

EU summit agrees on war against Iraq as a “last resort”

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Two days after millions took to the streets in worldwide protests against an Iraq war, the government leaders of the European Union (EU), meeting in Brussels, agreed a resolution that expressly approves of war as a “last resort”.

The resolution, accepted by all of the participating governments, is a patchwork melange, with phrases inserted to meet the political requirements of governments sharply divided over Washington’s demand for a quick end to United Nations weapons inspections and the initiation, within weeks, of a US-led invasion.

While containing language that implicitly criticizes the US position, the resolution underscores that the stance of France and Germany is by no means based on a principled opposition to what will be a war of colonial conquest. The resolution echoes uncritically the basic—and fraudulent—premises of the US war drive, concealing Washington’s imperialistic aims and promoting the lie that it is motivated by a desire to protect the world from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

The Greek president of the European Union had called the special meeting for Monday to overcome the gulf opened up by the widely differing stances inside Europe on the issue of Iraq. The meeting was regarded as an opportunity to salvage whatever remains of a joint European foreign policy. The result was a compromise formulation that covers over existing differences, but in no way resolves them.

In voting for the common resolution, the German government, in particular, shifted significantly from its former position. Previously it had rejected any sort of military intervention, but with the new resolution it has backed an ultimatum to Iraq, demanding “unconditional cooperation” and leaving the door open for the use of military force.

The summit resolution begins with an acknowledgment of the central authority of the United Nations Security Council in dealing with Iraq, an implicit criticism of the Bush administration’s repeated assertions of its readiness to attack Iraq, with or without the sanction of the UN Security Council—a threat that has been echoed by the Blair government in Britain.

The resolution goes on to call for the “full and effective disarmament of Iraq”. According to the European heads of state, this should take place “peacefully”, and the resolution declares that “war is not inevitable”. At the same time, the possibility of a military intervention is expressly recognised, although the resolution states, “Force should be used only as a last resort.”

In the following passage, Iraq—along the lines dictated by Washington—is threatened with “serious consequences”—the diplomatic code word for military attack—should it refuse to cooperate unconditionally with the demands of the great powers: “Baghdad should have no illusions: it must disarm and cooperate immediately and fully. Iraq has a final opportunity to resolve the crisis peacefully. The Iraqi regime alone will be responsible for the consequences if it continues to flout the will of the international community and does not take this last chance.”

The most determined European supporters of war—Great Britain, Spain and Italy—made concessions of their own in Brussels by dropping the

demand for a time limit for completion of weapons inspections, and agreeing a formulation that states: “UN inspectors must be given the time and resources that the UN Security Council believes they need.” This is distinctly different in emphasis from the line emanating from Washington, where administration officials are declaring that inspections will be allowed to continue only “for weeks, not months”, and Bush himself is quipping, in his inimitable fashion, that Saddam Hussein’s “time is up” and “the game is over”.

This diplomatic nod to the position of France and Germany is immediately followed in the resolution by a gesture toward the US-led war faction: “However, inspections cannot continue indefinitely in the absence of full Iraqi cooperation.”

Overall, the summit resolution approximated most closely the position taken by the French government, which is calling for an extension of the UN weapons inspections, while refusing to exclude the possibility of a military strike. Only recently French President Chirac made a point of emphasising that “France is not a pacifist country.”

The *Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday provided a sense of the thinking of the French government, quoting “a senior member of Mr. Chirac’s ruling right-of-centre coalition” who said over the weekend, “All we need is a few extra weeks from the Americans, so we can say the [UN weapons inspectors] got a chance to do their job. It’s a question of saving face.”

The agreement to the resolution by Germany is in line with the stance favoured by German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and differs from the standpoint of the German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD), who has declared he would under no conditions vote in favour of a resolution for war—a line enthusiastically supported within his own party.

Fischer (Green Party) has sought to avoid taking a categorical position on the war, regarding such a position as a limitation on his room for diplomatic manoeuvre. These differences have led the Green Party leader to come into conflict with the German chancellor in internal government discussions.

On the Sunday evening prior to the EU Summit, France, Germany and Belgium gave way on the issue of NATO assistance to Turkey, and agreed military measures for the defence of the country in the event of an Iraq war. This means Turkey will be able to immediately order up Awacs reconnaissance flights, Patriot missile systems and Fuchs-type trace tanks that will be manned mainly by German soldiers.

Prior to last weekend France, Germany and Belgium had blocked such a move, arguing that it sent the wrong signal and was detrimental to a peaceful resolution of the Iraq conflict. As a result, all three nations were subjected to furious criticism from the American side.

The agreement resolved the open split within NATO states—in the face of initial American opposition—that the moves to assist Turkey should be regarded as neither a decision in favour of war nor sanction for the participation of NATO in military action against Iraq. According to the official wording, NATO assistance should be limited to purely defensive

purposes—although it is obvious that in the event of war it is virtually impossible to draw a distinction between what are defensive and offensive military measures.

There are a number of reasons why the European governments felt obliged to arrive at a joint declaration on the issue of Iraq. The massive turnout at the February 15 antiwar demonstrations, which far exceeded the expectations of march organisers, came as a shock to all of the European regimes. In light of the intervention by millions of people into the war crisis, all of the bourgeois government heads felt obliged to close ranks, despite the differences dividing them.

In the aftermath of the protests—which saw millions demonstrating in Rome—Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has sought to distance himself from his former stance as an avid supporter of war on Iraq, and is now attempting to act as an intermediary between France and Germany on the one side, and Great Britain and Spain on the other.

Even British Foreign Minister Jack Straw conceded that it is very difficult for a country to go to war in defiance of public opinion. Of all the European government heads, British Prime Minister Blair's position is, in the near term, the most precarious. His political future would be in doubt should he support a unilateral war by the US. Facing massive resistance from the people, plunging approval ratings and growing opposition from the parliamentary Labour Party, he might well lose his job. Blair, therefore, has the most urgent need to cobble together support for a second Security Council resolution authorizing military action against Iraq.

Germany and France hope to exploit Blair's dilemma to drive a wedge between London and Washington, and thereby weaken the position of the Bush administration, which relies heavily on Blair to give it a cover of international support.

For its part, the German government fears political isolation and believes the time is opportune to shift from its former position. Under massive pressure from Washington, the German government is concerned not only about the existence of NATO, but also the European Union itself, upon which Germany has based its own schemes to extend its influence throughout Europe and beyond.

The ruthlessness with which the US has disrupted the activities of the European Union has provoked profound alarm in both Berlin and Brussels. In its latest edition, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* reports on a secret paper from the office of the foreign policy head of the EU commission, Javier Solana, which accuses the US of using eastern European countries to hinder the expansion of the European Union in the areas of foreign and security policy. According to the paper, the Americans are “determined to play off one European player against the other.”

On the Iraq issue, Washington has openly sought to enlist its East European clients as a counterweight to France and Germany.

In a clear snub, leaders of East European states that are due to be admitted as EU members were not invited to Monday's summit. In Brussels, French President Chirac remarked acidly, “They have missed a terrific opportunity to keep quiet.” He went on to threaten them with obstacles on their path to joining the EU. If they wanted to lessen their chances of entry, he said, “they could have hardly found a better way of doing it.”

Despite the efforts to arrive at a common European position, the resolution arrived at in Brussels can only mask, but not overcome the divisions in the European Union. The agreement is based on the lowest common denominator. Above all, two decisive issues were excluded: first, the timing and criteria for withdrawal of the weapons inspectors and transition to the “last resort”, i.e., war; second, the response of the EU should the US, in the end, take military action without the benefit UN sanction.

Great Britain and Spain have said they are prepared to support the US government even if it undertakes unilateral action, but Germany and

France are insisting that only the United Nations can sanction war. At the moment, they are attempting to delay a second UN Security Council resolution on the Iraq issue for as long as possible. The next conflict could arise precisely on this issue.

British and American diplomats are working on the draft of a new UN resolution that could possibly be presented to the Security Council this week. The draft will reportedly state that Iraq remains in “material breach” of UN resolutions and present the country with a short-term ultimatum. The resolution would provide the basis for the US undertaking military action at any time it chooses.

France and Germany have opposed a second resolution. They want to continue inspections on the basis of Resolution 1441, which was passed by the Security Council last November. Intensifying the pressure on Blair (and underscoring the flimsy substance of the resolution passed at the EU summit), Chirac reiterated France's opposition to a new Security Council resolution, declaring, “There is no need for a second resolution today, which France would have no choice but to oppose.”

But as the concessions made by France and Germany in Brussels and on the issue of NATO assistance for Turkey demonstrate, these governments could shift their position on Iraq at any time. The stakes are particularly high for the German government.

With growing unemployment and a mounting social crisis at home, the SPD-Green coalition is currently at the nadir of its popularity. It is under considerable pressure from the conservative opposition, which is broadly lined up behind the Bush government. Should France change its position and leave the German government standing alone in its foreign policy, the continued existence of the Schröder regime would be in doubt.

The resolution of the European heads of government is a further manoeuvre in a complex web of policy and intrigue, in which the real driving interests and aims are concealed from the people, and each government attempts to uphold its interests in the face of domestic and foreign pressure. It is impossible to base any serious opposition to the Iraq war on the diplomatic thrusts and feints of bourgeois governments. Instead, it is necessary to arm the broad movement against war that emerged so dramatically last weekend with an international socialist perspective. Only this will enable the working class to intervene as an independent political force.



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