

The Meaning of the UNSC Iran Vote: Were Russia and China given private assurances by Bush?

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In the aftermath of the [Dec. 23 United Nations Security Council](#) unanimous [vote](#) imposing sanctions on Iran for failing to suspend uranium enrichment ([see text of resolution here](#)), one has to wonder: why did Russia and China go along with it?

[Iran's pursuit of uranium enrichment for civilian nuclear purposes](#) is [allowed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#), and the [IAEA has found no indication that Iran has diverted any nuclear material to military purposes](#). While Russia [may prefer for its own reasons](#) that Iran not enrich uranium, it [fully recognizes that Iran's pursuit is legal under international law](#). Furthermore, [as Western news media constantly emphasize, Russia and China have extensive commercial ties with Iran](#), hence it is not in their interest to antagonize Iran. Their support of UNSC1737 doesn't seem to make sense.

The UNSC vote is ominous because it allows Bush to cut and paste from his [March 17th 2003 speech on the impending Iraq attack](#), substituting "q" for "n":

- *The (Iraqi) Iranian regime has used diplomacy as a ploy to gain time and advantage. It has uniformly defied Security Council resolutions*
- *[The regime] has a deep hatred of America and our friends. And it has aided, trained and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda. (see [9/11 commission report](#))*
- *Recognizing the threat to our country, the United States Congress voted overwhelmingly last year (to support the use of force against Iraq) to ["hold the current regime in Iran accountable for its threatening behavior"](#).*
- *America tried to work with the United Nations to address this threat because we wanted to resolve the issue peacefully.*
- *For the last four-and-a-half months, the United States and our allies have worked within the Security Council to enforce that Council's long-standing demands. Yet, some permanent members of the Security Council have publicly announced they*

will veto any resolution that compels (the disarmament of Iraq) the denuclearization of Iran. These governments share our assessment of the danger, but not our resolve to meet it.

- *The United Nations Security Council has not lived up to its responsibilities, so we will rise to ours.*
- *Should (Saddam Hussein) Mahmoud Ahmadinejad choose confrontation, the American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war, and every measure will be taken to win it.*
- *[T]he only way to reduce the harm and duration of war is to apply the full force and might of our military, and we are prepared to do so.*

In the case of Iran, this last statement would be especially ominous, because [it would signal that the US will use nuclear weapons against Iran](#). Recall that Bush has [explicitly refused to take the option of a US nuclear strike against Iran off the table](#).

Many other statements in the March 17th 2003 speech apply even better to Iran than they did to Iraq. “Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised” was false, but that Iran is enriching uranium is true. Saddam could not disarm of weapons it didn’t have, but Iran could bow to Bush’s demand and stop its nuclear enrichment program, hence the statement that by refusing to do so it would be “choosing” war is somewhat less farfetched. Iran’s [alleged threats against Israel](#) will undoubtedly be prominently featured in Bush’s speeches defending military action against Iran.

Iran will not stop its enrichment program, certainly not as a precondition to negotiations. This should be obvious to Bush, as well as to Russia and China. Hence one must ask: why is Bush pursuing this approach, and why are Russia and China, albeit reluctantly, supporting it?

What are Bush’s intentions toward Iran?

If Bush had any intention of reaching a negotiated agreement with Iran, he had [plenty of opportunities to pursue such options](#), as recently [detailed by Flynt Leverett](#) (see [complete article here](#)) [pdf]. In the absence of any concession by the US, Iran will not submit to US demands, and weak sanctions resolutions do not exert any real pressure on Iran. This has been clear to many observers [including this author](#) for many months. The only rational explanation to understand the US push to pass resolutions against Iran, no matter how weak, is that its purpose is to lay the ground for [planned military action](#).

If the intention is to attack Iran, it was important for Bush to have this UNSC resolution ([and the preceding one of July 31st](#)) approved *unanimously*, that makes a demand on Iran that Iran will not meet, to provide a fig-leaf argument that “the world” demands action, as UNSC 1441 did in the case of Iraq.

Why did Russia and China support sanctions?

Russia and China could have chosen to veto [the resolution](#), or at least abstain. Instead, after negotiating to water it down, they voted for sanctions. Why?

One could argue that they sincerely would prefer that Iran stops enriching uranium, permanently or at least temporarily, to defuse tensions. That may well be so. However, there has never been any indication that Iran would be inclined to stop enriching uranium if such sanctions are imposed, quite the contrary. These sanctions have essentially no effect on Iran, and Iran is in a position where it could live with even much stronger sanctions without much problem. So [Iran's defiant reaction](#) to the latest UN resolution was entirely predictable.

So I argue that Russia and China's vote is understandable only under the assumption that private discussions have been going on between them and the US. Their vote is understandable if in those private discussions:

- Bush strongly indicated that he would use military force if Russia and China didn't agree to support sanctions.
- Bush gave private assurances to Russia and China that he would not initiate military action against Iran without UNSC consent.
- Bush demanded that his private assurances remain private, arguing that making them public would undermine the diplomatic effort by reducing the pressure on Iran.
- Bush said that if his private assurances were made public deliberately or accidentally after the UNSC vote, they would no longer be binding.

A hint suggesting that such private assurances have been given is that Bush and Putin have publicly [stressed the importance of a "unified position" on Iran](#). As long as there is a "unified position" Iran will not be attacked, because Putin would never agree to such a course of action.

Are Bush's private assurances believable?

I will not make a judgment of how trustworthy President Bush is. However I argue that the evidence clearly indicates that any private assurances given by Bush to Russia and China that he will not resort to military action against Iran without Security Council approval were only given to induce them to support the UN action, and that he has no intention of honoring them.

The reason is simply that there is no other way to understand what Bush's purpose is in the approach being pursued, other than to reach a diplomatic impasse and subsequently resort to military action. The more sanctions are imposed, the less inclined and the less likely Iran will be to engage in compromise.

On the other hand, any private and [public assurances that Bush may have given Israel](#) regarding US support of [Israel against Iran](#) are likely to be honored by Bush, with [Congress' full support](#).

The final conditions for the [impending military action](#) are being rapidly put in place as we speak:

- Dec. 19: [U.S. is sending aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf](#) to “warn” Iran.
- Dec. 20: [Blair singles out Iran as the main obstacle to peace](#) in the Middle East.
- Dec. 23: UNSC sanctions resolution passes.

How will it get started? Either a [Gulf-of-Tonkin-like incident](#), or an [attack by Israel](#), or an incident in Iraq that will be blamed on Iran. Anything to provoke an Iranian response, argue “self-defense”, and escalate the confrontation till it leads to [taking out our big guns, nuclear weapons](#).

How can it be prevented?

As I and [other authors have argued](#), a military confrontation with Iran [is bound to lead to the US use of nuclear weapons](#). That is the only way the US can hope for [“rapid and favorable war termination on US terms”](#). In the absence of a [“nuclear option”](#) the US is highly unlikely to attack Iran because [it would carry a huge military cost](#). However it should be clear to most rational people that a US use of nuclear weapons, [no matter how small](#), against Iran [would have disastrous consequences](#) for the future of the world.

Consequently I argue that to prevent a military confrontation with Iran and facilitate a diplomatic solution it is essential to focus on [getting the US nuclear option against Iran off the table](#).

Russia and China may already have privately assured Bush that a US use of nuclear weapons against Iran would not be acceptable to them under *any* circumstances, no matter what the [“military necessity”](#) or the [“surprising military developments”](#) are, and that any US preparations planning for contingency use like [forward deployment of tactical nuclear weapons](#) would not be acceptable to them. Russia and China may already have privately warned Bush of actions they may take in response to a US nuclear use against Iran, from diplomatic to economic to military. Russia and China could ask that Bush publicly takes the “nuclear option” off the table as a condition to support any further diplomatic action against Iran. The US nuclear option against Iran is not going to pressure Iran to abandon enrichment, quite the contrary, and taking it off the table would certainly help to defuse tension.

The newly elected democratic Congress could take the US nuclear option against Iran off the table. Congress could pass a law prohibiting the US military from using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states. [Here is an example of such a bill](#). While the Constitution makes the President the “Commander in Chief”, it assigns Congress the responsibility to [“make rules for the government and regulation”](#) of the armed forces. Hence Congress could

pass a law removing the [authority of Bush to order the use of nuclear weapons](#) against Iran, unless [Congress first declares Iran to be a nuclear power](#).

Members of Congress should bring this issue to the forefront of public attention, call for hearings and introduce bills addressing the US nuclear weapons use issue. [Representative Dennis Kucinich has taken the lead](#) by publicly calling for the US to renounce nuclear first-strike policy. Any private assurances that members of Congress may have been given regarding US plans for nuclear weapons deployment and use should be made public. The public has a right to know.

The US use of nuclear weapons against Iran will affect America for generations to come. It is the responsibility of every member of Congress to do everything possible to remove the possibility that such a momentous decision could be made singlehandedly by a President that has earned a [record low approval rating](#). Just as ["obeying orders" is no excuse](#) under international law for committing illegal and immoral acts, each member of Congress will be fully responsible for choosing to ignore this issue.

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