

31/07/2002

5. I argued in February that:

- the French hate the thought of military action against Iraq and don't believe it is justified;
- they worry that, even if Saddam is overthrown, the effects in the region could be disastrous, especially given US policy on the MEPP;
- they will be mindful of the effect on France's muslim population;
- French commentators and press are mostly in the anti-action camp.

All this remains true. Chirac, liberated from the constraints of cohabitation and with a big parliamentary majority behind him, has a lot more freedom of manoeuvre than the then government should he choose to use it. But he has lots of personal mental baggage on Iraq. And he would have his work seriously cut out in shifting press and public opinion in favour of military action if he decided he wanted to do this.

6. I also argued in February that the French might be brought to benevolent neutrality if some of the following conditions were met:

- the US are committed and have a plan that is carefully thought through in military terms and capable of quick success;
- the French are properly informed and consulted in advance;
- the day after questions have been addressed;
- the plan has the prospect of respectable international support and some plausible legal cover.

These conditions still apply. But it is not encouraging for the French that they appear little closer to being fulfilled now than they were five months ago.

7. The question of UN backing is particularly important - if not a sine qua non - for the French, not just because of the Quai's approach to international law, but also because they see it as critical to winning the support of enough of the Arab world. The French would be prepared to go a long way to secure UN support for a military operation, which they believe might just be attainable if (a very big if) the Americans want it enough. The Quai's position is that, on past precedent, formal UN authorisation is not an absolute requirement for military action. But what would be indispensable would be a Security Council statement (not necessarily in the form of an SCR) that Iraq was in breach of its obligations, and a warning making clear to Iraq the consequences of continued violation.

8. How far might the new government go? They have been careful not to rule out the possibility of French participation in an operation with UN backing. If US-led action looks increasingly inevitable, they will not want to find themselves in the wrong place by dissociating themselves from an operation that could well come good, at least in the case of overthrowing Saddam. They know that, like it or not, French interests in the region will be tied to the success or failure of US action. The French will certainly not want to be excluded from what happens afterwards. This will increase the pressure on them to acquiesce in any action. The US Embassy argue that it might even lead to the French playing a small military part. I have severe doubts, but it may not be totally impossible.

THE EUROPEAN ANGLE

9. As so often, France will tend to be a key international, particularly EU, swing voter. The French share our desire to avoid a great European split, with all the damage this could do. Errera was particularly exercised about this when I saw him recently. The more we can engage with them seriously and early ourselves, at every level, including Chirac, the more chance we have of avoiding a big fall-out and managing sensibly whatever divisions we cannot in the end overcome. This should not just be, or seem to be, as a catspaw for the Americans, when our minds are already made up and decisions taken, but as a genuine open-ended and open-minded consultation. They will respond well if they think we are serious.

KEEPING THE FRENCH ENGAGED

10. We also need to share whatever information/intelligence we can with the French, not least to help them to buy into US policy. Information-sharing on Iraqi WMD capability is a particularly urgent priority. The French accept in principle that after 11 September we cannot watch while WMD threats develop. They want to work closely with us on non-proliferation. But they are not convinced that Iraq presents an imminent, severe danger, and certainly not one which justifies the wider risks of a military operation. This re-inforces the case for getting a high-level Pol-Mil team out to Paris to discuss this and other non-proliferation issues in early September.

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