

CONFIDENTIAL

NOSEC: FRANCE/IRAQ: HOW DID CHIRAC FINISH UP WHERE HE DID
From: PARIS

TO PRIORITY FCO

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AND TO IMMEDIATE CABINET OFFICE, SOSFA

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AND WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

PART 1 of 2

SUMMARY

1. Chirac and Villepin arrived at their current hard-line anti-war stance for a combination of reasons: Iraq-related disagreements, fears about the consequences of military action, deep concern about US hegemony/unilateralism, determination to project a distinctive French vision of the world, intoxication with unexpected and unaccustomed popularity, and opportunism/accident. They only decided to push their approach to its (for them) logical conclusion in early March when the swing six looked like voting with us. But they like where they are now and are determined to stick to it, even if all goes well for us in the war.

2. They may not in practice be able to keep it up for long but in the short term, it promises a very uncomfortable ride, particularly in the EU, where Chirac will use all his bullying skill on the 15 and the candidates. We have to take him on, and detach the Germans. But we share too many longer-term strategic interests to want a deep breach with Paris.

DETAIL

3. Why and when did Chirac take the decision to push his opposition to our approach to Iraqi disarmament as far as the veto threat? The answer is not just of interest to academics and historians: it will shape how the French play the next stages. In particular how much has all this to do with Iraq, and how much with wider French/Chirac ambitions?

Why?

4. The starting point has to be Iraq itself. As we have pointed out from here over the past few months, Chirac has long form and strong views. He has consistently disagreed with our policy, and never seen eye to eye with us over sanctions or military action. These personal convictions (rare in Chirac's case) have driven policy from the start. He never believed Saddam was really a danger to us. France has only ever agreed with great reluctance to each step to ratchet up the pressure on Iraq. Their simultaneous failure to help put real pressure on Saddam while accepting that only our military pressure had made him cooperate at all has been the single biggest weakness in their approach. But they believe they have been consistent and that their opposition to the use of force will in the end be vindicated.

5. Coupled with this has been concern about the impact of military action: on Iraq itself, in the region, on terrorist recruitment, on Christian/Muslim relations, on the Muslim community in France, on the world economy etc. The list has been long. These are fears which are genuinely held, not just by Chirac, but across the French political classes.

6. Behind these concerns are a further set of more deep-seated fears: about the dangers of an unchecked solitary superpower; about US unilateralism; about real US motives (particularly the idea of remodelling the Middle East to suit Israel); about using the UN to legitimise US self-interested decisions; about the dangers of the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes; about setting precedents for a series of further attacks (Iran, Libya etc). These are typically, but of course by no means exclusively, French worries. Many of them stem from a widespread perception that this Bush administration is fundamentally different from, and more dangerous than, any of its predecessors.

7. Behind all this lies profound French resentment that allies should be expected to come when the US whistle, even when they disagree; traditional French determination to make a different and distinctive view heard; and the burning desire of Chirac, after the frustrations of cohabitation, to show that France is back on the world stage, and that he, in particular, the doyen of the world's leaders, is back with a vengeance. Both Chirac and Villepin have insisted, as the first point in their presentation of the French position, that they have a different vision of the world. They stress the need for a multipolar world, with Europe one of the alternative poles to the US. This is absolutely central to French thinking, and reinforced by the fear of a US neocon agenda lurching out of control.

HOLMES

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