

Bush in Europe: tensions boil beneath talk of transatlantic unity

Bill Van Auken
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On the first leg of his five-day European tour, President George W. Bush delivered a speech to NATO and European Union (EU) leaders in Brussels that called for a revival of the transatlantic alliance, while delivering implicit threats of new US unilateral aggression.

The focus of the speech was a call for burying the hatchet over Washington's war in Iraq and forging a united commitment to the US administration's declared priorities of fighting terrorism and spreading democracy in the Middle East.

Behind the hollow rhetoric about "a new era of transatlantic unity," however, relations between Europe and America are beset by explosive economic and geopolitical tensions of which Iraq is only the most acute expression. These underlying contradictions assure that Bush will return from his European mission virtually empty-handed.

Referring to the conflict that arose between the US and many European governments over the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, Bush declared, "Our strong friendship is essential to peace and prosperity across the globe, and no temporary debate, no passing disagreement of governments, no power on Earth will ever divide us."

The claim that the divisions over the US war in Iraq were merely a "temporary debate" or "passing disagreement of governments" expresses both the arrogance of US imperialism and the disconnect between the current administration in Washington and political reality. Two years ago, on the eve of the war, millions of people took to the streets in Europe and around the globe to oppose the plans for military aggression against Iraq. The subsequent invasion and occupation have generated immense popular hostility throughout the European continent to Washington's foreign policy.

Bush's first stop in Brussels was marked by demonstrations calling for "No European Complicity" in global US aggression. A massive deployment of police power not only kept protesters far from the US president, but also prevented thousands of European Union employees from getting to their jobs in the center of the city.

Bush's posturing as the apostle of freedom and human rights is widely regarded as grotesque in Europe, given the revelations of illegal detentions, torture and killings that have emerged from US-run prison camps in Guantánamo Bay, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, together with Washington's open repudiation of international law.

US imperialism's assertion of the right to wage unprovoked, "preventive" war against any nation on earth that it perceives as a threat to American interests is far from a "temporary" or "passing" concern. It is a starting point in the strategic calculations of governments and ruling elites on every continent, and constitutes a direct threat to peoples all over the world.

Despite the public glad-handing between Bush and European leaders, the reaction within European ruling circles to the US president's diplomatic initiative was decidedly skeptical, an attitude that found open expression in the press. Germany's *Spiegel Online* commented: "Everyone's charm factor is on overload as leaders do back flips to pay each other compliments. Yet despite the candy-coatings, differences continue to separate Europeans from Americans, and when it comes to Iraq, Iran and China, everyone's hidden daggers are unsheathed."

The French daily *Le Monde* was even more blunt: "Mr. Bush is welcome in Europe as long as he agrees to a partnership of equals, rather than a relationship of dependence between the American superpower and its European vassals."

Bush used his speech to issue ultimatums to both Syria and Iran, while putting Russia on notice that Washington intends to demand democratic reforms as a cover for a policy of subordinating Moscow to US interests. In regard to Iran, Bush explicitly reiterated that Washington reserves the option of military force. "In safeguarding the security of free nations, no option can be taken permanently off the table," he declared.

Highlighting US collaboration with France in pushing a resolution through the United Nations Security Council last year demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, Bush repeatedly suggested that the US and Europe share common interests in the Middle East.

Washington desperately needs European support for its crisis-plagued intervention in Iraq. The continuing resistance to the US occupation has forced the Pentagon to sustain a deployment of 150,000 troops, stretching the US military beyond its capacity. Meanwhile, the Bush administration's request for another \$80 billion in military spending, largely to finance the Iraqi venture, has once again exposed the impact that the war is having on the country's deepening fiscal crisis.

Rather than come to Washington's aid, however, much of Europe appears to be extricating itself from the Iraqi quagmire. Following the lead of Spain, which withdrew all of its troops, the Netherlands announced that it will withdraw 1,600 troops from

Iraq next month, while Ukraine's new president, Victor Yushchenko, said last week that pulling his country's 1,600 troops out of the country would be a top priority. Portugal withdrew its 120 soldiers from Iraq earlier this month, and Poland has pulled 700 troops out and is considering the withdrawal of the 1,700 who remain.

In a symbolic gesture that will do nothing to alleviate the immense pressure on the US military, the European Union has drafted plans to open an office in Baghdad to train Iraqi judges and prosecutors.

European leaders have retreated from open confrontation with the Bush administration over US foreign policy and echoed the attitude of "let bygones be bygones" expressed by the US president. Introducing Bush before his speech, Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt acknowledged that the US invasion of Iraq had divided Europe and America, but then added, "It makes little sense arguing about who was right."

But the fundamental contradictions that underlay the divisions over Iraq persist, regardless of attempts on either side to claim that animosities have cooled on the eve of the war's second anniversary. At the root of these tensions is Washington's attempt to assert global hegemony by utilizing its military superiority, even as the world economic position of American capitalism continues to decline.

The flashpoints of division between Europe and America reflect this underlying conflict. Europe has refused to join Washington's bellicose threats against Iran, while Russian President Vladimir Putin announced earlier this week that Russia will boost its nuclear cooperation with Teheran, and that he himself will soon visit the Iranian capital. While turning Iran into a pariah state furthers the US drive to impose its control over the Persian Gulf, the country remains an important source of energy and trade for Europe.

Tensions have also surfaced over the nature of European unity, and, in particular, the EU's emergence as an independent military bloc. German Chancellor Schröder, in a speech last week to the Munich security summit, called into question the usefulness of NATO and chided Washington for failing to recognize the independent interests of Germany and Europe.

Finally, divisions have manifested themselves over relations with China. Just weeks before Bush's European tour, the US House of Representatives voted by a margin of 401 to 3 for a resolution condemning the European Union for pledging last December to work with China to lift an arms embargo that has been in effect since 1989. The resolution threatens retaliation in the form of "limitations and constraints" in cooperation "at both the governmental and industrial level" if the EU proceeds with its rapprochement with China.

Concerns over Europe's relations with China go beyond the significance of lifting the arms embargo. Washington fears that closer economic ties between the EU and Beijing could spell immense danger for the US economy. Asian central banks, most prominently the People's Bank of China, are financing more than three-quarters of the ballooning US current accounts deficit, running at approximately \$600 billion a year.

The European Union has already eclipsed the US as China's top trading partner, and the prospect of China switching its holdings

from the declining dollar and US bonds to euro-denominated assets poses the threat of a financial crisis with far-reaching implications for American domestic and foreign policy.

In an article published in the February issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Yale economist and former US Commerce Department undersecretary Jeffrey Garten warned in regard to such a shift: "The implications for what would ensue would affect much more than fiscal and monetary policy, and it could scuttle more than Bush's plans for tax and Social Security reform. Budget pressure dictated from abroad could affect the size and composition of the US armed forces and put excruciating pressure on the United States to solicit military help from other countries. It could reduce funds available for everything from homeland defense to education. In sum, the refusal of international investors to support out-of-control US fiscal policies could become the defining event of Bush's second term."

There are sharp divisions within the US ruling elite over how to deal with this threat. The dominant layer within the Bush administration appears to hold onto the belief that the US can rely on its military might to overcome its economic decline. The so-called "charm offensive" initiated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and now continued by Bush is seen not as a fundamental change in course, but a public relations effort to cajole European leaders into being more cooperative.

Others, however, are warning that this approach is not viable. The *National Interest*, a journal reflecting the views of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger and others associated with the "Realpolitik" wing of the US foreign policy establishment, published an article on the "post-election trajectory of US foreign policy," insisting that a change of course is required.

"Neoconservatives both in and outside the administration argue that all that is needed to make American foreign policy more effective is to change the tone of American statements and to engage in better public relations," stated the article, written by Robert F. Ellsworth and Dimitri Simes. "This is fantasy," the article continued. "What is required is not just a change in salesmanship, but rather how US policy is conducted."

No faction within the American ruling elite or either of its two political parties, however, has advanced a concrete proposal for overcoming the explosive contradictions that underlie the US economy. Under these conditions, whatever hollow declarations of shared values and common purpose are made by Bush and his European counterparts, the divisions between Europe and America can only deepen and the threat posed by American militarism grow.



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