Iraq war dominates NATO summit in Prague

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The last NATO summit meeting in Washington in April 1999 took place during the war against Yugoslavia. As the government heads met in the American capital to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the transatlantic alliance, NATO fighters were bombing Belgrade. The summit which takes place November 21 and 22 in the Czech capital of Prague is dominated by military preparations for an American-led war against Iraq.

The White House has announced that it expects a resolution from NATO supporting the UN mandate demanding the complete disarmament of Iraq—a mandate that is to serve as the pretext for war. US President George W. Bush has declared that he will use the NATO summit to seek support for likely military action against Baghdad.

The significance of the current summit extends beyond this issue, however. At stake is the future strategy of NATO, and, indeed, its very existence. The new National Security Strategy, recently announced by the Bush government, the so-called Bush doctrine, sharply delimits the authority of international alliances such as NATO. At the heart of the Bush strategy lies the presumption that the US can and will undertake action against any country that threatens or could potentially threaten US imperialist interests. The terms of this strategy include the possibility of the US undertaking preventive wars or even, with minimal justification, employing nuclear weapons.

Within such a framework, NATO is reduced to the role of an auxiliary force or military reserve called upon to support the US whenever the latter considers it necessary. If the Bush government gets its way, a war against Iraq will serve as a precedent and model for the future shape of military alliances. According to Bush's national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, the Gulf states are "typical, or the most important example, of the kind of threat that NATO will face in the future."

The Pentagon, in particular, has repeatedly made clear that it will not allow itself to be bound by decisions made by an alliance of 19 states, which will shortly be expanded with the addition of seven additional members. The widely quoted remark by US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that "the mission determines the coalition, not the coalition the mission" has been understood in Europe as an open threat to NATO. In the words of one German defence expert: "Based on its own needs and requirements, the US will decide who is to be its partner and will utilise NATO as a service base for American-led military operations."

Should an alliance partner fail to live up to the expectations of Washington, it risks being snubbed and cold-shouldered. The German government is a case in point. Social Democratic (SPD) Chancellor Gerhard Schröder came out against US plans for a unilateral attack on Iraq during the recent German elections. Although the SPD-Green coalition government has since sought to adapt itself to Washington's war policy, Bush continues to flaunt his hostility to the re-elected regime in Berlin. The US president has turned aside entreaties from Schröder for a face-to-face meeting, and made it clear he has no plans for a direct meeting with the German chancellor in Prague. Bush will meet separately with the British prime minister and the presidents of France, Turkey and Russia, but will encounter the German chancellor only in the official sessions of the summit and a photo session involving all the heads of state.

For some time now the European Union has sought to counter the American assertion of dominance by developing its own military capacities independent of the US. Progress along these lines, however, has been slow.

European nations are currently struggling to fulfil the strict financial terms laid down in the Maastricht stability pact that was agreed as the basis for European integration. The budget adjustments necessary will inevitably involve large-scale attacks on European welfare systems and will inevitably meet with resistance. Under such circumstances, the raising of enormous sums of money for rearmament has not been possible, and Europe has fallen increasingly behind the US on the military front. At the same time, European governments are divided amongst themselves as to how they should face up to the US challenge.

European countries had already decided on the creation of a 60,000-strong European army of intervention, due to come into effect next year. It is dependent, however, on the infrastructure and material support of NATO, and such collaboration has been blocked up to now by a Turkish veto. NATO member Turkey is demanding the right to participate in any decisions regarding interventions by the European force, a demand that has been categorically rejected by European Union (EU) member Greece.

The EU force also faces competition from a US proposal for a NATO Response Force (NRF). The creation of the NRF is on the agenda and is slated to be decided upon at the Prague summit. This multinational force is to comprise 21,000 soldiers. Its purpose is to enable the alliance, for the first time, to send its own forces anywhere in the world at short notice. The force is to be equipped to operate and fight in a war zone on the basis of its own logistics for a period of at least a month.

The technological, transport and logistical requirements of this new force will demand enormous sums of money, which will no longer be available for the EU alternative intervention force. When Defense Secretary Rumsfeld first made the surprising proposal for the construction of a new militia at the September NATO meeting

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in Warsaw, it was widely seen as a move to torpedo Europe's plans for an independent force.

Against a background of considerable tension in European-American relations, European government leaders did not dare to publicly reject the US proposal. Instead they speak of the new force as a means of applying pressure with regard to American foreign policy.

The German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, greeted the US initiative in a government statement, declaring the NATO Response Force to be a "constructive proposal." He then went on to lay down conditions for the acceptance of the plan. These included the provision that all interventions be decided upon by the NATO council, that the establishment of the new force not involve the creation of any parallel structures to those of an independent European force, and, finally, that German participation in interventions by such a force could only be made with the agreement of the German parliament.

In practice, Fischer's conditions mean an overlap in important areas between the European-proposed and US-planned intervention armies. Both could be activated only with European agreement, and the EU force would have access to the NATO infrastructure.

As the military dominance of the US has become more and more apparent, European governments have increasingly shifted to accommodate themselves to America's aggressive foreign policy. It is anticipated there will be no resistance at the Prague meeting to the plans for war against Iraq. Instead it is expected that France will formally drop its demand for a second resolution by the UN Security Council before military action supported by the UN can proceed. French participation in a military assault is regarded as entirely possible.

The German government, whose leaders, during the election campaign, described a war against Iraq as "adventurous" and categorically rejected any German participation, has since extended and expanded its commitment to the US-led operation in Afghanistan. In so doing, it is freeing up US troops for invention in Iraq. Additionally, contrary to earlier claims, German tanks stationed in Kuwait will remain in the country and, in the event of war, could be drawn into action.

In his government statement on the NATO summit, Foreign Minister Fischer did not make a single reference to the Iraq war. Instead he waxed lyrical over the new role of NATO, which is no longer to be merely a "defence alliance", but will make a "decisive contribution to security and stability in the world." He expressly declared his support for the "Prague Capabilities Commitment", which commits every NATO member to huge rearmament efforts, with corresponding increases in state military budgets.

The shift by European governments towards American positions, already apparent on the eve of the Prague summit, is motivated by their fear of isolation and of being left empty-handed after a war. Incapable of preventing a war, they want to have a share of the booty.

In addition, they fear the implications of a possible break-up of NATO. After the Second World War, the American presence in Europe served to mitigate the inner-European conflicts that had led to two world wars. Not only was NATO a military alliance against the Soviet Union, it also prevented the emergence of new hegemonic powers within Western Europe itself. NATO's collapse would inevitably raise once more the question of the relationship of forces within Europe—in particular, between Germany and France.

The recent convergence in relation to Iraq, however, will not reduce the growing tensions between the United States and Europe. In the last analysis, these arise from the intensifying rivalry between the imperialist powers in their struggle for raw materials, markets and geopolitical influence.

Another item on the agenda of the Prague summit is the admission of seven new members from Eastern Europe.

In 1999, NATO first accepted three former members of the Eastern bloc into its ranks—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Now four more Eastern European countries are to follow—Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Slovakia—as well as the three former Soviet republics—Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. The seven applicants are scheduled to receive an official invitation in Prague and be fully integrated by May 2004.

Russia has abandoned its initial resistance to the acceptance of former Soviet republics, a move that has been rewarded with a strengthening of its position in the NATO-Russia Council, a body representing NATO member states and Russia that was created to discuss and decide on issues of mutual concern.

The Eastern expansion of NATO is another disputed issue between Europe and the United States. The Europeans suspect some candidates are playing the role of a Trojan horse for Washington.

Romania, as a case in point, is the only European country to have signed an agreement with the United States granting immunity to American citizens in relation to the International Court of Justice—a precedent which the EU has tried to prevent. In contrast to other NATO members and candidates, Romania is neither a member of the EU, nor among the 10 countries to be admitted at the EU summit in Copenhagen next month. It is only scheduled to join in 2007.

At the same time, Washington is applying enormous pressure on Germany and other European powers to quickly admit NATO member Turkey into the EU. On the eve of the NATO summit, Bush repeated his call for Turkey to be accepted into the EU. Speaking on the telephone to the Danish premier, Andres Forgh Rasmussen, the current president of the EU Council, he praised the recent political reforms in Turkey and said that the convergence of Turkey and the Western world was "of strategic significance."

Within the EU there is significant resistance to the admission of Turkey, which is widely regarded as a close ally of Washington capable of blocking any joint European foreign policy.

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