

UN diplomatic charade on Iraq nears final act

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One salutary byproduct of a period of profound international crisis and social upheaval is the shattering of political illusions built up over previous decades. Washington's current drive to war against Iraq and the global eruption of US militarism are playing just such a role: exposing myths that have long beclouded the political consciousness of broad layers of working people.

The Bush administration's national security doctrine, providing for "preemptive" war against any nation that it views as a potential threat, has already given the lie to the notion that Washington acts as a force for peace and democracy on the world arena. Similarly, the passage last month of resolutions in both the House of Representatives and the Senate giving Bush a carte blanche to launch an unprovoked war against Iraq has deflated the illusion that the Democratic Party represents a progressive alternative to the Republicans for American working people.

Now it is the turn of the United Nations. The UN Security Council's unseemly "debate" on Iraq is exposing the pretense that the UN is some independent force for world peace and progress. The sordid maneuvers between the council's five permanent members—the US, Britain, France, Russia and China—recall Lenin's characterization of the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, as a "thieves kitchen," i.e., an instrument of the imperialist great powers for the plundering and oppression of the great bulk of humanity.

According to all sides, the new resolution demanded by Washington will likely be passed this week. This document will stand as a monument to the cynicism of imperialist diplomacy, providing the US with the sanction it demands for an unprovoked war of aggression.

The substance of the UN debate is ostensibly the establishment of a new weapons inspections regime in Iraq. In reality, all those participating in the discussions know that concern over "weapons of mass destruction" is merely a pretext for the long-planned US military action.

Initially, Washington attempted to utilize the absence of weapons inspections—interrupted at US insistence in advance of the 1998 bombing of Baghdad—as its pretext for launching a new war. After the Iraqi regime unexpectedly reached an agreement with the UN to allow the inspectors to return, the Bush administration was forced to adopt a new approach.

It set about creating conditions aimed at ensuring that the inspectors never set foot in Iraq, for fear that their presence would delay US invasion plans and expose as a colossal exaggeration, if not outright lie, its pretext for war—the supposed production of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. In the event that the inspectors do return to Iraq, the US is fashioning a resolution that will provide it ample opportunity to quickly stage a provocation and create a new pretext—Iraqi "non-compliance"—for the desired invasion.

Even as the diplomatic discussions continue in the Security Council, the Bush administration continues to proclaim its intention of invading and occupying Iraq, spelling out plans to appoint an American military governor to oversee the recolonization of the country and the transfer of its oilfields to the effective control of US corporations. Two more aircraft carriers are setting sail for the Persian Gulf, while thousands of US troops continue pouring into the region and American warplanes intensify their bombing of the "no-fly" zones in open preparation for war.

While Washington, with the support of Britain, demands that the Security Council grant it a legal cover for its aggression, the other Council members insist that a new resolution preserve the fiction that the UN upholds tenets of international law that bar precisely such actions. The solution that they are cobbling together amounts to an agreement to disagree, i.e., Washington will interpret the wording as a green light for military action, while France, Russia and China contend the language of the resolution calls for further consultation. Any one of the five permanent members has the right to veto a proposed resolution, but the three "recalcitrants" have let it be known they will not exercise their veto power.

"There has genuinely been a meeting of the minds," British Foreign Minister Jack Straw declared last week.

"We've got agreement on the idea of a two-stage approach," French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said in an interview published in *Le Figaro*, referring to the French demand that the UN deliberate again if Iraq is found to be violating the new weapons inspection regime.

Moscow "firmly opposes any formulation that would allow anyone unilaterally to automatically proceed to the use of force," said Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov. He added, however, that "in the last few days we have succeeded in bringing the approaches of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council ... closer. We have converged on a whole series of positions."

The unctuous UN Secretary General Kofi Annan issued a call for unity. "It's a grave matter; it's a question of war and peace," he said. "I'm still hopeful that the Council will come up with a resolution that all of them can sign to, or a vast majority."

It was left to US Secretary of State Colin Powell to spell out the basis for the new-found unity and the "meeting of the minds" between the council's five permanent members.

Under the resolution that is now being shaped, once Iraq is determined to be in noncompliance, the Security Council would be called into session to discuss the matter. The final wording, however, will not specify whether this discussion must result in a vote on a second resolution approving military action. Utilizing this procedure, "We can accommodate the interests of our friends without in any way ... handcuffing the United States," the secretary of state declared.

"I can't tell you now how long it might take them to consider such a report or what action they might take," Powell added. "But as their clock is ticking, there is a clock that is also ticking on the US side as to whether or not the violation is of such a nature that the president makes a judgment in due course that he should act if the UN chooses not to act."

In other words, the UN Security Council is encouraged to discuss the matter to its heart's content. Meanwhile, US cruise missiles will be raining down on Baghdad.

While much of the Security Council debate has centered on whether Washington's resolution might contain a "hidden trigger" for US military aggression, the UN's chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, made it clear last week that the trigger is in plain sight.

First, he spelled out that absent an agreement on the US proposal, no inspectors will go back into Iraq for fear that there "might be other

consequences,” i.e., instead of conducting a search for Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction,” inspectors could find themselves on the receiving end of weapons launched by US warplanes.

Secondly, Blix voiced concerns that provisions within the US resolution ostensibly intended to tighten the inspection regime are counterproductive. In reality, these measures—including the removal of Iraqi officials for interrogation outside of their country—are designed to ensure that Baghdad rejects the resolution, thereby creating the pretext for US military action.

There would be “great practical difficulties,” Blix said, in carrying out the US proposal to spirit Iraqi scientists and their families out of the country to be interviewed. There is no possibility that Iraq, or any other government for that matter, would accept the forced abduction of its citizens in this manner.

Blix also warned that it would be impossible for Iraq to meet the resolution’s 30-day deadline for filing a “complete and final declaration” on the status of its civilian chemical and biological facilities. Fulfilling this requirement is a precondition for inspectors returning to the country.

If Iraq is found to have withheld a full and accurate description of these facilities, it would be considered in “material breach” of the resolution and, according to the US interpretation, subject to attack. The 30-day deadline was set with an eye toward the US invasion timetable. Pentagon planners have determined that January or early February offers the ideal window for military action.

The four other Security Council members are fully aware of the cynical intent behind the US stance, even as they continue the diplomatic farce at the UN. “Privately, French diplomats who are close to the action are under no illusion at all: for them, it is quite clear that Iraq will never comply fully with the very strict obligations likely to be imposed on it next week by the Security Council,” writes Jacques Amalric, editor of the French daily *Liberation*.

The outcome of the Security Council debate was determined in advance by the character of its principal protagonists, the body’s five permanent members.

First there is the US, which has spelled out a policy of global hegemony and demands that the UN provide a rubber stamp or be condemned to “irrelevance.” Relying on its unchallenged military supremacy, Washington has made it clear that that UN resolutions and international law apply only to lesser countries. To the extent that it can utilize such legal means to further its strategic aims, it will do so; should they stand in its way, Washington will roll right over them.

Expressing unconcealed contempt for the world’s weak and defenseless nations, Washington acts as global bully and sets the tone for the Security Council debate.

Next are the second-tier imperialist powers, Britain and France, which owe their seats on the Council to their status as victors in World War II and to their former colonial empires, which at the time of the UN’s founding in 1945 still dominated much of the globe. Prime Minister Tony Blair has aligned Britain with the US invasion plans, while attempting to mediate an agreement with the rest of the European Union.

Bitter over Washington’s arrogance and its threat to French interests in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere, France has thrown up obstacles to the speedy passage of the resolution demanded by the Bush administration. Unable to unite Europe behind his position and petrified of an open break with the US, upon which French imperialism is ultimately dependent, President Jacques Chirac is prepared to acquiesce to US war plans.

Then there are the two countries shaped by the reactionary legacy of Stalinism. Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Cold War conflicts between Washington and Moscow largely paralyzed the Security Council, relegating the UN’s actions to marginal areas of global affairs that did not impinge on the interests of either of the two “super powers.” It is only the restoration of capitalism in the former USSR that has made it possible for the US to seek UN sanction for its planned invasion.

Today, the Russian Federation, with its long-standing political and commercial ties to the regime in Baghdad and a border barely 300 miles from Iraq, has ample reason to oppose US military action against the Arab state. But the regime in Moscow, composed of a gangster element that emerged, in part, from leading sections of the old Stalinist apparatus, in part, from a predatory petty-bourgeoisie that stood outside of the Kremlin regime, has no principled basis to stand in Washington’s way. It is quite prepared to sacrifice its Iraqi “allies” in exchange for assurances about its own imperialistic aspirations, such as in the Caucasus.

Behind the wrangling over diplomatic language to be incorporated in the UN resolution, both Moscow and Paris are making demands that they be guaranteed at least a portion of the Iraqi oil business once a US colonial regime is in place.

In China, the principal concern of the heirs of Mao is that nothing impede the growth of capitalism in China or infringe on their own political monopoly. Nothing—including abetting a colonial-style war in Iraq—is too depraved for Beijing’s sclerotic practitioners of “realpolitik.” As an added incentive, Washington and the UN have given the Chinese regime the green light for suppressing its own troublesome Islamic minority, adding the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, a group operating in Xinjiang Province, to their lists of terrorist organizations.

Finally, there is UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, who has worked tirelessly to smooth over differences between the US, on the one hand, and France and Russia, on the other, with the aim of brokering a deal acceptable to all parties. At once obsequious and devious, he personifies the national bourgeoisie in the former colonial countries, desperate to preserve for itself some place—even a small corner—at the imperialist banquet table. His mission is to provide a UN fig leaf for US war crimes, so as to convince the US ruling elite that the UN is still a useful tool.

In reality, this institution is what it was created to be over half a century ago—a foreign policy instrument of the most powerful imperialist nations, above all, the US. Attempts to glorify the UN as offering some kind of reformist alternative to the oppression of imperialism have long been the stock-in-trade of liberals, social democrats, Stalinists and assorted middle-class protest groups, all of which are hostile to revolutionary socialist politics. Now this institution can be seen for what genuine Marxists always said it was.

The end of the Cold War and the eruption of US militarism have vindicated the analysis of imperialism made by Lenin, who characterized its political physiognomy as “reaction all along the line.” This includes not only Washington, but also its European and Asian rivals.

Within ruling circles worldwide, reaction is ascendant, but the drive towards war is an immensely contradictory process that arises out of the insoluble crisis of world capitalism. Masses of working people on every continent are passing through experiences that are shattering old political illusions and posing the necessity for a new perspective.

The conclusion that needs to be drawn is that the only viable road to world peace and progress is the struggle to mobilize the working class of every country on the program of international socialism.



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