

# Britain: Blair's relations with Europe deteriorate after Bush's state visit

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's November 24 meeting with President Jacques Chirac of France was his first official engagement following the state visit of President George W. Bush to Britain.

The meeting was billed as an attempt to rebuild relations between Britain and France and overcome major disagreements that arose over the US war against Iraq. It only served to expose how tensions between Britain, France and also Germany are worsening as a result of Blair's prioritising of his alliance with Washington.

The prime minister uses every possible occasion to emphasise his belief that British foreign policy must be based on acting as a bridge between America and Europe. His speech to the Lord Mayor's banquet in London prior to Bush's visit stressed that Britain's future rested on the "twin pillars" of the US and Europe and anything short of full engagement in Europe was "completely self-defeating for the proper interests of Britain".

On the day of his meeting with Chirac, however, he stressed the other pillar, describing himself as "absolutely the strongest ally that the United States could have".

He insisted that his support for European defence cooperation was "not an issue between me and the [US] administration," because it would never be conceived of as a challenge to NATO and the transatlantic alliance. "This is an article of faith with me and people have got to make up their minds whether they agree with it or they don't agree with it."

"But there are people who want to pull me apart from America, there are people who want to pull me apart from the centre of Europe. I will not yield up either pillar of Britain's foreign policy in the early 21st century because it makes sense for Britain."

This attempt to portray Britain as even-handed in its dealings with Washington, Paris and Berlin is looking increasingly out of step with political reality. Blair has made concerted efforts to ensure the closest ever post-World War Two alignment between the interests of British imperialism and its more powerful American counterpart. This has placed great strains on Britain's relations with its European rivals. The only thing that has prevented an open rupture is not Blair's good intentions towards the Continent, but because the major European powers are themselves seeking to appease Washington and avoid a direct conflict with the US at all costs.

This has only encouraged the Bush administration to aggressively press forward its interests at the expense of the

European bourgeoisie, including those of Britain. Despite the talk of the "special relationship" and the public hailing of Blair by Bush, the stick is employed far more than the carrot in ensuring that Britain acts as Washington's proxy in Europe.

Blair's efforts to preserve his alliance with America have become ever more determined precisely because he knows that his actual influence in Washington is slight and that tensions between the US and Britain are growing.

Bush's state visit not only met with massive opposition from those opposed to the Iraq war and the subsequent US-British occupation, but took place against a background of major trade disputes between the US and Europe. But the president offered nothing as a sweetener to placate Blair's critics of his close relationship with the US on either front.

Blair stressed his continued commitment to the occupation and to the wider "war on terror" again and again. He was thanked profusely, but the rumoured reward for his loyalty—the US agreeing to release nine British citizens held in Guantanamo's Camp X-ray as "enemy combatants" to the UK—failed to materialise. At their joint press conference Bush insisted that the court procedures in place meant that "Justice is being done".

Trade disputes between the US and Europe focus on the Bush administration's imposition last year of a protectionist tariff of up to 30 percent on some types of steel imports. The World Trade Organisation ruled this illegal and is allowing the European Union to impose \$2.2 billion in retaliatory duties on American products. Blair raised the issue on three separate occasions during the state visit, but only secured a promise from Bush that he would make a "timely" decision.

The cold shoulder he received will not lessen but spur on his desire to cultivate Washington. He fears that the Bush administration would cut him adrift without much hesitation if he doesn't toe the line and this would leave him with little choice but to accept German domination of the Continent and no way of combating the Franco-German axis that has shaped the European Union since its inception.

What became clear during his subsequent meeting with Chirac is that behind the scenes at the state visit Blair had been told to step up his pressure on France and Germany.

There was no agreement with France on the key issues under discussion at the meeting, Iraq and the development of a common European defence force, and behind-the-scenes disputes over the proposed European constitution within his government became

publicly embarrassing for Blair.

Chirac told the press that the Bush administration's plans to formally transfer power to a puppet transitional Iraqi government by June 30, with elections for a permanent government hoped for by the end of 2005, "have taken too long and seems to me relatively incomplete."

He complained that the "UN role has not been explained or had been insufficiently explained".

The French government has publicly expressed concern that the present Iraqi administration is too closely linked to the US. A government source told the press, "They don't hold sway; they don't appear to be legitimate... They need a more credible referee."

Blair's signing a joint communiqué with Chirac affirming that the EU should be willing and able to deploy "credible battle group-sized forces" was cited as proof of Britain's commitment to Europe. But the proposal was a far cry from earlier plans to establish a rapid reaction force of 35,000 troops under independent European command. The communiqué spoke only of around 1,500 troops for use in autonomous operations. Blair insisted that it would not challenge NATO and would only carry out missions in which the US does not want to take part.

Chirac was clearly frustrated, stating repeatedly that the EU's military initiative was "totally consistent with NATO" and that "Neither the Germans nor the French wish in the slightest way to take any initiative which will be in contradiction with NATO."

He went on to explain his belief that there was a lack of trust between Britain and France and that a new "confiance cordiale" should be created to strengthen the century-old "entente (understanding) cordiale".

No agreement was reached over whether the EU defence force would have its own operations headquarters, which France and Germany want and Britain and the US oppose. And there is just as little chance of Britain accepting references to a "mutual defence" pact in the proposed European constitution due to be ratified following the end of discussions on December 13. Britain says this would make NATO redundant.

The meeting with Chirac focused opposition to the European constitution within Blair's Cabinet. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw made an extraordinary public intervention when he told the media that he did not view the constitution as "essential", adding "life will go on" even if negotiations collapse. Straw hinted that Britain might use its veto if it was forced to give up important powers—particularly issues relating to defence, foreign policy and taxation. Plans to extend EU defence cooperation are central to the proposed constitution, but run contrary to Britain's efforts to ally itself with the US.

Straw's hardline stance echoed statements made earlier by Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, describing plans for tax harmonisation as the EU's "grandiose scheme" for "fiscal federalism".

Blair's spokesman publicly rebuffed Straw stating, "We still think a deal can be done," while an unnamed government official said, "Jack went nuclear. In doing so, he made us sound like the Tories." But Brown insisted that Britain had "red lines and we are insisting on unanimity for tax, social security and defence" before

policies could be adopted.

Within days the matter had worsened despite Blair's diplomatic efforts. Italy, which holds the EU presidency, presented a draft of the EU constitution removing member state's veto on foreign policy and allowing a majority vote to decide rather than unanimity. A Foreign Office spokesman said the draft was unacceptable.

The final indication that Blair's efforts to straddle the US and Europe are coming apart is the unseemly haste in which he moved on from his final press conference with Chirac to a private meeting with Spain's Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar just one hour later. This is the second time that Blair has left a discussion with the representatives of the "Old Europe" coined by US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld to meet with Aznar. The first time was following a summit meeting between Blair, Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder of Germany in Berlin on September 21.

Aznar, like Blair, is seen by the Bush administration as the embodiment of "New Europe"—those states Washington feels are its allies, such as Poland and other former Stalinist regimes. Like the US, Blair has sought to wield these states into an alliance capable of countering Franco-German domination of Europe with Britain at its head. But this will inevitably create a backlash from Paris and Berlin.

On November 12, France's *Le Monde* raised that Paris and Berlin were considering the creation of a "Franco-German union" allowing closer cooperation on all issues and an alignment of their defence and foreign policies could not be vetoed by Britain, Spain and Poland blocking the EU constitution. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin called the project "essential", while Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said, "If Europe with 25 members is a failure, what is left for France? The initiative of Franco-German rapprochement."

Belgium's Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt is also proposing a separate pact made up of "hard-core believers" in the EU constitution and economic, defence and foreign policy harmonisation. A spokesman for Verhofstadt said, "Those who want to go faster than the others must be allowed to, as they were with the euro, without being held back by the rest."

The *Sunday Times* quoted a French diplomat prior to Blair's meeting with Chirac insisting, "The British must choose. Either they are with us, united in Europe where they should be, or they are destined to become united with America, something like an American state."



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