

Chirac seeks to appease Washington while ensuring France gets its cut

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The meeting between President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Tony Blair in London to mark a century since the signing of the Entente Cordiale in 1904 had more to do with France's relations with the United States than a proclaimed historic friendship with Britain.

In his efforts to stress France's common ground with Britain, Chirac was at the same time offering an olive branch to Washington while stressing that, unlike Blair, he will not roll over in the face of the demands of the Bush administration without being given something in return. To the same end, Chirac trod a careful path between praising Blair for his efforts to act as a bridge between the US and Europe, while cautioning him on the dangers this poses in Iraq and elsewhere and calling for the prime minister to commit himself more fully to developing European alliances as a counterweight to Washington's global hegemony.

Before leaving for Britain, Chirac had delivered a politically embarrassing verdict on the results of Blair's efforts to ingratiate himself with Washington. He told reporters for the *Times* that Britain had got very little in return for supporting the US-led invasion of Iraq. "I am not sure, with America as it is these days, that it would be easy for someone, even the British, to be an honest broker. Perhaps that will change, but that is the current state of things," he said.

He recalled that he had told Blair prior to the Iraq war that he should at least try to "obtain in exchange a re-launch of the peace process in the Middle East" for his support for Washington: "Well, Britain gave its support, but I did not see much in return. I am not sure that it is in the nature of our American friends at the moment to return favours systematically," he concluded.

Chirac also said that he was "not at all sure that one

can say that the world is safer" following the Iraq war.

In London, however, Chirac's tone was markedly less critical. After meeting with Blair on November 18, he said of Britain's close relationship with the US, "The fact that the UK can be a friendly partner between the European Union and the United States is advantageous for Europe. The US and Europe have a natural vocation to work together ... and historically share the same values."

Both continents have "mutual respect and confidence in one another," he continued. He was also "taken aback" by suggestions of a split between Britain and France. "They do not reflect either my own beliefs and certainly not the British government's," he said.

Chirac described Iraq as the "one and only" issue of sharp disagreement between the two countries, of which, "Who is right or wrong, history will tell."

He and Blair were on the same track when it came to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "We share the same analysis and the same goals" of utilising what he called a "window of opportunity" that could lead to "more stability, political order, and we should do everything we can to achieve that."

Blair spoke in similar vein, admitting, "On the question of Iraq, I think the differences at the time of the conflict were well known. But both of us are now working under UN Resolution 1546—both of us want to see a stable and democratic Iraq. And both of us will do what we can to ensure that that happens."

He added, "On the questions of Afghanistan, on the Balkans, on the question of Africa, on the question of climate change, we are working very closely together. On the question of European defence, we are working closely together. And it is worth just pointing out that our armed forces have been engaged in cooperation together in many different parts of the world."

Chirac's placatory stance has been matched by France's actions. Though he has insisted that he does not foresee a possibility of a French military presence in Iraq, France did vote with the US and Britain supporting the need to implement the UN resolution that sanctioned the US-led occupation.

His differences with Blair over the Iraq war, Middle East policy, and his alliance with Washington are not of a principled character. Chirac is simply haggling for position and a share of the spoils in what he knows is a fresh imperialist carve-up of the world and its resources and markets.

This is the essential content of his insistence that there must be a multi-polar world and a revival of multilateralism, mainly through a strengthened United Nations.

Chirac shrouds his own predatory ambitions in sanctimonious talk about the dangers posed by the untrammelled imperial ambitions of others—or at least the “danger” that their supposedly more noble intentions will be misunderstood.

In a speech to the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London, commenting on Blair and President George W. Bush's claim to be fighting for democracy in the Middle East, he warned:

“We must avoid any confusion between democratisation and Westernisation. For although our memory is sometimes short, the peoples submitted to the West's domination in the past have not forgotten.”

He called for a new world order based on multilateralism and appealed to the US and Europe to “rally together” to promote peace in the Middle East. A world ruled by “the logic of power” is certain to be unstable and headed for conflict. Neither the US nor Europe could meet the challenges facing the world alone. “It is by recognising the new reality of a multi-polar and interdependent world that we will succeed in building a sounder and fairer international order,” he said.

Chirac's posture as an opponent of imperialist might essentially reflects his understanding of the inability of France and Europe to successfully challenge the US for global hegemony on the military arena. He wants some form of international regulation and a spread of the balance of power, not out of some vague commitment to democratic ideals, but because this would enable France to better manoeuvre in pursuit of its own

colonial ambitions.

In this respect, it must be noted that Chirac spoke only days after French warplanes bombed an Ivorian airfield on November 6 in retaliation for the killing of some French military personnel in the country's civil conflict, wiping out its tiny air force and sparking anti-French rampages in the south.

But it gives Chirac nothing to acknowledge that, as an experienced imperialist politician, he is genuinely worried that the unrestrained exercise of US militarism is destabilising not only the Middle East, but the entire world—with potentially disastrous consequences. Hence, when pushed by reporters to expand on his earlier comment that the world was a more dangerous place following the Iraq conflict, he did not retract his position. Instead he warned, “If you observe the way things are developing in the world in terms of security and the expansion of terrorism—not just in the Middle East but throughout the world—if you look at all that, you cannot say, and be credible, that the situation has significantly improved.”



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