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## U.S.-FRANCE ANALYSIS SERIES

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### FRENCH POLICY TOWARD IRAQ

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George Bush's decision to speak to the UN about the Iraqi issue is an expression of how important forming an international consensus is to solving the problem presented by the Iraqi regime. Aware of this, Saddam Hussein is seeking to create and exploit rifts in the international coalition that evicted Iraqi forces from Kuwait and imposed the current sanction regime. A clear view of the issues of agreement and disagreement within the international community on the Iraqi issue will therefore be critical for maintaining the allied cohesion necessary for an effective policy toward Iraq. An understanding of the French perspective—a perspective widely shared by governments around the world—will be particularly important for arriving at a policy that the whole United Nations Security Council can accept.

#### **Principles of France's policy towards Iraq since the Gulf War**

Since its participation in Operation Desert Storm, France has sought to implement a policy based on three principles: preserving the stability of the Middle East; ensuring the authority of the UN Security Council; avoiding a humanitarian disaster among Iraqi civilians.

#### ***Preserving the stability of the region***

France's participation in Desert Storm—to which it contributed 10,000 troops—had the same motivations as that of the United States: to force Iraq out of Kuwait and prevent a major destabilization of the region and of the oil market, while avoiding an extension of the conflict to Israel and Saudi Arabia. Since that time, France has consistently insisted that Iraq should comply with its international obligations, in particular the destruction of all nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and the return of inspectors to verify their destruction.

Today, French and U.S. assessments of Iraq's WMD arsenal differ mainly on how far Iraq's nuclear program may have progressed. While both countries agree that Iraq currently has no nuclear weapons, the U.S. administration feels that Iraq could develop such weapons fairly quickly, particularly if they obtained fissile material from abroad. Paris, in contrast, believes that UN weapons inspectors had so crippled Iraq's program by 1998 that it would take many years to reconstitute. As far as chemical and biological weapons are concerned, French experts agree with their American counterparts that Iraq has tried to rebuild its stockpile since the withdrawal

of UN inspectors in 1998. And, while French officials may publicly address this issue with less frequency than their American counterparts, the risk of seeing these weapons fall into the hands of “undeterrable” terrorists is seen in Paris as serious. For all these reasons, France insists that Iraq must accept the unconditional return of inspectors as a guarantee that all its WMD programs are halted.

In contrast to some U.S. officials, however, the idea that inspectors could not succeed in controlling Iraq’s arsenal is not a view shared in Paris.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, French experts tend to believe that an inspection team with the appropriate tools and a reasonable freedom to circulate would be an effective guarantee against the resurgence of an Iraqi WMD program.

Consistent with this principle of regional stability, France is also skeptical about plans to overthrow Saddam Hussein that do not present a clear vision of what a “post-Saddam” Iraq would look like. While no one in Paris would mourn the passing of Saddam’s dictatorial regime, the risks that military intervention could make the regional situation even worse have made French officials and experts cautious about the use of force.

### ***Ensuring the authority of the UN Security Council***

Since the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, France has insisted on a multilateral approach to the Iraqi issue and on Iraq’s obligation to comply with Security Council resolutions, in particular with resolution 687. Following the same principle, however, France believes that the allies have an obligation not to exceed the authority granted by the Security Council resolutions. It is often heard in Paris that no compliance can be expected from Baghdad if the allies themselves take liberties with the resolutions upon which they have agreed.

Paris believes that the Security Council is the only body entitled to authorize the use of force. As a consequence, the goals of France’s policy toward Iraq strictly mirror those stated by the various Security Council resolutions. In contrast to some official U.S. declarations, France does not consider regime change a policy goal since it has never been recognized as such by any Security Council resolution.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this legal argument, there is also a pragmatic rationale behind this reluctance to include regime change as a stated policy goal. Specifically, the French believe that cooperation from Iraq is unlikely if Saddam Hussein believes that he will be personally targeted no matter how well he behaves.

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<sup>1</sup> This view was articulated by Vice President Dick Cheney. See Remarks by the Vice President to the Veteran’s of Foreign Wars 103rd National Convention, August 26, 2002, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, “It is the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq” Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, at the Pentagon, August 9, 2002, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil>.

### ***Avoiding a humanitarian disaster in Iraq***

The third principle driving France's policy on Iraq is concern for the Iraqi civilian population. French officials have always insisted that any kind of pressure (whether economic or military) to force Baghdad to comply with its international obligations should, as much as possible, target the regime and protect Iraqi civilians. This is the principal rationale under which Paris—while strictly implementing the sanctions regime—criticized that same regime for many years. Paris believed that the comprehensive embargo, which may have been legitimate at the time of the Gulf War, soon became inefficient, counterproductive (because it provided Saddam Hussein with an effective means to control his population) and even disastrous from a humanitarian perspective.

Paris warmly welcomed U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's proposal in March 2001 to change this embargo into a "smart sanctions" system since it consisted precisely in narrowing the target of sanctions to those responsible for Iraqi policy while avoiding to the degree possible the humanitarian cost of the previous sanctions regime. With the passage of resolution 1409 on May 14, 2002, Paris and Washington finally reached a common position on sanctions, thereby eliminating one major source of tension over the Iraqi issue.

### **Assessing the influence of pressure groups on France's policy towards Iraq**

Beyond the principles elaborated above, it is often said that domestic pressure groups have an important influence on France's Iraq policy. While the existence of these groups and their desire to influence France's policy is not in doubt, their actual influence—in particular that of business and political lobbies—is much less obvious. Although they all seek a common objective, i.e. the normalization of relations with Iraq, they have different political, economic and ideological motivations, that divide them into four categories:

- Supporters of France's past relationship with Iraq
- Business interests
- Humanitarian "anti-sanctions" lobbies
- Public opinion and the media

### ***Supporters of France's past relationship with Iraq***

In 1991, President François Mitterrand's decision to contribute French forces to Operation Desert Storm created some turmoil among various French politicians, high-ranking officials and intellectuals. Most famously, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, then Minister of Defense, decided to resign from government in protest of the French deployment to the Gulf region.

In part, this reaction stemmed from anti-American feelings exacerbated by the impression that Washington was using the crisis as an opportunity to build a "new world order," aimed at protecting American business and geopolitical interests. However, a more important source of French opposition to military action against Iraq came from France's traditional pro-Arab foreign policy and the related idea that, although the invasion of Kuwait was to be condemned, France

should continue to consider Iraq a pivotal secular power that served to help contain the Iranian fundamentalist threat. Today, few observers express interest in resurrecting France's past relationship with Saddam Hussein's regime. The vast majority believes that Baghdad overstepped the line in 1990, that France's participation in Desert Storm put an end to any "special relationship," and that no normalization of relations is possible until Iraq complies with its international obligations.

### ***Business interests***

A few French companies, like some of their European and American counterparts, share an interest in resuming business with Iraq. Despite these specific interests, however, Iraq is far from being one of France's main trading partners. Today, Iraq amounts to 0.2% of France's exports and 0.3% of its imports. In 1996 (the first year of the "oil for food" program) Iraq decided to diversify its sources of supply, largely in favor of neighboring Arab countries. As a result, in 2001, France ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in terms of contracts signed under the "oil for food program," behind Egypt, Jordan, Syria and the United Arab Emirates (40 % of the Iraqi market all together), Turkey, Russia, China and India. As far as Iraqi oil exports are concerned, France ranks fourth with 8% of total Iraqi oil exports, far behind the United States, by far Baghdad's biggest client, with 40% of Iraqi oil exports.<sup>3</sup>

Given these figures, it is very difficult to argue that business interests could deeply influence France's policy. French companies certainly have an interest in the full opening of the Iraqi market, but this is by no means unique to France, and there is no evidence that it exerts a determining influence on France's policy. In fact, on several occasions—most notably when France decided to back the new inspection commission, UNMOVIC, (Resolution 1284, December 1999)—France lost contracts as a result of having adopted tough positions towards Baghdad.

### ***Humanitarian anti-sanction lobbies***

Anti-sanction lobbies have grown in influence throughout the 1990's, most spectacularly in 1998-99 when a UN agency issued an alarming report about child mortality rates in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> The recent transition to "smart sanctions" slightly diminished the pressure from these groups, but concern for the situation of the civil population in Iraq remains strong, particularly given the prospect of further military intervention.

In the French Parliament, the "*groupe d'amitié France-Irak*" in the Senate and the "*groupe d'études sur l'Irak*" in the National Assembly organized fact-finding missions to Iraq and issued several parliamentary reports condemning the sanctions regime. But the relative weakness of the Parliament in the French foreign-policy making process prevented them from having a major

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<sup>3</sup> Sources: U.S. International Trade Agency; French Ministry of Economy and Finance (Douanes).

<sup>4</sup> In 1998, UNICEF published a report stating that child mortality had more than doubled in Iraq between the 1984-89 and 1994-99 periods. See *Report on Child Mortality in Iraq, 1999*, UNICEF.

impact on the government's policy. Pressure groups within civil society—including the Catholic Church—seem to have greater influence because their actions often benefit from greater media coverage.

The humanitarian concern expressed by these groups is definitely a factor that French officials have to take into account, a fact expressed in the principle of Iraq policy that seeks to minimize the harm to Iraqi civilians. Nonetheless, the effect of the actions of these groups on French policy is limited. In 2000, for example, several NGOs invited a group of intellectuals and politicians to take part in a highly publicized operation, nicknamed “A Plane for Baghdad.” This initiative consisted in flying directly to Iraq a few French and European personalities, including former French minister of foreign affairs, Claude Cheysson, to demonstrate against the sanctions regime. Taken by surprise, the French government decided neither to support nor to oppose this operation since, despite the heavy criticism heard in Washington, it did not technically constitute a violation of the embargo.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Public opinion and the media***

Public opinion is also a growing factor in France's policy towards Iraq. Whereas in 1991, opposition to Desert Storm was relatively mild, it is much less clear today that the French public would support a government decision to take part in another U.S.-led military operation. Washington's tendency toward unilateral actions has provoked a growing anti-American feeling among French citizens. This sentiment is widely shared by the media, the press in particular, where a great number of editorials have condemned U.S. unilateral actions.<sup>6</sup>

One should also not dismiss the impact of French Muslim minorities in the event of another war with Iraq. Given the sensitivity of part of the Muslim population in France to the plight of the Palestinians, any military action against Iraq could be interpreted as another move against the Arab world, especially if Israel got involved in the conflict with Baghdad or if the Israeli government adopted retaliatory measures against a Palestinian uprising in support of Iraq.

### **Potential French responses to a U.S. use of force**

As France's participation in the allied operation in Afghanistan has recently demonstrated, Paris is willing to take part in military operations if a major interest is at stake international law is respected and such operations are seen as the only recourse.<sup>7</sup> France's position in the months to come will derive from the three principles presented above and will depend upon the ability of

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<sup>5</sup> As long as no commercial transaction takes place (i.e. the plane refueling in the Baghdad airport), passenger transportation is not forbidden.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Jacques Amalric, “L'Amérique démesurée,” *Libération*, September 7, 2002. One poll by CSA TMO found that 83% of the French public believes that the U.S. actions in the world are intended to promote only U.S. interests. See <http://www.csa-tmo.fr>

<sup>7</sup> France was the only country to join the U.S. in air raids on Afghanistan.

the U.S. administration to present convincing evidence of the Iraqi threat. Three distinct scenarios are possible:

***1) Confronted with the prospect of a military intervention, Iraq accepts the return of inspectors or reasserts its willingness to negotiate***

If Iraq were ready to re-admit inspectors without conditions, it would be extremely difficult for Paris in the Security Council to support a U.S.-led military operation. France would probably favor the return of inspectors while, at the same time, imposing strict rules to force Iraq to let inspectors function effectively. Although Paris considers imperfect monitoring preferable to no monitoring at all, given France's growing impatience with Saddam Hussein, French officials will likely insist on obtaining unconditional cooperation from Baghdad.

A similar scenario would be the situation created by Iraq's willingness to discuss (and not simply to authorize) the return of inspectors. Baghdad's recent invitation to resume negotiations with Hans Blix—the head of UNMOVIC—already gave a hint as to what the respective attitudes in Paris and Washington could be in that situation. Replying to Iraq's invitation with a surprising unity of tone, both governments declared that Iraq had to accept an unconditional return of inspectors and that the time for general negotiations was over. However, patience with Saddam Hussein is likely to be more limited in Washington than in Paris. Should Baghdad reassert its willingness to negotiate, Washington might opt for military action whereas Paris might consider that a little more diplomatic pressure could drive Iraq to accept inspectors and avoid a costly and risky war.

***2) U.S. unilaterally decides on a military intervention to topple Saddam Hussein***

It is very unlikely that Paris would support such a unilateral move since it would contradict France's "three-principles" approach, generate strong opposition among the French public, and set an unfortunate precedent. According to President Chirac, "One sees arising the temptation to legitimize the unilateral and preventive use of force. This development is worrying. It is contrary to France's vision of collective security, a vision that depends on the cooperation of states, the respect for law and the authority of Security Council. We will reiterate these rules each time that it is necessary and, particularly, in relation to Iraq. If Baghdad persists in refusing to allow the return of inspectors without conditions, it is for the Security Council and the Security Council alone to decide the measures to take."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the attempts of a few American observers, no serious evidence of Iraq's implication in 9/11, nor in the anthrax scare, has been put forward to date.<sup>9</sup> If such were the case, then the U.S. and NATO would be fully entitled to intervene in Iraq on the basis of a right of legitimate

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Chirac, Speech to the 10<sup>th</sup> Ambassador's Conference, August 29, 2002, available at <http://www.elysee.fr>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Micah Morrison, "The Iraq Connection," *Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2002. Also, Richard Cohen, "War Without Evidence," *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2002.

defense. But as long as no such evidence is brought forward, France will not consider an attack on Iraq as another step in the “war on terrorism.”

The only acceptable argument, from the French standpoint, for a military operation against Iraq is Baghdad’s refusal to comply with its international obligations under UN Security Council resolution 687 and related resolutions. However, while French officials consider that resolution 687 contains a legal basis for intervention, the actual decision to intervene still has to be taken by the UN Security Council. Therefore, in the absence of such a multilateral decision, it is very unlikely that France would join in a new war against Baghdad.

### ***3) Iraq continues to play a cat and mouse game; Washington turns to the UN Security Council to ask for a military intervention***

In a September 9, 2002 interview with the *New York Times*, President Chirac suggested a two-step strategy to deal with this possibility. In previous declarations, French officials had refrained from mentioning a possible military intervention, arguing that it was up to the UN Security Council to decide on the appropriate measures. This time the French President was much more assertive. He proposed giving Iraq a three-week deadline for unconditionally re-admitting inspectors. If Iraq refused or hampered their work, another UN resolution would be passed on whether to use military force. Asked whether France might approve the use of force, he replied, “Nothing is impossible, if it’s decided by the international community on the basis of indisputable proof.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in contrast to Germany, France has not ruled out the use of force. However, in addition to the legal aspects, France’s final position will also depend on the following factors:

- The international situation, in particular the evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- The attitude and the stability of Iraq’s neighboring countries
- The presentation by the U.S. of a clear alternative to Saddam Hussein’s regime
- The kind of military action envisaged by Washington
- A U.S. commitment to remain engaged in Iraq after military intervention

In short, France’s attitude towards Iraq in the months to come will very much depend upon Washington’s approach to the problem and its willingness, not only to inform its allies, but also to discuss with them the entire range of options to deal with the Iraqi regime.

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<sup>10</sup> See Elaine Sciolino “French Leader Offers Formula to Tackle Iraq,” *New York Times*, September 9, 2002.