already made clear that it wants to avoid any open discord with the US. In a meeting to update party leaders in Germany, Chancellor Schröder rejected the withdrawal of German tanks from Kuwait, saying nobody could answer for the consequences that such a step would have for German-American relations over the next decades.

Germany's *Fuchs* tanks, which are presently stationed near the Iraqi border, specialize in seeking out chemical and biological agents. In the case of an American offensive against Iraq they would almost automatically become involved in the fighting, thereby making Germany a party to the war.

In order to damp down American war eagerness, German foreign

© World Socialist Web Site

policy is now looking particularly towards the UN. “Political attempts by the EU or UN to push for a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are seen in Berlin as the prime way to limit the danger of war,” reported the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. Such a line, the paper said, was agreed during Kofi Annan’s visit to Berlin at the end of February. The purpose was to win time for political initiatives.

The inability of the EU summit to provide a common response to American war preparations against Iraq is an expression of a more fundamental dilemma. Events since September 11 have pulled the rug from under the high-flying plans of the 1990s for European integration.

The introduction of a common currency and the removal of trade barriers were supposed to create the “largest domestic market in the world,” which would not only catch up with but also overtake the United States economically. In 1999, the EU summit in Lisbon formulated the goal of making the European Union the “most competitive and most dynamic knowledge-based market in the world” by 2010. This aim was affirmed in Barcelona, which in view of the increasing problems becomes increasingly absurd.

On the one hand, the hope that the negative social consequences of liberalisation could be cushioned by increased economic growth has emerged as an illusion. This hope was particularly encouraged by the social democratic parties who came into government almost everywhere in Europe over the course of the 1990s. For example, in 1998 Gerhard Schröder conducted the elections with the slogan “innovation and justice”, which was supposed to suggest the compatibility of economic liberalisation and social justice.

Meanwhile, expenditure on health, pensions and public services was strongly reduced everywhere in Europe. Rather than stimulating the economy, however, this only led to a further increase in unemployment. Each additional cut encounters increasing resistance and unleashes social protests. In Barcelona, several hundred thousand people demonstrated against the summit, and in Rome last Saturday nearly three million demonstrated against the social politics of the Berlusconi government in the biggest demonstration in Italy’s post-war history.

On the other hand, the economic pressure of the US on Europe is growing. Since September 11, the US administration is adhering less and less to the rules of free competition it itself proclaims. Trade war measures and intimidation through shows of military force now take their place. The billion dollar subsidies for the American aerospace industry, the enormous increase in military expenditure—whose side-effect is to subsidise the defence industry—and the recently imposed punitive tariffs on imported steel clearly show that in economic policy as well the Bush administration acts according to the slogan “America first”.

The so-called “war against terrorism” is directed ever more openly against the economic competitors of the US. With Iran and Iraq, not only are two important European trade partners threatened, increasingly the target of the present war also emerges as the military control of the oil resources of central Asia and the Gulf, upon which the European economy is dependent, for better or for worse.

Under the increasing economic and military pressure of the US, clear centrifugal tendencies are developing in Europe. Once again, the national interest is gaining the upper hand. In four European countries, social democratic governments were replaced by conservatives, supported by right-wing populist or neo-fascist coalition partners with a strongly nationalist and in part openly anti-European hue. This began in Austria and continued in Italy, Denmark and—during the Barcelona summit—in Portugal, where the social democrats lost power at the weekend to a liberal-conservative and right-wing populist coalition.

The revival of national egoism shows up most clearly, however, in Gerhard Schröder’s statements in Barcelona. The chancellor loudly demanded that “German interests be preserved” and accused the EU commission of “not sufficiently taking into account the special conditions of Germany as an industrial site”. Several European governments reacted with nervousness and irritation.

Even the German press was concerned. *Die Welt* wrote, “Schröder’s formulation of ‘German interests’ shoots wide of the mark.” The *Frankfurter Rundschau* spoke of a “new message of German self-confidence”. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* accused the chancellor of demonstrating “adolescent behaviour”, “signs of hooliganism” and “brute rhetoric”, but concluded that in future, every chancellor would “insist upon a redistribution of power and burdens, of influence and net [monetary] transfers” within the EU.

Under these circumstances, it is doubly risky for the European governments to pick a quarrel with Washington.

On the one hand, they are afraid that their internal division and military inferiority means the European Union will draw the short straw in any conflict with the US and come under even greater pressure. On the other hand, they fear that an open conflict with the United States could undermine their position in their own countries.

In the end, they owe the relative political stability of the past 50 years to their close alliance with the US. In Germany especially, no state—neither the Wilhelmian empire, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, nor the former German Democratic Republic—has lasted as long as the West German Federal Republic, and not least due to the protective power of the US. An open break in the transatlantic alliance appears to be, therefore, a most risky venture, although the increasing clash of interests pushes ever more strongly in this direction.

What binds the European governments with their counterpart in America is a common class interest, the fear of mounting social and political opposition. Despite all their criticism of Bush’s foreign policy, which they express behind the scenes, they have not hesitated for a second to imitate his domestic policy, and introduce into Europe anti-terror laws that eliminate fundamental democratic rights.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site