

Paris and Berlin consider military intervention in Iraq

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The French and German governments, both of which spoke out last year against the war in Iraq, have more recently been sending out unmistakable signals favouring rapprochement with Washington. In the meantime, they no longer exclude the use of their own troops to help control the occupied country.

In mid-January, French defence minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, a close and trusted friend of President Jacques Chirac, met with her American counterpart Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice in Washington for the first time. There is “a real will to end tensions between the USA and France,” commented Alliot-Marie after the meeting.

Meanwhile, circles close to Chirac reported that a new chapter had opened up, which could finally lead to a more consistent French engagement. The formal transfer of sovereignty to a Washington-appointed interim Iraqi government, planned for the summer, is seen in Paris as an opportunity to pull back from its previous stance not to participate in the military occupation of Iraq. Directly preceding the planned transfer of power in Iraq, four international summits will take place in June, at which appropriate agreements could be struck at the highest level—the G8 summit, the US-European Union summit, the NATO summit and the ceremonies to mark the 60th anniversary of the Allied landings in Normandy.

Although President Chirac’s spokespersons continue to stress non-participation in the war coalition led by the US, which represents an “occupation power,” the use of French troops within the framework of NATO units sent to Iraq with the official approval of the UN is considered possible and is openly being discussed. The French daily *Le Monde* quotes a “trusted source close to Jacques Chirac” saying, “It cannot be excluded that a sovereign Iraqi government might one day turn to the UN and ask for the deployment of an international stability force.”

Paris is thereby floating an arrangement similar to that in Afghanistan, where the US had taken the initiative to launch a war and overthrow the regime, while NATO later took

over command of the “International Security Assistance Force” (Isaf) and is now responsible for the security of the US puppet regime under Hamid Karzai.

In this regard, it is worth noting that a delegation from the interim Iraqi Governing Council, which visited Europe in December, was met in Paris at the highest level, with President Chirac receiving them personally. This in spite of the fact that the Governing Council relies exclusively on the US for its authority and enjoys no support at all in the Iraqi population. One of the president’s advisors justified this preferential treatment, telling *Le Monde*, “We said to ourselves that the members of the delegation will become important individuals in the coming months.” There was agreement with the delegation that the UN should “play a more important role in the transitional process.”

France’s conciliatory attitude had already been signalled in December, when former US secretary of state James Baker travelled to Europe on behalf of President Bush and was assured in Paris that Iraq’s debts would be reduced. The question of Iraqi debt is to be settled at the beginning of February, at a meeting of the finance ministers of the seven leading industrial nations in Florida.

Germany, which closely coordinates its foreign policy with France on the Iraq issue, has also agreed to a reduction of Iraq’s debts. A discussion has also begun in Berlin over a possible military engagement in the occupied Middle Eastern nation. As in Paris, it is also stressed here that the original rejection of the war was correct and that the German government is not prepared to engage militarily in Iraq. At the same time, however, the demand is being raised for a stronger UN role; the use of NATO forces with a UN mandate is endorsed, and humanitarian assistance by German Armed Forces has been promised—a move that in the final analysis comes down to a military mission.

According to a report in *Die Welt*, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder told the German foreign affairs parliamentary committee in mid-January he would “not stand in the way of NATO” if that body should decide to send a mission to Iraq. Military experts agree that this would almost automatically

involve the deployment of German officers, who are integrated within the NATO staff.

Moreover, Schröder told the committee that Germany's airborne military hospital Med-Evac would be dispatched to Iraq. In a subsequent television interview, he said Germany "could not refuse" a call for help from the provisional Iraqi government, "insofar as it involved transporting the injured—for example, the victims of terrorist attacks".

The despatch of medical units means that not only would German soldiers be active in Iraq, but this would also provide the pretext for sending further troops. *Die Welt* quotes a senior NATO representative saying, "An airborne hospital without military protection is inconceivable. No government can afford that." The paper summed up the views of the military with the words: "In the chancellor's offer one sees the first small step—the rest will follow."

In the past, large-scale international interventions by the German Army were prepared through such "humanitarian" missions. Medical teams are followed by armed units for their "protection," until the public is accustomed to the military intervention and all remaining obstacles fall away.

The consideration to send troops clearly exposes the motives of German and French policy regarding Iraq. Unlike the millions of demonstrators whose convictions last winter and spring drove them to protest against the war throughout Europe, the US and other countries, Schroeder and Chirac were, from the start, concerned merely with their own economic and political interests in the Middle East. Their opposition to the war was of a purely tactical nature.

The determination of the Bush administration to conquer Iraq by force, in violation of international law and bypassing all international institutions, horrified Paris and Berlin. They feared, with justification, that the world's most extensive oil reserves would fall under unilateral American control, that Europeans would be dislodged from a region where they had long pursued their own interests, and that an unstable Middle East would be plunged into chaos. This was the reason for forging a coalition against the US and the war.

From the beginning, this attempt was half-hearted, since neither government wanted to completely fall out with Washington. While, in the UN Security Council, the German government opposed the war, Schröder did not close down German air space or American military bases in Germany—a move that would have seriously impaired the preparations for war. Berlin did not want to be identified with the anti-war movement—under any circumstances—which encompassed broad sections of the population and could easily have become a movement against its own social policies. Therefore, it named neither the real reasons for the war (oil and power) nor the character of the war (a war of aggression, in violation of international law).

With the fall of Baghdad, Paris and Berlin abandoned their resistance and voted for a UN resolution sanctioning the military occupation of the country. Since they had not been able to hinder the war through diplomatic manoeuvres, and Washington had utilised its influence in Europe to isolate both countries on foreign policy issues, they preferred to come to an arrangement with Bush.

However, this adaptation to American policy does not mean that the tensions existing before the Iraq war have been eliminated. The struggle to re-divide the world, for control of raw materials, markets and strategic influence, which opened up with the Iraq war, inevitably brings forth new and sharper conflicts. Both Germany and France reacted to the Iraq war by increasing their military capacity and engaging in shuttle diplomacy.

The German Army, which at the time of German reunification in 1990 was purely a defensive force, now has some 7,000 troops deployed outside NATO territory. The recent reforms announced by Defence Minister Peter Struck envisage that in the future, 100,000 of the 250,000-strong army will be available for such tasks. They should be ready to act at short notice as an "intervention and stabilization force" throughout the world.

Their operational area is also to include Africa, a continent about which Chancellor Schröder and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer have shown increased interest recently. Last week Schröder toured Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and Ghana, and the newsweekly *Der Spiegel* quoted the Chancellery, saying, "Africa concerns us Europeans, it directly concerns us Germans." Fischer provided the necessary historical justification. The catastrophes on the African continent were, among other things, a result of British and French colonial policy, he was quoted by *Der Spiegel*. Now, when it concerns this bloody inheritance, Europeans will have to stand together—"It cannot be left to the two colonial powers."

In Brussels, Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Chirac, who support a joint European intervention in Africa, have already submitted a list of possible areas of intervention: Burundi, the Ivory Coast, Guinea, Sierra Leone, the Sudan and Zimbabwe.



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