

What is it all about?

M. east 12.3.03
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By Afzaal Mahmood

THE pro- as well as anti-war camps have created a lot of confusion in the public mind about the real reasons behind the Iraq crisis. The US, through its Orwellian propaganda (the war will make the region safe for democracy and free the world from terrorism), and France, Germany and Russia, through noble concerns and pious wishes, are trying to camouflage the real motives underlying their policies.

To take the anti-war camp first, President Jacques Chirac, a loyal De Gaulist, wants to clip the US wings and lead Europe as a counterweight to American power. His German ally, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, is a strong believer in European sovereignty. No one will be happier than Russian President Putin if the Iraq crisis deals a severe blow to the Atlantic alliance, Nato and the European Union. Also, Russia has considerable economic interests in Iraq: Baghdad owes Moscow \$8 billion in past debts and Russian companies have entered into lucrative oil deals with Saddam Hussein's government. All these are now threatened by the Bush plan.

The French motives are varied and complex. Foreign minister Dominique de Villepin, who combines aristocratic bearing with Hollywood looks, by using high-toned phrases in the Security Council debate (being the guardian of "an ideal, a conscience") attempted to divert attention from the real reasons: the substantial oil interests of Elf TotalFina in Iraq; the endangered French influence in the Middle East; the desire to pay the Americans back for the humiliation at the hands of Eisenhower over Suez in 1956; the psychic compensation for the decline of French power; and the emerging rivalry between the "Old Europe" and the New World.

President Bush was quite forthright at his news conference on March 6. He made it clear that he needed nobody's permission to protect the security of his people. He threw down the gauntlet to the anti-war camp asking them to "show their cards". Bush, however, carefully avoided explaining the real reasons for the impending war.

Of course, oil is one of the chief reasons. The international economic system is heavily dependent on oil and President Bush wants to ensure that cheap oil continues to reach the shores of his country which has become an oil glutton over the years. The first Gulf War was fought for oil twelve years ago. And why blame the Americans alone. Before them, why did the British and the French penetrate the region? Certainly, not to have a dip in the sea off the coast of Kuwait or Muscat or to visit the Babylonian archeological sites.

Besides oil, Washington has some other

strategic interests and concerns. It knows that Saddam Hussein was very close to acquiring nuclear weapons in 1990, and once he acquires them it will tip the balance in his favour and attacking Iraq will then no longer be a viable option. The reluctance of the United States to attack North Korea is a relevant example.

Another underlying objective of military action against Iraq is to provide long-term peace and security to Israel. The fall of Saddam Hussein will convince the Palestinians of the futility of depending on the support of the "rejectionist" camp — Iraq, Iran and Syria — and bring the Palestinians around to negotiating a settlement with Israel, largely on Israeli terms. This has been the strategy of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and the Jewish lobby in the US.

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Another consequence of Saddam Hussein's fall will be a clear signal that no leader or country could defy the United States with impunity. No country could any longer afford to harbour terrorists or help them in any way. Even a secular regime like that of Saddam Hussein's could become a US target. One wonders if Iran is going to be next on the list if it continues to be in the rejectionist camp.

The opposition of the anti-war camp to US Middle Eastern strategy is also a desperate attempt to play the balance of power game whose modern exponent was Otto von Bismarck. Bismarck thought he could contain France by creating a balance of power in the 19th century but his great power alliances crashed under their own weight.

After the failure of the League of Nations, an effort was made to the balance of power politics through the United Nations. The so-called great powers — the US, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and China — were given the veto powers in the Security Council over matters of their own national interest. However, only the United States and the Soviet Union were actually great powers, the remaining three being there because they happened to be members of the "victory club" but without any comparable power. Since 1945, world peace was not kept by the United Nations, but by the balance of power between the US and the Soviet Union until the latter's collapse.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union we

have lived in a world marked by a great imbalance of power whose risks are not readily apparent. President Bush has affirmed the primacy of great power politics in the context of the prevailing imbalance of power. In the absence of a Soviet Union or comparable alliance of powers, the United States, as the sole superpower, is free to pursue its national interest without any credible resistance. The current French-German-Russian attempt to fill the vacuum cannot redress the imbalance of power prevailing at the moment.

However, the Iraq crisis may reshape the western alliance. Long-standing friendships are being shaken and new ones being forged. President Jacques Chirac's furious attack on the East European governments which are supporting the American position on Iraq reveals the depth of the rift between the pro-

and anti-war camps. The French president has even threatened to block the entry of the East Europeans into the European Union which could tear Europe apart. The increasingly bitter debates in the Security Council indicate that the schism within the West is becoming irreconcilable.

The Americans are likely to support and encourage their new East European allies and further strengthen their ties with Italy and Spain while distancing themselves further from France and Germany and Benelux countries. For an average American, as John MacArthur of Harper maga-

zine has pointed out, France does not matter much since it exists more as a symbol of fashion, style and cultural snobbery than as an important European power.

Some commentators have already started referring to the Anglosphere: an alliance of English-speaking nations made up of the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with former Warsaw Pact countries (East Europeans) becoming an integral part of that coalition.

As if she were a crystal-gazer, former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in her 2002 book 'Statecraft' has urged Britain to withdraw from the European Union and join hands with East Europeans to negotiate a free trade agreement with them which would keep them virtually away from the "Old Europe". It will be interesting to see how Tony Blair, who has spent much of his prime ministership attempting to integrate Great Britain more closely into Europe, will react after his recent mauling at the hands of France and Germany.

The Americans are taking careful note of who is with them and who is against them in this war. It is more than likely that "Old Europe" (the anti-American camp in the European Union being led by France and Germany) and the increasingly irrelevant Nato will not be factored in further US foreign policy decisions. Washington is likely to act henceforth on a case-by-case basis not caring much for what others think about its decisions.