

LETTER OF APRIL 2002. IN THE KREMLIN, SUPPORTING U.S. MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST IRAQ IS NO LONGER A QUESTION.

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Summary: The comments by the Director of PIR Center reveal a new trend, not yet declared officially, in Russian policy towards Saddam's regime in Iraq. The author indicates windows of opportunity for Russia-US dialogue on states of concern; primarily, on Iraq, before the summit, but argues, at the same time, that in the case of Iran, unlike Iraq, there is little progress in increasing an understanding among the American and Russian sides.

While some US allies in Europe are hesitant or skeptical about a coming war against Saddam Hussein, Russia, a new US strategic partner in international antiterrorist campaigns, seems to finally express support for a future US-led military action against Iraq.

It is unlikely, though, that the Russian political leadership will make any loud public statements about its decision to agree with further US steps against Iraq. More realistically, this will be a silent support, even combined with some mild public criticisms. However, Americans should now be more than satisfied with the most recent Russian reaction on US preparations for a new war.

Moscow and Washington, at discreet and friendly talks, both have recognized that Baghdad has nothing or too little to do with al Qaeda and with international terrorism nets to justify an attack against it. Both seem to have if not the same, very similar data on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems: in both capitals, government experts simply would not buy rumors that Saddam now, after his defeat in the Gulf war and subsequent sanctions, succeeded in his unconventional military programs and possesses such weapons. But, experts on both sides of the ocean continue, Saddam is the *enfant terrible* of the region, which is equally important and sensitive for United States and for Russia, and, yes, he continues to maintain active interest in developing his WMD programs, time and circumstances permitting. He is a cheater, and it is impossible to deal with him and reach agreements on a compromise. This is why he and his regime should be the next target.

There is nothing surprising when such conclusions are now heard in every corner in Washington. For Moscow, however, this is an important and symptomatic political change, subject to prior internal intensive debate.

It is a debate over decisions made. Those who were repeating the mantra about seven (or eight, or how many?) billion dollars of Saddam's debt to Russia to be paid back "as soon as sanctions are lifted," are defeated. Lobbyists from oil companies who were telling tales in Kremlin corridors about the 20 or more billion dollars they - and presumably Russia - would gain from post-embargo trade with Saddam's Iraq, were not trusted. (The key lobbyist, Lukoil, currently faces increasingly severe troubles in its dialogue with the Kremlin rulers.)

Two key arguments which finally prevailed in the debate were nonproliferation and strategic economic interests.

For President Putin, the prevention of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has become a surprisingly important component in his foreign and security policy. He even once named nonproliferation "probably the most important national security priority" for Russia. Saddam's games with Moscow-supported Hans Blix's UNMOVIC inspectors finally irritated the Russian leadership. "If he [Saddam] does not immediately and unconditionally open all doors to [UN] inspectors, we would find no reason to provide any resistance to US plans to bomb him. It is just boring when he is trying again and again to play on our [Russia's] contradictions with the Americans. Has he noticed that the times have changed? Finally, we are exhausted with him: he is simply too irresponsible and too unreliable", a Russian government expert said this winter.

There has been little progress in Iraqi behavior since then. Meanwhile, some experts in Moscow have begun talking (with no change in their basic position that Saddam has no weapons of mass destruction) about "ifs": "what if he goes on with restoring of his BW program... if so, he may succeed rather quickly..." And Moscow decided it did not want this to happen. Why not again use a scenario which worked well in Afghanistan: Russians have too limited resources to act, to even provide active support to Americans during the operation; but why not use Bush's - almost religious - desire to cleanse Iraq of Saddam to also meet Russia's interest in reducing proliferation threats not far from its borders. As an influential advisor to the Kremlin and current head of the foreign affairs committee of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the parliament) Mikhail Margelov acknowledged in an interview published in March, "we have the same enemies as Americans. But we have no power to fight them now. Americans can well do it for us".

Russia would perhaps see no problem in sharing its intelligence with Americans in an Iraqi operation too, as it worked well in Afghanistan, recognizing, though, the fact that Russian intelligence in this particular region could be weaker and much more limited than that of the US or Israel.

No surprise, economic arguments were even stronger and even more effective in finalizing decisions in the Kremlin. Forget about the mythical billions Saddam will provide for Russia! Bush will pay instead. And the May summit is a good place to make a deal. According to well-informed Russian defense analyst Alexander Golts, such a deal has already been well drafted by experts on both sides. Even if Mr. Golts's sources, for this or that reason, are a little bit hasty with their conclusions, it is obvious that the Russian leadership was pleased with the US "understanding" of Russia's concerns about potential financial losses in Iraq in case of war, and was thinking about the possibility of a bargain.

For Russian government experts implementing President Putin's directives and dealing with this issue, however, some concerns remain.

Number one: what will happen in Iraq after Saddam is removed? Who will replace him? Will Iraq disintegrate or not? It looks like the American counterparts, who during recent meetings generally made Russians happy with their openness, are unable to respond to these crucial questions.

Number two: do American counterparts recognize the major difference for Russia in its approach to Iraq and to Iran? With its support for anti-Saddam plans, Russians definitely do not want their message to be read in Washington that Russia has its whole foreign policy on sale and that, after a check for silence in the Iraqi war is endorsed, both parties could exchange price lists and wish lists in regard to Iran. "In the case of Iran, the situation differs dramatically from the Iraqi one," believes one Russian expert. "Our current position on Iran, on a partnership with it is strong, and no one [in Moscow] has plans to use the Iraqi model of discussions with Americans when they touch upon Iran. We share some of the US concern regarding Iran, but basically we are still in disagreement with them on most assessments".

When George Bush comes to Moscow, it is unlikely that he and Vladimir Putin will spend a lot of time discussing Iraq: thanks to bilateral consultations, their positions are now very close, if not identical, and there is actually not too much to discuss. The same applies to Iran, but for a very different reason: the positions are still too far from each other.

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