

Britain: Blair seeks to deepen military alliance with Washington

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Just two days after Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a reduction in British troops in Iraq, Defence Secretary Des Browne made clear that this was in fact a redeployment of troops to Afghanistan.

On February 23, Browne had spoken of up to 1,000 additional troops being dispatched to the Helmand province. By Monday, this figure had risen to 1,400—just 200 short of the expected number to be withdrawn from Basra by May.

Prior to this announcement, Blair was already keen to oppose the widespread assertion that the Basra withdrawal signified an attempt to distance Britain from the US and a major shift in his foreign policy.

Even in his presentation to Parliament making the announcement of the Basra reduction, Blair took pains to stress his support for Bush's "surge" in Baghdad—the dispatch of an additional 21,000 troops. And he reiterated his commitment to the occupation.

The next day, Blair gave an interview to BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme in which the BBC's own web site said that he "appeared more defiant, unapologetic and convinced of his rightness than ever." The report continued, "this was probably one of the most robust interviews on the war the prime minister has given and he displayed no hint of any self-doubt or readiness to give an inch to his critics."

Blair not only declared that the government should be proud of its record of intervening overseas, but on the troop withdrawal from Basra added that this could be reversed if necessary.

What is clear is that the Basra withdrawal was in reality forced on a reluctant Blair, primarily by Britain's military.

Writing in the *Independent*, Patrick Cockburn attributed the withdrawal from southern Iraq to "political and military failure" rather than "any improvement in local security."

He cited military analyst Anthony Cordesman of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. In a comment entitled, "The British Defeat in Iraq," Cordesman asserted that British forces had lost control of the situation in and around Basra midway through 2005.

This assessment is backed up by a study, "The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq" produced by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Cockburn

quotes the paper's conclusion that "instead of a stable, united, law-abiding region with a representative government and police primacy, the deep south is unstable, factionalised, lawless, ruled as a kleptocracy and subject to militia primacy."

Cockburn posed the question, "Why is the British Army still in south Iraq and what good does it do there?" He concludes, "The suspicion grows that Mr. Blair did not withdraw them because to do so would be too gross an admission of failure and of soldiers' lives uselessly lost. It would also have left the US embarrassingly bereft of allies."

Such political calculations would explain why Blair did not give the military what they were actually calling for in Iraq—a troop reduction of 3,000—which the government had floated last year.

Numerous representatives of the military top brass have been insisting for months that Britain's armed presence in Afghanistan must be beefed up. The army is anticipating a spring offensive and considers Afghanistan to be a "winnable war," whereas Iraq is not.

This is not conceived of by anyone as a break with the US, but is based on a sober calculation that the best way of offsetting the debacle in Iraq is success in Afghanistan.

Britain's armed presence in Afghanistan takes on additional importance because of the refusal of the European NATO powers to dispatch combat troops. This has allowed Britain to underline its role as Washington's key strategic ally, ready to both put forces on the ground and wage a diplomatic offensive berating Berlin and Paris for their lack of commitment.

The *Sunday Times*, part of the Murdoch stable, editorialised, "One reason for the extra British troops, who will add to the nearly 6,000 UK soldiers already there and make this our biggest single commitment, is that other Nato members are refusing to fulfil their obligations.... France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Turkey have been lying low in a disgraceful manner.

"The only way for Afghanistan to emerge stronger from this conflict is to keep sending in more troops and to defeat the Taliban."

Afghanistan is considered to be Britain's major theatre of war, claiming more British lives than Iraq. Moreover, the government and military believe it is a war that they can build support for, if not in the public then across the House of

Commons.

Simultaneous with the announcement on troop dispatches to Afghanistan, an article appeared in the *Economist* magazine revealing that Blair had been “discreetly waging a campaign since last autumn to secure the missile-interceptor site for Britain.”

The Missile Defence Initiative (MDI), also known as the “Son of Star Wars” project, comprises long-range radar and interceptor missiles aimed at detecting and shooting down ballistic missiles. Washington has been making a determined bid to extend MDI into Europe from its present bases in Alaska and California. It has secured the agreement of the Czech Republic to host a radar station and Poland to site a silo for launching interceptor missiles. A lot of money is at stake. The White House has set aside US\$18.5 billion to be spent by 2009.

MDI’s extension into Europe has generated such a level of anger in Moscow that Russia threatened to target both countries for an attack by ballistic missiles. General Yuri Baluyevsky, Russian chief of general staff, said, “Its interception range will cover a significant portion of the European part of Russia, and its integration with US information resources will further strengthen the anti-Russian potential of this facility.”

A report by the BBC also alleged that Blair had discussed the shield with President Bush and that his chief foreign policy adviser, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, had been working directly with the US Security Council on the issue.

According to the *Economist*, Blair “has led the lobbying [of Washington] in person” and has “involved Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer and his probable successor, in the campaign.”

The report points out that Britain agreed to a US upgrade of its early-warning radar station in West Yorkshire in 2003 so that “it could play its part in the missile-defence system.”

It continues, “A similar hint that Britain and America were ‘exploring new areas of future cooperation’ on missile-defence was tucked away in a 2008 budget submission to Congress for work on the missile-defence shield.”

The *Economist* noted the long-term impact of such a decision: “A British missile site—built only after a battle royal at home—would bind Britain to that world-view for a generation. That may be exactly how Mr. Blair wants it.”

On Monday, a spokesman for Blair’s office confirmed the essential substance of the two reports, stating, “The prime minister thinks it is a good idea that we are part of the consideration by the US.” It has been reported that the US would want work to begin in 2008 and to have the system completed by 2012.

Blair’s pursuit of an ever-closer relationship with Washington has raised grave concerns within Britain’s ruling circles—concerns that are increasingly focusing on the prospect of a US attack on Iran. With daily reports in the media of advanced preparations for a strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities and infrastructure, Blair has come under intense pressure to

distance himself from such a prospect.

It is this that accounts for the evasive formulations he has employed on the question of the possibility of a military strike against Iran. Under questioning from a BBC reporter last week, Blair made the demonstrably false assertion that “There is, as far as I know, no planning going on to make an attack on Iran.”

He used the interview to declare, “I can’t think that it would be right to take military action against Iran” and to describe a diplomatic solution as “viable and sensible.” However, he refused to rule out military action, stating, “You can’t absolutely predict every set of circumstances that comes about.”

Blair is such a practiced dissembler that there is no way of knowing the degree to which he himself has reservations over a military assault on Tehran. What previous experience has taught is that this will not prevent him from endorsing whatever action is decided in Washington. Indeed, the role being played today is similar in all fundamental respects to that which he played in the build-up to war against Iraq.

In 2003, Blair was central to diplomatic efforts to lend the strike on Baghdad a veneer of international legitimacy by pushing for the desired United Nations resolutions. His aim, though unsuccessful, was to bring on board the European powers that opposed a strike or at least to off-set their objections that war had no legal foundation.

Blair is once again leading a US push to secure the support of the United Nations Security Council and Germany, which met in London on Monday, for tougher sanctions against Tehran. Once again, the Bush administration has met opposition to its intended military attack and has been forced to limit itself to stiffer sanctions that it could claim Iran is breaching.

Washington and London have both demanded a total cessation of Iran’s nuclear-enrichment programme, which the regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has rejected. With Russia and the European powers signalling their receptiveness to Tehran’s offer to cap uranium enrichment at very low levels, Blair has stressed the need for unity while insisting that “the tougher we in the international community are, the more likely we are to get the results we want. Any sign of weakness is lethal.”

When questioned on the need for ongoing talks with Tehran, he replied, “The question is, what is the conversation about? Given that they are saying they are not going to suspend enrichment, they are still supporting extremism in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Palestine and they are not showing any signs they are prepared to stop doing that.”



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