

# Franco-African summit: the scramble for Africa intensifies

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On February 19-21, French President Jacques Chirac hosted a Paris summit of African heads of state, entitled “Africa and France, Together in a New Partnership.” Extending an invitation to many countries traditionally considered outside France’s sphere of influence, Chirac invited representatives from every African country except Somalia. Only one head of state, Laurent Gbagbo of the Ivory Coast, who has run afoul of a French intervention force in his country, refused to come or send a high-level delegation.

The global Franco-American rivalry dominated the summit to an unusual degree. Departing from normal procedures, the conference adopted a declaration on the situation in Iraq. Largely echoing the French government’s position, it called for extended United Nations weapons inspections and stressed the importance of the UN in any resolution of the Iraq crisis. The French press praised the declaration as strengthening France’s stance, noting that it was adopted unanimously.

The vote was considered especially important since three African states—Cameroon, Angola and Guinea—were nonpermanent members of the UN Security Council and will vote on upcoming UN resolutions.

Recriminations broke out over the declaration immediately after the conference ended. Rwandan President Paul Kagame, aligned with the US, insisted that he had had no part in discussing it and that it had been “imposed” by the French. On French television, Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade claimed that it had been “voted upon”—leaving open the possibility that the French government had confronted the African leaders with a take-it-or-leave-it Iraq declaration.

In a subtle attack on the US, Chirac promised he would propose cutting subsidies of First World agricultural exports to African countries at upcoming

trade summits. This issue is quite popular with African heads of state since subsidized First World imports often ruin African farmers. Raising it gave French officials and the French press the opportunity to criticize the US government’s massive 2002 farm subsidy bill, which includes provisions subsidizing US exports to Third World countries. The question of farm subsidies is a longstanding bone of contention between the US and the European Union (EU) at trade talks.

Chirac also promised he would defend the preferential status France has granted to African agricultural exports, despite opposition from the US and the Cairns Group of agricultural exporters.

Chirac’s agricultural proposals also served to shield him from attacks by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had previously criticized him for claiming to care about Africa while preserving the European Common Agricultural Policy subsidies, which effectively shut African farmers out of the European market.

In line with its vicious anti-French attacks over the Iraq crisis, the British press reacted hysterically to the summit. Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* tabloid distributed a version of its paper in Paris with a picture of Chirac’s face superimposed on a worm’s body, labeled “Chirac is a worm.”

Most of the British media outlets focused on Chirac’s invitation of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe as exemplifying his willingness to deal with undemocratic governments. They pointed out that Mugabe is still technically under a EU ban prohibiting him from visiting any EU countries. French officials retorted that several African leaders had threatened to boycott the conference if Mugabe was not invited.

While attacking the summit along similar lines, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that the British Commonwealth is under increasing pressure from two

African members, South Africa and Nigeria, to rescind its condemnation of Mugabe. This article was the exception to the rule, however, as the US media largely blacked out details of the conference.

US and British hostility to Chirac's meetings with African rulers has nothing to do with concerns over democratic rights. Washington and London likewise prop up authoritarian governments and arm proxies in civil wars across Africa. Rather, they are concerned that France may seek to defend its imperialist interests and relations with former colonies more aggressively than before. The *Financial Times* of London complained that Chirac had "kidnapped European policy" on Africa.

The new conservative French government represents a break with the previous Socialist government on Africa policy. The French newspaper *Le Figaro* noted that it is closer to sections of the ruling elite that favor a greater military presence in Africa.

Thus far, the reassertion of French interests in Africa has not gone smoothly. France's military intervention in the Ivory Coast, where it is keeping a force of 3,000 soldiers, occupied much of Chirac's time during the conference. In the face of escalating violations of the recent Marcoussis peace accords, by both rebel forces and those of President Laurent Gbagbo, Chirac is trying to form a government of national unity, including both rebel and pro-presidential elements, centered on Prime Minister Seydou Diarra.

Diarra, scornfully labeled "the prime minister of France" in the Ivory Coast, traveled to Paris to meet Chirac during the summit. Chirac issued veiled threats of war crimes prosecutions against Gbagbo, claiming that "death squads" were operating in the streets of the port city, Abidjan—claims that Gbagbo immediately contested.

Even if France somehow manages to broker a peace deal to its advantage in the Ivory Coast, it faces a larger problem: attempts to assert its interests in Africa risk provoking a serious confrontation with the US. Most of the African problems discussed at the summit either involve or are related to fighting between French and US proxies.

The summit discussed the problem of transfer of power in Burundi from a Tutsi to a Hutu head of state. In the region, the US has typically backed the Tutsi ethnic group and France the Hutu ethnic group. This

was the case, for example, during the genocide in neighboring Rwanda. It is unclear if the Tutsi-controlled army in Burundi will accept the transfer.

It also discussed the problems in Congo-Kinsasha (Democratic Republic of the Congo), where Tutsi rebels from Uganda and Burundi are fighting government forces for control of gold and diamond mines in the eastern part of the country. France has organized support for the government from neighboring countries—Angola and Mugabe's Zimbabwe—both of which have faced Anglo-American opposition.

The problem of Chad's involvement in the civil war in the Central African Republic also involves a Franco-American rivalry. The Central African Republic's president, Félix-Ange Patassé, has called in Ugandan Tutsi forces to put down a revolt partially sponsored by Chad, which hosts a garrison of 1,000 French troops and is considered a French ally.

The poisoning of international relations arising from the US war drive against Iraq is intensifying the scramble for Africa, which, in turn, is further exacerbating the rivalries between the major capitalist powers. Despite verbal claims of concern for peace, military interventions by France and others seeking to secure natural resources or strategic positions will give rise to more of the civil warfare, social dislocation, indebtedness and poverty that are already devastating Africa. They also bring mankind closer to the point when the increasing tensions between the imperialist powers themselves assume military forms.



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