

Secretary of State Rice's tour

## US-European rift deepens over Iran

Ulrich Rippert  
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Just a few days after her confirmation as the new US secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice began a whirlwind tour of Europe. In the space of one week, she is visiting London, Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Warsaw, Rome and Ankara, where she also met the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov. She has also included stops in Tel Aviv and in Palestinian areas.

While many commentators describe the trip as a “charm offensive,” and refer to a relaxation of tensions in transatlantic relationships, the opposite is the case. Behind the exchange of diplomatic niceties, conflicting interests and opinions are being fought out, most central among them the question of Iran.

After veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh exposed US war preparations against Iran, followed by bellicose comments by various US representatives, there is little doubt among European politicians that Washington has begun serious preparations for a military offensive against Teheran. This is a goal that is decisively rejected, not only by Berlin and Paris, but also London.

The German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* ran the headline on its front cover last week, “USA against Iran, the next war?” Threats made by US president George W. Bush against Iran in his state of the nation address dominated the headlines of reports on the speech in the German and French press, indicating widespread fear that Washington could take the same approach to Iran as it did toward Iraq.

In London, the first stop of her European trip, the US secretary of state again attacked the Iranian government. She accused it of lacking democratic legitimacy, of supporting international terror and of failing to respect human rights. Questioned by a journalist on whether she could imagine an attack on Iran during the Bush administration's second four-year

term, Rice said only that such an attack was “at this time not on the agenda.”

The divisions between Europe and the US over military action against Iran are even deeper than their differences over the Iraq war, which has already led to a profound transatlantic crisis and splits across Europe.

Not only Germany and France, but also Britain have vital economic and political interests in Iran. A 30-member-strong delegation of British businessmen travelled to Iran just a few days after agreement was reached last November over the Iranian atomic program between three European Union states and the Teheran government. According to the German Heinrich Böll institute, which has close links to the German Green Party, the British trade and industry minister, Patricia Hewitt, stressed that trade relations between both countries had grown continuously over the past five years and would have great importance for both sides. Her ministry smoothed the way for approximately 100 enterprises to operate in Iran in the past year alone.

According to the institute's report, exports by European Union states to Iran grew by 25 percent last year in comparison to 2003. Teheran's most important European business partners are Germany, Italy and France. At the same time, Iran plays an important role in assuring the energy supplies of many European countries.

European governments are not merely concerned about their economic interests. They are afraid that a military strike against Teheran will politically destabilise the entire region to an even greater extent than the Iraq war.

Even before her trip, Secretary of State Rice had made clear that she expects Europe to directly participate in the US occupation of Iraq—a course which is ruled out by Germany and France. In addition, she

demanded that the European Union drop its plans to waive the current weapons embargo against China. For their part, the Europeans have called upon Washington to commit itself to a diplomatic solution of the Iran crisis instead of sabre rattling. Behind a multitude of diplomatic initiatives both sides remain firm in their respective positions.

From the standpoint of the geo-strategic interests of the US and its attempt to establish unrestricted control over energy resources in the Middle East and Caspian region, Washington has had Iran in its sights for some time. The country borders directly on the Caspian basin and offers the possibility of transporting oil and gas reserves from the region via a modern pipeline system to the world market. The Bush government already has a military presence in three neighbouring countries—Turkey, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although the majority of the European governments reject a renewed military adventure in the Middle East, they are not ready to openly oppose the US government and its secretary of state. No one in official circles in Berlin or Paris—not to speak of London—dares to confront the Bush government and its former national security advisor over the war in Iraq, which blatantly contravenes international law, or over the series of subsequent war crimes.

Instead of bluntly explaining to Rice that the European Union is no longer prepared to tolerate the open and disguised threats of war and that any further military adventure, whether against Iran or another country, will be met with an immediate blockade of US military bases on European soil and further sanctions, political circles in Europe have done exactly the opposite.

Following pressure from the US government, the management of Germany's Krupp AG decided to redeem a part of Iranian shares in the company in order to limit Iranian influence in the enterprise. The British energy giant Shell, which together with the Spanish Repsol YPF had finalised a comprehensive natural gas agreement with Iran last summer, has put its production plans "provisionally" on ice.

On a political level, the European Union also seeks to make the best of a bad deal. Following the lodging of a legal case against US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld on charges of war crimes by a Berlin-based attorney's office in the name of an American human

rights organisation, Rumsfeld's German counterpart, Peter Struck (SPD), stated his conviction the case will not even reach the stage of a preliminary investigation. Struck urged Rumsfeld to reverse his decision not to participate next week at the Munich security conference.

German Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) was even clearer following an unscheduled discussion with President Bush during a visit to the US last week. Schily explained afterwards: "That is an honour, which is not given to every interior minister." Press reports subsequently revealed that Schily had assured Bush that Germany would provide development aid for Iraq.

This cowardly attitude towards Washington is rooted, above all, in fears on the part of European governments that a consistent uncovering and struggle against US war plans could unleash a powerful popular response. They can clearly recall the worldwide mass demonstrations against the Iraq war two years ago, in which several millions took part, and are keen to avoid a repetition.

European political circles fear that mass protests against war could also take up social questions and turn against governments at home. It is no coincidence that Otto Schily has stressed his personal friendship with the former US attorney general, John Ashcroft. Schily is most impressed by the ruthless law-and-order policies employed by the US government against its own population.

At the same time, Germany and every other European government pursue their own imperialist goals, which they seek to conceal from the mass of the population with the same outpourings and appeals on behalf of democracy and liberty which are so characteristic of the current US government. Under these conditions the conflicts between the great powers are intensifying in a form that recalls the darkest days before the beginning of the First World War.



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