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U.S. offers deal on Iraq at UN

France, Russia lowering opposition as compromise resolution takes shape

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NEW YORK — Bowing to pressure, the United States offered a compromise proposal at the United Nations that would call for serious "consequences" if Iraq does not comply with tough weapons inspections, and

France and Russia appeared ready Thursday to sign on.

The U.S. proposal calls for one resolution, rather than two, that would require the United States to consult with the UN Security Council—but not have to wait for its authorization—before taking military action if Iraq

blocks weapons inspectors from doing their work.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said he thinks there are "favorable conditions" for an agreement within the council. While France has not formally accepted the U.S. compromise, reportedly holding out for a few changes in the draft, diplomats thought there would be agreement soon.

French diplomats declined to comment, but others close to the

process said Paris had informally signaled its acceptance.

"Their instinct is to push for more," said a council diplomat. "But they won't let that kill the deal."

The compromise was outlined Wednesday by Secretary of State Colin Powell in phone conversations with his French and Russian counterparts.

On Thursday, Powell said that further conversations with the two parties "are going well." He

was in New York for a scheduled speech but spent the day lobbying Security Council ambassadors by phone and meeting with the UN's chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix.

After the meetings, a senior State Department official sounded optimistic that five weeks of negotiations were finally coming to a close.

"Everyone is feeling now

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AP photo by Kathy Willens

Iraqi UN Ambassador Mohammed Al-Douri listens to the discussions Thursday among Security Council members as some of them attempt to find a peaceful solution to the escalating crisis.

RESOLUTION: Diplomats say pact could come soon

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we're in the homestretch," the official said. "We've rounded the bend."

The resolution proposed by the United States is a deliberately ambiguous compromise that allows its main opponent on the council—the French—to take credit for keeping the United States from acting without the United Nations.

While Washington would prefer UN backing, the language of the draft also ensures it would not have to win a second Security Council resolution to authorize a strike.

"The United States does not need any additional authority, even now, to take action to defend ourselves," Powell said.

Any resolution that emerges, he added, would preserve the right of the United States to act

in concert with other nations "even though the UN would not wish to act."

The French had been insisting on a two-step process designed to keep the United States from launching a strike as soon as weapons inspectors run into trouble in Iraq.

The first resolution, under the French proposal, would strengthen the inspectors' mandate and grant them immediate access to any site in Iraq. If the inspectors were impeded, the French wanted to require a second resolution to approve war.

In the past week, however, French diplomats have amended their criteria to a "second meeting, not necessarily a resolution," paving the way for compromise.

The U.S. formula falls in between Washington's demand for a single resolution and the French preference for two—resulting, in effect, in a step and a half.

The U.S. draft calls for the Security Council to convene immediately if the chief weapons inspectors report "any failure by Iraq to comply with its disarmament obligations, including its obligations regarding inspections." The council will then "consider the situation" and—the U.S. hopes—declare Iraq in further "material breach."

A second resolution autho-

rizing action would be welcome, but not necessary, U.S. officials insist. The declaration of "material breach," a U.S. official said, would signal adequate multilateral support for the United States to act without the formality of a resolution.

"The French don't oppose military action if Iraq fails to cooperate with inspectors," said a council diplomat. "They just don't want the U.S. to go off on its own. The U.S. has said it will consult with the council but it doesn't want to be bound by it."

The U.S. draft represents a careful compromise, not only with the Security Council but also with demands of hard-liners in the Bush administration.

While French diplomats say they dislike the demand in the draft for "consequences"—implying but not specifying military action—Washington insists that the term must remain.

Powell described "consequences" as one of the key elements of the resolution.

A resolution must make "clear that Iraq has been in violation—in material breach—of UN resolutions for a long period of time," he said. Inspectors must go in with "more powerful instructions and with much more support. And third, there must be a threat—consequences for their continued failure."

Los Angeles Times