

Blair warns United Nations has no veto over US-led war vs. Iraq

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has spelt out his preparedness to back a unilateral attack on Iraq, in defiance of international and domestic opposition.

With opinion polls showing a majority of British people against war, and even his own party split over the issue, Blair went further than ever before in backing a US-led attack in his first televised press conference of the new year earlier this week.

Dismissing critics of his pro-war stance as “naïve and misguided”, the prime minister insisted that military action could take place without United Nations approval. Adding his support to the Bush administration’s policy of regime change, he warned that other countries considered a threat to western interests could be next in line.

UN weapons inspectors are due to make their first report on their search for Saddam Hussein’s “weapons of mass destruction” on January 27. So far the inspectors have admitted they have not found a “smoking gun” and have requested more time.

At his press conference Blair seemed to accept their request, but made clear military action would take place.

The British and US governments were “confident” that Iraq would be found in breach of UN resolutions, he said smugly, leading the *Guardian* to speculate that the prime minister must have a “card in his hand”.

In reality, Blair has always insisted Iraq is damned whatever happens. He knows that the weapons inspections are only window dressing to obscure that America’s objective is a colonial-style occupation of Iraq and the seizure of its oil fields. The prime minister hopes that his support will ensure British capital is treated favourably when it comes to dividing up the post-war booty.

In the “heads the US wins, tails Iraq loses” scenario,

Iraq will be accused of breaching UN resolutions if no weapons are found, and charged with the same if they are.

Sections of the British establishment, however, including a sizeable section of the Labour Party itself, are concerned that any military action must have UN backing if it is to have any legitimacy. With the January 27 deadline approaching, there have been anxious calls for Blair not to go it alone with the US.

Blair made clear he would defy such entreaties, stressing that the issue was not what the US/UK would do, but what the UN was prepared to do.

“If the UN does find that there is a breach, is the UN going to stand aside or is it going to enforce its will?” he asked.

Britain and the US had made a “deliberate decision... to work with the international community” and take “the UN route” he continued, but that was a “two-way process”. In return, “it also behoves the other countries who wanted the US to take that decision to step up to the mark and say well if there is a breach however then we are prepared to have the UN authorise action”.

“I want to make it quite clear... if there is a breach we would expect the UN to honour the undertakings that were given”.

Asked point blank whether he was afraid that Russia and France would block action through the UN Security Council due to their “massive commercial interests” in Iraq—i.e., their oil contracts—Blair played down the possibility. Such differences “could be resolved” he said, if there was a “different regime in Iraq”, the first time that the prime minister has made explicit his support for the Bush administration’s goal of regime change.

Just in case things did not go quite so smoothly, however, Blair underlined that the UN Security Council

would not have the final say. If some countries “put an unreasonable or unilateral block down on action”, the US and the UK would not be “confined,” Blair said. “Whatever happens, Saddam will be disarmed”.

He went on to suggest a type of “rolling war” strategy was envisaged, warning with regards to tensions with North Korea that military action would “not stop at Iraq”.

The prime minister’s bellicose remarks won support from much of the media and the Conservative Party. The *Times* explained that although Blair would win popular support if he stood up to the US, this was simply not an option.

In truth Britain had no control over the Pentagon, it explained. Blair’s choice was “not between ‘war’ or ‘no war’, but a possible war in which Britain had a notable military presence allied to disproportionate political influence, or one in which she joined other European Union states spluttering on the sidelines with no part to play in the aftermath of an inevitable American victory”.

Elsewhere, the prime minister’s statements caused deep disquiet. The BBC website forecast that should Blair go “to war without UN backing and/or no concrete evidence of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction he will not only face a public backlash in Britain, he will be isolated in the global community and probably spark a major cabinet split”.

Labour MPs expressed similar concerns at a closed discussion of the parliamentary group on Wednesday, with reports that the meeting, like the party, was completely divided over the issue.

Afterwards pro-war Labour MP Anne Campbell, said she thought half of her constituency members would resign if the government backed military action without UN authority, whilst anti-war MP Alan Simpson said Blair would lose his “democratic mandate and credibility” in such an event. Labour MP Alice Mahon complained that government policy was out of kilter with the opinion of the vast majority of people that had elected it.

Church of England bishops joined the fray, issuing a statement opposing current government policy. “We do not believe that the evidence presented to date suggests a clear link exists between Iraq and Al Qaeda or that Iraq poses an immediate threat to international security,” the statement read. Without this “military

action could not be morally justified”.

Concerns were heightened still further when Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon reported to parliament the same day that the UK was “minded” to support America’s controversial “Son of Star Wars” programme, and to offer British radar facilities for the new missile defence system. The announcement led former Labour Defence Minister Peter Kilfoyle to accuse the government of “surrendering” British foreign policy to the Bush administration.

It is no wonder that Blair is unable to reassure his critics. The prime minister is due to meet with Bush at the end of January, ostensibly to decide the next course of action. There is ample evidence that this is already determined. Military experts have said that the massive force now being assembled by the US in the Gulf—expected to comprise some 150,000 troops, including marines—is indicative that a major land offensive is being prepared.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, General Wesley Clark, NATO’s former Supreme Commander Europe, said he thought it unlikely that the US would wait for UN agreement before launching an attack, and predicted war was likely to start in mid to late February.

A small number of UK forces are currently making their way to the Gulf to join their US counterparts. Militarily, their presence is negligible. Politically, however, they are meant as a signal of the Blair government’s intent to back Bush “all the way”.



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