

Summit of Four in Brussels

Schröder and Chirac pledge their allegiance to Washington

Peter Schwarz
3 May 2003

Prior to and during the US-led assault against Iraq, many opponents of the war pinned their hopes on Germany and France—the countries at the heart of so-called old Europe—in anticipation that the two nations would oppose Washington's aggressive foreign policy and establish a pole of opposition on the world stage.

Even before the war's end, it became clear that such hopes were exaggerated. The governments in Berlin and Paris limited themselves to verbal and diplomatic opposition—such as their refusal to agree to a resolution sanctioning the war in the UN Security Council. Neither took any practical steps against the war. The German government in particular refused to block the use of US bases in Germany and German airspace—a move that would have had considerable repercussions for the US war effort.

Now that the war is over, any form of European diplomatic opposition to the political line of the Bush administration has also collapsed. This was patently clear at the so-called Summit of Four in Brussels last Tuesday, which brought together those heads of government who had spoken out most forcefully against the war.

The invitation to attend the summit, attended by the heads of state of Germany, France, Belgium and Luxembourg, had already been made on the eve of the war. After the failure to prevent the US from undertaking its unilateral path to war, the summit was seen as an opportunity to give a fresh impulse to plans for the development of a joint European foreign and defence policy—plans which have been under consideration for some time but which have yet to be put into practice. Under conditions in which Europe was completely split on the issue of the Iraq war, the initiative for the conference was limited to a central core of countries—other nations which supported the war including Great Britain, Italy and Spain were not invited.

In fact, the joint European currency union was organised in similar empirical fashion. Instead of waiting for a consensus of European countries, with all its attendant problems, a handful of core nations took up the initiative and through a mixture of pressure and accomplished fact were able to persuade other countries to take part.

From the very beginning, Washington and its closest European allies regarded this latest Brussels summit as an anti-American initiative and predictably attacked the proceedings.

The US government used its influence in order to isolate the four European countries gathered in Brussels. For their part, the four had launched a last-minute bid to expand the list of participants. As it turned out, however, even the Greek government, which vocally opposed the war, did not send a representative to Brussels. Greece currently chairs the European Union and pressure from other European countries led it to turn down the invitation to Brussels. For similar reasons the EU foreign policy coordinator, Javier Solana, also failed to attend.

The Foreign ministers of Spain, Italy and Great Britain accused those participating in the summit of seeking to split the EU, declaring that it was “ridiculous” and “unacceptable” for a group of three or four countries to take it upon themselves to determine European foreign and defence policy. Similar charges came from conservative opposition parties in Germany. The chair of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Angela Merkel, declared that the summit was a “separatist signal” to Europe.

Hopes or fears—according to differing points of view—that the summit would oppose the imperialist course of the US proved to be groundless. There was not the slightest hint of criticism of the American government from the Brussels meeting. Absolutely nothing was said about a war carried out in flagrant violation of the United Nations and international law that has resulted in tens of thousands of Iraqi war dead and the installation of a colonial-type regime in defiance of all international regulations and institutions. Instead, as one commentary put it, the participants sent “one pledge of loyalty after the other across the Atlantic.” They outdid one another with their oaths of fidelity to the American government.

Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt emphasised that the summit should not be seen as “competition for NATO. French President Jacques Chirac added: “Naturally we are helping to support a strong transatlantic alliance”, while German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder declared that it was not an issue of “too much America, but rather too little Europe”. The closing document of the summit categorically emphasised that transatlantic partnership, i.e., the alliance with the US, is the “fundamental strategic priority”.

Had it not threatened to lead to a substantial loss of face, the participants would have preferred to have cancelled the summit. It is alleged that the German chancellor hesitated until the very last moment before finally deciding to travel to Brussels.

To the extent that there were any plans for developing a European response to the US they remained exclusively of a military character. The summit's closing document states that the prerequisite for a “credible and effective diplomacy” is a “credible security and defence policy”.

To this end, summit host Verhofstadt had worked on an extensive draft that included the proposal for the setting up of a “headquarters” for European Union military forces in Tervuren, a suburb of the Belgium capital. This would enable such forces to operate for the first time independently of NATO, where America continues to play the leading role. Verhofstadt also referred to the desirability of doubling European defence spending over the next 10 years, thereby bringing the European military budget to a level similar to that of the United States.

Such measures are not directed against the neo-colonialist content of American foreign policy, which is aimed at subjecting entire countries and regions to the control of Washington. Rather, they are aimed at enabling

Europe to subject other nations to its own control—either as a partner or potentially a rival to the US.

Nor are the participants at the Brussels summit motivated by the defence of international principles, such as the sovereignty of nations, but instead by the realisation of their own imperialist interests—something already made clear by their participation in the Balkan and Afghanistan wars. Their military priorities were spelled out by the guidelines for the German army, which state with surprising bluntness that the task of the armed forces is the “sponsoring and securing of worldwide political, economic, military and environmental stability” and the “maintenance of free world trade and access to strategic raw materials”.

Accordingly there is very little in the way of real differences within the EU regarding military rearmament. The most important initiatives in this respect have also been supported completely by Bush’s closest ally in Europe—Great Britain. A significant impetus for EU plans for rearmament were laid down by the British- French summit of St. Malo in 1998—where incidentally no other EU country was invited.

Differences remain, however, over relations with the US. Should Europe be satisfied with playing the role of a junior partner? Or should it take up the role of a rival and demand to be “treated equally,” as the diplomatic language goes?

The British government, which regards its role to be that of a “bridge” between Europe and America, is a determined advocate of the first alternative. On the eve of the Brussels meeting, British Prime Minister Tony Blair gave an interview to the *Financial Times* newspaper in which he expressly argued in favour of a unilateral world under American domination.

There is “a difference of vision,” he said. “Some want a so-called multi-polar world where you have different centres of power, and I believe will quickly develop into rival centres of power; and others believe, and this is my notion, that we need one polar power which encompasses a strategic partnership between Europe and America.”

In a remark patently addressed to the French president Blair went on: “Those people who fear ‘unilateralism’—so-called and in inverted commas—in America should realise that the quickest way to get that is to set up a rival polar power to America.”

Participants at the Brussels summit argued vigorously against Blair’s “vision.” “A multi-polar world exists whether we want it or not,” Chirac said. Alongside the US, other countries and regions such as India, China, South America and Europe should play a role, Schröder added. “The key element of German foreign policy remains integration in multilateral structures,” he said.

The participants in Brussels promptly retreated, however. Their military plans remain at the level of general recognition of the need for close European military and rearmament cooperation—areas in which there has been agreement within the EU for some time. All that remained of the proposed European “headquarters” was a very vague recommendation: “We proposed to our partners the creation of a nucleus of a collective capability for the planning and conduct of interventions by the European Union.”

The American government reacted with predictable scorn to these gestures of submission. Speaking before a US congressional committee, US foreign minister Colin Powell mockingly declared: “Four European countries have come together to work out of some kind of plan for some sort of headquarters.” He added that there would be no need on the part of the Europeans for a new centre. They would not be able to come up with the necessary finances for rearmament and the development of their military forces.

The inability of the French and German governments to seriously counter aggressive US foreign policy arises in the final analysis from their own social program. While they feel threatened by the ruthless interventions undertaken by the US on the world arena, they are in the

process of introducing American-type conditions in Europe. This makes them incapable of appealing to the broad masses of Europe who took to the streets in their millions to oppose the war on Iraq.

A united Europe offering its more than 400 million inhabitants a good standard of living and working conditions would present a powerful pole of opposition to US imperialism. It would also exercise a powerful influence on the American people called upon to bare the burden of militarism.

Schröder and Chirac, however, are determined to follow an entirely opposite course. In the very midst of the Iraq war, both European leaders introduced savage attacks on the respective welfare states of their countries. Neither of them is able to criticise the criminal methods of the clique surrounding Bush because they share the same goals—the subjection of the entire world to the most brutal forms of capitalist plundering and exploitation.

Their project for Europe, which envisages the unification of the continent in the interests of big business and the banks, leads inevitably to increasing division. Their policies intensify the contradictions between individual European governments, which fear domination by one or another of the great powers. At the same time, their prescription for Europe is rejected by the people as a whole, who see the process of unification as nothing other than as a threat to their living standards.

Most recently, the US government has used its influence to intensify divisions inside Europe—in particular, to weaken its most powerful rivals, France and Germany. It has been able to do this, however, only because of the concessions to the US made by the German and French governments themselves.

Above all the governments in Eastern Europe, which lack any sort of popular support, have thrown their full weight behind the US. These governments represent a thin layer of nouveau riche and former Stalinist bureaucrats who have massively enriched themselves by plundering what had been state property. Meanwhile, the broad masses in these countries suffer from rampant unemployment and the near breakdown of the social system.

Similar criteria apply to the right-wing governments of Spain, Italy, Denmark and Holland. Benefiting from the utter political bankruptcy of the old reformist parties, the governments in these countries were able to come to power and push ahead with intensely unpopular measures. The Italian government in particular has recruited its personnel from the same wealthy, corrupt and even criminal layers that characterise the American administration. The former Italian defence minister, Cesare Previti, a close friend and the lawyer of head of government Silvio Berlusconi, has just been found guilty of bribing judges and been sentenced to 11 years in prison.

The campaigns launched in Germany and France against the unemployed, pensioners and workers play directly into the hands of these reactionary tendencies. A genuine and progressive unification of Europe can only come about through the initiative of the broad masses of European working people. To this end the struggle against American war policy is inextricably bound up with the fight against the introduction of American social conditions in Europe. Such a unification must be carried out under the banner of the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact