

Bush in Brussels: US steps up threats of wider Mideast war

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24 February 2005

George Bush began his European tour in Brussels with a series of bellicose pronouncements, putting his hosts on notice that the United States intends to push ahead with new military threats and provocations that could expand the current war in Iraq into a wider conflagration embracing much of the Middle East.

The principal target of Bush's threats was Iran, but Syria also came in for a heavy-handed warning. The US president denounced Tehran for allegedly planning to build nuclear weapons and made clear his opposition to the strategy, pursued by Britain, France and Germany, of offering economic concessions to Iran in return for promises to limit its nuclear programs to energy production. He claimed that Iran had "breached a contract with the international community. They're the party that needs to be held to account—not any of us."

While this language clearly resembles Bush's rhetoric before the attack on Iraq, when he cited Saddam Hussein's alleged multiple violations of UN resolutions, Bush went out of his way to deny press reports suggesting an imminent US military strike against Iran's supposed nuclear weapons labs.

Pentagon planning for such strikes—including the dispatch into Iran of special forces teams to choose targets—was reported by the *New Yorker* last month. Pentagon officials have since confirmed they are systematically updating longstanding contingency plans for military action against Iran, to take into account the presence of 160,000 American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, which border Iran on the west and east.

Last week, former top US weapons inspector Scott Ritter, in remarks at a college campus in Olympia, Washington, said that Bush has already signed off on a June 2005 air strike against selected Iranian targets. Ritter also claimed that the Bush administration had manipulated the result of the January 30 Iraq election, reducing the vote of the victorious Shiite coalition from 56 percent to 48 percent in order to block the emergence of a pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad. He suggested that *New Yorker* correspondent Seymour Hersh, author of the report on war planning against Iran, was about to publish an exposé of Iraq vote fraud.

In remarks to the media Tuesday, Bush declared, "This notion that the United States is getting ready to attack Iran is

simply ridiculous." He added immediately, "And having said that, all options are on the table," provoking guffaws from the press corps.

Equally provocative was Bush's criticism of Syria as "an occupying power" in Lebanon. As commander in chief of the US military, Bush presides over a much bloodier and more brutal occupation of Iraq, with ten times as many troops. Moreover, he is a fervent supporter of the government of Israel, which has occupied the West Bank and Gaza for nine years longer than the Syrians have had a troop presence in Lebanon.

It is a historical fact that Syria originally intervened in Lebanon with the tacit consent of both the United States and Israel, to bolster the right-wing Christian Falangist ruling elite, whose power was threatened by an alliance of oppressed Shiite Muslims and Palestinian refugees. In that capacity, Syria presided over atrocities like the massacre by its Falangist allies of Palestinians at the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp.

A quarter century later, the US suddenly finds Syrian domination of Lebanon intolerable. This is not because of any concern for the democratic and national rights of the Lebanese people—which both the US and Israel have long ignored—but because American imperialism, from its new vantage point as the occupying power in Iraq, sees Syria as the next obstacle to extending its domination over the Middle East.

Even more ominously, Bush sought to browbeat both China and Russia, nuclear-armed major powers. He prodded the European Union not to sell advanced weapons systems to Beijing, while warming up for his summit with Vladimir Putin with a lecture on the need for Russia to meet US expectations about democracy at home and weapons sales abroad.

Two leading US senators, Republican John McCain and Democrat Joseph Lieberman, introduced a resolution February 18 calling for Russia to be suspended from the Group of Eight industrialized nations because of actions like the state takeover of Yukos, the largest private Russian oil company, and Putin's opposition to Viktor Yushchenko, the US-backed candidate who took over as prime minister in the recent Ukraine elections.

Bush's comments Monday about Russia, demanding it "renew a commitment to democracy and the rule of law," were typically hypocritical coming from an administration whose

foreign policy is based on the premise that the United States will be bound by no law where its perceived interests are at stake. Bush has repeatedly declared that he will never be constrained by international law, which he demeans as giving the United Nations, France or some other country “veto power” over US military action.

As for his declaration that that the US “stands for a free press, a vital opposition, the sharing of power,” the trend within the United States itself is precisely the opposite: a cowed media, a token opposition, and unchecked power for an administration that stole the 2000 election and only narrowly won last November’s vote.

In relation to China, Bush claimed that a plan by the European Union to lift a 15-year ban on arms sales would “change the balance of relations between China and Taiwan.” His real concern, however, is not the balance between China and Taiwan, but between China and the United States. Both Pentagon officials and right-wing US think tanks see China as the most formidable future antagonist of American imperialism, especially if China’s economic weight and enormous population are combined with advanced technology supplied by Europe.

There is particular concern in Washington that China could acquire or develop high-tech command-and-control systems and targeting capabilities comparable to American AWACS and “smart” weapons. This would make obsolete the current American war planning in the Far East, based on using air and naval power to control the Taiwan Strait.

The American media obediently followed the direction of White House spin doctors, portraying Bush’s bullying in Brussels as a “charm offensive” in which the US president sought to bury the hatchet with European leaders after the bitter conflicts over his decision to invade and occupy Iraq. The reality is that the tensions between the rival imperialist powers are even greater than in 2003, although masked by diplomatic formalities.

This conflict emerged sharply in the discussion at the NATO summit Tuesday on support for the training of Iraqi security forces. All 26 member countries of the US-led alliance ultimately agreed to participate, although six refused to send military trainers to Iraq, consenting only to host the training of Iraqis outside the country. French acquiescence was particularly begrudging, as President Jacques Chirac ultimately agreed to supply a single French officer to help coordinate the NATO training effort.

Bush welcomed this acceptance in principle of the legitimacy of the US occupation regime in Iraq. “Twenty-six nations sitting around that table said it’s important for NATO to be involved in Iraq,” he said. “That’s a strong statement.” Asked about the French contribution of one officer, he replied, “Every contribution helps.”

While the NATO agreement does little to assist the US materially in Iraq, the political significance of this capitulation

is unmistakable. It arises not merely out of fear of the United States or adaptation to the reality of a reelected Bush administration. More fundamentally, the European powers are preparing for their own Iraqs and Afghanistans, as the conflict between the rival imperialist powers over control of critical resources and strategic positions intensifies.

Not one of the 26 governments cares to state what they all know to be true: the US intervention in Iraq is illegal, a war crime under international law, and all those who collaborate in that effort are themselves war criminals under the Geneva Conventions and the precedents set in 1946 at Nuremberg. For the European imperialists, as for their American counterparts, such charges are only for defeated or second-tier war criminals.

But in the midst of Bush’s tirades against Iran, Syria, China and Russia, there came a sharp reminder that the driving force of American aggression in the Middle East is the weakness, not the strength, of American capitalism. US stock markets plunged Tuesday after a report that the South Korean central bank was planning to hold more of its reserves in other currencies rather than the dollar, because of the sharp depreciation of the US currency against the euro and the yen.

This report sent shock waves through financial markets, with the dollar falling sharply against the euro, the yen, the British pound, the Canadian dollar and the Swiss franc. The price of oil—calculated in dollars—rose sharply as well. The price of gold jumped \$7 an ounce in a single trading session.

Central bank officials in South Korea and Japan hurriedly announced that they had no plans to sell dollar assets from their enormous foreign exchange reserves—\$850 billion in Japan, \$200 billion in Korea—a pledge that temporarily stabilized the markets. But the implications of this episode are clear: American imperialism may hold military sway over the world at present, but from an economic standpoint, it is an unstable and declining power, forced to borrow over \$600 billion a year (more than the entire Pentagon budget) simply to balance its books.

This acute contradiction between superficial military strength and underlying economic weakness is what lends such an explosive, even deranged character to American foreign policy. In that sense Bush, with his semi-literate banality and messianic bluster, is not an accidental figure. He personifies the crisis and historical blind alley of American imperialism.



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