

Showdown and Compromise at the UN

By Ian Williams

Bismarck's dictum that people who want to appreciate treaties and sausages should not watch them being made applies to Security Council resolutions as well. The U.S. is set to win Security Council support for a resolution on Iraq and is already calling it victory.

In one sense, it is indeed an American triumph. The threat from Bush has secured Baghdad's climb down from its refusal to admit the inspectors or accept the validity of UN resolution 1284. The U.S. pressure has also brought over other Security Council members to an implicit acceptance that Iraq will face military force if it fails to comply with disarmament and inspection.

However, the American positions actually changed considerably in the face of French obduracy. But they did not want to advertise it; nor did anyone else in case it upset the hawks in Washington. The new resolution inching its way to examination early in November will take inspections seriously rather than using them as a flimsy excuse for war, and the ball will be very much in Saddam Hussein's court. The question is whether he will cooperate and disarm, or dissimulate and bring about his own downfall at the hands of the U.S. military.

Much of the negotiation was not actually among the "P5"—the permanent veto-holding members of the Security Council—but within what an Irish diplomat engagingly calls "the P1." The horse-trading between the realists and the axis of aggressiveness in Washington is what took up much of the past seven weeks. Colin Powell leveraged the resistance from France and even the pleas of close allies like Blair to shift the administration's position toward a more pragmatic one that deferred to the needs of coalition-building.

The initial American position was dictated by the hawks, whose nightmare was that Iraq

would deprive them of a *casus belli* by accepting inspectors. However, Bush has at least for the time being opted to go with the inspectors—both the UNMOVIC and International Atomic Energy Administration (IAEA) teams—backed by a strong resolution. His and Cheney's meetings with team leaders Hans Blix and Muhamed El Baradei (from which Rumsfeld was notably absent, even if Wolfowitz was present) were in part a reassuring signal to the waverers on the Security Council. After the president's initial diplomatically disastrous fit of pique when Iraq first accepted inspections, the White House had apparently decided to back them.

At the expense of the hawks, there has also been some flexibility in the new drafting. Now, inspections are not set up to provoke Iraqi non-cooperation—unless of course Iraq does indeed have undeclared weapons programs that it will try to conceal. The U.S. can claim the right to unilateral decisions of military action, but as now arranged will not have to. The other members of the Security Council have almost all conceded that when the inspection teams go into Iraq they will be backed by the threat of force. The implication is that if they face any serious problems from Baghdad, then the Security Council will back military action. In discussions inside the Security Council this week, the Russians, Chinese, and French all admitted that this was Iraq's last chance.

The U.S. began this process by declaring that it did not want a second resolution that would explicitly authorize military action. Now Powell has been inclined to say that the U.S. does not need one. Furthermore, it would not necessarily say no if a second resolution were proposed, and the U.S. has accepted that Blix should report back to the Security Council if there are any problems. The resolution that is advancing in the council discussions will cite Iraq's failure

to comply with previous resolutions. However, the consequences of such failure will be played down in the text—so that along with Powell's assurances, they will not be seen as triggers for the U.S. to act unilaterally.

The process reveals much about how the Security Council works. Iraq has exasperated even the few friends it had, and most council members want to see the whole inspection question settled. That, along with the perennial desire for consensus in the Security Council, has enabled the U.S. to get more than it deserved. Most members have been far too polite to laugh openly when the U.S., one of the worst global citizens, lectures the UN about living up to its responsibilities. It is instructive that the president's father used the Security Council vote on Desert Storm to lever Congress into supporting the Persian Gulf war. Bush junior used a complaisant Congress's resolution as an additional means of pressuring the Security Council.

The British have played what has become an almost traditional role in its attempt to bridge the gap between Washington and the rest of world—and with reality. The prospect of a unilateral U.S. intervention without a

UN mandate appalled the British Foreign Office, which knows as well as anyone else outside the U.S. that this would be totally illegal. It also worried Tony Blair, who faces the prospect of regime change himself if the UK were to go along with any such move.

Blair has added his voice to Colin Powell's in calling for President Bush to stick with the UN road. In the Security Council, the British arguments have lacked the ethical dimension that former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook once claimed for British policy. In effect, they have maintained that since the U.S. is going to go ahead anyway, the council should endorse the U.S. demands and thus save the appearance at least of international legality. They have also pointed to the need to support Powell against the really dangerous unilateralists in Washington.

The French may have a cynical motive—to ensure their companies access to the Iraqi oil fields—but their appeals to principle were so successful that they became a hostage to their own oratory, with council members like Ireland and Mexico vigorously backing the French stand. Although China and Russia are

always unhappy at any suggestion of unilateral interference by other countries, they have also been happy to see Paris as the frontrunner on the issue.

Although the end result is indeed likely to be a successful American resolution, whose consequences may eventually include the regime change that has been the administration's public policy, we can draw some considerable comfort from the strong opposition to American unilateralism in the Security Council. The effect of the drawn-out resistance led by France has also worked on public opinion in the U.S. itself. According to polls, the U.S. public is much less eager for unilateral action than intervention by a coalition—even though a frighteningly high proportion of them (66% according to a Pew Research poll in October) have bought the presidential line that Iraq was involved in the September 11 attacks. Presumably they will also be much less eager if Iraq readily cooperates with the UN inspectors. But all this remains to be seen.

(Ian Williams

<uswarreport@igc.org> writes for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org) and is the author of The UN for Beginners.)