Blair's Washington summit: What next for Britain in Iraq?

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Prior to British Prime Minister Tony Blair's arrival in Washington for his December 7 summit meeting with President Bush, the *Guardian* ran an editorial focusing on how it believed Blair should respond to the report by the Iraq Study Group (ISG).

Entitled "If Not Now, When?," the comment was an appeal for Blair to argue for a change in US policy on Iraq to reflect the Iraq panel's call for involving Iran and Syria in efforts to stabilise the country and prevent a military defeat.

It described the report as "an implicit repudiation of the entire divisive international and domestic political project that President George Bush has pursued since 9/11, *with the unfailing and dismaying public support of Tony Blair."* (Emphasis added)

The *Guardian* embraced as its own the essential aim of the panel co-chaired by former Republican Secretary of State James Baker—i.e., to seek a political consensus in the US and internationally behind the occupation of Iraq.

The newspaper wrote: "We in Britain need to be very clear about this, as do the American people: when Mr Baker called for a new consensus both in the US itself and internationally he was, in effect, indicting the failure of the knowingly unconsensual policies followed so foolishly by Mr. Bush both at home and abroad, *and supported so recklessly by Mr. Blair*." (Emphasis added)

It concluded with a list of demands on Blair to put himself "publicly and unambiguously on the side of Messrs Baker and [Democratic ISG co-chair Lee] Hamilton. Even at this late stage, the prime minister must not go to the White House counselling caution in the acceptance of the study group's proposals. He should use his influence—if it exists at all—to demand broad changes of US policy in the region, especially over Israel-Palestine, and make clear both to the president and in public the increasing reality that Britain is getting out of southern Iraq as soon as practicable anyway. No grovelling. No blurring of advice. Just hand Mr. Bush the revolver and tell him he must do the honourable thing with his failed policy."

This is strong stuff coming from a newspaper loyal to the Blair government. It reflects the conclusion drawn by broad layers of the British ruling elite that Iraq has been a disaster and that Blair's alliance with the Bush administration has damaged both Britain's interests in the Middle East and its international standing.

Yet just one day later, after Blair's appearance at a press conference alongside Bush, a far more reserved editorial appeared under the headline, "Avoiding Great Expectations." The newspaper cautioned that "it would be a grave mistake to exaggerate how much [Blair] is likely to be able to achieve now....

"It may make sense for the prime minister to argue for engagement with Iran and Syria—though there are reasons to assume that it will not produce very much very soon. No one in Washington will sign up to a grand bargain that includes acquiescence in Iranian nuclear ambitions. Nor is the US likely to deliver the Golan Heights back to Syria."

The same negative view was advanced regarding a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the *Guardian* noting: "A just and lasting peace in the Middle East is a laudable and urgent goal. But achieving it will be very hard in the dark shadow of Iraq."

The pronounced change in tone is significant, not merely because it reflects an attempt to shield Blair from criticism, but because it shows the depth of the crisis now faced by British imperialism.

Entertaining hopes that Blair of all people would take a stand against Bush is self-deception of the worst sort. However much he may agree that certain tactical shifts in Middle East policy are necessary, his own political fortunes are inextricably tied to the Washington neo-conservatives and to what takes place in Iraq.

Blair has, in fact, long argued for the US to place more pressure on Israel to agree to a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, has been reticent about pushing for an open confrontation with Iran, and has advocated an attempt to reach an agreement with Syria and split Damascus from Tehran. But none of these tactical disagreements with the Bush administration—all now echoed by the ISG report—have ever counted as much in Blair's political calculations as maintaining his alliance with Washington.

The *Guardian* believes that the setbacks suffered by Bush in last month's congressional elections require that Blair distance himself from America's disastrous Middle East policy. It hopes to convince him that he now has an opportunity to finally exert some influence in encouraging not only a bipartisan policy in the US, but its international corollary—a multilateral approach that takes into account the interests of Britain and the other European powers.

Blair's performance in Washington proves that the opposite is the case. He understands the setbacks suffered by the Republicans—in Iraq and domestically—as his own.

The mass anti-war sentiment that found at least partial expression on November 7 is no less pronounced in Britain, and could just as easily result in a political debacle for the New Labour government. That is why, after having described the Baker report

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as a “strong way forward,” Blair stood by and even made supportive noises while Bush made clear that he would not accept its recommendations, would not negotiate with Iran and Syria, and was preparing a counter-position under the aegis of the Pentagon that in all likelihood will inaugurate a yet more bloody military offensive in Iraq.

Blair even accepted the poison chalice of acting as Bush’s de-facto envoy in a diplomatic tour of the Middle East this month, which can do nothing other than provide a fig-leaf behind which such a military offensive is prepared.

Much more is revealed in these developments than Blair’s own role as a stooge for Bush. If that were the only problem facing Britain’s ruling elite, then Blair would have been removed some time ago. He persists because, in the final analysis, no section of British capital has a viable alternative strategy to that which he has pursued.

What does the *Guardian* want? Not an end to the Iraq occupation—Britain’s troops are to be withdrawn only when “practicable” and, significantly, Afghanistan is not even mentioned—but its continuation on a new basis. The newspaper wants Britain to get more “quid” for its “quo”—something for its something. And that is all that most of Blair’s bourgeois critics want. They do not offer a different policy, merely a call for a harder bargaining stance in Britain’s dealings with Washington.

The question that haunts them all is just how far they can take such horse-trading with the US, given Britain’s subordinate position in relation to its transatlantic partner. There are many within the British bourgeoisie who nurse their petty resentments towards the US and pride themselves on Britain’s diplomacy and statesmanship when compared with the “Ugly American.” But ever since the 1957 Suez debacle, they have understood that it is the US that ultimately calls the shots.

Just prior to Blair’s trip to Washington, Kendall Myers, a senior analyst with the US State Department’s Bureau of Analysis and Research, gave a lecture to the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. In it he stated that Blair got “nothing, no payback” for supporting Bush in Iraq. Blair should have been ditched by Labour, he added, but the party had lacked the “courage or audacity” to remove him.

The Bush administration, he continued, took little account of what Britain said: “We typically ignore them and take no notice. We say, ‘There are the Brits coming to tell us how to run our empire. Let’s park them.’ It is a sad business and I don’t think it does them justice.”

But Myers did more than embarrass Blair. He declared that the “special relationship” between Washington and London was always a “myth”: “It has been, from the very beginning, very one-sided. There never really has been a special relationship, or at least not one we’ve noticed.”

Such candid remarks will strike a resentful chord within the British establishment, but resentment and dissatisfaction alone cannot produce a major shift in foreign policy. For this, significant layers within ruling circles would have to conclude that their strategic task is to build a series of alliances within Europe as a counter-force to the US. And to date, the European bourgeoisie has proved itself militarily incapable of offering such an alternative power base and lacking the necessary political will to mount such a challenge.

Despite their obvious desire to profit politically from the reversals suffered by the US, they are constrained by a belief that a defeat for the “world’s policeman” in Iraq would be politically disastrous—bringing in its wake a mass radicalisation of the working class not only throughout the Middle East, but also in the US and Europe.

The British bourgeoisie fears such an outcome more than any other. Nile Gardiner, director of the Margaret Thatcher Centre for Freedom, wrote on December 7 in the *Telegraph* of the greatest challenges ever faced by the Anglo-American special relationship, noting, in particular, that “anti-American views are now as widespread, or perhaps even more prevalent, in the UK than in some continental European countries with a far deeper tradition of public scepticism toward the US.”

A “weakening of the Anglo-American alliance,” he warned, would mean “the further loss of national sovereignty, the diminution of British global power and influence, the loosening of defence and intelligence ties, and a weakening of the close-knit financial, trade and investment relationship... In times of international crisis, the US and the UK stand together, and the world is a safer and better place for it.”

In reality, US imperialism faces a major loss of its economic power for which its aggressive military policy could never compensate. Far from being a factor ensuring stability and peace, America has become the major destabilising factor in the world situation.

As a result, British imperialism’s alliance with, and continued reliance on, Washington is at the very heart of its own mounting difficulties.

Whether under Blair or whoever succeeds him as Labour leader, Britain will continue as America’s chief partner-in-crime in Iraq. Like the debate in the US between the Democrats and Republicans, and within the Republican Party itself, the debate over Britain’s foreign policy takes place between factions whose concern is how best to advance their predatory imperialist interests in the Middle East and internationally. Such an agenda not only demands continued bloodshed in Iraq, but must also pave the way for worse atrocities in future. This must provoke mounting domestic opposition that can find no outlet within the official political spectrum.

Equally, any sharp shift in the political situation in America, whether due to events in the Middle East, the worsening situation facing the US economy, or a movement in opposition to the gutting of living conditions and the erosion of democratic rights, will have grave consequences for Britain.

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