

The UN vote on Iraq: the political issues

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Last week's 14-0 vote in the UN Security Council lifting sanctions on Iraq has graphically exposed the futility of the illusions fostered in the UN—and in France, Germany and Russia—as a means of stopping the US-led invasion and occupation of this small, impoverished and largely defenceless country.

The US- and British-sponsored resolution legitimises what, just prior to the invasion, French, German and Russian spokesmen were declaring to be illegitimate and contrary to international law. None of the cosmetic amendments made over the last week alter the fact that the three European powers have sanctioned an indefinite US neo-colonial rule over Iraq and the plunder of its oil and other resources.

The US and its military allies hold sole political control in Iraq. All the revenue from oil sales as well as Iraqi foreign assets and a portion of the UN's "oil for food" monies are to be placed in a special fund in the Iraqi Central Bank and dispersed at the discretion of the occupying powers. Various mechanisms, including an interim Iraqi authority and a UN special representative, will consult, collaborate, advise, monitor and so on. But there is no ambiguity as to who will make the final decisions.

In embracing the US resolution, none of the political representatives of French, German or Russian capitalism attempted, in any way, to explain their change of heart. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin made clear that his government had simply dropped its objections to the war, saying "France's absolute priority now is to look to the future." He was echoed by Germany's ambassador to the UN Gunter Pleuger who lamely declared: "We can't undo history."

Just two months ago the language was totally different as French, German and Russian leaders condemned the US drive to war. On March 10, French President Jacques Chirac appeared on national television to announce that France would veto any resolution sanctioning a US war on Iraq "whatever the circumstances". There was "at this time no reason for making war," he said, declaring that an attack on Iraq without UN approval would be "a dangerous precedent". In a speech the same day in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov also indicated that Russia would exercise its veto.

Just days later, after Washington and London abandoned their attempts to obtain UN approval, French Foreign Minister Villepin expressed regret at a decision "which nothing justifies

today, and which could have heavy consequences for the region and the world." Russian President Vladimir Putin declared it was "a mistake" that was "fraught with the gravest consequences." His foreign minister Ivanov branded any invasion illegal, saying: "The use of force against Iraq, especially with reference to previous resolutions of the UN Security Council, has no legal grounds."

From the outset, this opposition was based not on principle or concern for the Iraqi people, but on naked self-interest. France, Germany and Russia all accepted Washington's pretext for war—that Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction posed a threat to the world. In November, along with the rest of the UN Security Council, they voted for resolution 1441 sanctioning a weapons inspection regime. The three powers did not rule out war on Iraq but argued that more time had to be given for UN weapons inspectors to carry out their work.

Reacting to Bush's final ultimatum to Baghdad, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder declared on March 18, just two days before the attack on Iraq, that there was no justification for armed intervention when the UN weapons inspectors had just reported progress. "My question was and is: does the degree of threat stemming from the Iraqi dictator justify a war that will bring certain death to thousands of innocent men, women and children? My answer was and is: no."

It should be noted that, even as such statements were being made, the three powers were at pains to reassure Washington that they would do nothing to impede its war efforts. The US was able to use its bases in Germany. There was not the slightest hint that any move would be made in the UN Security Council to condemn, let alone act against, the illegal war of aggression.

The utter cynicism of the present about-face by Germany, France and Russia is underscored by the fact that the events of the last two months have exposed all of Washington's justifications to be brazen lies. No so-called weapons of mass destruction, or their precursors, or the means for manufacturing them, have been found. The simple explanation is that there were none—as all involved well knew. Nor, despite having access to Iraqi security personnel and mountains of documents, has the US produced anything to demonstrate any link between the secular Hussein regime and the Islamic extremist Al Qaeda.

As for the Bush administration's absurd claim to be "liberating Iraq": this has been roundly refuted by the latest UN

Security Council resolution. It legitimises a military occupation and administration until such time as Washington establishes “an internationally recognised, representative government” in Baghdad—that is, a pliant regime drawn together from the various exiles and organisations that have been on the US payroll for the last decade. The willingness of France, Germany and Russia to drop their previous objections for last week’s vote is a sure indication that they will also rubberstamp whatever regime the US finally puts in place.

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss the events of the last months as an unfortunate episode or the product of individual weaknesses. The war on Iraq, like any great political crisis, has stripped away the inessential and transitory to lay bare the real state of international affairs. Last week’s vote in the UN Security Council above all exposed the body for what it is: an imperialist institution, in the strict scientific meaning of that term.

For decades, the UN has been presented as a hope for the future: a lever for international cooperation to ensure peace, social equality and a better world for humanity as a whole. Last week its role as a clearing house for the major powers to settle their affairs and pursue their interests become transparently evident. Having treated the UN with contempt, invaded Iraq and established a military administration in Baghdad, the Bush administration made absolutely clear that anything less than a complete and unconditional UN sanction for the US actions would have serious economic and political repercussions. Faced with these threats, France, Germany and Russia caved in and legitimised the law of the jungle—might is right—in return for a minor stake in the plunder.

As for the lesser members of the UN Security Council—Angola, Chile, Pakistan and others—their support for the resolution simply revealed the impotence and cowardice of the ruling elites of such countries vis-à-vis the major powers. The actions of Syria summed up the thoroughly venal character of all the Arab bourgeois regimes. After absenting itself from the vote at the UN, Damascus issued a contemptible statement declaring its support for the resolution “out of concern to improve the living conditions of the brotherly Iraqi people” despite its failure to make “Iraqis the masters of their own destiny and natural resources.”

The willingness of the UN Security Council to lift the economic sanctions on Iraq without any serious debate confirms that the rationale for their imposition was a sham from the start. By insisting that Iraq disarm after the 1990-91 Gulf War, the UN provided Washington with the pretext to maintain its military forces in the Persian Gulf and to engage in one provocation after another against Iraq. The failure to find any evidence of weapons of mass destruction not only exposes the criminal character of the US actions but underlines the fact that the UN as a whole is guilty of perpetuating a monumental fraud.

An estimated half million Iraqis, many of them children, have

died over the last 12 years as a result of the UN sanctions or from the air attacks carried out by US and British warplanes patrolling the no-fly zones. Yet in the UN Security Council last week, the grounds for imposing the crippling blockade were barely even discussed. No attempt was made to insist that Washington allow UN inspectors back into Iraq for the simple reason that all the major powers knew that Iraq’s limited capacity to produce weapons of mass destruction had been dismantled years ago.

If one were to go by superficial appearances, last week’s vote reestablished unanimity among the major powers in the UN Security Council. In reality, the acquiescence of the European bourgeoisie to Washington’s demands has only temporarily papered over the deep fault lines that erupted in the lead up to the war. The diplomatic war of words stemmed from the belated recognition by France, Germany and Russia that the US invasion of Iraq was part of far broader plans for American global hegemony that conflict with the fundamental interests of the European bourgeoisie.

Anyone who believes that equanimity has been restored to the United Nations after a disturbing but isolated experience is in for rude shocks. The basis for the Cold War alliance between America and Western Europe ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Bush administration’s aggressive assertion of US interests, in flagrant disregard for previous norms of international relations, stems from an attempt to resolve intractable social and economic contradictions at home through military conquest abroad. It inevitably sets the stage for future crises and ultimately for military conflict between the major imperialist powers.

For the millions who took part in the antiwar protests around the world, the vote in the United Nations provides a salutary political lesson. It demonstrates the complete worthlessness of relying on the bourgeoisie or its political agencies as a bulwark against imperialist war and the need for a new political strategy. The only viable means for waging a struggle for world peace is the independent mobilisation of the working class in every country to abolish the capitalist system that inevitably gives rise to war and to refashion society on a socialist basis to end social inequality and want.



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