

OPINION/ESSAYS

Build on the UN-Iraq Agreement: Here's How

By Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr.

AS the dust settles from the latest rush to the brink of hostilities between Iraq and (mainly) American forces, many in Washington are finding fault with the new United Nations inspection arrangements in Iraq, and with the accompanying UN resolution warning Baghdad to cooperate.

Yet, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan deserves credit, not criticism, for his 11th-hour agreement with Iraq. It gave the Clinton administration a chance to reassess its own deeply troubled position in the Persian Gulf before Saddam Hussein could draw it into a win-the-battle-but-lose-the-war situation.

The US has, rightly, stood up to Iraq's brazen efforts to evade UN scrutiny of its weapons of mass destruction programs, so that the Middle East might be spared a future calamity. But being right is not enough. From Congress to the audience at Ohio State University, from the UN Security Council to the capitals of the old Gulf War "coalition," it is painfully clear that the administration's overall approach toward Iraq lacks support, if indeed it is understood at all.

Five years into President Clinton's stewardship over American interests in this sensitive region, it is hard to avoid the perception that he and his policy aides have done little more than try to cling to the status quo inherited from President Bush. The Middle East has changed a lot during the 1990s; the Clinton administration has not attuned its perceptions or policies to the changes. The result is a tenuous and deteriorating strategic position.

Whatever personal energies the president has expended on the region have largely been devoted to the Arab-Israeli peace process. Even here, Clinton has played the US hand tentatively and unpersuasively, giving Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu no face-saving alternative to pursuing the deleterious path demanded by his party's hard-liners.

In the face of complex, serious challenges posed by Iran, Republicans and Democrats alike have recklessly outbid one another to erect unilateral American sanctions that reflect no real strategy, enjoy no international support, and provide no basis for responding coherently to overtures from Tehran.

Meanwhile, the Arab states of the Gulf have learned that the Clinton administration pays high-level attention to them only when it needs something. They have watched the US repeatedly lapse into global military convulsions at the whim of Saddam, making the Iraqi dictator appear to be America's equal.

It is small wonder that so many governments have found it in their interest to distance themselves from Washington's activities in the region. The peoples of the Gulf find little in the Clinton performance with which to identify. With the understandable exception of Kuwait, negative popular sentiment is putting

at risk the welcome that US forces have long enjoyed in the Gulf.

The Clinton administration would do well to realize that US national interests are linked to the successful completion of the Arab-Israeli peace process, irrespective of the parties' positions at any given time. It could further reverse its isolation by crafting an Iran policy that not only addresses current threats, but also puts forward a credible vision of a more secure, harmonious, and prosperous region—unlikely though it may seem today—wherein Iran assumes its natural place of importance without posing dangers to its neighbors or to US interests.

Right now, however, Iraq is the problem at hand for US policymakers.

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Bill Clinton

This observer would propose the Clinton administration explore a comprehensive refocusing of the UN-authorized approach to Iraq, a grand bargain between the US and other governments, codified by the Security Council, in which all agree to a package of measures such as the following:

- Separate Saddam from the sovereignty of Iraq by convicting him of war crimes, finding and freezing funds held by the regime in foreign financial havens, and denying visas to key Iraqi regime figures and their relatives.
- Shut down Saddam's media presence within Iraq, principally the local television broadcast facilities, by force if necessary.
- Consider any UN inspection site to be an approved military target, if access is denied.
- Expand "no fly" restrictions to ban Iraqi military helicopter flights and significant ground-forces movements.
- Maintain sufficient coalition forces in-theater.
- Declare a deterrent policy of "Unilateral Assured Destruction" should Iraq employ any weapon of mass destruction.

• Express readiness to consider a clean slate with any successor to Saddam (but keep Washington's inept hand out of the business of creating the next Iraqi government).

• As the incentive for other governments to sign on, lift the UN sanctions, under controlled conditions, so that the Iraqi people will suffer less for their dictator's sins and the Saddam clique can no longer profit by controlling the flow of scarce goods.

The US is without peer as a military power; there is no need for an Iraqi crisis to reaffirm this. Missing in the Gulf is an American approach that demonstrates an equivalent strength of wit, that exerts influence and attracts support by dint of being tactically sensible, morally appropriate, and geopolitically visionary. Mr. Annan has done his job; it is Clinton's turn to step up to the issues that are already defining the future in the Middle East.

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