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Geopolitics Special Report

Iraq: By The Ides of March

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The diplomatic endgame on Iraq is taking clearer shape, telescoping toward a climax in the first and second weeks of March that neatly coincide with a cluster of alternative start dates for a war that President Bush has agreed to with Central Command chief General Tommy Franks, US and UN sources tell us.

On the diplomatic front, a draft of a tough, tightly written new resolution declaring Iraq in further "material breach," and which has missed the final opportunity to disarm under the terms of Resolution 1441 will be circulated next week, most likely on Monday, diplomats say. The US/UK tactical divide over whether the resolution should include a deadline or ultimatum for Iraqi compliance that we wrote about two days ago (MGA 2/19/03 "Iraq: Closing the Diplomatic Window") has in fact been more or less resolved, although that seems to have escaped most of today's media reports which are just no catching wind of the short-lived tactical spat among the two allies.

For now, administration officials tell us the resolution will not include an explicit deadline that would in essence offer Baghdad yet another final, final opportunity. But there will be an implicit deadline as written in the current draft resolution, revolving around the actual date of a formal vote, which UN sources say is unlikely before March 7 -- when UNMOVIC chief Hans Blix is now tentatively scheduled to make his next formal appearance before the Security Council -- but not much beyond that.

In circulating the draft resolution as it is being currently drafted, a key element of the US/UK tactical maneuvering is to neutralize French-Russian-German calls for offering inspectors more time, by forcing the Security Council to focus solely on judging Iraq's compliance with the narrow requirements of Resolution 1441 rather than on ways to strengthen the inspections regime.

The March 7 Blix testimony will shape up as an implicit deadline

This "mind-focusing" as one diplomatic source describes their efforts will be aided by a "timeline for action" emerging from Blix's office. Blix today will formally order Baghdad to destroy missiles and engine components for banned missile programs -- UNMOVIC sources say they know of about 100 missiles declared by Iraq. "If they were smart, they would start destroying some of those missiles to show compliance, but they are more likely to put up a fight," said a UN source with direct contact with Iraqi officials.

US officials are aware that Iraq is likely to try and employ more "salami tactics," such as destroying a few missiles or offering up a few scientists for exclusive, private interviews (the UN today received a list from Baghdad of 83 scientists it says were involved in the past destruction of banned WMD). There is no question that Iraqi capitulation on its banned missile programs -- a very bitter pill for Baghdad to swallow on the eve of a possible invasion -- could complicate swift UN approval for military force.

So in order to forestall such "cat and mouse" tactics, US and UK officials plan to seize upon a 300-page report Blix is now drafting which identifies a laundry list of "unresolved disarmament issues." This report will be presented to UNMOVIC'S College of Commissioners early next week, and will be included in a written report to be delivered to the Security Council on March 3. It is intended as a "work in progress" report which will be boiled down by late March into some five to twenty "key remaining disarmament tasks" Iraq must take to win a clean bill of health from the UN. But it is morphing into something much more urgent and imminent.

This report will emerge at the same time as the Security Council is wrestling with the stark US/UK challenge to judge whether Iraq has violated 1441, and UN sources say elements of the Blix laundry list of unresolved disarmament issues could function as a de facto ultimatum: in effect, specifying steps Iraq must take -- above and beyond destruction of missiles, interviews of scientists and overflights of spy aircraft -- or to be deemed in compliance.

What this will all build toward is Blix's next appearance before the Security Council now tentatively slated for March 7. If Blix tells the Council UNMOVIC is still waiting on Iraq to start fulfilling those "unresolved disarmament issues," the US and UK will then push for a swift vote, almost certainly between March 7 and 14. US diplomats say this is truly Iraq's final opportunity to bite the bullet.

US ready to accept UN failure -- but not to stop the war

And as a senior US diplomat tells us, Washington is "ready to accept that this might not work" if it fails to round up the nine required Security Council votes and forestall any vetoes from France, Russia or China. But a failed vote, US officials say, would not forestall US action -- just make the Security Council irrelevant.

Against the backdrop of the final diplomatic endgame at the United Nations over the next two weeks, US war planning is being finalized down to an exceptionally detailed level that well-placed sources in Washington tell us points to the start of war by mid March -- but with an early March start date preferred by the US military planners still possible.

Well-placed US sources tell us that three dates were agreed to between Bush and Franks when the Centcom commander visited the White House last Thursday in what is expected to be "the last face-to-face meeting between the two" before the possible start of hostilities. Three dates were selected in case word of one leaks, the source said, adding that the three dates were "bunched together" -- and were all before mid-March.

Another indicator of the extent of war preparations and timing comes from sources in Kuwait who tell us the Kuwaiti government has just agreed to shut its international airport and air space to all nonmilitary flights upon the request from Centcom, depending on timing for US airlift needs.

Bush also reassured Franks that the timing for the start to a war, if that is the decision taken, would be determined by what would be ideal for the troops and military strategy rather than diplomatic considerations. A UK source, keenly aware of Tony Blair's predicament, shot back to us that "the timeline is for Bush and Blair, not the Pentagon, to decide."

But our US source replies: "The president is getting really impatient with all this."

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