

Letting the United States and Britain Go It Alone

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — The response of Europe's Big Three to America's proposed use of military force in Iraq 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 Mr. 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 of 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, 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 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 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, 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 French-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 German newsmagazine 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. 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. Coalitions demand consensus, tending toward the lowest common denominator, as was the case in 1991 when the Arabs (in particular the Saudis) stopped Norman Schwarzkopf from going all the way to Baghdad.

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 UN inspectors come back, then all's well that ends well.

The French will have miscalculated, and blustery Boris Yeltsin will have been sobered up. 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 has done its dirty work, will count its blessings. Nobody is looking forward to anthrax "Made in Iraq."

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