

IRAQ CRISIS: DIPLOMATIC MANOEUVRES

GREEK INITIATIVE

Plans for summit highlight deep divisions in Europe

By George Parker in Brussels and Krishna Guha in London

Europe's divided response to the Iraq crisis hit a new low yesterday as European Union leaders argued over a planned emergency summit designed to present a united front.

The Greek EU presidency said the proposed summit, on February 17 in Brussels, would allow Europe to decide a common strategy as the crisis over Baghdad entered a decisive phase.

But the initiative – following closely on evidence of divisions in Nato – prompted some European capitals to warn it would highlight deep divisions in the Union.

France and Germany are urging more time for weapons inspections, while Britain, Spain and Italy have committed themselves to supporting the tough US position on Iraq.

Tony Blair, British prime minister, yesterday attempted to persuade the Greeks to limit possible fallout by confining the discussion to foreign ministers only.

Britain, like most other EU governments, only learned of the summit from news agency reports yesterday morning.

"Absolutely brilliant," complained one EU diplomat. "The Greeks were pretty clear on Friday that this summit would not take place at heads of government level. Things have clearly changed."

Costas Simitis, Greek prime minister, was originally cautious about arranging the summit, fearing the EU would not be able to agree on anything more than the most anodyne of texts on Iraq.

But yesterday, urged on by George Papandreou, Greek foreign minister, he agreed to bring together foreign ministers for talks on Monday morning, followed by a meeting of EU leaders in the afternoon.

The proposed date is three days after Hans Blix, chief United Nations weapons inspector, delivers a report to the Security Council on Iraq's compliance in the hunt for weapons of mass destruction.

"Mr Simitis decided to take the initiative for these meetings at the beginning of next week to look into our moves after the Blix report," Mr Papandreou said yesterday.

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day.

Greek officials explained it was decided that, even if there was no agreement, it was incumbent on the EU presidency to try to forge a common position.

They said they expected all heads of government to attend the summit, in spite of warnings from many that the event could be a public relations disaster.

In proposing the summit, Greece appealed to the US and Europe "to end their war of words".

"It is known that there is a crisis in transatlantic relations. However, we believe

that in this difficult period there must be calm from both sides," the Greek foreign ministry said.

Gerhard Schröder, German chancellor, was among those urging Athens to call the summit. He plans to attend.

Berlin, whose staunchly anti-war stance has infuriated Washington, would welcome the chance to present its case as part of a united European stance on Iraq.

But many diplomats in Brussels find it hard to envisage a united position emerging next week, especially if the US uses the second Blix report as a chance to accelerate preparations for war.

In London, Downing Street said it was "not aware that consensus had been reached" over the heads of government summit. If a summit did take place, officials added, Mr Blair would attend and make his case.

A senior British official said the UK had never tried to hide the fact that there were "differences of approach" within the EU over how to deal with Iraq.

He said that the summit might just be helpful if Mr Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, produced a clear-cut indictment of Iraq on Friday.

Europe is trying to strengthen its structures to deliver a common foreign and security policy, including plans for a new EU president and foreign secretary.

But divisions over Iraq have dealt a serious blow to its aspirations, and exposed the problems of forging a policy from the national interests of 15 member states.



Jacques Chirac walks past a ceremonial guard of honour on his way to greet Vladimir Putin as the Russian leader arrived at Charles De Gaulle airport yesterday Getty Images

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY

Chirac seeks to counter US stance

By Robert Graham in Paris

Jacques Chirac, the French president, yesterday used the first official visit to France by Vladimir Putin, the Russian leader, to announce a common Franco-Russian-German front to counter pressure from the US administration for an early decision on using military force against Iraq.

The move highlighted growing divisions at the United Nations over how to tackle the question of removing Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

President Chirac, encouraged by the reluctance of a number of UN Security Council members to say the weapons inspections are failing, appears determined to lead a block to challenge the US view that war is inevitable.

Yesterday the French pres-

ident announced soon after Mr Putin had arrived in the early afternoon: "There is still an alternative to war. The use of force can only be as a last resort."

The three countries' leaders also called for "a substantial reinforcement" of the UN weapons inspection process being conducted in Iraq.

The declaration follows talks in Berlin over the weekend between Mr Putin and German chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

French officials said consistent with this stand was the Belgian, French and German refusal yesterday to accept to provide Nato guarantees to Turkey in the event of a war with Iraq.

They said the granting of such guarantees presupposed that the weapons inspections had failed.

The beefed-up weapons

inspections were first suggested on February 5 by Dominique de Villepin, French foreign minister, at the UN in reply to the expose by Colin Powell, US Secretary of State.

Mr Powell had demonstrated at length how US intelligence thought the

special co-ordinator appointed.

France also offered to supply Mirage IV fighters, based in Saudi Arabia, for aerial photo-reconnaissance. These could be used as an alternative to – or as a complement to – the American U2 "spy planes". Mr Putin yesterday

'There is still an alternative to war. The use of force can only be as a last resort'

Iraq regime was in breach of its UN obligations and was seeking to conceal weapons of mass destruction.

Mr de Villepin proposed that the number of inspectors be raised by as much as three times the current contingent. He further suggested some be based outside Baghdad in regional centres and that there be a

said Russian aircraft could also be made available to take part in surveillance operations.

President Chirac had sounded out Mr Schröder on these proposals last week and again over the weekend. But it was only when Mr Putin endorsed them that they had become formalised yesterday. Until then the

French saw Mr Putin unwilling to upset the Americans, while also keeping a foot in the camp of those like France who saw war as a last resort.

These proposals suggest the three leaders are confident the report on February 14 by Hans Blix, the UN chief weapons inspector, will provide sufficient argument for the inspections to continue. The move also underlines the determination of President Chirac to delay any decision on military action as long as possible.

Implicit in yesterday's declaration was the threat that three leaders might be ready to prepare a counter-resolution should the US seek to push a second resolution through the security council authorising the use of force against Baghdad.

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