

Europe alarmed by US threats against Iran

Peter Schwarz
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Reports of American war preparations against Iran have provoked consternation within European political circles.

US military Special Forces units had been operating in Iran for several months, identifying targets for air raids and a possible invasion of the country, according to a recent article by American journalist Seymour Hersh published in the *New Yorker* magazine. The article cited high-ranking US intelligence officials as its sources. While the Pentagon rejected Hersh's report as inaccurate, its disclaimers were only half-hearted. When President Bush was asked directly about the article, he expressly said he would not exclude a military option against Iran.

On the surface, the European political response has been one of appeasement. According to diplomatic circles in Brussels, an attack on Iranian nuclear plants is not a realistic option at present; and Washington's military involvement in Iraq makes an operation against Iran hardly feasible. Bush's insistence that the military option be kept open should not be understood as a threat but is purely hypothetical, since the American president always keeps all the options open. There is even speculation that Washington deliberately leaked the information used by Hersh in order to increase pressure on Iran, thereby helping achieve a breakthrough in the diplomatic efforts of the Europeans, who are negotiating with Teheran about ending its nuclear programme.

However, many European politicians, by dissociating themselves sharply from any military action against Iran, have made clear that Hersh's report and the threats of the US government are taken very seriously.

Already last November, British Foreign Minister Jack Straw stressed that he could not imagine any circumstances "which would justify military measures against Iran." Now, one of his spokespersons has said it was inconceivable "that the United Kingdom would support such a policy, if there ever were such a policy."

In Germany, both government and opposition spokespersons have rejected the American position. Gernot Erler, a Social Democratic Party (SPD) foreign affairs expert called the US threats "a shot across the bow for the European Union's policy of negotiation." He expressed surprise at the lukewarm denials of the US government and voiced the fear that the US administration was trying to extend its dreadful Iraq policy. The chair of the Green Party, Claudia Roth, criticised the US government plans as "not at all helpful." She warned they would aggravate the situation throughout the entire region and stressed, "We need diplomatic solutions, not threats of force."

The opposition Christian Democratic Union's (CDU's) foreign affairs spokesman Friedbert Pflueger appealed to Bush to support the EU's diplomatic efforts. His parliamentary colleague Ruprecht Polenz said, "We would move forward much faster, if the Americans didn't just stand with their arms folded watching the Europeans."

In addition to Hersh's article, there are numerous other indications that American war threats against Iran are deadly serious.

Even before Bush's re-election, the German weekly *Die Zeit* reported at the beginning of November on the plans of the neo-conservatives to bring about regime change in Teheran. "The Mullahs must go—if the bomb cannot be defused, then the power apparatus in Teheran should be," was

how *Die Zeit* described their attitude. "Should George Bush win the election, this project could soon stand on the agenda."

According to *Die Zeit*, those agitating for such a course of action included "Pentagon officials, strategists and lobbyists, who have already advanced the campaign against Saddam Hussein" and who possess "personal contacts with the highest echelons in Washington, particularly to vice-president Richard Cheney."

In particular, *Die Zeit* pointed to the role of Michael Ledeen, a right-wing ideologue for the American Enterprise Institute and a key figure in the Iran-Contra affair of the 1980s, as well as Douglas Feith, who heads the Pentagon political-planning department. Feith also enjoys close links with the Israeli government, which is likewise interested in a regime change in Teheran. These circles feel vindicated by Bush's re-election. As Seymour Hersh emphasises in his article, Bush's success in the election has "strengthened the position of the neo-conservatives within the Pentagon's civilian leadership, who had endorsed the invasion [of Iraq], including Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defence, and Douglas Feith, Under-Secretary of Defence for Policy".

During confirmation hearings before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice also announced a hard line towards Iran. "At some point, Iran has to be called to account for its failure to meet its international obligations," she stated. At the same time, she broadened Bush's "Axis of Evil"—Iraq, Iran and North Korea—to include four more countries: Cuba, Burma, Zimbabwe and Belarus, calling them "outposts of tyranny"—a clear warning that the US intends to hold fast to its aggressive course.

In an interview with MSNBC television news, Vice-President Cheney accused Iran of developing "new robust nuclear programmes" and of being a well-known sponsor of terrorism. "If one looks around the world for potential flash points, then Iran stands at the top of the list," he added.

President Bush's inauguration speech dispelled any remaining doubts that US military threats should be taken seriously. He threatened to "liberate" the entire world with American weapons. What this means can be seen every day in Iraq, where more than 100,000 people have died since it was "liberated." Bush made it clear that neither international law nor any other impediments will prevent the US from attacking any country it regards as an obstacle to its interests.

Reinhard Bütikofer, federal leader of the Green Party, the party of the German foreign minister, accused Bush of "trampling the great value of liberty in the dirt." He added, "The great slogan of liberty has been hijacked for a policy that will finally produce less than liberty."

The hope that, following the US foreign policy debacle in Iraq, Washington would be more peaceful and amenable to compromise has proved to be a complete miscalculation. Like a wild animal that has been cornered, the Bush government is thrashing about in a blind rage.

In this regard, there are remarkable parallels between the mentality of the right-wing clique that presently determines American foreign policy and Hitler's Nazi regime. In situations of apparent hopelessness, Hitler often staked everything on one roll of the dice—and won. Compromise and retreat were alien to him. Thus, in Munich in 1938, he was successful in gaining control of the Sudetenland and the Czech defences without firing

a shot, owing to the British policy of appeasement. His victory opened the way for the Second World War. Hitler maintained this attitude—even when the final result of the war was long decided—right up to the fall of the Third Reich.

The predominant majority in official European political circles undoubtedly rejects an armed attack on Iran. As a German newspaper commented, this would be “the nightmare scenario, not only of the Europeans.” Europe’s rulers fear for their close trade relations with Iran, one of the most important oil producers in the world, and for the stability of the entire region. “Iran in flames would unleash an inferno all the way to Europe,” another newspaper commented.

But the European policy is unable to seriously oppose that of Washington. To do this, it would have to make clear to the American government that it would react to a military attack on Iran not only with words, but also with deeds. Imposing international sanctions against America, shutting down US military bases in Europe and supplying defence equipment to Iran would be the minimum necessary to divert the right-wing clique in the White House from their bellicose course.

However, the European governments are neither capable nor willing to take such steps. Instead, they are responding in a manner similar to that of British Prime Minister Chamberlain in 1938 in the face of Hitler’s demands over Czechoslovakia. They are trying to convince Teheran to disarm itself, in this way hoping to appease Washington and to protect the “peace.” For months, the German, French and British foreign ministers have been negotiating with the Iranian government over closing down Iran’s nuclear programme—although the program is in compliance with international law and international contracts.

The fact that Teheran will not simply accede to such entreaties is all too understandable after the experiences in Iraq. As is now apparent, following the first Gulf War, Baghdad met Washington’s demands for disarmament and destroyed a large part of its weapons. In this case, European governments also exerted enormous pressure, supporting sanctions against the country. But this did not prevent the US from attacking and conquering Iraq. The so-called Weapons of Mass Destruction only served as a pretext; the real goal was the installation of a puppet regime and the conversion of Iraq into an American semi-colony.

The same applies to Iran. At least the American neo-conservatives are more honest in this regard, when they openly talk of regime change in Tehran. In a country that suffered for 26 years under the bloody dictatorship of the Shah, who came to power in a 1953 CIA-backed coup, a regime subservient to the US is to be (re)established.

European governments do not oppose American policy openly, because they agree in principle with its goals. They are not concerned with Iran’s right to self-determination and sovereignty, but with their own interests in the region, which they see endangered by the aggressive actions of the US.

The dispute about Iran forms part of a broader pattern of conflicts emerging more and more openly between the US and Europe—and above all with Germany and France.

The recent edition of the French journal *Politique étrangère* points out that throughout the Mediterranean—from the Middle East to Morocco—the US and Europe increasingly confront each other as rivals. Under the headline, “A new transatlantic rivalry in the Mediterranean?,” the journal concludes that, although the Americans and Europeans arrived at the same analysis regarding the problems of the region and pursued the same goals—political and economic liberalisation—“economic initiatives take place separately and their consequences potentially lead to conflict.”

European initiatives for the economic integration of the region, like the 1995 “Barcelona process,” stand in competition with American projects like the 1998 “Einzenstat Initiative” for the integration of the Maghreb. The article describes the latest initiative for the re-organisation of the region under American supremacy, called the “Greater Middle East”

project, which covers the entire Middle East and North Africa.

American and European interests increasingly collide in other regions of the world, such as the states that emerged from the breakup of the former Soviet Union, in attitudes towards Russia and China, as well as in financial and industrial policy.

Emblematic of the latter was the recent unveiling of the new Airbus 380 in Toulouse. With this new plane, the Europeans are challenging the nearly 40-year monopoly enjoyed by the American Boeing 747 for large-scale long-distance jets. The Airbus 380 is substantially larger and more economical, and has a greater range than its American competitor.

As the plane was solemnly unveiled in the presence of the French, British, Spanish and German heads of state, Chancellor Schröder of Germany alluded quite openly to US arguments used during the Iraq war. At that time, Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld had made great play of the differences between “new” and “old” Europe. With a wry smile, Schröder said, “It is the traditions of good old Europe, of cooperation, fairness, social sensitivity, that have enabled the A-380-project to become a success.”

The increasing transatlantic tensions are a consequence of the fight for markets, raw materials and cheap labour between the large corporations that dominate the world economy. The contradiction between the global character of modern production and the system of nation states in which bourgeois society is anchored can be only resolved within capitalism by violently dividing and re-dividing the world among the great powers. That was the cause for First and the Second World War, and is today the reason for the deepening tensions between the imperialist powers.

The danger of war this produces cannot be opposed by supporting one great power against another; by supporting the “more peaceful” against the more aggressive; by supporting “old Europe” against America. The struggle against imperialism and the danger of war requires the unification of the international working class based on a socialist programme directed against the foundations of the capitalist system.



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