

Chirac hails Anglo-French ties

French President Jacques Chirac today spoke of the "true friendship" between his country and Britain but again stressed there were "differences" over Iraq.

Mr Chirac admitted the two nations took different views on military action in the country but added that they had "never worked in closer co-operation" than in the current fight against terrorism.

He also spoke of history and values shared by Europe and America which had forged a link so strong that it "cannot be challenged by anybody".

Mr Chirac was speaking to an invited audience of 200 students and academics at Rhodes House at the University of Oxford at the end of his official visit to the UK.

Asked when it was acceptable to intervene militarily in a country, the president said: "It's not for any given country to consider that a situation is open to stepping in and interfering," he said.

"It's up to the international community to do so, in particular the UN which alone has the authority to interfere."

Mr Chirac added that, if countries intervened independently, it would "throw the door wide open to hosts of reasons to wage wars under the guise of legitimate interference".

He had earlier spoken of a shared interest in multilateralism, saying that, when it came to the need to reinforce the international rule of law, "Britain and France are totally in sync".

After being introduced by Oxford University Chancellor Chris Patten, who spoke in French, Mr Chirac gave a five-minute speech in his native tongue in which he spoke of the importance of a "dialogue of cultures".

"Any culture, big or small, has something to teach us, something unique... something which any balanced, fair world needs," he told the audience.

He then fielded a series of questions from the audience and, in his answers, repeatedly stressed unity between Britain and France.

The president pointed to factors as diverse as Britons owning homes in France and the success of yachtswoman Ellen MacArthur to explain the strength of the connection.

"There's a great deal of harmony even though, here or there, there might be different interests or opinions," he said.

"These differences are really the exception that confirm the rule."

On a broader theme, Mr Chirac called for reform of the UN and said countries including Germany, Japan and India should be allowed to become permanent members of the Security Council.

