

Blair's foreign policy: from a "bridge" to a bridgehead

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The tenor of Prime Minister Tony Blair's annual speech on foreign policy this week at the Mansion House, London, was entirely predictable.

For the past several years, Blair has faithfully outlined his belief that Britain must act as a bridge between the United States and Europe if it is to defend its national interests. This year was no exception, but the prime minister was speaking in the aftermath of the re-election of George W. Bush. He spoke as a man with fresh wind in his sails, who felt vindicated in his unswerving loyalty to Washington over Iraq and was determined to take on his critics at home and in Europe.

What was perhaps more surprising was the response amongst sections of the British media, which attempted to play down Blair's pro-US message and even to portray the essential content of his speech as a warning to America against the dangers of unilateralism.

The vast bulk of Blair's address was an extended justification for his support for war and British participation in the subsequent occupation of both Iraq and Afghanistan. After asserting that democracy was a reality in Afghanistan and was on the way to being established in Iraq, Blair directly addressed his critics.

"Iraq," he said, "has dramatically surfaced differences between Europe and America and Britain's role in both alliances. The relationship is under question as never before. So now is the time to defend it."

And his defence? That there is no alternative to an alliance with America and no contradiction between this and an orientation towards Europe. "There is only one superpower in the world today and we are its strong ally. The most powerful political grouping that has created the largest economic market in the world is the European Union—and we are a leading member. It's a great position."

To those who questioned either aspect of his policy, Blair reiterated once more that we live in an interdependent world that demanded alliances "to further our national interest."

Of the two alliances, however, it was on a defence of the "special relationship" with the US that Blair concentrated. He argued that it had led to victory in World War II, protected the West against the Soviet Union and today was essential if vital trade and investment between the US and Europe were to be

maintained. And then there was world security: "If America were to pull up the drawbridge, retreat from its obligations and alliances abroad, the terrorists would attack the rest of us..."

"And if America did withdraw: if when Kosovo came up, they said no; told us to sort out Al Qaeda in Afghanistan ourselves; said we could tackle nuclear proliferation on our own, where would we be?"

Paragraph after paragraph continued in a similar vein before Blair finally came round to mentioning Europe. Here Blair raised first his belief that Europe should be aware that US foreign policy was "evolving" and that it should work to shape it.

Then came his only remark on America that could possibly be interpreted as a critique. "None of this will work," he said, "unless America too reaches out. Multilateralism that works should be its aim. I have no sympathy for unilateralism for its own sake."

Such a remark is hardly groundbreaking. After all, Blair has constantly justified his alliance with Washington on the basis that it was aimed at preventing America from adopting a unilateralist approach to foreign policy.

Moreover, when he returned to the question of Europe, he outlined a role for Britain not so much as a bridge across the Atlantic but as a bridgehead within Europe from which to fight for a pro-US, pro-free market agenda.

Within an expanded European Union of 25 members, Blair noted that there are divisions over what he described as "the scale of economic reform" and the degree of enthusiasm for the transatlantic alliance.

Britain must use its position to insist that "Europe must take the road of reform in its economy and renewal of its alliance with America." There was an argument "raging as to [Europe's] future direction. The argument can be won."

Blair's priorities could not have been made clearer, yet the next day several newspaper reports concentrated on glorifying his warning to the US against striking out on its own.

The *Financial Times* described the prime minister as having "delivered an unusually firm message to the US administration that it, too, needed to reach out."

The *Daily Mirror* headlined its report, "Blair in warning to Bush," The *Guardian* report spoke of Blair urging "the US and

the EU to stop patronising each other and work together.”

Even Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*, which is strongly pro-Bush as well as pro-Blair, headlined its report, “Belt up, PM tells Europe and US.”

All of which is, of course, arrant nonsense. Blair is the last person in the world to ever contemplate telling Bush to belt up! Why then the fairly widespread attempt by Britain's media to stress Blair's supposed even-handedness in a speech that was little short of a panegyric to America?

Firstly, there is a recognition within ruling circles that Blair's support for US warmongering is intensely unpopular. All his allies, and his critics in particular, know how damaging is the perception of him as Bush's poodle. The question was even raised during the two's joint press conference in Washington last week. So it is politically important for domestic consumption to create the impression of independence on Blair's part, particularly given that he will be seeking re-election himself next year.

The November 13 *Economist* noted “a currently fashionable theory is that the president, painfully aware how his friendship has diminished the prime minister in the eyes of British voters, would not take offence if Mr. Blair engineered a row with him.”

In any event, Washington will certainly take Blair's warning against unilateralism with a large pinch of salt.

The second factor influencing press commentary is a degree of wishful thinking. Although dominant sections of Britain's ruling elite support Blair's view that the transatlantic alliance is the only conceivable foundation for a viable foreign policy, they still balk at how far Blair is prepared to go and at the consequences of such a strategy. They know full well that appeals for Washington to respect the interests of Europe will fall on deaf ears, and that they are trapped in an alliance with an ever more bellicose and aggressive partner.

Indeed if Blair thinks that his hand has been strengthened against France and Germany, then this is only a pale reflection of the thinking in the White House and Pentagon. When Bush visits Europe early next year he will seek to lay down the law to his European allies rather than help Blair in his bridge building project.

The one section of Blair's speech that acknowledged the extent of the difficulties he now faces was when he said of Britain's “unique” transatlantic role: “Call it a bridge, a two-lane motorway, a pivot or call it a damn high wire, which is how it often feels”.

Blair's most loyal cheerleaders in the *Guardian* were forced as well to conclude with a negative estimation, both of Blair's speech and the possible success of his strategy. Blair “sounded more convinced of the need to keep the Americans sweet than to get closer to the continent,” they complained.

“In essence, the prime minister was restating the classic assumption of all recent governments that Britain can continue to serve as a bridge across the Atlantic, avoiding a choice

between the old and new continents. It is no surprise that, after Iraq, he sees the need to be ‘a tireless advocate of a strong bond between the two.’ But no surprise either that it is so very difficult to do.”

The antagonisms between the US and Europe cannot simply be wished away. Success for the US is not predicated on a belief that a rising tide raises all boats. It is based on a struggle for global hegemony over its rivals in the economic, military and political sphere. This does not mean, however, that the hopes of some within the bourgeoisie that a unified Europe can provide an alternative to Washington will be realised. There is every indication that Blair's response to Bush's re-election will find its echo in Europe's capitals.

Already there are numerous reports of strains developing between Paris and Berlin—including over how far German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder is prepared to go in order to restore amicable relations with Washington. In any event, there will be repeated efforts made to placate Washington and ensure a continued rapprochement, combined with attempts by France and others to strengthen Europe's bargaining position on the military and economic front. And at every juncture, the Bush administration will seek to utilise its alliances within Europe to sabotage such a development.

None of this bodes well for Blair.

A still greater danger faces the government—the absence of any significant social base for its stance and the active and growing hostility of broad sections of the working class towards its foreign and domestic programme. Blair may be able to soothe and cajole his critics with a few well-chosen phrases, knowing that he can bask in the reflected power of his alliance with Bush. But he has no way of winning popular support for an agenda based upon untrammelled military aggression and economic reforms that are plunging millions into hardship and debt.



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