

The Azores summit: Bush sets deadline for US aggression against Iraq

The Editorial Board
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Sunday's summit meeting in the Azores sets the stage for the launching of American military action against Iraq within a matter of days. President Bush is expected to go on national television as early as Monday night to announce the final decision for war. American warplanes and 250,000 troops are poised to begin the invasion and conquest of the impoverished country, with the likely destruction of tens of thousands of innocent lives.

At a new conference after the summit, Bush openly threatened France and other European countries which have opposed adoption of a war resolution by the UN Security Council. He repeated the claim that Monday would represent a "moment of truth." This may well be true, but not in the sense Bush imagines.

The Bush administration is tearing down and repudiating the entire framework of post-World War II international relations. It is revealing the true face of American imperialism, in a rapacious and criminal drive to seize Iraq's oil resources and establish a dominant position for the United States in the Persian Gulf.

The White House has repeatedly employed false analogies to the 1930s to justify its policies, with ludicrous comparisons of Iraq, a weak and impoverished country, to Nazi Germany. There is a parallel to Hitler, but it involves Bush and not Saddam Hussein. Once again, as in the 1930s, the world has been staggered by brazen acts of bullying and aggression perpetrated by a major world power. That is why massive protest demonstrations against the US war drive have taken place in virtually every world capital.

The communiqué issued by the Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Spanish Premier Jose Maria Aznar made grandiose pledges of the bright future for the Iraqi people once their country has been conquered by the United States and, as one US columnist put it, "70 years of independent history comes to an end." The cynicism of these promises can be judged by the efforts of the three to cast the blame for the starvation and impoverishment of the Iraqi people—the consequences of 12 years of US and UN-backed economic sanctions—on the Iraqi government.

Who were these individuals claiming the mission to bring democracy to the Middle East? Bush himself is not the product of a democratic vote, but of a stolen election. He came to power through the intervention of the US Supreme Court after losing the vote to his Democratic Party opponent. Blair is the hand-picked prime minister of media mogul Rupert Murdoch, hated and opposed in his own party, his war policy despised by the overwhelming majority in Britain. Aznar heads the party which traces its legacy to fascist dictator Francisco Franco. Like Blair, he has taken the decision for war in the face of overwhelming public opposition, defying the democratic will of the Spanish people.

The location of the meeting—on an American airbase on the Portuguese island of Terceira, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean—was an expression both of the isolation of the Bush administration and its complete contempt for public opinion. The summit could not have been held in the capitals of any of the three countries without a full-scale military mobilization. It had to be held on an island, inaccessible to the people of the countries involved, to avoid mass protests like the one million people who marched through the Spanish capital, Madrid, the day before. Even so, a few hundred Azoreans rallied outside Lajes Air Base to show their opposition to the coming war.

The event was in many ways bizarre. The three heads of state travelled 2,300 miles (Bush) or 1,000 miles each (Blair and Aznar), to sit round a table for barely an hour. They then appeared before the assembled international media to announce a new ultimatum directed, not so much at Saddam Hussein, but at France, Russia, Germany and the other states which have opposed a Security Council resolution authorizing military action against Iraq.

Bush gave the Security Council members 24 hours to rubber-stamp the US-British resolution, after which he will terminate all further diplomatic discussions and authorize the Pentagon to proceed with bombing and a full-scale land invasion. At one point, the US president's face contorted as he denounced France for its expected veto, and he seemed prepared to order military action against Paris as well as Baghdad.

This was not a summit to "go the last mile" in seeking a diplomatic solution, as the White House claimed—failing to explain, in that event, why the chief US diplomat, Secretary of State Colin Powell, stayed behind in Washington. Rather, it was an effort to make absolutely certain that no diplomatic obstacles would succeed in diverting the Bush administration from its long-desired goal of war.

Blair declared, in his comments at the news conference following the summit, that the US-British occupiers would be committed to "using Iraq's resources for the benefit of the owners, the Iraqi people." This was an effort to counter the widespread—and entirely correct—belief that a major goal of the US-led invasion is to seize control of Iraq's oil reserves, the second largest in the world.

Blair's reassurance was all the more ludicrous following a week of open discussion in the US and British press over the vital importance of control of Iraq's oil resources in the postwar period. Published reports say that the British military forces dispatched to Kuwait by Blair have been given the mission of securing Iraq's southern oilfields, extending from Rumaila near the Iraq-Kuwait border.

Turkey has balked at stationing US troops on its soil, partly because of massive public opposition, but also because the Turkish military

plans to seize Kirkuk, the center of Iraq's northern oilfield with one third of the country's reserves, in order to forestall efforts by Iraqi Kurds to capture the city and make it the capital of an autonomous or independent Kurdistan. The Bush administration is now planning to airlift US troops into Kirkuk to block either Turkish or Kurdish predominance.

And, as always with the Bush administration, personal financial gain happily dovetails with plans for military conquest. Only days before the summit, the British newspaper the *Guardian* revealed that Vice President Richard Cheney is continuing to receive payments, estimated at between \$500,000 and \$600,000 annually, from Halliburton, the big oilfield services company he headed before the 2000 election campaign. Halliburton is one of three huge US companies being given privileged status in bidding for contracts to rehabilitate Iraq's oilfields under a postwar American administration.

It is a measure of the cowardice and corruption of the American media that not a single major US newspaper has reported the *Guardian's* findings. Nor was Cheney questioned about his personal finances during hour-long interviews Sunday on NBC's *Meet the Press* and CBS's *Face the Nation*.

Bush repeatedly declared that the main purpose of military action against Iraq was to defend the world from the supposed threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The administration's lies on this subject have been repeatedly exposed, most recently in an article which appeared in the *Washington Post* on the day of the summit.

The newspaper's national security reporter Walter Pincus—a former CIA informant and well-connected at the agency—cited CIA sources as acknowledging, as though it was obvious, that the US government has no evidence that Iraq possesses any chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

Pincus reported "concerns among some members of the intelligence community about whether administration officials have exaggerated intelligence in a desire to convince the American public and foreign governments that Iraq is violating United Nations prohibitions against chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons and long-range missile systems." He added: "A senior intelligence analyst said one explanation for the difficulties inspectors have had in locating weapons caches 'is because there may not be much of a stockpile'."

He continued: "Administration officials, in making the case against Iraq, repeatedly have failed to mention the considerable amount of documented weapons destruction that took place in Iraq between 1991 and 1998, when the previous U.N. Special Commission on Iraq had inspection teams in the field. In that period, under U.N. supervision, Iraq destroyed 817 of 819 proscribed medium-range missiles, 14 launchers, 9 trailers and 56 fixed missile-launch sites. It also destroyed 73 of 75 chemical or biological warheads and 163 warheads for conventional explosives."

The Azores summit follows a week-long series of debacles for American diplomacy. Washington has failed to shift Turkey's opposition to the deployment of American troops, and has so far not been able to obtain permission from its NATO ally for passage of American warplanes through Turkish air space. The equipment for an entire American armored division is floating on ships sitting offshore of Turkey's Mediterranean coast.

At the United Nations, bribery and threats by the US have failed to win significant support from the six uncommitted countries which hold the key votes on the Security Council, most notably from Mexico and Chile, both wholly dependent on the US market for their exports. The Bush administration has no more than four sure votes out of

fifteen, the same number it had a month ago.

White House and State Department officials have repeatedly made predictions that have proven false: that Germany would eventually fall into line, that Russia would see its interests lay with the US, that France would contribute forces so as not to miss out on the spoils of war, that the half dozen smaller states could not stand up to US pressure. If US military strategists are as poor at calculating the odds as its diplomatic specialists, the Pentagon is in for some bloody surprises.

The opposition to US war plans on the part of European powers like France, Germany and Russia is rooted, not in any principled opposition to imperialist war and the slaughter of innocent civilians, but in their recognition that the US drive to war has implications that go far beyond Iraq. The war represents an unprecedented and immensely dangerous bid by the United States for a position of unchallengeable global hegemony, a position which its imperialist rivals cannot accept, despite their present military inferiority.

French imperialism may have had hopes of an accommodation with Washington last fall, when Resolution 1441 was passed through the Security Council unanimously. But since then the Bush administration has reacted with increasing vehemence and bitterness to every attempt at a diplomatic resolution to the confrontation with Iraq.

Having decided that the conquest and occupation of Iraq was central to its global ambitions, the US is not prepared to brook the slightest opposition. The extreme-right faction that has come to power in Washington aims to put an end to all restraints on its freedom of action, not only in the Middle East but on every issue.

In its hell-bent rush to war against Iraq, regardless and even in defiance of the UN Security Council, the United States is bringing about the collapse of the entire framework of international relations assembled in the aftermath of war. It has embarked upon a bloody and criminal project whose catastrophic consequences will become all too clear in the months and years ahead.



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