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Outlook

**The Problem of Punishing Saddam; Answers From Europe Are All Over the Map**

**Josef Joffe**

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As the United States is priming those bombs destined for Saddam Hussein's biological and chemical weapons labs, Europe is applauding faintly. Only the British -- cheers to the "special relationship" -- are ready to fly along.

What a change. During the Gulf War in 1991, if some European allies did not dispatch ground forces as the French and British did, they contributed at least a frigate or two. The Germans and the Japanese, citing their unsavory pasts, preferred to buy their way out -- with billions of dollars for the American war kitty. The Soviets made a significant contribution just by doing nothing (apart from frantic mediation), rather than siding with their old ally Iraq.

This time, Europe has split along classic lines -- never mind its mad dash toward monetary integration and all those sonorous commitments to the "common" foreign and security policy" enshrined in the fabled 1991 Maastricht Treaty.

At one extreme are Tony Blair and the British, as enthusiastic about streaking across the Iraqi skies today as Margaret Thatcher was in 1990 when she exhorted President Bush: "Don't go wobbling on me now."

At the other extreme are the French, who in balmy days dispatched General Lafayette to help America against a British tyrant named George. But, then as now, France's motives were not entirely selfless. In the 18th century, the French still held onto some significant real estate in North America, and anything that would weaken their rival Britain also made sense. It was good realpolitik.

This time, the French are against American strikes in Iraq. Their line is: Give diplomacy a chance, and haven't the Iraqi people suffered enough from the seven-year sanctions? The Anglo-Saxons insist the country must endure?

It isn't all sweet reason that animates the French. In 1991, they went along grudgingly. Only after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had bitten every French and Soviet hand that wanted to help him did Paris pitch in with the American-led coalition, calculating that it was better to be on the winning side. Now they have concluded that they can afford to sit this one out. Though they won't be in the best of company (if you consider Syria, Russia or Iran), they will be with the larger numbers.

The Germans, as usual, are in between. Even if they wanted to go along, they don't have the right equipment. Though the Luftwaffe flies Tornado bombers like those of Britain's Royal Air Force, these are not ready yet for delivering earth penetrators or tank-breaking submunitions.

But last Sunday, addressing U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen and a bevy of insistent American senators in Munich, Chancellor Helmut Kohl said the magic words: "Of course, America can count on our full political support." And, of course, U.S. Air Force units stationed in Germany could be used for the air strikes against Iraq.

So the response of Europe's Big Three to America's proposed use of military force is: "Yes" (Britain), "No" (France) and "Go to it, we'll be cheering from the sidelines" (Germany).

Why the split? One reason is "Made in the USA." The French have seen the signals coming out of Washington, as have many other Europeans. It isn't just that Bill Clinton has been weakened by Zippergate; many can read the subtext of wobbliness that accompanies the steely rhetoric of the "last remaining superpower." There is a feeling that Clinton would rather not bomb, that he would be only too happy to see Saddam Hussein step back from the brink.

This hesitancy -- and Washington's reluctance to call in its chits -- is what allows distinctive national interests to come to the fore. Take the French, and assume that those F-117s and Tomahawk cruise missiles do go into action -- "bunker busters," self-guiding submunitions and all.

The French evidently surmise that there will be an uproar in the streets of Araby, complete with lots of burning Uncle Sam effigies. And that CNN will diligently broadcast the images of dead children and destroyed shelters all around the world, 24 hours a day.

And if you think in realpolitik terms, as the heirs of Cardinal Richelieu proudly proclaim they do, there are some nifty French gains to be culled from the aftermath.

First, by standing up to American "imperialism," France, would-be conqueror of Egypt in the 1956 Suez War, would bask in the accolades of the Arab world. Not bad, when you consider that France has always tried to regain a foothold in the Levant -- where the United States has called the shots for three decades.

Second, French neutrality with an anti-American edge would pile up a good number of IOUs in Baghdad, and these will come in handy when the sanctions are either lifted or broken for good. Look for French oil companies like Elf to get the first concessions. Indeed, France's efforts over the years to get the embargo loosened may be directly tied to its quest for a strategic position in the Persian Gulf's oil fields.

Much the same goes for the Russians, whose president, Boris Yeltsin, in a bizarre outburst, has invoked the specter of "World War III" if the United States hits Iraq. In part, this reflects sheer frustration about the ex-empire's impotence. But there is a dollop of good old realpolitik here, too. The Russians would dearly like to see an end to Saddam-bashing and the sanctions because they might then be able to collect the billions that Iraq owes them for arms deliveries in the 1980s.

How about the Germans, neatly suspended between France and Britain? There is continuity here, too -- even after reunification and the end of the Cold War. As in the old days, Germany will not refuse a call from Washington when the chips are down, regardless of Franco-German friendship and European integration. Nor, presumably, will Italy.

In Germany's case, there may also be a guilty conscience at work, as German firms have always been fingered as key suppliers for Iraq's chemical and biological weapons program. Just last week, in an interview with the weekly German news magazine Spiegel, the former head of Iraqi military intelligence, Wafik Samarai, claimed that his embassy in Bonn was the European purchasing hub for "materials and know-how." Did the German authorities know? "They closed both eyes," alleges the defector.

In the end, nobody but perhaps the French will dare cross the United States. But this time, alliance loyalty costs less than in 1991 when the United States insisted that allies either dispatch their tanks and planes or pay tribute. This time, the United States is acting more like Gary Cooper's sheriff in "High Noon," strangely diffident and resigned to shooting it out by himself. As a high-ranking American official put it recently: "If you don't join us, at least don't undermine us -- and get out of the way." Most European allies will simply get out of the way and wish the United States Godspeed. Which isn't necessarily bad.

Napoleon once said: "Let me have to fight against coalitions," meaning that the strong do better on their own. Demanding consensus, coalitions are cumbersome -- tending toward the lowest common denominator, as was the case in 1991 when the Arabs -- and in particular the Saudis -- stopped Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf from going all the way to Baghdad. Or as Clausewitz put it in "On War," "One country may support another's cause, but will never take it so seriously as its own."

So Napoleon had a point. If the United States and Britain achieve their goals, if they hit what needs to be destroyed, if Saddam Hussein tucks tail and lets the U.N. inspectors come back, then all's well that ends well.

The French will have miscalculated, and blustery Boris Yeltsin will have been sobered up (metaphorically, at least). The Arabs in the street will burn American flags, but their masters will be quietly assessing how long Saddam Hussein will need to rebuild his military capability. And the rest of the world, seeing how America had done its dirty work, will count its blessings. Nobody is looking forward to anthrax "Made in Iraq."

If.

Josef Joffe is editorial page editor of the Suedddeutsche Zeitung in Munich and an associate of Harvard's Olin Institute for Strategic Studies.

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