

Saddam Hussein's latest foray to the center stage of international affairs, the movement of elite Republican Guard units southward toward the Kuwaiti border, appears to have been an attempt to underscore to the Iraqi people and to states in the region his vitality as a leader. He made this move two weeks after the Iraqi government was forced by necessity to cut back by nearly forty percent food rations to the population, and one week before the United Nations Special Commissioner, Rolf Ekeus, was to issue a report attesting that a weapons of mass destruction monitoring and verification regime in Iraq was now "provisionally operable."

It is possible that, by a logic alien to Western civic culture, Saddam Hussein's menacing ploy boosted his stature with some in Iraq, although this time around he won no Palestinian or Jordanian sympathy. He certainly made the point to one and all that he remains a force to be reckoned with. But whatever benefits the Iraqi leader hoped to reap from this action, the negative consequences will almost certainly outweigh them. Iraq has blundered badly, and set back its own campaign to have U.N. sanctions and restrictions lifted.

Different Views from Washington and Baghdad.

Among the Security Council permanent member states, there has long been a lingering suspicion that Iraq's cooperation with the U.N. Special Commission's monitoring effort did not signify a genuine intent to forego a weapons of mass destruction capability permanently. Mr. David Kay, who led many international inspections of Iraqi weapons sites, has said he fully expects Iraq to try to reconstitute its weapons capabilities after the sanctions are lifted and the Baghdad regime again has access to significant oil revenues.

Ironically, even though Iraq's cooperation with the Special Commission was almost universally understood to be a tactic aimed at lulling the international community into lifting the sanctions, Security Council permanent member states were generally in accord with a scenario by which the sanctions could be removed six to twelve months after the monitoring and verification regime was in place. Most observers projected that the sanctions would come off in mid-1995 or thereabouts. But all such bets are off now.

Why did Saddam Hussein throw away his chance to regain access to oil revenues at the very moment when the Special Commissioner's report would have started a six-month countdown to a likely Security Council vote? Retired General Norman Schwartzkopf, among others, has speculated that the Iraqi dictator anticipated an irresolute reaction from the White House. Whatever Saddam Hussein thought he would accomplish, history books will note him not only for the cruelty of his actions, but for the enormity of his misjudgments.

The U.S. Response. President Clinton reacted

appropriately and effectively to the Iraqi provocation, leaving no time or room for Baghdad to escalate further. There is no question that the President acted for the right reasons; politics did not enter into it. By contrast, many Clinton aides seemed visibly seized with the political impact of this episode on the forthcoming mid-term elections.

From the campaign trails of Virginia and Tennessee, Senate candidate Oliver North and Vice President Al Gore traded harsh *ad hominem* barbs concerning the Iraq crisis. Several Cabinet members explained the Administration's robust deployment actions by vowing not to repeat "the mistakes of the past" — a transparent jab at the Bush Administration's failure to anticipate and forestall Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The French Defense Minister, albeit with his own agenda in mind, protested the intrusion of domestic political motives into U.S. foreign policy.

Like his predecessor, President Clinton has discovered that standing up to Saddam is a political boon. His advisers would do well, however, to heed the example of George Bush, who found that the rewards of besting the Iraqi despot can be short-lived. The issue of transcendent importance for the President, politics notwithstanding, is what policy course will best serve the national interest.

Short-Term Objectives. The immediate objective of securing Kuwait from a possible Iraqi re-invasion has already been accomplished. This is not to say that the *status quo* is acceptable to the U.S.; it is not. The cost to the United States of mobilizing and transporting to the Gulf a force in the tens of thousands, accompanied by several hundred aircraft — not to mention the disruption to the national leadership — far exceeds Iraq's costs in sending some armored units southward. President Clinton, having set a new standard with this level of response to such a threat, can ill afford for Iraq to be able to trigger such a response by the U.S. again and again, undeterred and unpunished.

For that reason, the Administration has considered a preemptive strike to penalize Iraq for provoking this crisis. The U.S. also pressed at the United Nations for restrictions on Iraqi ground activity in southern Iraq to augment the coalition's existing "no-fly zone."

The Central Issue: Sanctions. At the heart of policy discussions is the future status of the U.N. Security Council's economic sanctions on Iraq, which appear to have been the driving factor behind Iraq's provocation. Ever since the sanctions were imposed, the question of their duration has concerned Iraq's neighbors, creditor countries, petroleum companies, non-proliferation experts and policymakers alike.

The sanctions were provided for in Security Council Resolution 687, adopted on April 3, 1991. This resolu-

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tion, among many other things, prohibited foreign countries from purchasing Iraq's oil. The sanctions provision was tied to the U.N. goal of eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program, subject to a long-term monitoring and verification regime to ensure that Iraq did not rebuild these capabilities. The details of this regime were spelled out seven months later in Resolution 715.

Paragraph 22 of Resolution 687 stated that the ban on purchasing Iraqi oil "shall have no further force or effect" once the weapons of mass destruction aspects of the resolution were satisfied. President Bush made it clear that he wanted to keep the sanctions in force until Saddam Hussein was removed from power.

President Clinton, however, sounded a more flexible note from the time he took office, downplaying any emphasis on the removal of Saddam Hussein. In March of 1993, the Clinton Administration explicitly aligned its policy with the United Nations' position that sanctions would be lifted when compliance with the relevant resolutions was achieved. Yet the Administration has maintained a deliberately vague posture on what exactly it means by "relevant resolutions."

In December 1993, Madeleine Albright, the U.S. representative at the United Nations, enunciated a "two-phased approach" to lifting the sanctions, in which Iraq would have to go beyond compliance with the disarmament demands in Resolution 687, and show "its readiness to rejoin society" by fulfilling numerous other U.N. resolutions, such as those relating to recognition of Kuwait and treatment of Kurdish and Shiite populations.

The New York Times, accusing the U.S. of "changing the rules," has editorialized that "[T]he Administration's position is misguided, putting domestic political posturing ahead of the problem of containing Iraq's military power most effectively."

In the current crisis, the Albright reinterpretation has been elevated to a high semantic art, as top U.S. officials have taken to characterizing the body of U.N. resolutions on Iraq as "the sanctions resolutions."

Pitfalls Ahead. Rising to Saddam Hussein's challenge has been a relatively straightforward matter thus far. But President Clinton and his policy team will find themselves tested in seeking to accommodate a number of interlocking objectives from here on. The President's tasks are many:

He must ensure that the U.S. can and does deliver on its threats. Unvarnished threats of preemptive strikes and no-tank zones can, if such actions are not taken, cost the President international credibility. Significant new force commitments may prove costly and degrade readiness for other missions.

He must hold the coalition together. France, eager to

do business with a post-sanctions Iraq, has publicly critiqued the U.S. response to Saddam Hussein. Russia sent its Foreign Minister to Baghdad rather than following Washington's lead; Mr. Kozyrev's pronouncements in Baghdad implied more dissatisfaction with Washington than with the Iraqi government. Turkey and Egypt, both bulwarks against Iraq in 1991, are now extremely loath to see a second confrontation. Any visible cracks in the coalition will embolden Saddam.

He must avoid splintering Iraq. U.S. interests would not be served by a breakup of Iraq, at a time when Iranian behavior is a serious concern and Gulf states are on the verge of accepting peace with Israel. Turkey would view an autonomous Kurdish enclave in Iraq as a grave concern. If there is no authority to be held accountable in this oil-rich, technologically-capable country, Iraq could become an even worse nightmare for arms control and non-proliferation experts.

He must protect the legitimacy of the U.N. role. Special Commissioner Ekeus elicited very substantial Iraqi cooperation and compliance on weapons of mass destruction by identifying these steps as the path to lifting sanctions. A legitimate and credible U.N. role is the best, indeed the only, viable mechanism to forestall a revived threat of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons and their means of delivery in Iraq. Absent a Security Council vote to revise the restrictions on Baghdad, any unilateral U.S. attempt to move the "goalposts" further away just as Iraq is close to reaching them will, in the long term, harm the efficacy of the U.N. and thus the security of the United States.

Most importantly, the President must know where he stands on the core issues as they arise: what exactly Iraq must do to have the sanctions lifted; whether Iraq can gain any acceptance while Saddam Hussein remains in power; whether U.S. actions will continue to be governed by multilateral consensus positions at the U.N. Security Council; how far to go in supporting anti-regime political movements in the Kurdish north and the Shiite south, especially if Saddam's internal grip weakens; and what to do the next time Baghdad threatens the neighborhood.

A millenium before the birth of the United States, the Abbasid Dynasty was already settling in for its 500-year reign in Baghdad. If U.S. policy in the Gulf is to have any chance of advancing American interests at an acceptable cost, it must point the way to a *modus vivendi* in which friendly and unfriendly actors, benign and dangerous alike, can coexist and function peacefully. This problem is not going to go away. All that lacks is the solution.

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