

Putin, Schröder, Chirac to meet in St. Petersburg

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Two days after the fall of Baghdad, Russian President Vladimir Putin is due to meet with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac in St. Petersburg. The two-day summit beginning April 11 will consider the results of the Iraq war.

A meeting between Putin and Schröder had been scheduled some time ago. Under French pressure, President Putin invited Chirac and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan at short notice. Annan, eager to avoid further damage to his relations with Washington, turned down the invitation.

Prior to the war France, Germany and Russia collaborated closely to block a resolution authorizing the US-British invasion from being passed in the United Nations Security Council. Now they are seeking to ensure a substantial role for the UN in a post-war Iraq.

Nevertheless, the three countries are unlikely to condemn the illegal war carried out by the US and Britain, despite the fact that it was launched against the express wishes of the Security Council. Chancellor Schröder has already unconditionally hailed the fall of Iraq. It was a positive development, he said, adding that a rapid victory for the invaders had been hoped and wished for.

Putin, Schröder and Chirac are insisting that the UN play a leading role in post-war Iraq for a number of reasons. In the first place, they fear they could be left out when it comes to dishing out the booty should Iraq remain under exclusive US control. French and Russian companies stand to lose valuable oil concessions in Iraq under a US-installed regime. Russia alone stands to lose \$20 billion worth of business.

It could further forfeit \$8 billion in Iraqi debts to Moscow. Muwaffak Fatuchin, a leading member of the US-backed Iraqi National Congress, has already threatened to cancel this debt.

“Countries such as Russia, the Ukraine and Byelorussia were friends of Saddam,” he said in an interview. “They

backed him up. That is why no one will pay back the debts they are owed. They delivered their weapons to him and they should take up the issue with him.”

Deals worth billions to be financed from the country’s oil resources, including contracts to rebuild Iraq, stand to go exclusively to US firms unless the UN has a say. European newspapers have quoted on numerous occasions a statement made by US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to the effect that those countries which sacrificed their “lives and blood” for the “liberation” of Iraq should reap the financial rewards.

Of even greater concern to the summit participants than the immediate economic consequences of the war are its long-term political implications. It is no secret that the American government regards the conquest of Iraq as the first step in reorganising the entire region in accordance with its own interests. After initial difficulties, the ease with which the US-led alliance was able to record successes in the war will only whet the appetite of White House and Pentagon hawks.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has already launched new threats against Syria. Earlier this week, according to the *New York Times*, he warned that Syria “had ignored his past cautions against aiding the Iraqi leadership.” The *Times* continued: “He said it was too soon to say if the United States would take action against Syria, which after Iraq is considered high on the Administration’s list of enemies.”

Putin, Schröder and Chirac are seeking to restrain Washington’s bellicose foreign policy by drawing it into the UN. In so doing, they are looking to Great Britain for support.

British Prime Minister Blair stood side by side with Bush during the war, but in the long run Blair regards British political influence as being bound up with the country’s role as a bridgehead between the US and Europe. Should it be reduced to the role of junior partner

to the US, Britain would lose any political room to manoeuvre in the sphere of foreign policy.

Blair has therefore intervened in favour of UN input and in Ireland last Tuesday managed to secure an assurance from the American president that the UN would play a “vital role” in Iraq. When questioned on the content of such a role, however, Bush referred merely to the provision of humanitarian aid and the nomination of possible members of a future Iraqi government. In substance, Bush granted very little to Blair, making it clear that the future regime would be made in the USA.

Paris immediately rejected such a reduced role. Chirac declared that in the reconstruction of a post-war Iraq, the United Nations—and “it alone”—had to play the central role. Only the UN, he continued, had the “necessary legitimacy”. The days had passed when “one or two countries could decide the fate of others”. Chirac did state, however, that he was prepared to allow the victors of the war to assume control for a brief “phase of safekeeping”.

Ultimately, the differences between Chirac, Schröder and Putin, arising from their distinct and disparate economic and political interests, are too profound to enable them to unite and pose a serious counterweight to Washington’s bellicose foreign policy. Chirac’s appeals to “wisdom” fall on deaf ears in the US.

Chirac regards the current situation as a chance to enhance the somewhat tarnished reputation of France as a great power. For a long time he did not exclude the possibility of French military participation in an Iraq war. However, after appeals from Germany, Belgium and other European countries for the “construction of a powerful European alternative”, he decided to attempt to fill the role of head of a new coalition opposing the US drive for global hegemony.

Chirac’s remarks in opposition to the establishment of outright American control over Iraq received a lukewarm response from his German allies. In his government statement of April 3, Chancellor Schröder had emphasised the central role of the transatlantic alliance in German foreign policy. He also endorsed an enhanced role for the UN, saying, “The United Nations must play the central role in shaping the future of Iraq and its political reorganisation at the end of the war.”

But German criticism of US policy towards Iraq has been more muted than that of the French, and it virtually ceased once the war began. The German government failed to undertake any practical measures, such as banning US military activities on its territory or in its

airspace.

Germany is also concerned that an axis between Berlin, Paris and Moscow would have disastrous consequences for eastern European countries that are applying to join the European Union—in particular, Poland, which enjoys close economic links to Germany. Poland’s unconditional support for the war in Iraq is bound up with the country’s attempts to curry favour with Washington and ward off the development of overly close relations between Berlin and Moscow.

Russian President Putin is even less inclined than Schröder to jeopardise his country’s relations with the US. He has always emphasised the strategic significance of Russia’s alliance with the US for his country’s economic development.

Initially Putin criticised the war as a “grave political mistake,” but went on to emphasise that “for economic and political reasons, Russia is not interested in a confrontation with America.” Just recently he again stressed: “Russia has cooperated with the US and will continue to work together with Washington.”

Nevertheless, new tensions emerged after American soldiers fired on a Russian convoy in Iraq that included the Russian ambassador, Vladimir Titorenko. The ambassador was attempting to leave the Iraqi capital and was heading for Syria. He claims his convoy was deliberately fired upon. One day later US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice paid a visit to Moscow, but was unable to completely satisfy Russian concerns over the incident. Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov refused to even meet with Rice.

It is already evident that the meeting in St. Petersburg will produce little of substance, apart from hollow appeals for Washington to submit to decisions made by the United Nations. Such appeals will have even less impact following the US military successes in the war than they did prior to the onset of the invasion. Chirac, Schröder and Putin will scrupulously avoid anything that could be interpreted as addressing the opposition to Bush within America itself. All of them are agreed on this point.



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