

Tensions mount between US and Europe over war threat against Iran

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As Washington steps up its campaign of propaganda and aggression against Iran, some leading European politicians and sections of the media have expressed their concern during the past week over the increasing danger of a US military provocation plunging the entire Middle East into chaos.

Three former senior US military commanders—Generals Robert G. Gard and Joseph P. Hoar and Vice Admiral Jack Shanahan—sent a letter to the British *Sunday Times*, published on Sunday, February 4, warning of the consequences of any US military attack on Iran.

Clearly attempting to mobilize European public opinion against the plans of the Bush administration, the US generals bluntly declared: “An attack on Iran would have disastrous consequences for security in the region, coalition forces in Iraq and would further exacerbate regional and global tensions. The current crisis must be resolved through diplomacy.”

Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer made a similar warning last week in the pages of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Fischer himself is no opponent of war—as German foreign minister in 1998-1999, he played a vital role in paving the way in Yugoslavia for the first international military intervention by the post-war German army—and he is certainly no enemy of Washington. While in office, he maintained the closest relations with the secretary of state under President Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright. But in his comment for the *SZ*, Fischer warns against repeating what he euphemistically terms the Bush administration’s “mistakes” in Iraq by seeking “regime change” in Teheran and extending hostilities into Iran.

The fears of chaos in the Middle East resulting from a military strike by the US against Iran were most clearly summed up in a column last week by journalist Ulrich Ladurner writing for one of Germany’s leading weekly publications, *Die Zeit*. Referring to Bush, Ladurner writes: “He is weak, that is correct, but that is by no means any guarantee that he will not plunge into a further adventure. Quite the opposite, his weakness is a danger. It is precisely the disaster in Iraq that could induce the Bush government to carry the war over the borders of Iraq, into the middle of Iran.

“The US used this strategy in the seventies in Southeast Asia. When they could proceed no further in Vietnam, they drew Cambodia and Laos into the war. Weakness can also be a motive for going to war.

“The Democrats are currently vigorously attacking his Iraq policy, but that by no means implies that they would not be ready to support an attack on Iran. It all depends on the reason. If the Bush government is able to successfully demonstrate that Iran is directly involved in the killing of US soldiers, then the Democrats would hardly oppose it—as was the case in 2003. Then ‘the hour of the patriot’ would be at hand. And as we are well aware, there are very many of these in the ranks of

the Democrats.”

Parallel to preparations for a US military strike—or an Israeli provocation with US support—Washington is also increasing pressure on European companies and governments to break commercial and financial relations with Iran.

Under strong pressure from the US, European governments supported a United Nations Security Council resolution in December 2006 giving Iran 60 days to halt its uranium-enrichment program or face economic sanctions. Now, the US is stepping up the ante and demanding firm and rapid measures by European companies, banks and governments to cut their ties with Teheran.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, one senior US administration official declared, “We are telling the Europeans that they need to go way beyond what they’ve done to maximize pressure on Iran.” The official went on, however, to complain about the European reaction: “The European response on the economic side has been pretty weak.”

The US administration is particularly targeting loans made by European governments to Iran. According to the International Union of Credit and Investment Insurers, European loans to the Iranian government in 2005 amounted to US\$18 billion. The biggest donors were Italy (US\$6.2 billion/4.7 billion euros), Germany (US\$5.4 billion/4.17 billion euros), France (US\$1.4 billion/1.08 billion euros) and Spain and Austria, each with US\$1 billion dollars (772 million euros).

In addition, US Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson has sent European governments a list of 30 Iranian companies, which, according to Washington, are involved in terrorism or armaments production, and should no longer be treated as trading partners. Iranian banks with branches in Europe have also been targeted for sanctions.

While US officials claim that the move to intensify economic and financial sanctions against Iran is driven by the latter’s nuclear-enrichment program, Washington has also registered alarm over the Iranian government’s move to switch all its foreign transactions, including those involving its main revenue earner—oil (80 percent of all foreign earnings)—from the dollar to the euro.

On December 18, a spokesman for the Iranian government, Gholam Hossein Elham, declared in Teheran that the government intended to transfer all foreign trade payments from the dollar. The measure was partly planned as a political response to US aggression against Iran, but was also based on the fact that Iran is currently forced to sell its oil for the weak dollar and then pay for its imports in Europe with the stronger euro. Such a move would have enormous implications for US imperialism, possibly leading to a major shift by other countries out of

the dollar and into the euro.

In terms of trade and finance, Europe already has large-scale interests at stake in Iran and surrounding countries in the Middle East. This explains European reluctance to accede to the current US requests. As one European official stated: “We are going to be very cautious about what the Treasury Department wants us to do. We can see that banks are slowing their business with Iran. But, because there are huge European business interests involved, we have to be very careful.”

Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and Britain all have extensive business dealings with Iran, particularly in energy. In addition to buying oil from Iran, European countries also export machinery, industrial equipment and commodities, which have no military application and have nothing to do with what the US claims are attempts by Iran to develop nuclear weaponry.

Countering recent US criticism of Austria’s business links with Iran, European deputy and vice chairman of the SPE (Party of European Socialists) fraction in the European parliament Hannes Swoboda reacted by declaring: “The intervention of the United States against normal economic relations with Iran is completely unjustified. Europe and the European economy should not be forced to pay for the failed Iran policy of the US.” Swoboda called upon the Austrian government to clearly defend its business interests against US pressure.

The extent of European hostility to US policy in the Middle East also exploded to the surface last week in the form of comments made by French President Jacques Chirac. In an interview with a number of French and US newspapers, Chirac baldly declared that, should Iran send nuclear missiles against Israel, Teheran would be wiped off the map in a matter of minutes.

Upon being reminded in the course of a brief and fiercely critical media campaign that official US and European policy is to undertake measures to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities in the first place, Chirac played down and revised his remarks the next day. Nevertheless, the damage had been done. In the space of one outburst, Chirac had revealed his determination to strike a path independent of the US and its “coalition of the willing,” while at the same time making clear that in the defense of French capitalism he was prepared to be every bit as ruthless and brutal as his counterpart sitting in the White House.

Increasing divisions across the Atlantic as well as between the major capitalist powers in Europe itself form the backdrop to the latest trip by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Gulf region. Merkel’s four-day trip to four Arab and Gulf states—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait—follows on the heels of a similar recent itinerary by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Like Rice, Merkel is seeking to whip up support in the Gulf fiefdoms for a policy aimed at isolating Iran and the Hamas and Hezbollah movements in Palestine and Lebanon. At the same time, Merkel hopes to compensate for probable future losses of German interests in Iran through intensified trade links with the region, which is at the moment under the protective wing of the US military.

In many respects, German capitalism has the most to lose of all the European states in the event of a conflict between the US and Iran. Germany is the biggest European exporter to Iran (4.3-billion-euro exports in 2005 - an increase of more than 50 percent compared with 2002), and much of this trade is bound up with the lucrative Iranian oil industry. Some of Germany’s biggest companies—Siemens, BASF, Linde—are active in Iran, in addition to many smaller German firms.

Nevertheless, since coming to power in 2005, the German chancellor has refused to utter a word of criticism against the disastrous US war and occupation of Iraq and has proved to be one of the most steadfast European supporters of the US administration.

Together with Britain and France, Germany played a crucial role in enforcing the UN economic sanctions against Iran last December. Merkel has since provided vital political cover for intensified US aggression in the Middle East by calling for a revival of the imperialist quartet—the EU, the US, Russia and the United Nations—and a new initiative to isolate radical Islamist movements.

Following her recent visit to the Middle East, US Secretary of State Rice made Berlin her first European port of call and fulsomely praised the support and understanding of the Berlin government for US policy in the region. In an interview with the *Financial Times* last week, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier went so far as to express his hope for “the US to play a greater role in the Middle East than in the past.”

Now in her role as EU president and chair of the upcoming G8 summit, the German chancellor is determined to continue her policy of appeasement towards the US. Washington officials say that Merkel has been responsive on the issue of economic sanctions against Iran, and at least one German bank, Commerzbank, has recently suspended trading in dollars with the country.

Merkel is also determined that German business interests be allowed to expand in the Middle East and Gulf area. Despite the fact that the ostensible reason for her visit was to revive the “peace roadmap” in the Middle East, she traveled as head of a delegation of 40 German business leaders, including her Economics Minister Michael Glos and representatives from Deutsche Bank, Siemens, Deutsche Bahn, and the Wintershall energy group. Important issues on the chancellor’s schedule are attendance at the German-Emirates business forum in the United Arab Emirates and discussions in Saudi Arabia over German technical support and transport links for Saudi Arabia in the event of a sea blockade of the Persian Gulf by Iran.

For Chancellor Merkel (Christian Democratic Union) and her foreign minister Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party), the current instability in the Middle East presents fresh opportunities to stake out German economic influence in the region under conditions in which American influence there is weakened. In so doing, however, the German government is recklessly strengthening the hand of the Bush administration to spread its Iraqi bloodbath throughout the region—with immense and horrific consequences not only for the peoples of the Middle East, but also for working people in Europe and America.



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