

# The Iraq Outcome: A Hollow Victory for U.S. Policy

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## Brief Analysis

To the Clinton Administration, the Iraq crisis appears headed toward a satisfactory outcome. As a result of the UN Security Council's unanimous condemnation of Iraq and imposition of additional (if modest) new sanctions, Saddam seems to have succumbed to the will of the international community, with UNSCOM inspectors soon returning to Iraq to operate more-or-less along pre-October 29 lines. Along the way, the Administration was apparently willing to ease Saddam's climb-down only through an unrelated expansion and/or extension of the "food-for-oil" deal that allows some additional Iraqi oil exports and, perhaps, some face-saving but relatively innocuous alteration in the composition or functioning of the UNSCOM inspection teams. While keeping a "wait-and-see" posture, the use of diplomacy backed up by the threat of force seems to have worked.

The problem with this analysis is that it is founded on a series of questionable premises, which lead to flawed analysis and dangerous conclusions. The result may be that military confrontation is averted in the short run but that the clock starts ticking toward a far more explosive conflict, with fewer U.S. and international assets ready to respond, at a time and place of Saddam's choosing.

PREMISE: THAT THE RESTORATION OF THE STATUS QUO ANTE IS A VICTORY: As has been borne out by numerous testimonials of UNSCOM inspectors, the status quo ante was a day-in/day-out cat-and-mouse game between UNSCOM sleuths and the Iraqis, with the latter continually lying, cheating, deceiving, obstructing, hindering, and otherwise refusing to provide full cooperation to UNSCOM, as mandated by UN resolutions. Six years of Iraq's refusal to comply with the UNSCOM inspections is prima facie evidence that the status quo ante is unacceptable. Even if the outcome of this crisis is the restoration of UNSCOM inspections along pre-October 29 lines-and there is great concern that the mandate, composition or parameters of UNSCOM inspections will somehow be constrained as a result of the current diplomacy-resurrecting the status quo ante is itself no victory. On the contrary, restoration merely returns the international community to a bad situation. Without an improved UNSCOM inspection regime-in which Iraq suffers swift and sure penalties for each act of non-cooperation with the unlimited mandate of the inspectors-there is no guarantee that Iraq's war of attrition against UNSCOM will not resume.

PREMISE: THAT SADDAM FAILED IN HIS OWN OBJECTIVES: Some Administration officials have suggested that

Saddam has shot himself in the foot by taking action that has led to the complete suspension of UNSCOM inspections since only UNSCOM can issue Iraq the clean-bill-of-health that is necessary to trigger the end of UN economic sanctions. According to this logic, Saddam's action have been self-defeating; by forcing a break in the UNSCOM chain of inspections, he has forced UNSCOM to re-do much of its past work, insuring that sanctions will remain in place indefinitely.

The problem with this rationale is that it presupposes that Saddam's main goal has been to gain an end to sanctions, to hamstring UNSCOM, or both. While that may be so, these are not necessarily the only objectives of the recent gambit. It is just as possible that Saddam's main goal has been to gain some time-maybe as little as the three weeks since the crisis began-to work feverishly and unimpeded on some aspect of his biological, chemical or ballistic missile program, as UNSCOM chief Richard Butler has warned. Indeed, Saddam may have already achieved this objective, with anything additional that he can gain-a more deeply fractured international coalition, additional "food-for-oil" concessions, some "light at the end of the sanctions tunnel"-being unexpected but welcome bonuses.

PREMISE: THAT THE PRESERVATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION IS A TOP PRIORITY: While the Administration took important steps to provide for an unilateral military option, virtually all signals from high-ranking Administration officials suggested that diplomacy was not just the preferred option but the only option given serious consideration, given the lack of coalition support. This turns policy-making on its head. Achieving coalition consensus is a means to an end, not an end in itself. For example, in 1990, the United States needed to put together an international coalition in large part as a way to ensure the domestic coalition in support of the use of force; this time, the home front was strong and secure, evidenced by the bipartisan declarations in support of military action. Moreover, in 1990, the United States adopted a clear position in the face of Iraqi aggression-"this shall not stand"-and then sought to build an international coalition to implement it. This time, in the face of the diplomatic equivalent of the invasion of Kuwait-what the President has termed a "threat to the children of the world"-the Administration declared the maintenance of international consensus to be a chief priority and then sought to build a position around that consensus. As the passage of the weak UN Security Council resolution two weeks ago attests, this is a sure-fire way to empower the most risk-averse or Saddam-sympathetic member of the "coalition"-in this case, Russia-and to end up with a lowest-common denominator approach toward dealing with the crisis.

A more realistic premise from which to base policy is that the coalition does not exist. Indeed, since June 1993, the last time the Security Council found Iraq in "material breach" of UN resolutions, the differences among Council members on key aspects of Iraq policy have been so profound as to make ridicule of the term "coalition." Of the original countries in the military coalition, only two-Britain and America-take an active role in all aspects of the one ongoing military mission, aerial overflights of "no fly zones" in northern and southern Iraq; indeed, France pulled out of the "northern no-fly zone" last year even though it was largely a French idea.

The most serious dispute concerns terms for the eventual lifting of sanctions and the potential for Saddam's political rehabilitation. Standing alone, U.S. policy has been to insist that Iraq comply with all relevant Security Council resolutions-including those pertaining to the human rights of the Iraqi people-as a precondition for lifting the oil export restrictions; almost the entire rest of the world, led by France and Russia, endorse a narrow reading of the Gulf War ceasefire and conclude that only a positive determination of Iraqi compliance by UNSCOM would be sufficient to end the oil export sanction. The reason for this split is clear: As U.S. officials have stated with varying degrees of candor for the past five years, Saddam is irredeemable and will never be permitted to exercise sovereignty ever again; to the French, Russians and others, Saddam's foibles can be forgotten with the passage of time so that the world can proceed with the business of exploiting Iraq's vast energy resources. So far, the issue has been academic, since Iraq has never come close to meeting UNSCOM's requirements. However, with UNSCOM itself coming under greater scrutiny, concern is growing that the U.S. insistence on all Security Council resolutions-not

just the Article 22 requirement-may be weakening.

Conclusion: The bottom line of this episode is that Saddam may emerge from the current stand-off no weaker than he was one month ago and probably a good deal stronger. He succeeded in evicting UN inspectors (for a time) and paying no price for it, in garnering sympathy from several major world powers, and earning a review of the "effectiveness" of UNSCOM inspections. As a result, rather than tightening the box on Saddam, the diplomatic outcome from Geneva carries the risk of giving Saddam a way out of it.

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Policy #282

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