Chirac and Schröder oppose Bush's war ultimatum

Peter Schwarz
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Paris and Berlin have issued statements opposing US President Bush's war ultimatum to Iraq.

Early Tuesday morning, just a few hours after Bush's speech at 2 a.m. European time, the French presidential council issued a short communiqué denouncing the decision to go to war as a violation of international law.

"Without any consultation of the United Nations Security Council, Iraq has been posed an ultimatum," the communiqué stated. "This one-sided decision contravenes the will of the Security Council and the international community, which desired a continuation of weapons inspections on the basis of Resolution 1441."

The communiqué declared that "only the Security Council is able to legitimise the use of force" and concluded with an appeal: "France appeals to the responsibility of all those who respect international law. Whoever undertakes to cast aside the legitimacy of the United Nations and elevate force above the power of law assumes a grave responsibility."

In a television speech a few hours later, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder expressed similar sentiments to those of the French president, though in more moderate terms.

"The world is on the eve of war," said Schröder. "My question was and remains: does the extent of the threat posed by the Iraqi dictator justify the imposition of war which will result in the certain death of thousands of innocent men, women and children? My answer in this case was and remains: no."

Schröder continued by saying that there was no reason to break off the UN disarmament process. On that issue, he said, he is of the same opinion as "the overwhelming majority of our people, as well as the majority in the Security Council and the peoples of the world."

Similar responses to Bush's declaration of war came from Moscow, Beijing, Ottawa, Jakarta and many other capitals. They all voiced concerns about the legitimacy of war with Iraq. Aside from Britain and Spain, only a few other countries expressed support for the White House--Australia, Japan and Poland, for example--although in each case the overwhelming majority of the population rejects such a war.

In Germany, the conservative opposition of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU) have backed Bush. Their parliamentary fraction passed a resolution backing Bush's 48-hour ultimatum to Saddam Hussein. The chairperson of the CDU, Angela Merkel, said that the conservative fraction would bear all the consequences which arose out of the ultimatum to Iraq.

The speed and tone of the French and German governments' reaction to Bush's declaration of war came as a surprise to some commentators. For some time there has been speculation that Paris and Berlin would work to close the political gap with Washington once the decision for war was beyond any doubt.

This is has proven partly the case, at least in regard to the immediate situation in Iraq.

Chancellor Schröder has repeatedly made clear that, despite his vocal objections, he would not interfere in any way with the American war efforts. The US Army and Air Force have been given unrestricted use of their bases in Germany and German air space, although prominent legal specialists have expressed doubts that such permission is compatible with the constitution.

German chemical detection vehicles remain in operation in Kuwait, and the German military continues to man AWACS reconnaissance planes that are circling the skies over Turkey--although there is every risk that these forces will become involved in the war. The

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German government has also indicated its willingness to take part in the "reconstruction" of Iraq should this take place within the framework of NATO.

The French government has announced similar intentions and assured the US that should it have problems in Iraq it could count on France. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin declared recently, "We will not use the present crisis to come up with arguments that could tomorrow further deepen the divisions within the international community.... Should this situation come about, then we have to close ranks and stand by the United States in the search for solutions."

The communiqué by the French president makes clear, however, that more is at stake than the reorganisation of Iraq. Before a single bomb has fallen on Baghdad, the American war ultimatum has claimed its first victim: the world order that secured comparatively stable relations between the great powers for over a half a century has been reduced to rubble.

Although the French communiqué is short, its implications are far-reaching. When "international law"--i.e., the international rules and regulations drawn up after the Second World War, largely at the behest of the United States--are no longer respected by the US itself, how will future disputes between states be settled? For trade disputes, differences of political opinion, or--as in the present situation--decisions over war and peace, the sole operating principle will be: might makes right.

This applies not only to conflicts with countries like Iraq, but also to disputes between the great powers themselves. The world is threatened with a return to a situation resembling that which prevailed in the first half of the last century, when conflicting interests between the great powers erupted in two world wars.

Commentaries in the European press have turned increasingly to this theme over the past few weeks. Slowly the realisation is sinking in that the Bush administration has irretrievably destroyed the old world order. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* for example, commented recently: "Washington's crude treatment of the UN, NATO and the Europeans, and its blindness to the complex consequences of an attack on Iraq, are a taste of the new world order à la Bush junior."

The newspaper, which is close to the Social Democrats and the Green Party and reflects the thinking in government circles, concluded: "The European Union has to develop into a world power."

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