

French diplomacy and Bush's campaign against Iraq

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The French government is trying to contain the US offensive against Iraq through negotiations in the UN Security Council, where France has veto power. It is insisting on a two-step process: first a resolution returning UN weapons inspectors to Iraq, and then a resolution authorizing military action against Iraq if the weapons inspectors judge that Baghdad is not cooperating.

French diplomatic spokesmen are keeping quiet about the negotiations at the UN, while insisting that discussions with their American counterparts are “constructive.”

The few details about Franco-American negotiations that surface in the press give a different picture. *Le Monde*, writing about a phone conversation between the French President Jacques Chirac and George W. Bush, spoke of a “deaf persons’ dialog,” in which the two presidents held firmly on their positions. They reportedly finished their conversation by deciding to leave their foreign ministers with the task of reconciling their positions.

On October 3, Chirac met with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who was re-elected last month in a close vote thanks to his public opposition to US military intervention in Iraq. Washington has denounced Schröder and to this day Bush has refused to congratulate him on his election victory.

Chirac and Schröder both stressed that their positions on Iraq were “similar.” Chirac added: “Germany has clearly defined its position on the matter of a possible military engagement—a position which, naturally, I can completely understand.”

The French press has suggested that France is trying to warm relations between Germany and the US by publicly adopting an intermediate position. Comments by French politicians, however, show that other

strategic considerations are also at work.

On October 8, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a former Socialist and head of the Pôle Républicain (Republican Gathering), indicated that “the real objectives of US foreign policy are to seize the second-largest series of oil wells in the Middle East.” He added that he thought that the greatest problem was not “so much Iraq as American unilateralism.”

The head of the Socialist Party’s delegation in the National Assembly, Jean-Marc Ayrault, publicly asked the government to veto proposed US resolutions before the Security Council.

The French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, replied that such a decision would deprive France of “influence, of the ability to weigh in on the development of international issues.” He meant that if the French government chose to openly oppose US positions, it risked the same ostracism that Washington has imposed on Germany, and might push the Bush administration to decisively abandon the UN, designating it a “failed” institution, as Bush has threatened to do.

Villepin’s speech to the French Senate on October 9 shows that all the different sections of the French political elite are preoccupied by the geopolitical implications of the US war offensive. Villepin identified France’s three “responsibilities”: the elimination of Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction,” the preservation of stability in the Middle East and Europe, and defense of the “fundamental role of the UN.”

Villepin identified the importance of the Middle East in imperialist terms, calling it an “essential strategic zone” due to its oil riches and its geographical position at the crossroads of “major transportation lanes.”

He also noted that the “internal cohesion” of European states would be threatened by “an illegitimate

handling” of the crisis that flew in the face of public opinion. He did not cite recent poll results, which clearly show the gulf that exists between the French government’s position, as it tries to woo Washington, and popular opinion. According to a poll by the Ifop agency, 65 percent of the French population oppose a war in Iraq even if the UN approved it, and 70 percent think that the US has an “overly dominant” position in the fight against terrorism.

Villepin was doubtless thinking about the radicalization of public opinion in the poorer French suburbs, many of which have large concentrations of Arab immigrants, and against which the government of Prime Minister Raffarin has directed the lion’s share of its new repressive security policies.

The opposition to Washington’s war policy became more explicit in Villepin’s discussion of the UN. Only a few days after the US government announced its new foreign policy framework based on “pre-emptive” wars, Villepin declared: “[France] refuses to sanction any unilateral or pre-emptive action; it is persuaded that a new international order must be based on dialogue and cooperation. If the world today needs a strong America, it also needs a strong Europe.”

This critical attitude is not limited to Villepin. *Figaro*, a right-wing newspaper close to the current government, published an article on October 10 describing French attempts to “restrain American liberty of action in Iraq” and to frustrate the “clan of warmongers that makes up the administration of George W. Bush.” It identified the stakes in the current negotiations as “the fate of the Iraqi population” in the hands of a dictator possessing “weapons of mass destruction,” “regional stability,” “control of the world’s principal reserves of petroleum,” and “the world order.”

According to *Figaro*, France may soon rally Russia and China—the two other members of the Security Council opposed to the war policies of the US and Great Britain—to its position on UN resolutions. At the end of the article, however, the journalist conceded that the question of war would be decided not by the UN, but by White House fiat. Bush is now armed with a congressional resolution authorizing him to declare war on Iraq when he sees fit, the writer noted, and takes his instructions from a group of counselors who have promoted the doctrine of pre-emptive war and have

long been pushing for an attack on Iraq.

France’s political line evidently bases itself on the hope that the White House will back down in the face of UN opposition—a hope that ruling circles are having an increasingly hard time getting anyone, including themselves, to take seriously. In the meantime, European ruling circles opposed to a US war, notably in France and Germany, are getting yet another lesson on their military weakness vis-à-vis the US.

Villepin’s wish for a “strong Europe” takes material form in an 11 percent increase in the French military budget and French insistence at European budgetary negotiations on tolerance of deficits resulting from increased military spending. Pushed to its logical conclusion, this perspective leads to armed confrontation between the major capitalist powers.

French imperialism, which in 1991 fully participated in attacking Iraq and imposing sanctions on the country, cannot be trusted in the slightest to oppose the impending war. To hide the predatory character of French foreign policy, first under Socialist Party President Mitterrand and today under his right-wing successor Chirac, the French ruling elite must repeat the Bush administration’s lies, according to which Iraq is the aggressor and a menace to the international community.



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