

Tensions flare between Washington and Berlin

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Within days of his re-election as German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (SPD—Social Democratic Party) has retreated from his categorical rejection during the election campaign of a war against Iraq. Schröder and his Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) are now doing everything in their power to dispel tensions between Berlin and the Bush administration.

On Monday, Fischer told the *New York Times*: “We’ll work very hard to improve these relations—they are crucial for both sides, especially for us.” The foreign minister plans to fly this week to Washington.

Schröder flew to London on Tuesday, for talks over dinner with British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Just prior to Schröder’s arrival, Blair had been trying to persuade the British Parliament to take a hard line against Baghdad based on his “dossier” of alleged information relating to Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. No details have been released on the Blair-Schröder meeting, but commentators agree that the British prime minister had intervened after the German elections as a mediator between Berlin and Washington.

Both Fischer and Schröder continue to reject military action against Iraq—although their public opposition is far more muted than prior to the September 22 elections. Both men make clear that they are prepared to make concessions.

At the September 26 meeting of NATO nations in Warsaw, German Defence Minister Peter Struck declared that beginning in January Germany is prepared to join the Netherlands in assuming joint responsibility for the International Protection Forces (Isaf) in Kabul. A strong military presence by Germany in Afghanistan would free up US personnel for a war against Iraq. The German government has also dropped its threat to withdraw its Fuch tanks stationed in Kuwait.

While Berlin has made considerable efforts at appeasement, the American government has shown no sign that it is prepared to forgive and forget.

On September 24, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer made clear that any normalisation of relations was unthinkable. “Nobody should be under illusions or mistakes that now that the election is over, that everything goes back to the way it was,” he said. “That’s not the natural result of the manner in which that campaign was waged. And I think that’s plain for everybody to know and see.”

President Bush has still not congratulated Schröder on his re-election as chancellor—a gross breach of international protocol and deliberate snub. A leading government official stated in the *New York Times* that Schröder and his government “have a lot of work to do to repair the damage that he did by his excesses during the campaign.”

At the recent NATO meeting in Warsaw, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld handled his German counterpart Peter Struck like a naughty schoolboy and described American-German relations as “poisoned”. Rumsfeld made a point of avoiding Struck at the meeting and then even went so far as to leave the room when the latter spoke. Questioned by the press on his position, Rumsfeld replied, “If you’re in a hole, stop digging.”

The irreconcilable position adopted by the Bush government cannot be explained merely by the occasionally sharp language used in the German election campaign, such as the comparison made between the methods of Bush and Hitler by former German justice minister Herta Däubler-Gmelin. Such disputes are part and parcel of electioneering and are usually resolved after the appropriate apology has been made. In this case, the German government went further, forcing Däubler-Gmelin to resign.

The Bush administration is far angrier over Schröder’s open criticism of its threat of war against Iraq and the fact that such criticism found considerable popular support. Describing Washington’s war plans as an adventure, Schröder’s clear rejection of the Bush line was decisive in the SPD and Green Party victory in the German election. These results represent a blow to Washington’s efforts to establish an international alliance for an invasion of Iraq. Since Schröder’s re-election, voices rejecting a war have been heard in Asia, Europe and the US itself.

An editorial in the leading Indian newspaper the *Hindu* is typical, assessing the German election as follows: “This is a vote against war and more specifically against some of the retrograde policies of the Bush administration.” The editorial concluded: “India will hail the fact that Germany has finally raised its voice for peace.”

Commentaries in the US itself have expressed similar positions, with the *New York Times* writing: “The fact that a

European election has been won on an antiwar ticket critical of the Bush administration will clearly complicate the President's efforts to win support in Europe and will make anti-Bush sentiment more acceptable."

In an interview with radio *Deutschlandfunk*, Gerald Livingstone from the German Historical Institute in Washington was asked about the roots of the tensions between America and Germany. He replied: "The real reason is of course American policy towards Iraq and fears on the part of the US that precisely at the time when George Bush is attempting to win over allies, a coalition for an eventual preventive attack against Iraq, the Germans stand in the way at the decisive moment."

The attempts by Schröder and Fischer to appease Washington in the aftermath of the election demonstrate that they cannot be relied upon to oppose a war with Iraq. It is entirely predictable that they will come to an arrangement with the American government once war starts—and recent moves by the US administration make a war virtually inevitable. Foreign Minister Fischer was recently compelled to deny reports that he had offered to make German troops available for peacekeeping in a post-war Iraq.

The German government has absolutely no objection to the military subordination of an oppressed country such as Iraq—this was made clear in Germany's participation in the recent war against Yugoslavia. Its real concern is the defence of German and European interests in the region in the face of possible unilateral action by America.

Germany and the other countries of the European Union (EU) have extensive trade links with Iraq and hope to expand them after the lifting of international sanctions. Currently, France is Iraq's biggest trading partner within the EU, with a total trade balance of \$1.5 billion. Following France is Italy, with total trade worth \$1 billion. Europe accounts for the bulk of investment in the Iraqi oil industry as well, including the French concern TotalFinaElf, the Italian (ENI) and Russia's (LukOil). With a total trade balance of \$4 billion, Russia is Iraq's biggest trading partner worldwide.

Should Saddam Hussein be overthrown and replaced by a US-imposed regime, then all of these lucrative European trading links could be lost to American firms. Washington would exercise an even tighter stranglehold over the Persian Gulf oil reserves upon which European economies are so dependent. In addition, Berlin and the EU as a whole fear that a war with Iraq would destabilise the entire region, with disastrous political and economic consequences for Europe.

Most European countries, therefore, are trying to dampen the war fever promoted by the Bush administration and are insisting that any war must take place only under the auspices of the United Nations—a move which makes it easier for the European bourgeoisie to take its share of the war booty. In this respect, Berlin can play an important role. In January, Germany gets a seat as a non-permanent member on the Security Council

and is due to take over the council's chairmanship in February.

Under these conditions, Schröder's efforts to tone down the row with Washington also serve to close European ranks, which threatened to break apart under US pressure. Many commentaries in the German press have accused Schröder of going too far in his criticism of the US, alienating his European partners and thereby making it easier for Bush to isolate Germany and go ahead with his war drive.

The influential *Die Zeit* newspaper wrote: "The Germans will notice that the Americans are not maintaining their lousy mood merely just because they feel insulted. American interests are simply much easier to enforce after Schröder's diplomatic idiocies."

At the same time as Schröder pulls back, French President Jacques Chirac has sharpened his criticisms of the US. At the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Copenhagen, Chirac declared his "total resistance" to the US strategy.

Chirac told the assembled heads of 15 European and 10 Asian countries, including China and Japan, that France opposes any unilateral action and warned against the dangers of such a course. Only the UN Security Council, in which France holds a veto, can authorise a war, he insisted. He warned Blair that Britain could find itself standing alone should it undertake further support for the US on this question.

In Europe, the threat of war against Iraq is increasingly seen as an effort by Washington to permanently reinforce its current military and political superiority. Media and political circles have taken careful note of the so-called "Bush doctrine", which is aimed at ensuring that no other country can match or catch up to the military superiority of America so evident since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Although the German government's vocal opposition to a war with Iraq did not last long, the considerable tensions of the past few weeks were not just a temporary result of the election campaign. While no doubt the Social Democrats sought to adapt themselves to mass antiwar sentiments in Germany and throughout Europe, these tensions ultimately reflect the growing rivalry between the great powers in their struggle for economic and political influence. The build-up to an invasion against Iraq is therefore the harbinger of even more catastrophic conflicts for which working people in both Europe and America would be forced to pay the price.



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