

NATO summit underlines US-European tensions

Chris Marsden**3 July 2004**

The meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in Istanbul has served to underline the continuing divisions between the United States and Europe and the problems faced by US imperialism as a result of the popular opposition it faces in Iraq.

At the summit held June 28-29, the Bush administration was able to secure a number of key concessions from its European rivals on a NATO role in policing Iraq and Afghanistan, but all of them were of a lesser order than the White House desired. And the concessions were not simply the result of a US position of strength, as is more usually the case. Bullying and threats certainly played a role in America's political manoeuvres. But their effectiveness in part reflected a belief by the European powers that unless they offered at least minimal help to Washington, a defeat in Iraq would be entirely possible.

The US has been able to successfully utilise its present military superiority to divide the European Union and establish its authority as a major power in Europe. Sixteen of NATO's 26 member nations have troops on the ground in Iraq, including Britain, Poland and Italy, and Washington can rely on the support of most of the former Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, who joined the EU this year.

Nevertheless, France, Germany and other European powers are still not prepared to be sucked into what has all the makings of a Vietnam-type scenario, as the US is demanding, and many of them would like to see Bush's administration replaced by the Democrats under John Kerry in November.

This does not mean that they will contemplate outright defiance of Washington. Far from it. Not only are they still convinced that the US enjoys a dominant global position, but they also fear that a defeat for the US—which still plays the role of chief enforcer for the world bourgeoisie—would lead to an eruption of anti-imperialist struggles in the Middle East and internationally that would threaten their own survival.

Prior to the NATO summit the US-European Union summit in Ireland had already agreed to support training the police force of the American puppet regime in Iraq. So a

similar decision at the NATO summit was a foregone conclusion.

But in a significant indication of its weakened position, this proved to be as far as the US could push things in Istanbul as well.

A summit that President George W. Bush had trailed as proof that divisions over Iraq between the US and Europe were a thing of the past was instead characterised by diplomatic tussles over Iraq, Afghanistan and Turkey's possible membership of the European Union. Disagreements remain with both Germany and France, but it was French President Jacques Chirac who was most vocal in expressing them.

Chirac publicly opposed any collective NATO presence on the ground in Iraq, telling a news conference, "I am completely hostile to the idea of a NATO establishment in Iraq. It would be dangerous, counterproductive and misunderstood by the Iraqis, who after all deserve a little bit of respect."

He insisted that NATO should limit its role to coordinating national efforts and training outside the country, while US officials are insisting that training should be carried out by a NATO command based in Iraq.

On Afghanistan, Chirac also rejected a joint US-British proposal that NATO's elite new response force be deployed to provide security for September's elections. France had agreed that NATO should send hundreds more troops to bolster the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, but insisted that the response force should be used only for emergency situations, not for peacekeeping.

On Turkey, relations between the US and France were most openly hostile. Bush had urged the EU to bring Turkey into membership as soon as possible, prompting a denunciation of his meddling from Chirac. "It's a bit like if I told the United States how they should manage their relations with Mexico," he told reporters.

The summit's decisions reflected these divisions. NATO committed itself to help train the new Iraqi army. This fell far short of the Bush administration's original aim of an

official NATO military presence in Iraq. And both France and Germany said they would not send instructors to Iraq, but would train Iraqis at military academies in their own countries.

Chirac said, “Any NATO footprint on Iraqi soil would be unwise,” while Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany said, “The engagement of NATO is reduced to training and only training. We have made clear that we don’t want to see German soldiers in Iraq.”

A statement by Bush and 25 other heads of state could say nothing specific, stating only that NATO would “encourage nations to contribute to the training of the Iraqi armed forces” (emphasis added).

Ivo Daalder, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, commented, “It’s a political declaration with no real practical meaning. Countries that will provide training were doing so before the declaration, and I doubt that countries that were not will now be so inclined.”

NATO also agreed to expand its security force in Afghanistan from the 6,500-member force in and around the capital Kabul to around 10,000 troops operating throughout the country. But the US is still providing 20,000 troops and France succeeded in blocking the deployment of NATO’s elite rapid response force. It is also the case that the European powers are more ready to send troops to Afghanistan precisely because of their continued disagreement with the US over Iraq. Afghanistan has taken on the function as a placatory compromise to smooth Washington’s ruffled feathers.

In a similar vein, NATO leaders also announced the end of military operations in Bosnia and the handing over of policing and occupation to the EU.

The Bush administration, while anxious to hail its successes, was clearly dissatisfied with what had been achieved. Bush even chose to express his hostility by concluding his time in Istanbul with a speech in which he again called for Turkey to be admitted post haste into the EU.

The tensions during the NATO summit found expression in some of the more critical US press comments. In ways reminiscent of the denunciations of the United Nations prior to the Iraq war, there was talk of the “unviability” of NATO, of “Franco-German obstructionism” and of it courting the risk of “irrelevance.”

The US verdict on the summit can also be judged by the report-back given to Parliament by his key ally, Prime Minister Tony Blair. In a statement to MPs, Blair said, “I worry frankly that our [NATO’s] response is still not sufficient for the scale of the challenge we face.”

He called on the NATO powers to demonstrate more commitment to the efforts of the US and Britain to counter

the threat from international terrorism and unstable states, which dealt in chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. In a reference to France and Germany, he said that even those countries that “passionately disagreed” with the Iraq war should now be clear that they were “without doubt” on the side of defeating terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Succeeding in it would be a fitting way to reinvigorate the transatlantic alliance and heal its divisions,” he insisted.

He warned that if NATO does not provide the necessary security, both Iraq and Afghanistan could end up becoming terrorist havens: “And I think there is still, at least in certain quarters, not the right sense of urgency in meeting the challenge that we face.”

Blair said he would have liked to have had a larger number of troops in Afghanistan from the very beginning and that Britain had offered to provide the UK-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corps to lead the international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan in 2006. He further indicated that the Labour government would make an announcement on whether more British troops would be sent to Iraq by the end of July.

Given less media coverage are the growing tensions with Russia produced by US efforts to establish its hegemony over Eastern Europe and the oil- and resource-rich Caucasus and Central Asia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected an invitation to attend the Istanbul summit, which marked the recent accession to NATO of seven east European states, including the former Soviet Baltic republics. The summit was attended by Ilham Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan, Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan.

A post-summit communiqué emphasised that NATO will seek to increase its profile in the “strategically important regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia.”

NATO aircraft began patrols over Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on March 29 as soon as the three countries, along with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, joined the alliance. The US has also sent military advisers to Georgia, and opened air bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—using the pretext of the “war against terrorism” and the example of Afghanistan. This has created major frictions between Washington and Moscow and prompted ongoing efforts to counter US influence by Russia.



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