

# Congress and the UN Vote: Sending a Mixed Signal to Saddam

Nov 28, 1990



## Brief Analysis

**T**hursday's UN Security Council vote authorizing the use of force to effect Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait constitutes a major step toward war in the Gulf. The effect of the resolution is to deliver an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein: "leave Kuwait by January 15 or else you will soon be forced out."

Although the resolution does not require immediate resort to force, tactically the United States cannot postpone action much beyond the deadline. Any extended delay would allow Iraq to win a major psychological victory by claiming it had called the bluff of the U.S. and the entire United Nations. The Bush Administration will not allow this to occur. Thus, by setting a deadline the administration has chosen to use force if necessary to evict Iraq. It will be up to Saddam to decide whether force will be required.

The UN Security Council resolution will reinforce the implicit ultimatum President Bush had issued Saddam Hussein by deciding to double U.S. forces in the region and discard carefully formulated rotation plans. These earlier moves severely limited the time available to the United States to allow sanctions to work. Because American troops cannot remain in the desert indefinitely, some will have to return home by next summer. Yet because the U.S. lacks the rotation base to maintain 400,000 troops in the Mideast, the return of American forces would reduce their numbers in the region and create the impression that Saddam had forced the U.S. to back down.

To focus now on the efficacy of a sanctions-only policy -- as did yesterday's Senate hearings -- is to engage in a debate that may not fully capture the logic of unfolding events. The UN Security Council resolution constitutes a finding that sanctions alone cannot achieve the liberation of Kuwait. It authorizes the use of force, not as a vague future threat but as a concrete near-term option if Iraq does not now comply with Security Council resolutions.

### Can Coercive Diplomacy Work?

The key question then is whether the strategy of coercive diplomacy adopted by the Bush Administration and about to be endorsed by the United Nations will produce an Iraqi withdrawal before war becomes inevitable in the winter of 1991.

While no one can know what Saddam Hussein thinks, it appears that the combination of heightened American rhetoric and creation of an offensive option have convinced him that the United States may go to war. Otherwise, he would not have called up additional reserve forces or sought to buy time by the piecemeal release of all Western hostages providing peace prevails.

But Saddam probably has not been persuaded that war is inevitable. Moreover, he may not believe that Iraq will lose that war or that he personally will suffer more by fighting than by withdrawing under international pressure. Indeed, on all these points the domestic U.S. debate may be confounding the administration's strategy.

### The Domestic Debate and Saddam's Calculus

Clearly, Saddam has ample reason to believe that American domestic opinion may constrain President Bush either

from initiating a war or persisting in a bloody conflict. If there is already strong opposition to war in the United States, it is logical to assume that opposition will grow if Americans begin to die in large numbers. While Saddam cannot blithely bet on outlasting the U.S. in a war -- given U.S. capabilities and Iraq's isolation -- the uncertainties about America's staying power may enable Saddam to believe that he can avoid choosing between an unpalatable withdrawal and a devastating defeat.

Moreover, in some respects the effort to drum up support for the use of force within the U.S. may persuade Saddam that it is better to fight than to submit. This paradox is evident in the current discussion about Iraq's nuclear capability. President Bush and other senior administration officials, in an attempt to bolster public support for their strategy, are now emphasizing the danger that Saddam and his weapons systems pose to the world in general and the U.S. in particular. But this effort may also persuade an already paranoid Saddam Hussein that the U.S. seeks not only his withdrawal from Kuwait, but also the destruction of his military capabilities and his regime.

If so, Saddam may believe that withdrawal will be the precursor for further humiliations. At a minimum, the U.S. and the international community will have to maintain the arms embargo and insist on intrusive inspection of Iraq's military capabilities if there is to be any chance of re-establishing a stable regional balance of power in the wake of Iraq's withdrawal. Worse still, Saddam might contemplate the prospect of a war crimes tribunal, demands for reparations and concerted attempts to subvert his regime.

Thus, the strategy of coercive diplomacy may fail if Congressional opposition to the use of force mounts while the administration focuses increased attention on the Iraqi menace. Under this scenario, Saddam may be tempted to test America's will, making war inevitable.

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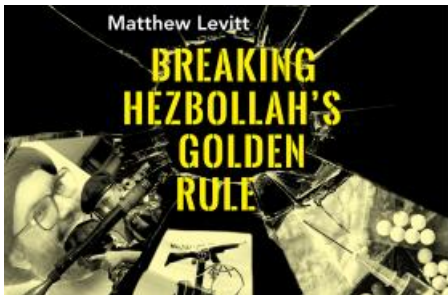
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