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Chirac Scolding Angers Nations That Back U.S.

BRUSSELS, Feb. 18 — "New Europe" barked back at "old Europe" today, deepening the continental rift over Iraq after President Jacques Chirac of France told Central and Eastern European countries to keep their views on Iraq to themselves or risk losing their chance to join the European Union.

"We thought we were preparing for war with Saddam Hussein and not Jacques Chirac," said Alexandr Vondra, deputy foreign minister of the Czech Republic, one of the European Union applicants that have drawn French ire by openly supporting the United States and Britain in the Iraqi crisis. Mr. Vondra said his country and its immediate neighbors "definitely cannot remain silent," as Mr. Chirac advised on Monday.

The French president, in an unusually emotional outburst in Brussels after the European Union meeting on Monday about Iraq, derided the Central and Eastern European countries that have signed letters expressing their support for the American policy on Iraq for being "badly brought up," and having missed "an opportunity to keep quiet."

All 13 candidates today endorsed the joint declaration on Iraq issued on Monday by the 15 European leaders, warning Saddam Hussein that he had "one last chance" to disarm and vowing to "avoid new lines of division" over European policy on Iraq.

But divisions exist. The war of words highlighted not only disagreement over Iraq, but also France's struggle for dominance in European affairs in the face of an enlarging European Union whose incoming members are historically beholden to the United States.

France has long been concerned that the former Communist countries, indebted to the United States for liberation from Soviet domination in the cold war, would turn out to be a sort of Trojan horse bringing America's influence into the union.

"For France, the European Union is a way for it to remain a big power in the world because it can use Europe to act and to have a certain influence in world affairs that it can't have anymore on its own," said Gilles Lpesant, a French expert on European identity and Eastern Europe. France fears that expanding the European Union membership will erode its influence and weaken Europe's position as a potential counterweight to American power.

The broader European Union membership is also more likely to produce a decentralized organization that leaves much power with national governments, rather than the more centralized, cohesive union favored by France and Germany.

The tension across Europe has grown steadily as Central and Eastern European countries have sided with the United States over how to resolve the Iraq crisis. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld last month chastised France and Germany for opposing the United States, calling them "old Europe," out of step with the "new Europe" made up of former Soviet bloc countries.

While France this month recalled its gratitude to the United States for liberation from Germany more than half a century ago, the gratitude of former Communist states toward Washington seems far more immediate and, for now, binding. Even once rock-solid bonds like that between Germany and the United States have been undermined in recent months.

Andrzej Kapiszewski, professor of sociology and political science at Krakow University in Poland, recalled that even under communism, America remained a benevolent presence. "I'm from Krakow, and practically every single person had some relative in the United States," Mr.

Kapiszewski said.

There is little sense of obligation to Western Europe, though, and some irritation at the long, difficult negotiations insisted on by Western Europe for membership of the European Union.

The East-West European divide broke into the open when eight European leaders, including the European Union candidates Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, signed a letter of support for Washington's position in January. That letter was followed by another signed by 10 more countries, including seven candidates for the European Union.

The letters reinforced widespread suspicion in France that the poorer European countries are primarily attracted to European Union membership for economic reasons while their political allegiance will remain with Washington.

"Europe is not a cash register," warned Dominique de Villepin, the French foreign minister, on Sunday.

In his comments on Monday, Mr. Chirac went on to suggest that opposing France and Germany could hurt candidates for European Union membership. He warned, in particular, that Romania and Bulgaria, the poorest of the thirteen candidates and the two that are still negotiating to enter the bloc in 2007, "could hardly find a better way" of reducing their chances for membership by speaking up against France.

The French defense minister, Michele Alliot-Marie, echoed Mr. Chirac in Warsaw today, telling her hosts that "it was better to keep silent when you don't know what's going on."

The comments were rejected across Central and Eastern Europe on Tuesday, suggesting that France will face serious challenges in exerting its influence over an expanded European Union.

"France has a right to its opinion, and Poland has the right to decide what is good for it," said Adam Rotfeld, deputy foreign minister of Poland, the largest of the candidates for the union. "France should respect that."

Poland recently angered many European Union members by choosing Lockheed Martin F-16 fighter jets over French and Anglo-Swedish rivals.

The tensions between Poland and France are particularly notable because the two countries have traditionally been close. But President Bush is clearly regarded, at least for now, as a better friend to the Poles than President Chirac.

Charles Gati, a professor in European Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, said nationalist sentiment in countries that are candidates for the European Union could now rise.

"This will strengthen nationalist arguments," Mr. Gati said. "They will say the West is not only selfish but divided, and we can't count on it."

Sorin Ionita, director of the Romanian Academic Society, a leading think tank in Bucharest, said: "If France wants to lose all the sympathy it has in the East, this is the way to go, to say you little guys will have to listen to us forever, whether we are right or wrong. Which is ridiculous, especially when France is wrong."

Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, who initiated one of the controversial letters supporting Washington, insisted today that the candidate countries should not be silenced.

"They have as much right to speak up as Great Britain or France or any other member of the European Union today," Mr. Blair said.