

How to deal with America? The European dilemma

By David North
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There comes a point in the development of every major political crisis when the essential underlying motivations and issues, long hidden from view, come to the surface. We have now arrived at that point in the crisis produced by the decision of the Bush administration to invade Iraq.

It is Iraq that is the immediate target of America's military arsenal. But what is being foreshadowed in the increasingly bitter diplomatic dispute over the fate of Iraq is a direct and open conflict, potentially violent, between the major imperialist powers.

Much of the discussion of American war aims has focused on the Bush administration's determination to seize control of Iraq's oil wealth. This is, of course, a major factor in the calculations of the US government. But that objective, however important, is only part of a far broader and more ambitious goal. The United States seeks world hegemony, which means the political and economic reorganization of the entire world in the interests of the American ruling elite. This requires the subordination to its will of not only weak and underdeveloped countries such as Iraq, but also, and above all, its powerful imperialist rivals in Western Europe and Japan.

US War Minister Donald Rumsfeld's contemptuous dismissal of the opposition of Germany and France to America's war plans has brought into the open the long-simmering conflict between the United States and Europe. When asked by a reporter about European criticism of the Bush administration's drive toward war, Rumsfeld replied, "You're thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. I think that's old Europe. You look at the vast numbers of other countries in Europe. They're not with France and Germany on this. They're with the United States."

Never before has the United States so openly attacked its long-time allies, called into question the unity of bourgeois Europe, and expressed so explicitly its goal of creating its own special sphere of influence on that continent, in direct opposition to France and Germany.

In his typically artless manner, Rumsfeld left no doubt that the United States has promoted the expansion of NATO—with the inclusion of weak former Warsaw Pact states that are easily manipulated by the United States—as a means of undercutting French and German influence in Europe.

The far-reaching implications of America's hostility to Europe have not been lost on France, and this is the reason for its decision to drop its stance of studied equivocation and state its opposition to a war against Iraq more directly. It is not a humanitarian concern for the fate of Iraq's people that accounts for the French shift, but rather the belated recognition that America's drive for hegemony poses a threat to core political, economic and geo-strategic interests of the European bourgeoisie.

Throughout the 1990s the European ruling elites have lived in a state of semi-denial, pretending that their relationship with the United States would not be substantially affected by the demise of the USSR and that their own continental and global interests were in the long term compatible with those of the United States.

This exercise in wishful thinking ignored the fact that America's postwar relationship with Europe between 1945 and 1991 was determined fundamentally by its appraisal of its own essential economic and geopolitical interests within the specific context of the Cold War. America's attitude toward Europe was determined by the overriding need to (1) enforce the isolation of the Soviet Union and minimize its influence in Western Europe ("containment") and (2) prevent social revolution at a time when the European working class was extremely militant and highly politicized.

The United States' emphasis during that period on its alliance with Western Europe was, in fact, a departure from the historical norm. The more basic tendency of American capitalism, rooted in its somewhat belated emergence as a major imperialist power, had been to augment its world position *at the expense* of Europe.

The preconditions for the maturation of the United States as a major capitalist power during the nineteenth century was its persistent undercutting of European influence in the Americas, from the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine in the 1820s to the expulsion of Spain from Cuba in the late 1890s.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the United States expanded its global influence by undermining the colonial empires of the European imperialist powers. This was done not in the interest of democracy, but to open up world markets restricted by the colonial system.

To the extent that generally favorable economic conditions and its own immense wealth made it possible, the United States masked its predatory imperialistic appetites with a pose of altruistic benevolence. But despite its humanitarian posturing—as the defender of “four freedoms” and as the “arsenal of democracy”—the United States never for a moment forgot its own self-interest.

Nothing better illustrates the ruthless core of American diplomatic philanthropy than the bone-crunching terms laid out by Roosevelt to Churchill in 1940-41 as a precondition for American financial and military assistance during the height of Nazi Germany’s bombardment of Britain. Yes, Roosevelt agreed to “save” Britain, but it would cost a pretty penny. By the time the United States was finished with Britain, the old roaring imperial lion had been turned into America’s pussy cat—a transformation exemplified in the person of Britain’s present prime minister.

The exigencies of the post-World War II situation compelled the United States to nourish its alliance with the old imperialist powers of Europe and hold its own aggressive tendencies somewhat in check. Moreover, the general recovery and expansion of the world economy worked in favor of a mitigation of inter-imperialist rivalries. But the tendency toward the unilateral assertion of American interests, regardless of European concerns, remained active beneath the veneer of multilateralism. Indeed, a deterioration of world economic conditions generally had the effect of bringing latent conflicts into the open.

For example, in August 1971, when the American dollar came under attack in financial markets, President Richard Nixon abrogated the system of dollar-gold convertibility that had been the foundation of the international capitalist monetary system for a quarter century without bothering to consult with European leaders in advance. They were informed only that Nixon would have some interesting things to say about the world economy and that they could stay up late and watch his speech on American television. When asked whether the British, French and Germans might object to the American measures, US Treasury Secretary John Connolly replied, in his own distinct fashion, “F—k them.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the international framework upon which postwar diplomatic relations were based. There was no longer any need for the United States to prop up the Western European bourgeoisie as a line of defense against the Soviet Union. Moreover, the demise of the USSR created a vacuum of power that the United States was determined to exploit to its own advantage.

But the most important reason for the now unbridled aggressiveness of American foreign policy is to be found in the protracted and accelerating deterioration of the American economy. The use of military power is seen by significant sections of the ruling elite as a means of counteracting the long-term consequences of the decline in the world position of

American capitalism and the threat posed by international competitors.

In words that appear prophetic, Leon Trotsky, among the greatest Marxists of the twentieth century, made the following warning in 1928:

“In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies primarily at the expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war.”

Officials in the Bush administration have become increasingly blunt in laying out the consequences of a European refusal to fall into line behind the United States. As one official told the *New York Times* on Thursday, “Our goal is to rub their nose in reality, and then proceed to discuss what we do about it.”

And what is this reality? The Bush administration has indicated not all too subtly that French and German companies will be excluded from participating in the carve-up of Iraq’s oil industry in the aftermath of war. Even more serious, there have been suggestions that the United States, after occupying Iraq, will exert pressure on Iran, which is a critical supplier of oil to Western Europe.

From the standpoint of France and Germany, the behavior of the United States is utterly reckless and raises the danger of a complete breakdown of whatever remains of the entire legal and institutional framework that regulated the affairs of world capitalism. For the Western Europeans to submit to the diktats of the United States would mean to accept their relegation, in the words of the conservative French daily *Le Figaro*, “into a simple protectorate of the United States.” But to openly resist would raise the risk of a potentially catastrophic military confrontation with the United States. Either alternative, or even some middle road between the two, would profoundly destabilize relations among European countries. Moreover, the social consequences of conflict between the US and the “old” Europe would inevitably intensify internal class tensions.

This is the dilemma that confronts the Western European bourgeoisie.

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