Paris, Berlin react to Bush's speech

Europe lays down conditions on Iraq

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President Bush's appeal last Sunday for greater international support for the US occupation of Iraq was greeted coolly in most European capitals.

The governments in Paris and Berlin made it clear that they are not willing to simply provide troops and money to bail Bush out of a disaster that they had previously warned against but were unable to prevent. At the same time, they indicated that they are prepared to intervene in Iraq should the US make the appropriate concessions. Neither government calls for the withdrawal of the occupying troops and the right of the Iraqi people to determine their own destiny; instead they favour the formation of a colonial or puppet government upon which—either directly or via the United Nations—they could exercise decisive influence.

German foreign minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party) emphasised that the prerequisite for German involvement is complete transparency regarding activities in Iraq and unrestricted control by the United Nations. A military participation by Germany is currently not an option, he said, and this time there will be no direct payments to the US, as was the case following the Persian Gulf war of 1991. Fischer made it clear that the days of "cheque-book diplomacy" are over.

In an interview with the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* late last week, French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin referred to a statement from his ministry that said the French government is not prepared to play the role of fireman in Iraq after "exactly what we warned of from the beginning has taken place."

According to de Villepin, the position of the French government is well known and needn't be changed. Despite recent tensions, Paris is prepared to cooperate, but such cooperation is bound up with clear conditions. This includes a UN mandate for Iraq, which clearly stipulates that all countries taking part should be placed on an equal footing. France strictly rejects the dominant role demanded by Washington for the US-British-led coalition in post-war Iraq.

In addition, de Villepin demanded the rapid return of Iraqi sovereignty—under the protection of the United Nations—including a clearly delineated plan for new elections to take place before the end of the year. These conditions must be fulfilled, he added, with "no compromises or half measures."

The speech by President Bush also met with sharp criticism from the European daily papers. The British *Independent* said that there was much in Bush's speech that was objectionable, and "not only the consciously misleading connection made between the September 11 attacks and Iraq." He "lectured those countries which were opposed to the war on their duties," but "this is hardly the right tone to convince other countries to risk the lives of their soldiers on dangerous Iraqi territory."

The Zurich *Tages-Anzeiger* noted that the most important element in the speech by the US president was what he did not say. "The president neither mentioned the failures on the part of his government regarding post-war plans for Iraq, nor did he outline the shape of a strategy for withdrawal from the Gulf. He neither mentioned the unsuccessful search for weapons of mass destruction, nor the related dubious information of the US secret services prior to the war..."Just to call upon "our friends" to forget past divisions in the light of new challenges—this is not enough."

The *Frankfurter Rundschau* reported in a similar manner under the headline "Bush's mishaps" that the US president had delivered a "Texas-style mea culpa." Bush had not addressed the issue of "weapons of mass destruction which remained to be found," nor was there any serious tone of self-criticism detectable in his speech, the paper noted.

In an even clearer manner, the newspaper *Neue Westfälische Zeitung* commented last week on the American proposal for a new UN resolution on Iraq. "The draft resolution that is currently being presented to the UN Security Council by US strategists to get it out of the whole mess is nothing less than an insult. The world community is being asked to take part in a so-called multinational peacekeeping force involving unpredictable risks, under conditions where it would not have the slightest influence on the aims and the implementation of the mission."

Despite such sharp criticism, the European Union (EU) remains deeply divided over Iraq. On the one hand, the German chancellor met with the French president in Dresden at the end of last week to declare their desire to continue their close collaboration. They clearly distanced themselves from the draft resolution presented by Washington to the United Nations, which "is very, very far removed from a line which Germany

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and France could fully support." On the other hand, Great Britain, Spain, Italy and Poland have already sent troops to Iraq. And in his latest trip to America, the head of the Italian government, Silvio Berlusconi, who currently holds the chair of the European Union council, effusively praised the policies of the US president.

Last weekend, the 15 foreign ministers of the European Union, together with 10 ministers from candidate member countries, could agree on only a very vague and general declaration at their informal meeting held at Lake Garda in Italy. Their statements afterwards merely indicated that the most important aim must be to transfer government power to the Iraqi people themselves "as soon as possible" and maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq.

While Germany and France sought to use the Lake Garda meeting to improve the draft resolution, the Blair government in London was in the process of increasing its troop deployment in Iraq. Only shortly before the meeting, Poland had sent its own troops to take part in the US-led occupation.

In their manoeuvres over a new draft resolution at the UN, the issue for Germany and France is not if, but rather under what conditions, they will participate in the occupation of Iraq. Together with the criticism levelled against the US, there are also more moderate voices to be heard. Last Sunday, for example, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder called the American draft "a step in the right direction," which just did not go far enough. He also implied that Germany was quite prepared to "help out in the reconstruction of Iraq." It was possible, for example, for his government to assist in the training of Iraqi police and soldiers. The chancellor is also in favour of a multinational force when such a move is sanctioned by an appropriate UN resolution.

The conflict centres on the issue of who plays the leading role in post-war Iraq. Germany and France are attempting to exploit the growing military and political crisis of the American government to limit its powers in Iraq. They are also using the UN to increase their own influence, thereby gaining access for European companies to the country's oil wells as well as securing a role for European concerns in reconstruction projects. Washington urgently needs international help in the form of soldiers and money, but is not prepared to accept any restrictions on its military, economic and political power.

Up until the beginning of the 1990s, Germany and France were Iraq's two most important business and trading partners. It was only the 1991 Gulf War and the sanctions imposed afterwards that severed these economic ties. Both countries had used their influence to arrange the system of sanctions in a way that would enable them once again to develop close links with Iraq. However, the latest war finally put an end to these plans. This was one of the reasons why both countries opposed the war in the first place.

Since then, fears have grown in Paris and Berlin that Iraq is developing into a powder keg threatening the entire Middle East. This is another reason why both governments are ready in principle to intervene in Iraq.

A growing number of German politicians are also calling for Berlin's participation in Iraq. The foreign policy spokesman for the conservative opposition in Germany, Wolfgang Schäuble (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), warned the government against categorically rejecting an intervention by the German army. He told the newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*: "If it is convinced that reconstruction should take place in Iraq under a UN mandate, then the government cannot on principle reject participation. We should support the current change of mind by the Americans."

The chairman of the German military association, Colonel Bernhard Gertz, argued in a similar fashion. In his opinion, the government cannot avoid the eventual participation of German troops. Gertz told the magazine *Focus* that, should the United Nations agree on a resolution for Iraq along the lines favoured by Germany, "the government will not be able to maintain its stand."

Contrary to current propaganda, which alleges that a European intervention would serve humanitarian purposes, the deployment of German and French troops in Iraq would do nothing to stabilise the situation in the Middle East and would undoubtedly encounter considerable resistance from the Iraqi people. These troops would be part of a regime of occupation responsible for the colonial suppression of the country aimed at the exploitation of its oil wealth.

It is clear that, despite all the demagogic talk of introducing freedom and democracy, a brutal dictatorship is being prepared. The commentary by an American academic in the influential *Financial Times* Monday did not mince words. Harvard Dean Stephen Walt recommended that the Bush administration concede to European demands and prepare domestic Iraqi forces to take over control of the country. "The aim is not to introduce democracy," he wrote. "What is necessary is basically a government of minimal effectiveness, which can hold the fort. Unfortunately this must take the form of an authoritarian government, because that is what is needed to prevent the disintegration of Iraq."

German-French participation will also do nothing to dissipate tensions between the two countries and the United States; quite the opposite is the case. The struggle for economic influence and power in this strategically important region will only intensify.

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