

RESTRICTED

RUSSIA/IRAQ: PUTIN IN FRANCE AND DUMA ACTIVITY
From: MOSCOW

TO IMMEDIATE FCO

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FROM POLITICAL COUNSELLOR IN HMA'S ABSENCE ON DUTY TOUR
SUMMARY

1. Putin's remarks on possible use of a Russian veto. Duma defeats nationalist (Zhirinovskiy) call for the use of the veto.

DETAIL

Putin's comments in France

2. The Russian news agencies have carried Putin's first public reference, in France, to a possible Russian veto in the UNSC on Iraq. Speaking on French TV, Putin noted that "so far we see no need to exercise our right of veto". But he is reported to have then said that "with France or alone", Russia would be prepared to veto an "unreasonable use of force". He described the France/Russia/Germany joint statement as the first attempt since the Second World War to settle a serious and acute international issue outside the regime of blocs" and said that "if we want the world to be more predictable, and easier to forecast, and therefore a safer place, it should be a multipolar world".

3. Speaking subsequently to journalists in Bordeaux, Putin said of the veto: "We have used this right more than once, and we can do it again." But he also warned against "fuelling controversy over this issue", and stressed that "Russia will never return to the state of conflict with its partners either in Europe or in North America."

Russian press reaction to Putin's visit to France

4. Most Russian newspapers share the assessment that the Iraqi crisis has brought Russia, France and Germany together. The state-owned Rossiskaya Gazeta stressed the "high degree of trust" and "splendid personal relationship" between Chirac and Putin. Vremya Novostei (centrist broadsheet) praised Putin's advocacy of multipolarism, and said that he had become a star of the French screen. Nezavisimaya Gazeta (daily broadsheet) reflected the French newspapers' largely complimentary comments about Putin's position on Iraq. However, it noted that the one "fly in the ointment for Putin" was Le Monde's article criticising the Russian army's actions in Chechnya. Izvestiya (liberal daily) emphasised the importance of Putin's support to Chirac and Schroeder, suggesting that the French and Germans had dropped their proposal for UN peacekeepers in Iraq because Russia had not agreed to it.

Duma discussion

5. On 12 February, the Duma met to discuss Iraq. Zhirinovskiy (leader, extreme right-wing Liberal Democrats) tabled a draft statement appealing to Putin to veto any UN initiative involving the use of force against Iraq. Rogozin (Chairman, International Affairs Committee) put forward a more moderate counter-draft, which avoided directly mentioning the Russian veto but stressed

at "Russia can and must use its international authority, and its powers as a UN Security Council permanent member, to settle the Iraq problem exclusively on the basis of international law". Rogozin carried the day: his draft was passed with 252 deputies in support and five abstentions. Zhirinovsky's received the support of just 40 deputies.

6. Rogozin's moderate stance in the Duma discussion was balanced out by his interview on RTR (state-owned TV channel) on 10 February, in which he accused the US of ignoring the international legal system and trying to encircle Russia's borders by moving into Afghanistan and Iraq (he speculated that Libya was another possibility). However, Rogozin stressed that the US remained Russia's partner: his opposition to US actions was that of a concerned colleague.

COMMENT

7. Putin's remarks in France on Iraq had a harder edge to them. But this is probably in part a negotiating tactic in advance of the series of key events in the Iraq process over the next few days, and in part a desire to please his host. The line Mamedov took with HMA on 10 February is in keeping with this approach. For their part, the French Embassy here continue to believe that Russia would not veto a second UNSCR.

8. (Contact for this telegram: on Firecrest or
Moscow extn)

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