

# Franco-British summit: Chirac signals Paris ready to back war vs. Iraq

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Any illusions that the European powers can be relied on to oppose a US-led war in the Persian Gulf were dealt a blow by the Franco-British summit that took place on February 3, and France's subsequent responses on the issue.

During the talks at the French resort of Le Touquet, President Jacques Chirac made clear that he was not opposed in principle to an attack on Baghdad. Making common cause with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chirac emphasised his opposition to Saddam Hussein and stressed that France "would not rule out" military force against Iraq.

His words were given additional weight by news that the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle had made an unscheduled departure for exercises in the Mediterranean alongside America's carrier, the USS Harry S. Truman. Just days before, French Defence Ministry officials had announced that 150 servicemen and a small number of warplanes were being deployed to Qatar, in a move seen as indicating French preparedness to line up with a US attack on Iraq.

If Chirac still felt it politic to reiterate French objections to a US-led assault on Iraq not sanctioned by the United Nations, it is because he is playing a cynical game in which the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqi people are to be sacrificed, providing France's own imperialist interests are taken into account.

The summit was held on the eve of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation of the American case against Iraq at the UN Security Council. Despite the flimsy and fraudulent character of Powell's case, the presentation was aimed, in part, at enabling the UN's reluctant objectors to manoeuvre into position behind a war. This external US pressure helped ensure that relations between Blair and Chirac at the summit were cordial, even after months of tensions between the two countries.

The talks had originally been scheduled for December, but Chirac postponed them after a bitter public row with Britain over reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) governing farming subsidies. Paris and Berlin had cut a deal on the matter, enabling France to maintain its subsidies for

an extended period, causing alarm in London at the prospect of a strengthened Franco-German axis for the European Union.

The stepping up of US preparations for war against Iraq has changed the balance of forces within Europe to the detriment of France and the benefit of Britain. Efforts by Paris and Berlin to mark out a common European position of resistance to US ambitions were undermined by the "gang of eight" declaration in late January. The declaration, signed by five EU members including Britain, and three prospective members from eastern European countries not only supported US preparations for war, but rejected France and Germany's claims to be speaking for Europe, leading US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to refer contemptuously to Paris and Berlin as "old Europe".

Chirac was also placed on the defensive by the heavy defeats sustained by German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's ruling Social Democratic Party in local elections at the weekend. Although not occasioned by his antiwar stance, which remains popular, the 15 percent swing to the Christian Democrats was portrayed by Washington and London as a victory for their line and a signal for a possible shift in position by Germany.

With Powell's statement to the Security Council heralding the closing stages of preparations for war, France does not relish being isolated on the sidelines. Chirac therefore gave every indication that France's position will be subject to revision in the event of discussions on a second UN resolution.

He hinted at Rumsfeld's rebuke in his summit statement. France and Britain "represent two ancient civilisations, two old nations, two old cultures", Chirac said, and this was a great strength. But otherwise the two leaders studiously avoided past disagreements. Britain and France "have different approaches" to war against Iraq, Chirac said, "but first and foremost we have two convictions which are fundamental and are shared." The two countries were in fact far closer to one another, he continued, and were "entirely in agreement" that Iraq must be disarmed and that "this has to

be undertaken within the Security Council of the United Nations.”

The demand for UN approval is favoured by sections of the European ruling class and various antiwar groupings. The call has nothing to do with principled opposition to an imperialist war against a small, impoverished country for the purpose of occupying its territory and seizing strategic oil resources. Politically it is aimed at chloroforming public opinion, especially in Europe, where the vast majority of the population is opposed to war.

In France 75 percent of people are against an attack on Iraq. Chirac’s apparent reluctance to join a US-led war is aimed at shoring up his standing domestically as the true representative of the French nation. He also hopes that his stance will underscore his claim to be the most intransigent spokesman for Europe against the US. By insisting on UN approval, the lesser imperialist powers hope to exercise some form of control over the US, so as to ensure their share of any post-war carve up. Paris, for example, is keen that the favourable deals struck by France’s TotalFinaElf oil company with Saddam Hussein to develop the lucrative Majnoon and Nahr Umar oil fields, are not abrogated or threatened by a future US takeover of the country.

Chirac responded angrily when pressed to set out his disagreement with the US and Britain. “Do not expect me to open heaven knows what Pandora’s box or get into an argument with anybody,” he said, dismissing claims that he was on a collision course with the US as “pie in the sky”.

Asked repeatedly whether France would make good its previous pledge to wield its veto on the UN Security Council against war, Chirac refused to be drawn. “France will assume its responsibility as it sees fit,” he said. The President also refused to reiterate his demand for a longer timetable to be extended to the UN weapons inspectors, as did Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin following Powell’s submission, referring instead to the “Iraqi risk”.

For his part, having marked himself out as America’s key ally in Europe, Blair felt in a position to be generous. If he was able to bring France on board US war plans, he would again demonstrate his importance for America whilst undermining criticisms that his gung-ho approach had left him out on a limb in Europe, regarded as Bush’s poodle. Blair has made great play of his own willingness to stick to the UN route and seek a second resolution if possible before going to war, but has also insisted that if one member of the security council uses its veto, then all bets are off.

Blair studiously avoided any mention of France’s invitation to Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to attend an African summit in Paris this month, apparently in breach of EU sanctions against his regime. Chirac also spoke of the need for “give and take”, thought to be a reference to

previous British intransigence over CAP reform.

More significantly, the British Prime Minister endorsed the recent French intervention into its former colony of Cote d’Ivoire where a rebel uprising is underway. Some 3,000 French military personnel are currently in the country, which could act as a staging post for renewed French intervention across this important oil-producing region.

The two leaders also agreed to press ahead with plans for a common European security and defence policy, including pooling military equipment for “peacekeeping or humanitarian missions”. Differences over EU defence had held up progress over the last months, with France favouring an autonomous command independent of NATO and Britain insisting it should be complementary to the alliance.

Military cooperation between the two countries had been advanced by Britain’s decision to award the French company Thales part of its new aircraft carrier contract. At Le Touquet, moreover, Chirac won British backing for strengthening the 60,000-strong European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF), which will replace NATO in Macedonia next month.

The decision does not end the force’s disputed status, but merely postpones it. Nevertheless, it underscores that with war imminent, Britain and France do indeed have much in common—not least hopes to reinvigorate their colonial pasts. According to reports, the ERRF is expected to play a significant role in Africa. British spokesman admitted that further talks between Chirac and Blair “on Africa would include the question of oil resources as a possible alternative source of energy”.



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