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MADRID: PLEASE PASS TO MANNING AND RYCROFT

SUBJECT: NOSEC: IRAQ: WHICH WAY WILL RUSSIA JUMP?

## Summary

1. The Russians are not nearly as steamed up about Iraq as the French and Germans. Putin's attitude is based on a pragmatic assessment of Russia's interests - which means avoiding war if possible, but more importantly not falling out with the Americans and avoiding marginalisation of the UN. They are not talking veto language, and Putin's latest remarks begin to prepare public opinion for a vote in favour.

## Detail

2. I had expected the approach to a second resolution to be harder for the Russians than SCR 1441, but that's not how it's turning out so far. They are, inevitably, in the "most opposed" group in the Security Council (UKMIS tel 161), but at the Moscow end they are not signalling real determination to make difficulties or hold out to the end - rather the opposite. The mood is a mixture of pragmatism and sullen acquiescence in a presumed outcome.

3. The straws in the wind:

- PUBLIC STATEMENTS: Before the Blix presentation, Russian Ministers and spokesmen were taking the line that the inspectors had found nothing and needed more time, and that military action (particularly unilateral) would not be justified. However the official line was ritualistic, carefully moderated, and designed not to box Russia in (nor to whip up public emotions). Putin left most of the talking to the Ivanovs. Putin's remarks in Kiev post-Blix, openly contemplating agreement with the USA in the Security Council if Iraq created problems for the inspectors, changed the tune sharply, and Igor Ivanov has swung into line with his concerns about "unclear questions with regard to chemical and biological weapons" (Moscow tel 32).

- PRIVATE SIGNALS: Putin first told the PM two years ago that he would not regret the passing of Saddam Hussein, and he and Prikhodko have not pressed hard on us since SCR 1441. The

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44

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Americans are evidently getting the same signal, and my US colleague is quietly confident about the Russians. Putin is acting as if he has

war

against terrorism and Al-Qaida.

- **THE FRANCO-RUSSIAN SYMPHONY:** It isn't playing. Before 1441, Chirac and Villepin were burning up the phone lines to Moscow, and Lavrov and Levitte were (for a while) in bed together in New York. It feels different this time. Part of the reason is that the Russians thought the French welshed on them in the 1441 end game; part is that Putin has never developed with Chirac the friendship he feels with Blair, Schroeder and Bush; part is that Schroeder doesn't seem to be actively tugging Putin his way. But I think the larger point is that Putin knows this is the litmus test with Bush and has staked heavily on a strategic relationship with the Americans, recognising and pragmatically accepting the facts of global power, whereas Chirac's strategic orientation is the opposite. There is also no awkward question here of whether or not to join the war. From 9-11 February, Putin will be visiting Germany and France (where the media knives are out over Chechnya). This may well create the impression of a common front, but under the surface it isn't so.

- **POLITICAL HEAT:** Almost no one here wants to see a war in Iraq; and the Russian body politic is less pragmatic than Putin and acutely uncomfortable with US hyperpower and Russian impotence. But there is less heat here than in France, Germany or Western Europe in general. This is not the Balkans. Russian nationalists can whip up crude, racist emotions over fellow Slavs, but not over Arabs or Moslems. (And on the Arab/Israel dispute, they rather admire Sharon's tough way of handling Islamic terrorists.) Some leading politicians (eg Rogozin) think Putin will pay a domestic price in this election year for backing the Americans. Others (Yavlinsky) see the voters as indifferent, and interested in bread and butter. The political class are expressing less emotion to us than over past European issues (Kosovo, NATO enlargement, Kaliningrad), and no one is forecasting that Putin will break with the Americans, however much they (including the MFA) dislike his line. I had a lot of military and defence types at my house last night - none of them were steamed up. There are still dangers for Putin. I sense that both his (numerous) opponents within the system and the Communist and nationalist forces in the political arena are biding their time, and could go for him if the affair went badly.

- **BUSINESS INTERESTS:** The Russians are bidding up their economic interests (eg the recent oil delegation to Baghdad), and Putin wants to be seen to be defending them. But the oligarchs have gone quiet in public, and don't seem to be running the policy. Ditto the Iraqi debt argument. The Iraqis have not been forgiven for cancelling Lukoil's West Qurna contract - shot in foot. Keeping the oil price high (though not extreme) and avoiding a post-conflict collapse below \$18-20 is a key interest. They seem less nervous about this (Venezuela helps).

- **POLITICAL INITIATIVES:** They're not trying any. No emissaries with peace plans. They seem to have put some pressure on Iraq privately. Relations are not warm.

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- EVACUATION: The MFA are publicly denying plans - and privately talking to the Americans about US help in planning evacuation.

4. So what will the Russians do?

- Putin's key objectives will be to:

(a) stay onside with the Americans, and gain some leverage with them on major Russian interests.

(b) avoid marginalisation of either Russia or the UN. UNSC Permanent Membership gives Russia power.

(c) avoid domestic damage.

- They will tuck in behind the French and Germans in the Security Council, with the Chinese, but not lead the pack. They'll support more time for inspections, calls for proof positive, and ploys to get Saddam to concede or step down.

- They will not veto in isolation; probably not veto in Chinese company alone; and in general will do all they can to avoid vetoing. They would rather let through (perhaps on an abstention) a distasteful second UNSCR than see the Americans go unilaterally and sideline the Security Council. They would vote in favour of a "smoking gun" resolution, and in favour or abstain (depending on the French vote) on a resolution based on further reports from Blix of non-cooperation.

- Russia's biggest problem is potentially the French and Germans. It would be awkward but not completely impossible for Putin domestically to be more US-friendly in a vote than Schroeder/Chirac.

- If the US goes unilateral, the Russians will make a decent show of grumbling, the domestic temperature will rise, but they won't be actively obstructive.

5. What should we do? More of the same. We should help the Americans to keep the Russians engaged, including on "day after" issues. This means keeping up the PM's conversations with Putin (as last week) and yours with Ivanov (as today). First Deputy Foreign Minister Trubnikov will be in London next week. Iraq isn't his patch, but he has some weight and we should take him through the issue. Chaplin has proposed a visit to Moscow during the next fortnight.

6. The bottom line is that Putin doesn't want to lose the chips he's staked on Bush. Iraq versus USA is a no-brainer. (Nor does Putin wish to part company with us, in the run-up to his State Visit).

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