



## BRIEFING NOTE

### The Europeans can stick together on Iraq

*By Steven Everts, Heather Grabbe and Charles Grant*

The emergency EU summit on Iraq has produced a useful statement on what unites Europeans in their dealing with the Iraq crisis. After the very public squabbling of recent days and weeks, EU leaders pulled back from the brink and decided to underline the common ground between them. But deep splits still remain inside the EU about the need for, and timing of, possible military action in the case of continued Iraqi non-compliance. Both the inspectors and the EU have got themselves a bit more time. But it is equally clear that the moment of truth – when leaders will have to assess whether inspections can deliver Iraqi disarmament – is approaching fast.

It is important that the EU shows, to the public and partners such as the US, that it matters on the big issues. It should stick to its relatively tough stance on the need for active, full and swift co-operation by Baghdad. But as the pressure mounts, the EU should also remember to stay united. Some diplomats may say that when it comes to contemplating military action, the EU must adopt ‘an agreement to disagree’. But that would leave the EU split down the middle during the likely war. Even if the fighting proved relatively bloodless, the wounds of the recent diplomatic fracas could take years to heal.

The EU can and should do better. It should find a position that meets four requirements: ensuring that Iraq disarms; safeguarding the centrality of the UN inspection process; providing explicit UN backing for military action; and maintaining European unity. The Franco-German-Russian proposal for prolonged but reinforced inspections certainly chimes with European public opinion. Even in Britain, close to 90 percent of people want the inspections to continue. In his recent report, chief weapons inspector Hans Blix effectively asked for more time as well as more active co-operation from Iraqis. However, the flaw in the Franco-German-Russian proposal is the lack of a deadline. The US and the UK, understandably, fear that Saddam Hussein will string out the inspection process indefinitely, or at least until international resolve starts to wane. At some point leaders will have to decide whether disarmament can take place peacefully through inspections or whether military force is needed.

The EU's leaders should therefore adopt a two-pronged strategy. First, they should support continued inspections, so long as Hans Blix reports that he is making progress. Second, they should say that unless Blix certifies that Iraq is positively disarming of weapons of mass destruction by 14 March, they will support a UN resolution that authorises force.

This proposal has obvious attractions and drawbacks for both camps. The US and the UK would have to accept a small delay in the Pentagon's timetable – but Tony Blair would get the second UN resolution he needs. France and Germany would have to accept a deadline for the end of inspections – and in all likelihood the need for military action. But the coalition would then go to war on the authority of the UN, rather than on the bidding of US. Each side would obtain its essential objectives.

The EU needs to do more to prepare for the post-war reconstruction of Iraq. There is not enough time to produce a thought-through plan for the Brussels summit. But EU leaders should agree on the broad principles of such a plan – including the political settlement, the economic reconstruction and the provision of security. Later on they should present some constructive alternatives to Washington’s policy, rather than simply acquiesce or object.

Europe’s leaders need to remind their people, and the rest of the world, that they agree on much more than they disagree on. For example, they could probably all support a call for firm action against Iraq to be linked with parallel progress on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The EU should resist the temptation to come up with its own peace plan. As EU High Representative Javier Solana has said, “there is no shortage of peace plans for the Middle East. The problem is implementation.” But the EU should put maximum pressure on the US to push ahead with the ‘roadmap’ (drawn up the US, the EU, Russia and the UN) for the establishment of a Palestinian state by 2005. The EU also needs to make a strong effort to win the confidence of the many moderate Israelis who mistrust it. It could offer to upgrade its partnership with Israel, for example through deeper political ties and Israeli participation in EU policies such as the fight against cross-border crime and illegal immigration – so long as Israel negotiates with the Palestinians.

Finally, EU leaders should capitalise on the slightly improved mood of the emergency summit. From now on, when they disagree, they should argue in private rather than in public. There must be no more divisive declarations of two, eight, ten or however many. Any future EU communiqué should be signed by the leaders of current and future member-states. All 25 of them should show that European foreign policy is not an oxymoron.

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