

French government moves toward participation in Iraq war

Alex Lefebvre
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The French government has announced a series of military measures increasing France's ability to launch strikes against Iraq. At the same time prominent political figures have openly warned against obstructing the US war drive.

The refitting of the French Navy's aircraft carrier, the *Charles de Gaulle*, was postponed for several months so that it could leave the Mediterranean port of Toulon and sail for the Persian Gulf in late January. This would place the carrier in the region prior to the likely onset of the US assault.

Another indication of French intentions was the recent visit to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates by Defense Secretary Michèle Alliot-Marie. The purpose of the trip was to ensure that in a war with Iraq the oil sheikdoms would allow the French armed forces to use airbases and supply depots located within their borders. The Persian Gulf countries grant France the use of these facilities in exchange for the sale of French weapons.

France has also signaled to the UN its willingness to use its Mirage spy planes, based at Mont-de-Marsan in southwestern France, to overfly Iraq and reconnoiter the country. During the heaviest fighting in Afghanistan these planes identified 1,100 targets for planes flying from the *Charles de Gaulle* and from French airbases in Kyrgyzstan.

The French Ministry of Defense tersely declared that the "French armed forces will intervene once the time has come." The center-left newspaper *Le Monde* indicated that a trigger for French military action would be "proof coming from UN inspectors that Iraqi disarmament is a sham." According to Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin's December 19 declaration, the French government already agrees with UN weapons inspector Hans Blix that the Iraqi weapons declaration

is incomplete.

Faced with overwhelming public opposition to the US war drive, the French government is trying to project a moderate stance on the question of participation in a US-led attack. French President Jacques Chirac's New Year's address to the French people did not once explicitly mention Iraq, although he said that "France should be in the first ranks of countries for peace." Defense Minister Alliot-Marie insisted that war should be viewed as "the worst solution."

In an attempt to prevent a unilateral declaration of war by the US, the French government has announced its intention to use its one-month January term as president of the UN Security Council to insist on a Security Council vote on any attempt to declare Iraq in "material breach" of its obligations. The conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* reported that the French government has worked hard to place Germany, which until recently argued against participation in a US war with Iraq, at the head of the committee managing UN sanctions against Iraq.

However, a *Figaro* editorial added that for the US to accept France's prominent position in the Security Council it must "be persuaded that [France is] in no way attempting to get in the way of its interests." Moreover, according to Jacques Myard, a member of the ruling conservative UMP coalition in the National Assembly, "[Foreign Minister] Dominique de Villepin and the government are convinced that the Americans are going in."

Thus, despite the government's pose of independence from the US, French ruling circles have no intention of providing serious opposition to the US war drive. Increasingly, government representatives are jettisoning any pretense of opposition to war.

Pierre Lellouche, a UMP representative, recently asserted that “France’s position has never been fundamentally distinct from the American one. We simply disagreed about methods. France wanted to work through the Security Council.”

Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, a UMP deputy and vice-chairman of the Assembly’s Commission on Foreign Affairs, said that the main difficulties in France’s presidency of the Security Council would come from the fact that “public opinion is not ready for a war.”

The Socialist Party (PS) has called for a French veto in the Security Council in case of unilateral American action, hoping to capitalize on mass opposition to the war and make people forget its own participation in imperialist maneuvers against Iraq during the 1990s. However, its fraction in the National Assembly is too small to prevent the UMP government from going to war.

According to the UMP’s Myard, “Doing everything to avert war [means] staving off war until January 27,” when Blix will deliver the final report of the UN weapons inspectors. This posture is intended to allow the government to present its participation in an invasion as a legitimate response, presuming the UN report will provide a fig leaf for attacking Iraq.

In addition to playing on the public’s hopes of avoiding war, the French government’s posturing aims at garnering support amongst Arab regimes in the Middle East. According to *Le Monde*, Middle Eastern governments were privately expressing their thanks to Chirac for providing “a voice distinct from the Americans.”

The government-owned Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* praised France’s UN negotiations with the US, declaring that the world Francophone summit of mid-October 2002 was an attempt to stop the spread of “American hegemony.” It attacked those who see in French diplomacy only “a double game to obtain [a] share of the war spoils in Iraq.”

Despite *Al-Ahram*’s claims, the French government’s maneuvers are designed precisely to defend France’s own imperialist interests in the Persian Gulf: the Franco-Belgian corporation TotalFinaElf has multibillion-dollar oil contracts in Iraq which the US could unilaterally cancel if it occupied Iraq without French assistance. As *Le Monde* put it, “France cannot abstain

from participating ... if only so as to avoid being cut out of the business of reconstructing Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein.”

However, such participation would not signify a lessening of the tensions that are raging between Washington and Paris, which in early December boiled over into a dispute over cruise missiles. When the US denied France access to Tomahawk cruise missiles because France wanted more technical details about the missiles than the US wanted to divulge, Fabrice Brégier, the head of the missile branch of the European defense corporation EADS, testified that the US was using its cruise missiles as a “fundamental tool” in a program of “economic domination.”

Brégier invited British and Italian firms to join EADS in working on the Scalp missile, which is projected to have capabilities roughly comparable to the Tomahawk, but to be built exclusively with European technology. *Le Monde* exulted that “France is joining the exclusive club of cruise missile-owning powers.... ‘Tomahawk diplomacy’ is no longer the sole prerogative of the United States.”



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