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NOSEC: IRAQ: AVOIDING A FRENCH VETO
From: PARIS

TO IMMEDIATE FCO
TELNO 110
OF 041759Z MARCH 03
AND TO IMMEDIATE CABINET OFFICE
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CABINET OFFICE FOR MANNING AND RYCROFT
SEE MIFT

SUMMARY

1. If we get the votes, a lone French veto remains hard to imagine but is by no means out of the question, given where Chirac still is. We should try to help him avoid it at the right moment by a personal appeal from the Prime Minister, with the Elysee warmed up in advance as necessary, as well as from Bush - once we have the votes. MIFT sets out the main arguments, which are no longer primarily about Iraq, but about what kind of international system we want to be left with. A personal big picture appeal might be most effective. Kofi Annan (and Schroeder) may also be able to help at the right moment.

DETAIL

2. As we know, Villepin's comment to David Frost over the weekend, that France would oppose a second resolution, and other similar public comments, do not necessarily mean a veto. But Saddam's agreement to destroy the Al-Samoud missiles, and his other moves, have comforted the French in their view that inspections are working and that they speak for the vast majority of the international community in seeking more time for peaceful disarmament. There are nerves about potential French isolation in the Quai and in Chirac's own UMP party. But I still see no sign that Chirac himself is looking for a way out. His apparently rapturous reception in Algiers this weekend, and his continuing (unprecedented) domestic popularity will only boost his confidence.

3. Levitte's comments to Jeremy Greenstock over the weekend reinforce this, but nothing the French say at this stage, even privately, should be taken at face value. Their main aim is to influence the undecided in the Security Council: for the time being, French efforts are almost entirely focussed on preventing the US and ourselves from mustering 9 votes, and on keeping alongside the Russians and Chinese, in order to avoid being put on the spot. Like us, they are working the phones as hard as they can. There is nothing that we can do now to dissuade them from this course.

4. Should they fail, it is hard to see how the French could rationally calculate a solitary veto to be in their interests. But the idea of cutting a figure on the international stage will appeal much more to Chirac than it would to us in similar circumstances. He could no doubt shift at the last minute and get away with it in domestic terms. But he is certainly not yet preparing the ground for an abstention and may well be tempted to make a "heroic" stand to defend an alternative French vision of the world.

5. Even if a lone French veto were manageable in straight Iraqi

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policy terms, its consequences in Europe, in the UN, across the Atlantic and more widely, could be very difficult to manage indeed. So we need to have a good go at dissuading Chirac, not so much because I expect him to be convinced by our power of argument, but because in my judgement he is less likely to shift if no-one serious has asked him to do so. So both the Prime Minister and Bush should call Chirac at the right moment, if and when it becomes sufficiently clear that we have the votes, and that the Russians and Chinese will not veto. MIFT contains the best detailed British arguments I can see for persuading Chirac (the Americans will obviously come at it from a different angle). But a personal appeal from the Prime Minister on the following broad lines might have most impact:

- understand that you don't like way in which US have gone about Iraq or being put on the spot. Agree that being an ally does not mean unconditional support. But whatever our arguments about Iraq, reality is that US feel their national security interests are threatened. They will just about understand if you are not able to support them. They will not if you veto. The world may not stop turning - and military action can only be stopped by Saddam's actions not yours - but your ability to influence the US and the international scene will be diminished for a significant period

- I really don't want to see this. We both want the US to continue to engage in the world's multilateral organisations. Iraq is not the right issue on which to try to force this question with the US, and in the end, is not worth risking a fundamental transatlantic split over either. After Iraq, we need to pick up the pieces and get back to working together on the big issues that face us all: Iran, DPRK, terrorism, climate change, poverty etc. A fracture of this kind will make all this much more difficult

- we are closer than you might think on the underlying picture. We need a stronger EU and it needs to be able to deal with the US more as an equal partner - an Europe-puissance if you want to call it that. But we are not there yet, and we never will be if we try to build it on the ruins of the transatlantic relationship or define Europe through its opposition to the US. A veto would not advance your interests or your vision of Europe and the world, and could even destroy it.

6. An approach from the Prime Minister should be prepared in advance with the Elysee, either through me, or by David Manning, and reinforced by action with Villepin and the Quai. The timing is uncertain, depending on the timing of and prospects for a New York vote, but we presumably might need to start at least the warm-up by the end of this week, if the Security Council line-up is clearly moving our way by then.

7. A final thought: Kofi Annan might be able to make a powerful late appeal to Chirac not to jeopardise UN/Security Council credibility by vetoing, and we should keep this in mind. For the moment my guess is , but his calculation may well change if we have the votes. Similarly, Schroeder might well be able to influence Chirac at a late stage if he is by then very worried about the effects of a negative vote but too weak/boxed in to detach himself from Chirac's coat-tails. He might be open to Prime Ministerial argument about his responsibility to save Europe from a grand Gaullist gesture.

HOLMES