

After the Iraq Crisis - who is isolated in Europe?

The deep splits in Europe caused by the Iraq crisis will impact on European, and international, politics for a long time to come. The British government argues that the success, in their view, of the US-UK war on Iraq vindicates the British approach to Iraq, to transatlantic relations and to Europe. The UK, so the spin doctors say, has majority support in the soon-to-be enlarged EU of 25. It is France they insist who risks isolation post-war unless it changes its ways substantially.

In fact, it is Britain that has seen the most damage to its standing and influence in Europe. And Britain not France now has its work cut out to avoid marginalisation, while denying to the British public that this is the case. As the dust settles from the war, it is becoming clear that the events of the last few months, have substantially undone six years of constructive diplomacy by Tony Blair aimed at establishing the UK as a leading player in Europe, equal to France and Germany. Britain's post-war approach does not so far seem to be doing much to repair this damage.

Since 1997, many on the continent, have seen Blair as the most pro-European British Prime Minister in decades, and thought there had been a sea change in British attitudes to the EU. That illusion has now been rudely shattered. As one British official close to the European scene puts it: "Britain did what its governments have done since time immemorial: it said 'we want to be at the heart of Europe', and then we find when push comes to shove that we stand for much that is different to a lot of the continental positions, and that we are not prepared to stand with them".

The risk is that Britain's post-war position risks simply amplifying the 'diplomacy of intolerance', which has characterised the Blair government's approach to those in Europe who do not agree with it. This intolerance has also merged into myth-making about events both pre- and post-war.

Blair's credentials as a multilateralist are now looking very tattered both in the EU and at the UN. And in both organisations, Britain has found itself in a minority and not in the lead. Indeed, in the EU only five out of the current fifteen member states supported the UK over Iraq. And in Brussels, as post-war assessments are made, it is the UK's commitment to Europe that is now being questioned as a result of the Iraq crisis - much more than any of the other five.

Although two of the other larger member states, Spain and Italy, sided with the US-UK stance, their overall European commitment is not doubted, in the way that the UK's is. And their profile was much lower - they did not lead the debate at the UN, nor send troops. Moreover, the fact that Aznar and Berlusconi are not as pro-European as their predecessors is simply seen as part of the normal political cycle. These countries are in the euro and committed politically to European integration.

In contrast, Britain's real political commitment to Europe has always been doubted. Now many think that even Blair, the best hope for years in making Britain more committed to the EU, has failed to shift the UK from its traditional ambivalence.

For the UK repairing relations with France and Germany is vital but difficult. The revival of the Franco-German relationship last autumn took British politicians and officials by surprise. The series of new Franco-German agreements that started in October, first on funding enlargement, and then on the future of Europe convention, from economic policy to justice and home affairs and defence issues, left the UK on the back foot.

This culminated in the joint Franco-German stance on the Iraq crisis from late January this year. In a deliberate attempt to 'get back' at the French and Germans, the British and Spanish seriously aggravated European differences, through the infamous letter from eight European leaders to the Wall Street Journal .

Blair's intolerance of countries holding different views to his sank to new depths after the failure to get a second UN resolution. He and Jack Straw, led extraordinary insults and attacks on France to try to cover up this failure, ignoring the fact that they had no majority at the UN Security Council, and France was in line with international political and public opinion. At the same time the new myth was born, which Blair still repeats post-war, that the second resolution was a final ultimatum which could have prevented the war and not about providing a legal basis for it. As one Brussels official puts it with considerable understatement, these insults to France from top British politicians 'were not appreciated'. Blair and Straw's behaviour is not forgotten by many, and not only France, in the EU today.

Nor does the imminent enlargement of the EU 25 member states rescue the UK. It is true that eight of the central and East European countries who will join the EU next year signed declarations of support for the US over Iraq, allowing the UK to claim a majority of 14 out of 25 future member states. But many of these countries felt highly pressured into their statements of support, given their twin applications for NATO as well as EU membership.

As David Kral of Czech think tank Europeum puts it, in the Czech case, there were considerable differences of view inside the governing coalition and "the country found herself uncomfortably torn between the US and Europe trying to maintain strong transatlantic links but also to build up strong intra-community relations in view of the upcoming EU accession". Once the candidate countries are safely inside both the EU and NATO, their diversity of views, interests and alignments will become apparent. There is no 'new Europe' group for the UK to try to lead.

Nor do other areas of European policy offer the UK much comfort. A positive decision on holding a euro referendum is not expected soon. Indeed most of the new member states are likely to join the euro before Britain. Nor will these countries welcome British demands, as a new budget debate gets underway, that they continue to subsidise the British rebate. In another important policy area, the UK (together only with Ireland) remains outside the Schengen border free zone.

Meanwhile, plans for progress on a common European defence policy - pushed forward by France and Britain five years ago - will be taken forward at a mini-summit of France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg on 29 April. They will hold the door open to encourage Britain to join them afterwards. But the message is clear - if we

Europeans cannot move forward in unanimity on political integration, we will aim to do so in a smaller 'coalition of the willing'.

Britain has tried to caricature the French position as anti-American, to cover its own damaging marginalisation, arguing that France will have to shift its position to avoid isolation. Blair has called for a European 'reckoning' over transatlantic relations. But officials say that no such reckoning or postmortem is likely. Given the deep ongoing divisions, it is seen as too damaging a process. Nor would many EU countries, in such a reckoning, endorse the various myths that Blair is creating for the UK audience.

Indeed, Blair could take one step to rescue the UK's position in Europe if he would make it publically clear that US threats to punish France for daring to have a different view were unacceptable. US policy is also likely to focus on attacking French and German leadership in the EU. Blair should not imagine this will help his own European leadership ambitions - he cannot lead in Europe without France and Germany. Some suggest the UK will help France and Germany to repair bridges with the US and so strengthen Britain's European position. This is overoptimistic and puts the cart before the horse. First Britain must find ways to demonstrate its renewed political commitment to the EU, and to political relations within the EU, and to show its alliance with the US does not always or mostly come first.

To do this, Blair should drop his anti-american characterisation of France and recognise that Chirac is calling for a common European foreign policy that will express Europe's interests, not an anti-American foreign policy. This is the task all 15 EU leaders gave to the current future of Europe convention 18 months ago. Indeed a common foreign policy, if it could be achieved, would be expected to look for positive transatlantic relations, but also would have differences of view, both major and minor, from time to time. It is the UK that will have to shift from its unstinting support for the US, if it is to participate in this European foreign policy ambition. It is this necessary shift that Blair wants to conceal from the British public, hence his reluctance to drop his critique of France.

Some think that in its recent statements on post-war Iraq and the role of the UN, and in its caution over comments on Syria, the UK is already quietly trying to make this shift. As one senior Brussels official puts it: "obviously the British would not say they are trying to distinguish themselves from the US. But they are trying to come back to Europe". Some hope that the UK's failure to act as an effective bridge between Europe and the US, and the dismissive comments of Rumsfeld when he suggested the US could easily go to war without the UK, will lead Britain, on reflection, to make a stronger choice in favour of Europe. Others doubt this, arguing that Britain will continue to remain midway across the Atlantic trying to balance its European and American commitments.

Much will depend on what the US does next. As one British official in Brussels says "if the US invades Iran, Syria or North Korea, then Blair really will have an existential choice to make". For now, Blair is in the uncomfortable position of trying to repair the damage done to the UK's standing and influence in the EU, without letting on to the British public and media quite how much damage has been done.

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