

Russian and French Policy Toward Iraq: Emerging Differences with the United States

Oct 28, 1994



Brief Analysis

President Clinton's visit to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia tomorrow provides an opportunity to reflect upon the impact of Saddam Hussein's decision to deploy some 70,000 troops to the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. Two results among several stand out: Strong, forceful U.S. action will deter the Iraqi dictator. The stronger, more forceful and clearer the U.S. action, the more likely Hussein will back down.

Nonetheless, Saddam Hussein's maneuvers have exposed a distinct fault line among Security Council "Perm Five" members with the United States and Great Britain on one side of the divide and Russia, France (and to a lesser extent) China on the other. The coalition no longer possesses clear unity of purpose in its approach to Iraq, a fact perhaps best symbolized by Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev's visit to Baghdad. While the cohesiveness of the coalition had been under strain for some time, Saddam's latest maneuver had the effect of demonstrating that with regard to aspects of Iraq policy (as distinct from that of broader Gulf security), the emperor's clothing was found wanting. Differences over Iraq policy are unlikely to be papered over and probably will result in increasingly contentious bargaining in the weeks and months ahead as the Security Council debates the future of the Iraqi sanctions regime.

Points of Agreement

The differences within the Perm Five stand out more clearly when contrasted to areas of agreement, of which the most important is a recognition of the need to nurture, sustain and advance long-term stability in the Persian Gulf. In operational terms that means for all Perm Five members agree that Iraq must: refrain from aggressive, hostile action which can constitute a threat to peace and security in the region; recognize Kuwaiti sovereignty and its borders; and, meet all UN requirements regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including accepting the establishment in Iraq of a viable and effective UN monitoring regime.

General acceptance of this policy framework goes far to explaining why there could be unanimous agreement for UN Security Council Resolution 949, adopted during the height of the recent crisis. In effect and in practice, UNSC 949 is focused on the Gulf, attempting to clarify and refine (primarily in negative terms) what the precise relationship should be between Iraqi behavior and the advancement of Gulf stability and security.

Enter the Differences

The unanimous vote on UNSC 949, however, does not tell the whole story. What the crisis also reflected was the emergence of a differing Russian and French policy line toward Iraq itself. Three points stand out:

Attitude Toward Saddam Hussein: While Saddam Hussein and his regime may not be "nice guys," nonetheless, the Russians and the French seem to have concluded that the regime is not in danger of falling, that the time has come to deal with it and that the regime -- despite all that it has done and stands for holds power legitimately. Ultimately, that is the message of the Kozyrev trip to Baghdad.

Saddam and Long-term Gulf Stability: The Russians and French also seem to have concluded that Saddam is no more of a threat to regional stability than would be a future Iraqi government of unknown composition. In that respect, Paris and Moscow have bought into the idea that the devil one knows is better than the devil one does not.

Attitudes about the relationship between Iraqi troop deployments and the sanctions regime: In effect, the Russian and French position is that there is no relationship between the two; that the Iraqi troop deployment was a unique event for which an appropriate response was required, including the passage of resolution 949. Moscow and Paris believe that that unique event, however, should have no impact on the issues of sanctions compliance and sanctions lifting, both of which are seen as proceeding along a well defined path which has specific requirements which, when met, should elicit a specific international community response.

Why the Difference in Approach...

Russian and French assessments about Iraq are linked to an emerging policy strategy which appears to be organized around the concept of a drive for position in the Gulf. Economically, both the French and the Russians are in search of markets in the region. In that respect Iraq is the last major open market, given the dominant U.S. position on the Arabian peninsula (perhaps best symbolized by the conclusion of the Boeing and AT&T deals which excluded any European, including French, participation) and Germany's emerging dominance in Iran. In addition, Russia and France want repayment of debts that Baghdad owes them. Politically, the Gulf still remains one of the globe's most important pieces of real estate, an area which affects world energy prices and financial markets and which can have enormous influence over the political stability of much of the Arab and Islamic world, including North Africa (of concern to France) and the "near abroad" (of concern to Russia).

...And What is Next?

For the French and the Russians, the bottom line would seem to be that the time is approaching when the international community needs to begin to bring Iraq back into the regular channels of international commerce, discourse and even diplomacy. But herein lies the catch Iraq cannot be brought back into the international fold as long as the sanctions regime remains in place. Sanctions operate at two levels: quite literally they deny Iraq physical access to world markets. But equally important at the political level, their maintenance serves notice that Iraq is still an international pariah.

In pushing for Iraq's reentry, the French and Russians are not asking for a short circuiting of the sanctions regime per se. Iraq must meet defined requirements, specifically including those related to WMD and Kuwaiti recognition. But in meeting those requirements, the French and Russians are arguing that there must be an "end game" on those aspects of the sanctions regime which are related to requirements fulfilled. The most obvious example of this linkage is between the WMD provisions of UN Resolution 687, especially Article 22 which would permit Baghdad to resume the export of Iraqi goods, including oil, upon the fulfillment of the WMD requirements.

The next skirmish over sanctions will be at the regularly scheduled bi-monthly Security Council review of the Iraqi sanctions regime, now set for November 15. The primary issue for discussion will be the length of the trial stage for long-term monitoring, with the U.S. presumably arguing for an open-ended period and the French, Russians (and others) arguing for a period of fixed duration (six months being the preferred length). Iraq's expected recognition of Kuwait's sovereignty and borders would redouble the determination to set a fixed period. However, whatever the formal outcome in November, the fundamental differences will remain and continue to eat away at coalition cohesion.

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