

U.S. Objectives in Iraq: Rollback vs. Containment

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Brief Analysis

The terms rollback and containment surfaced during the Cold War. Rollback was always preferred to containment, but until Ronald Reagan's success in the 1980's, the Soviets were too strong. For this reason, the United States essentially settled for containment during the Cold War. By contrast, Iraq has a regime that can easily be toppled with an assertive, proactive political and military strategy. Politically, the situation must be mastered with an effective counter-strategy. Militarily, the United States should be honest with itself and consider the need for the use of ground forces to overthrow Saddam.

Like any other U.S. policy, if chosen, rollback requires the correct follow-through. To claim to support rollback, but to do so only halfheartedly, would be to invite repetition of the disasters at the Bay of Pigs or in Hungary in 1956.

Arguments against Rollback

- The U.S. defense budget does not allow for full fledged rollback. In fact, the U.S. military budget is said to be sufficient to fight two regional conflicts, yet lately we have been hearing that the United States does not even have the power to fight one. If the United States does not have the resources to carry out a rollback, defense funding should be increased by drawing money from elsewhere in the budget. In fact, the United States is almost certainly capable of fighting and defeating Saddam's much weakened army.
- American public opinion is reluctant to support rollback. The Clinton Administration maintains that the American people must be convinced to accept U.S. intervention in the Gulf. But the American people are in fact far in front of the President on this issue. A U.S.A. Today poll announced that 60% of the American public support ground troops in the Gulf, while 75% support air strikes. The public clearly affirms U.S. action in the Gulf; public opinion is ahead of the administration.

Tough-minded Containment? Intervention in Iraq with ground forces is the best option, but difficult to sell. If it cannot be implemented, it is important that the United States turn to its "next best" options, not full-scale retreat from the Iraqi challenge. If it is not possible to implement a rollback with ground forces, U.S. policy should consist of hard-edged bombing. If the United States rejects going in and opts for containment, an extremely tough-minded containment should be implemented.

Although one can make a good case for tough-minded containment in theory, even the hardest headed containment tends over time to "define international deviance down." From "no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq," the United States has come to accept as its goal "slow WMD development." President Clinton has even maintained that inspection works; this is particularly curious given that he has also argued that Iraq today-after seven years of inspection-poses a grave danger to world peace. As opposed to containment, rollback formulates a clear, goal-oriented situation rather than a "pseudo-sophisticated realpolitik."

Rather than the "reluctant sheriff" mentioned in Richard Haass's book on U.S. policy, the United States should create

a "trigger happy sheriff," who does not let issues like Saddam get out of hand in the first place. If the United States is not going to use ground troops now, when, and in what situation, will ground troops ever be used to advance U.S. interests?

RICHARD HAASS

Containment is not meant to be a solution. It is a mechanism of management. To think of Saddam as a condition to be managed rather than a problem to be solved provides for a more patient trajectory towards this crisis.

Containment is the only option that is both desirable and feasible for U.S. policy towards Iraq.

Making Containment Work. The United States needs to combine pressure on Iraq with a counter-reason for Iraq to cooperate. If Saddam opens his doors to inspectors, the UN should grant him permission to export, which is consistent with the letter and spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 687. This would be a much more reasonable, fair-minded position to take with Iraq, and it would ameliorate the United States' failing credibility with the rest of the Arab nations.

There is a linkage between the Middle East peace process and attitudes towards intervention in Iraq. The consequence of a drifting peace process is alienation of the Arabs, who feel the United States has a double standard in promoting peace in the Middle East. This sentiment has to be considered in any containment policy.

The United States should consider adopting a nuanced policy toward Iran in the hope that the potential for U.S.-Iran rapprochement might affect Saddam's calculations.

The United States needs more regular consultations with allies about Iraq. The United States has been attending to Iraq episodically; only when a crisis happens. Instead, the United States needs to engage in complex calculations about where Iraq fits in overall U.S. policy interests. That requires making tradeoffs. This is a hard process, but it is worthwhile if the Iraq problem is in fact high on the U.S. agenda.

The Costs of Rollback. Rollback supporters often cite the benefits of rollback without adequately explaining the costs and risks:

- Rollback asks too much of a weak and divided opposition. Arming Iraqi opposition groups is just enough to get them in trouble and insufficient to get them over the top. There are moral, political and military consequences to supporting these opposition groups when they cannot be expected to seize power.
- If the United States is using the Afghanistan model in this ordeal, then the "Pakistan player" is missing: a country through whom arms can be funneled and where areas can be secured for military use.
- Occupation of Iraq by U.S. troops is the only way to ensure the overthrow of Iraq's current regime. But occupation plays to the weaknesses rather than the strengths of the American military. Also, over time, occupation becomes costly and strains relations with allies.

A tough minded containment policy is not going to mellow Saddam Hussein. It could, however, weaken him.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Megan Fisher.

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