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## **France befriends its old adversary**

By Dominique Moisi

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Saddam Hussein has achieved a small revolution in Europe. While Britain remains faithful to its hardline position on Iraq - and to the US - France and Germany have switched places. Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, has alienated Washington with his opposition to war. France - usually Europe's critic-in-chief of unbridled US power - has struck a more emollient tone, a pleasant surprise for the White House.

President Jacques Chirac clearly understands America's concerns if not its methods. He has not always thought this way. Thirty years ago the French establishment, led by a young prime minister, Jacques Chirac, felt in tune with the "strong and dynamic personality" of Mr Hussein, the "perfect incarnation of what a modern secular Arab leader should be", as French officials then described him.

For a long time, France viewed the Iraqi leader with what can best be described as disappointment. But sympathy has long since evaporated. Paris has considered him a hopeless cause ever since UN inspectors were forced to withdraw from Iraq four years ago. There is no doubt that France now sees Mr Hussein as a threat.

Despite the influence of an active pro-Iraq lobby, the French government privately considers Mr Hussein as an Arab Slobodan Milosevic, armed with chemical and biological weapons. He is a dangerous maverick who must be restrained and, ideally, disposed of, although in the French diplomatic lexicon, regime change is a consequence and not a goal of war. In this regard, there is continuity between Dominique de Villepin, the new foreign minister, and his predecessor Hubert Védrine.

Like the British, but unlike the Germans, the French do not exclude a military solution, or their involvement in it, as long as it is carried out under a UN mandate. Instinctively interventionist, the French do not suffer from the same historical limitations as the Germans. In Paris, Berlin's anti-war stance has been greeted with discreet *schadenfreude*. Gerhard

Schröder's irresponsible posturing has harmed Germany's efforts to acquire a permanent seat on the United Nations security council. The French see his absolute opposition to war not as a sign of humanist modernity but as the legacy of a burdened past.

All the same, most French oppose a unilateral US strike against Iraq. The government does not question US military superiority or that Mr Hussein's regime could collapse even more quickly than that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. What it and many others question is the political legitimacy of Washington's strategy and the extent of US commitment to Iraq post-Hussein. Washington is better at overthrowing regimes than at rebuilding states. Democratizing the Middle East, starting with Iraq, is a justifiable objective - but one full of potentially dangerous illusions. The country of the French Revolution knows all too well that no one likes "armed liberators", especially if they come from a different culture and a different religion. The country that has yet to come to terms with its painful colonial experience in Algeria knows the dangers of wanting to do good for other people without their participation or consent.

If France's trepidation stems partly from its own experiences, it is also a product of the distance it keeps from the US, and particularly from US policy on the Middle East. Even so, the government has managed to formulate a subtle and balanced message of critical support. For beyond the issue of Iraq, France's foreign policy priority is to re-create itself in the eyes of the Americans as a reliable and worthy ally. Anti-French sentiment in the US over the past year - largely due to unfair allegations of anti-Semitism - has frightened Mr Chirac's government into action. Paris feared a US boycott of the country and its products.

A position of critical support for the US also allows France to resume its diplomatic mission as mediator between north and south and legitimise its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It also makes no sense to stand against Washington if it is determined to remove Mr Hussein from power. If France wants to do business in a post-Hussein Iraq it must keep its distance from the present regime. If war is averted, it can claim that a tough stand forced Mr Hussein to back down, no thanks to Mr Schröder.

With his flamboyant romanticism, Mr de Villepin has certainly brought a different style to French diplomacy after the coldly analytical Mr Védrine. It is too early to tell whether there will be a change of substance. But, on paper at least, Mr de Villepin wants France to help change the world. His predecessor, whether out of modesty or cynicism, merely wanted France to adjust to it.

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