European Union foreign ministers divided on Iraq war

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Discussion of American plans for war against Iraq dominated the meeting of European Union (EU) foreign ministers that took place last weekend in the Danish city of Ellsinore.

The week prior to the meeting saw vigorous discussion throughout Europe over the threats made by US Vice President Dick Cheney, who indicated that the US was planning a unilateral military strike against Iraq to force a change of government. Cheney told American war veterans that a "preventative strike" against Iraq was necessary even if the country agreed to readmit UN weapons inspectors.

Cheney's initiative was seen as an attempt to override European and domestic opposition. The German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented: "If Cheney gives many such speeches, the president will be left with the choice between war or a devastating foreign policy defeat." One immediate reaction to Cheney's speech was a marked intensification of European criticism of US policy in the Middle East.

In Germany, Edmund Stoiber (Christian Social Union—CSU), the main opposition candidate in upcoming national elections, changed the position he had held up to this point. Previously he had sharply attacked German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD) over the latter's public criticisms of the US war policy. Now Stoiber is seeking to distance himself from US plans.

According to leading figures in the CSU and its sister conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Stoiber's former standpoint was no longer tenable after the latest comments by Cheney. "When there is talk of a preventative strike, then we have to react," Stoiber commented.

In a quickly arranged appearance in Berlin, Stoiber clearly rejected any unilateral action against Iraq. He declared, "The monopoly for decisions and action rests with the United Nations. This excludes unilateral actions by a country without consultation and without an international mandate."

French President Jacques Chirac expressed a similar view when he made his annual address to French ambassadors. He said, "One sees the appearance of the temptation to legitimize the unilateral and preventive use of force. This is a worrying development." Chirac continued: "This is contrary to France's view of collective security, which is based on cooperation between states and respect for the authority and law of the UN Security Council."

In Great Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair, the closest ally of the Bush administration, is coming under increasing pressure inside his own Labour Party, where opposition is growing to a war against Iraq. According to a poll of one hundred local Labour deputies undertaken by the *Times* newspaper, only a fifth of those questioned were in favour of military action. A former Labour foreign minister, Denis Healey, even questioned whether Blair could survive politically, should he support a US attack on Iraq.

According to a report in the *Financial Times*, Blair himself still privately supports a change of government in Baghdad by violent means. Last Thursday, however, he is reported to have had a long telephone conversation with the US president in which he urged Bush to do more to publicly legitimise a war by securing the support of the UN and establishing a time limit for Iraq to readmit weapons inspectors.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who is regarded as an opponent of Cheney, put forward the same point of view in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation. He described the return of UN weapons inspectors as a critical "first step" in dealing with Iraq, and called for an international debate on whether to take military action. "I think that the world has to be presented with the information, with the intelligence that is available," he said. "A debate is needed within the international community so that everybody can make a judgment about this."

Under these conditions, it was not difficult for the EU foreign ministers to reach a consensus against a unilateral American strike. At the end of the EU meeting, which passed no official resolution, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer stated: "No one is in favour of a unilateral approach or invasion as a means of securing a change of regime." The EU ministers were agreed that any US action against Iraq should be made contingent on a UN Security Council mandate.

The foreign ministers were split, however, on wider-ranging questions. The most extreme positions were held respectively by the German and British sides, with the rest of the EU ministers holding intermediate positions.

British Foreign Minister Jack Straw was obviously looking for a better pretext to wage war. Supported by a Spanish colleague, Ana Palacio, Straw called for the elaboration of a "threatening scenario with military options" to put pressure on the Iraqi regime. During the meeting in Ellsinore it was announced that the British defence minister, Geoff Hoon, would fly to the US this week for six days of detailed discussions over a possible military strike.

On the other side, the German foreign minister was prepared to consider military action only as a last resort. He insisted on the

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return of UN weapons inspectors, but at the same time warned of the incalculable risks of a war. Such a war, he said, would not just destabilise the immediate region, it would also have consequences for Europe as a "directly affected regional neighbour." Even if the war were legitimised with a UN mandate, it would unleash a flood of Islamic acts of violence and lead to the collapse of the world-wide anti-terror alliance.

For the first time in post-war history it was the German government, and not the French, that emerged as the sharpest critic of US policy. The new conservative French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, insisted on a mandate from the UN, but at the same time expressly kept open the military option.

The conflict over Iraq must be considered against the backdrop of growing tensions between Europe and the US. If the European foreign ministers—despite their differences—are unanimous in insisting on a UN mandate for war against Iraq, this unanimity reflects their fear of the increasingly unilateralist tendencies of the American government.

Despite repeated efforts to portray the UN as a guarantor of international rights, the opposite is the case. Throughout its history the UN has been used by the great powers to enforce their own priorities. Today, far from being a "community of the peoples," the UN is at most a community of increasingly discredited governments.

But to the extent that a war is sanctioned by the Security Council, the powers represented in the council can assume that their own interests will be taken into consideration in the ensuing "peace," i.e., the drawing of new borders, the imposition of a new government, the assigning of commissions and concessions, the general division of the booty.

This is why a war against Iraq, unilaterally declared and carried out by the US, represents such a nightmare for the European powers. The Persian Gulf possesses half of the world's discovered oil and gas reserves and is one of the most important export markets for the Europeans. A unilateral campaign by the US against Baghdad poses the danger that the Europeans will be cut off should the region be transformed into an American protectorate—or sink into chaos as a result of war. These are the considerations that underlie the position adopted by the European powers, especially the Germans, rather than any scruples, love of peace or concern for their own electorates.

The growing fear that the US government may go it alone is also expressed in another question that played a central role at the meeting in Ellsinore: the conflict over the establishment of an international criminal court.

Up to now the court, launched with full support from the European powers, has been denied recognition by America. The US government is insisting that its own citizens be excluded from its jurisdiction, a position regarded by the Europeans as incompatible with international law.

In the meantime, the US government has begun concluding bilateral agreements with as many states as possible, whereby the latter pledge that they will not yield up any US citizens to the international court. According to the prevailing view in Europe, such a standpoint contradicts the purpose of the international court.

This has led to considerable tension inside the European Union. The Italian government, together with the British government, has signalled that it is prepared to sign a deal with the US. East European countries that are seeking entry to both NATO and the EU have come under pressure from both sides. The US government is prepared to accept their entry into NATO only if they sign an agreement on the non-delivery of US citizens, while the EU will admit only those countries that unconditionally agree to the international criminal court, i.e., who refuse to sign a bilateral deal with the US.

On this issue there was no agreement in Ellsinore.

The German side increasingly regards the American position as an attempt to weaken the European Union as a whole. In a commentary, the German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*, which is close to the SPD, went as so far as to claim that the US was using the Iraq question and the international criminal court primarily to "set back the newly developed European foreign and security policy."

The *Rundschau* continued: "Should the Americans come up with proof that the unity of the Europeans does not go deep when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of international questions, then Europe will have failed in its plan to politically bring its global economic weight to bear." The fate of European foreign policy was now to be determined by these two questions, the newspaper wrote, adding that Germany, as the biggest EU country, was assured an important role.

This commentary reveals more about the aims of German foreign policy than the author may have intended, i.e., that the issue for Germany is to "bring its global economic weight to bear." Such is the real motive behind the Iraq policy of the Schröder/Fischer government, even though, for electoral purposes, it is presented as a peace policy.

In fact, such a policy is bound up with strengthening Germany's own military forces. During its four years in power, the SPD-Green Party coalition has increased expenditure for international military interventions tenfold and done more toward "breaking taboos regarding the military" (Schröder) than the previous government of Helmut Kohl (CDU) accomplished during its 16 years in power.

The price for such policies will be paid by the people as a whole, in the form of increased expenditure for armaments and growing international conflict. A genuine answer to the growing danger of war can only be provided by the unification of the international working class, including the American and European, on the basis of a socialist programme.

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