



Interview of the President Jacques CHIRAC, by Robert Graham and Andrew Gowers for the Financial Times (Elysee Palace).

Jacques Chirac is in conciliatory mood as he prepares to host next weekend's summit of the Group of Eight major industrial nations at the lakeside town of Evian. But in his study at the Elysee Palace on a rainy Saturday afternoon, he remains unrepentant about the anti-war stance during the Iraq crisis and the split in transatlantic and inter-European relations. "A war that lacks legitimacy does not acquire legitimacy just because it has been won," he says. Mr Chirac also points out that last week's United Nations resolution paving the way for Iraq's postwar reconstruction did not all go Washington's way: "The US has had to put a lot of water in its wine over the last 15 days at the UN." But in a gesture to Tony Blair, his European adversary during the Iraqi conflict, he notes: "Here, I think, the role of Tony Blair has been positive."

The French president, now 70, can claim to be the most experienced statesman on the world stage, having rubbed shoulders with Soviet Cold warriors such as Leonid Brezhnev and US presidents going back to Richard Nixon. But he will need all his skills and personal charm at Evian. French diplomacy, of which Mr Chirac is the prime architect and executor, will be on very public display and trial. It will be the first time President George W. Bush sets foot on French soil since France came to be reviled in Washington for opposing the use of force to overthrow Saddam Hussein. As Colin Powell, secretary of state, noted last week while in Paris for a foreign ministers meeting, the US is not ready in public at least to forgive and forget so quickly. For Mr Chirac, the days of riding a wave of domestic and European popularity for his anti-war stance have passed. Abroad, he is seeking to mend fences with European allies and send soothing noises to Washington. At home, his centre-right government under Premier Jean-Pierre Raffarin is grappling with a weak economy and an unexpectedly widespread opposition to plans to shake up the pensions system. Yesterday some 400,000 protesters were again on the streets of Paris. Mr Chirac nevertheless projects a determined optimism. The message he wants to convey is that it is time to move on from Iraq. The task now is to generate confidence in the world economy and forge a better consensus on development: "I am convinced Evian can convey a message of confidence in world economic growth; but this message has to be credible and the confidence fully justified. Despite our differences, we in the G8 all share the same set of economic values." He brushes aside the idea of punitive US action, saying he does not subscribe to a "classroom view" of the world where naughty schoolboys are scolded: "I have been struck by the hostility [towards France] coming out of Washington and it saddens me. But I regard this as the chattering of a few people, which has been picked up by the media. Frankly, I don't lose much sleep over it." A self-acknowledged "pragmatist", Mr Chirac's views can be as eclectic as the contents of his study. The room mixes personal touches - the president's collection of primitive art - with tradition - General de Gaulle's ornate antique desk - and



an ultra-modern flat-screen television. Officials preparing for the summit - it brings together war coalition partners of the US and Britain, with the anti-war camp of France, Germany and Russia, as well as Canada, Italy and Japan - claim to have never let the Iraqi crisis intrude. Another sensitive issue the weakening dollar and the strong euro is also being brushed under the table, even though remarks by John Snow, US Treasury secretary, last week sent the dollar tumbling. "I don't think the present situation [on the currency markets] requires any particular comment," Mr Chirac says. "What we have got to make clear to the world [is that] we are determined to use all our energy to work together." Yet differences between Paris and Washington remain and are there for all to see. "We have a vision of the world based on the view that war should not be used to settle a crisis which can be resolved by other means," the French president says. "War must be the ultimate resort. The world today obliges us to seek a consensus when we act; and not to act alone. "The US has a vision of the world which is very unilateralist. I hold a vision of a multilateral world which, apparently - and I say apparently - is opposed to this. Europe is, and certainly will be in the future, here to stay as a major world power. Then we have to take account of the emergence of China on the world stage, and India too. So there are other poles. "Whether you like it or not; whether you wish it or not...We are moving towards a multi-polar world. In any case, there will essentially be two poles: Europe and the US, who share common values; and in this context I have no real worries." Mr Chirac acknowledges, however, that the US is disengaging from Europe: "The US is less and less interested in Europe. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall this trend was masked by events in Yugoslavia and the Balkans conflict. This is a very significant development and I am not entirely happy about it. Nevertheless, in the medium term, over the next 50 years, I still see the transatlantic link being essential." He makes no apology for his rebuke to the eastern European countries that sided with the US over Iraq by signing the so-called Letter of Eight: "The new entrant countries have to accept that there are certain rules which should be observed. They did not even consult with us and we learnt of the letter in the newspapers: that was not very elegant. But the page has now been turned."

Similarly, while he concedes that the timing of the recent defence summit organised by Belgium with France, Germany and Luxembourg was "not particularly well chosen", he defends the initiative. "There has to be some push to get things going on occasions - a pioneer group ready to take the initiative and we felt we needed this over defence.

"Of course, we are not going to build a European defence without Great Britain. That makes no sense when they are the biggest military power, with France near the same level." In this respect, he points out: "At the Le Touquet Anglo-French summit [in February] at the height of the Iraqi crisis, we were able to say we don't agree on Iraq and put this on one side. Then with Tony Blair we were able to agree to take several steps forwards in the defence field."



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On development, some of Mr Chirac's thunder has been stolen by Mr Bush's announcement that the US intends to devote \$15bn to the fight against Aids. "The Bush administration has taken a very positive step increasing the amount of money devoted to the fight against Aids: this obliges us in Europe to follow suit," he concedes. But Mr Chirac wants to extend the debate beyond the Aids issue to include less talked-of pandemics such as malaria and tuberculosis. He also has to steer round the contentious topic of genetically modified food which has soured EU-US trade relations. "Companies bringing new medicines on to the market have to put them through a long period of trial before they are approved. The same considerations must apply to GMOs. If after a process of trial they are approved by the appropriate authorities and demonstrated to be harmless, then I am in favour. But I emphasise my guiding principle is one of precaution." At Evian, Europeans will be watching how Mr Chirac handles the delicate trade dossier; in particular, whether he is prepared to be more flexible over agricultural subsidies, a deadlock that risks sinking the Doha round: "Europe has to give a little ground ahead of Cancun [the World Trade Organisation meeting in September] and the Doha round. But it should not move alone. The hold-up in the negotiations certainly cannot be blamed entirely on Europe." While accepting the need to avoid a breakdown at the WTO, Mr Chirac is unwilling to countenance further changes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funding deal he forged last year with Gerhard Schroeder, the German chancellor: "There is no reason to modify this accord. Farmers, like businessmen, need to operate with clear ground rules: can you imagine how they feel if told the rule changes every three years? "Of course, we have to prepare for the reforms coming after 2006. But it is not serious to make an arrangement for six years then seek to change it. It is also easily forgotten that the CAP agreement imposed a ceiling on spending which involved considerable sacrifice for France as well as Germany." In February Mr Chirac surprised colleagues with an about-turn on cuts in agricultural subsidies: rich countries, he said, should stop subsidising agricultural exports to African countries. Though his critics accuse him of gesture politics towards Africa and of cultivating close personal links with African leaders, Mr Chirac's constant emphasis on the North/South divide appears to reflect a genuine concern. Not without certain apprehension from Washington, he has broken with tradition and organised a pre-Evian summit next Sunday lunchtime involving international institutions and leaders from such countries as China, Brazil and India to discuss development issues. "Our overall aim is to shift the relationship with the South from one of aid and aid-dependency to one of real partnership." This explains why he will cajole his Evian colleagues to follow through with the Millennium Project launched in Johannesburg for the continent to achieve 6-7 per cent annual growth: "The African countries themselves must make a big effort on the path towards good governance: the other effort has to come via the classic means of development aid." Even if there are some rough times ahead at Evian, Mr Chirac is not afraid of any ruptures that might emerge, least of all within Europe. "There will be crises in Europe, it has been built upon crises," he observes. Then he adds: "Building Europe is not like driving along an auroroute but climbing a mountain path where you stumble, where you hit crevices, rocks fall. It is hard, uphill work. But we are always going forwards, not backwards. The divisions caused by the Iraqi crisis have happened but the crisis is now over."

