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Russia says UN plan for Iran is 'first step to war'

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Russia will seek the removal tonight of the core of a UK-sponsored draft United Nations resolution on Iran because it fears that it could pave the way to unilateral military action to curb the Iranian nuclear programme.

A bruising battle looms in New York at a dinner of foreign ministers of the five UN Security Council veto-holding members, plus Germany, over UN plans to compel Iran to abandon uranium enrichment. The high-stakes talks at the Waldorf hotel will be the first official duty for Margaret Beckett, who replaced Jack Straw as Foreign Secretary on Friday, and could result in an embarrassing climb-down for Britain.

British and US officials have said the core of the draft text is its placement under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which provides for possible sanctions and military enforcement.

John Bolton, the US ambassador to the UN, said last week when Britain, France and the US tabled the draft: "The fundamental point is for Russia and China to agree that this is a threat to international peace and security under Chapter VII."

But faced with heated Russian and Chinese objections to the Chapter VII provision at ambassador level, Mr Bolton was saying by Saturday night that he had asked the two countries to come up with another way of making the resolution's demands mandatory.

Yury Fedotov, the Russian ambassador in London, said his country opposed the Chapter VII reference because it evoked memories of past UN resolutions on Yugoslavia and Iraq that led to US-led military action which had not been authorised by the Security Council.

Russia's partners in the Security Council had argued in the past that the reference was needed to obtain "robust language," he said. But "afterwards it was used to justify unilateral action. In the case of Yugoslavia, for example, we were told at the beginning that references to Chapter VII were necessary to send political signals, and it finally ended up with the Nato bombardments."

Mr Fedotov said Russia regretted that the co-sponsors decided to table the resolution without holding further consultations, acknowledging that Iran could take political advantage of the disunity among the big powers on the Security Council.

Iran threatened yesterday to pull out of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which would end the international supervision of its nuclear programme. Europe and the US believe that Iran is using the cover of a civilian programme to build a nuclear bomb, while Tehran says that its uranium enrichment is purely for peaceful purposes.

The Iranian parliament wrote to the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, threatening to ask the Tehran government to withdraw from the treaty unless the UN Security Council resolved the crisis "peacefully."

Russia says that although statements by the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had been "unacceptable", the international community should build on the official Iranian position to bring Iran into compliance through "incentives rather than sanctions".

Mr Fedotov said: "Our position is not much different from Britain and the US. We want Iran's nuclear programme to remain in a peaceful framework, and we need clarification on its past programmes on the questions raised by the International Atomic Energy Agency [the UN nuclear watchdog]. But on tactics we have our own views, based on past experience regarding Iraq and Yugoslavia.

"We have serious doubts sanctions would work. [They] could pave the way to a military action. The military option is a nonsense. It's [an] adventure that could threaten international stability in this region and beyond."

Iran remains defiant and has threatened to strike back against the interests of any country that tries to stop it enriching uranium.

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