

Despite US intelligence shift:

# European powers back continued sanctions against Teheran

Stefan Steinberg  
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Following the release of the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report Monday, leading European politicians have stressed the need for continuing sanctions and political pressure on Tehran.

The NIE, consisting of the findings compiled by America's 16 intelligence agencies, confirmed that Iran was not carrying out any programme to develop nuclear weapons. The report—a direct repudiation of earlier NIE's claims—makes clear that Washington's campaign to emphasise a supposed danger of military aggression from Iran in order to justify a military strike against the country is built on a web of lies similar to the campaign preceding the Iraq war.

Nevertheless, leading European political circles and influential media outlets have reacted to the report with a continuation of their policy of appeasement towards the administration in Washington. Although completely aware of the explosive implications of the NIE findings, politicians in London, Paris and Berlin have made no criticism of the Bush government and are maintaining a stance of “business as usual—” i.e., insisting that international sanctions and economic and political pressure be maintained on Tehran. In so doing, they are perpetuating the same criminal role they played in the run-up to the Iraq war.

US State Secretary Condoleezza Rice is due to arrive in Brussels at the end of this week to attend a NATO meeting where she will be calling for a further round of punitive sanctions against Iran. The recent comments by leading European politicians give a clear signal that, despite the embarrassing disclosures in the NIE, they will continue to back the administration in Washington and Rice's initiatives in Brussels.

On behalf of the French President, French Foreign Ministry spokesman Pascale Andréani declared after the publication of the NIE report, “Iran is not respecting its international obligations and our position remains unchanged.” France, he said, “will continue to pursue the implementation of measures (sanctions) within the framework of the organisations of the body of the United Nations.”

Commenting on the significance of the NIE report, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party—SPD) refrained from any sort of criticism of the Bush administration's campaign against Iran and noted merely that the report opened up an opportunity for more dialogue. He made known that the agreed policy of sanctions would be continued and stressed that the international community was still responsible for keeping nuclear weapons out of the Middle East.

Speaking on behalf of the SPD's coalition partner in Germany, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) foreign policy expert Eckart von Klæden also declared that pressure must be maintained on Iran. He told the *Berliner Zeitung*: “Iran is still building a missile delivery system, it still doesn't fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and it supports international terror organisations such as Hamas

and Hezbollah.”

In a number of newspapers and media outlets in Germany, there was an audible sigh of relief in reaction to the NIE report, which they declared had finally dispelled any threat of a military action against Iran. *Spiegel Online* declared, “The Apocalypse evoked by US president George W. Bush most recently in the form of a ‘Third World War’ has been cancelled for the time being.”

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* also welcomed the NIE's publication: “Now everybody knows and he (Bush) will no longer be able to ignore them. In his last days at the White House Bush will not be able to begin the third war of his period in office—at least not against Iran.” In a euphorically titled piece, “Putsch by the peace doves!,” the weekly *Die Zeit* declared, “The intelligence report is a victory for the doves of peace.”

Other editorials noted that the publication of the NIE could have wider repercussions for US attempts to establish its military hegemony in other regions of the world. With regard to US plans to establish anti-missile bases in a number of east European countries to ward off a hypothesised danger of Iranian aggression, Karl Grobe notes in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* that the NIE report makes clear “the plans to install missile defence bases in Poland and the Czech Republic as quickly as possible were ideologically motivated rather than rationally justifiable....”

At the same time, papers linked to the conservative right and the finance world set the tone for the stance taken by most west European governments in seeking to play down the new intelligence findings, with the French conservative *Le Figaro* paper warning against any “dropping of one's guard” with regard to Iran.

Echoing President Bush's own thoroughly distorted argument dismissing the NIE's findings earlier this week, the German conservative paper *Die Welt* declares: “By sometime between 2010 and 2015, Iran might have enough material to make an atomic warhead. That's really not that far from now, when you think about it.... While the diplomatic efforts plod endlessly forward without accomplishing much, there's no reason to sit back and relax now.”

The *Financial Times Deutschland* writes: “The (NIE) report is no cause for sounding the all clear.” The paper then calls upon the US and European sides to continue to resist pressure from Russia and China, which are opposed to broad sanctions against Iran. “The US government is now going to have a tougher time getting the international community to toughen its sanctions in mid-December, especially Russia and China. Of course, they'll demand fewer sticks for Iran, but the intelligence report would be the wrong argument for that.”

The varied responses in German newspapers with regard to the NIE report were generally in line with those of the British media, with the *Guardian* (editorial: “War Postponed”) and the *Independent* fulsomely welcoming the report, while the conservative papers like the *Times* and

the *Telegraph* warned against any let up in pressure on Iran.

In fact, the different reactions to the NIE report by the European press reflect profound divisions within the European political elite over the best way to implement its own interests in the Middle East. All of the major players in Europe have their own interests in the region and, as major imperialist powers, have no scruples about the need to resort to military measures when necessary. At the same time, the aggressive US foreign policy and, in particular, the debacle of the US war against Iraq have led influential political circles to question the wisdom of a foreign policy tied by an umbilical cord to Washington.

The election of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy earlier this year resulted in a shift by a major European country towards Washington and US foreign policy. Sarkozy has made no secret of his admiration for the American president, and since his election has been one of the fiercest advocates of punitive sanctions against Iran. In particular, the French Foreign Ministry is working closely with the US in Lebanon to isolate one of the key allies of Iran in the region—the Hezbollah movement.

The election of the German chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) in 2005 also brought to power a politician who favoured closer links to the US. Unlike her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder (SDP), Merkel had expressed her support for the US war against Iraq in 2003. Nevertheless, the uncritical stance towards Washington adopted by Merkel has led to increasing strains within her own fractious coalition.

Foreign Minister Steinmeier recently made a point of publicly criticising Merkel's decision to receive the Dalai Lama in Berlin—an open affront to the Chinese government with which the German government enjoys extensive business and trade ties. A few days after the reception in Berlin, the Dalai Lama travelled to Washington where he was fulsomely welcomed by President Bush.

Although the German chancellor has made her own vigorous intervention into foreign policy areas, the official German position on Iran and the NIE report has been put forward by Steinmeier, who argues that sanctions must be paired to direct negotiations with the Iranian leadership in Tehran. Steinmeier has the backing of the former foreign minister, Joschka Fischer (Green Party), who argues in a very similar fashion in the latest *Die Zeit*. Steinmeier has played a key role in bringing about independent European initiatives such as the recent trip to Tehran by the foreign ministers of Great Britain, France and Germany.

While divisions exist between and within European governments on how best to proceed against Iran, there is unanimity on one key issue—uncritical support for Israel.

Striking in the comments by European politicians and media reports is the lack of any criticism of the recent statements by Israeli politicians, who immediately denounced the NIE report and renewed their threats of aggression against Iran.

Israel has made clear that it sees no basis in the report to refrain from its own military preparations for a strike against Iran, acting also as a proxy for the US. This alternative—a military strike against Iran, which would provoke retaliatory action by Tehran, which in turn would create the premise for the US to intervene militarily to defend its closest ally—has been the subject of discussion in Washington circles for some time.

The close collaboration between US and Israeli political, military and secret services for concerted military operations against Iran is no secret to western European intelligence agencies. They are also aware that President Bush discussed the contents of the NIE report with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert at the recent Annapolis conference.

If the European powers were genuinely interested in a peaceful solution to the conflict with Iran, their foreign ministers would have immediately condemned the warlike diatribes from Israel. Instead, not a word was said. For all of the major powers—Great Britain, Germany, France—criticism of Israel and its policies is impermissible.

Just as the current drumbeat for war against Iran takes a very similar

form to the Bush administration's preparations for its war against Iraq—i.e., a systematic campaign of lies and provocations that met with no real opposition from the Democratic Party in America itself—so the current policy of European nations, with regard to Iran, despite differences of approach, bears a striking similarity to their role in the run-up to the Iraq war.

European nations such as France, Germany and Great Britain supported the sanctions regime against Iraq, which led to the death of an estimated 500,000 children. On a number of occasions, the leaders and foreign ministers of these countries argued that their support for the punitive sanctions dictated by Washington was their only means of retaining influence in American policy circles and preventing all-out war.

In the event, the Bush administration was able to take advantage of the weakened state of Iraq following years of sanctions in order to push ahead with its military invasion in 2003 and the subsequent occupation. While a number of European governments, such as France and Germany, then went on to declare their opposition to the US-led war, they did nothing to oppose it, and in fact provided vital behind-the-scenes tactical support for the America war machine.

There were certainly differences between some European governments and the US over the Iraq war, but they were entirely of a tactical nature. The major European powers shared the same basic concern as their ally across the Atlantic—the securing of the vast mineral reserves in the Middle East for Western consumption.

Now, the same scenario has emerged in relation to Iran. There is no doubt that the major European countries are extremely alarmed about the political consequences of a US military strike against Iran. The anticipation of catastrophic consequences of such a conflict is leading to growing strains and divisions within the European bourgeoisie. But once again, European foreign ministers argue as they did in the case of Iraq that European support for sanctions is the only way to prevent US military action against Tehran.

In fact, the appeasement and submission by European to Washington in the 1990s facilitated the US invasion of Iraq, and it would be utterly self-deluding to believe that the NIE report, or European diplomacy in the Middle East, has removed the danger of a US military strike against Iran.



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