

Growing Prospects for War

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Brief Analysis

The Bush administration's reported decision to send 100,000 more U.S. troops is a turning point in the Gulf crisis. When they are in position -- in two to three months -- the United States and its allies will be able, for the first time, not only to defend Saudi Arabia but to launch an attack to liberate Kuwait.

This increased capacity is in tandem with political steps to raise the level of threat against Iraq. The Bush administration is back on the track, returning the focus to pressuring Iraq, after the distractions of the UN General Assembly session, Temple Mount incident, and Soviet negotiating efforts.

Now the Bush administration has three main objectives:

- To persuade Iraq that war is inevitable if it does not withdraw from Kuwait.
- To prepare the American people for the possibility of war.
- To convince the American people, Congress, and America's allies that the White House will act cautiously and responsibly.

U.S. Credibility

Despite the unprecedented rapid build-up of American military power in the Persian Gulf, the United States has faced a credibility problem. Saddam Hussein respects American military power but does not think the United States has the will to take on Iraq. Saddam has stated this from the outset of the crisis. President Bush's precipitous drop in the domestic public opinion polls last month undoubtedly reinforces this impression.

So has U.S. behavior in the crisis to date. Saddam knows that U.S. air power could have punished Iraq severely with limited risk to American forces. Why did not the United States strike Iraq? In Saddam's eyes, the United States was unwilling to accept the casualties or the risk of an Iraqi counterattack that could have jeopardized American forces and damaged Saudi Arabia's oil fields.

Indeed, even now senior military and civilian officials consistently stress the defensive nature of America's deployment to the Gulf. While "all options" are open, the United States has not presented a credible threat to use force.

Today, with air superiority and significant ground forces present, the United States and its allies can defend Saudi Arabia. But Saddam does not fear a defensive deployment. He believes Iraq can outlast the United States in the region and thinks that a major American presence will eventually undermine his Arab opponents.

War-Fighting Potential

Saddam will only fear a force that can push him out of Kuwait and destroy his army. With President Bush's decision, such an American force could be on the front line in 2 months.

Although the United States and its friends can dominate the skies and exact severe punishment on Iraq today, there is still reason to doubt that U.S. ground forces could push Iraq out of Kuwait without paying a heavy price. Iraq has

about 450,000 soldiers in Kuwait and southern Iraq, including some 8-12 heavy divisions. According to British sources, Iraq has 3600 tanks in the Kuwait theater compared to 1600 that the anti-Iraqi forces will have by mid-November. Iraq has 2300 heavy guns compared to 750 for its opponents. Iraqi infantry units have been digging in and building fortifications, similar to those used during the Iran-Iraq war, all along the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia border.

As of today, U.S. ground forces would be hard-pressed to advance into Kuwait without suffering heavy losses. The United States has only two heavy Army divisions in Saudi Arabia, accompanied by light Army and Marine Corps units. Four additional American armored and mechanized divisions with up to 100,000 troops, drawn from U.S. forces in Europe, will enable the United States to go on the offensive with some degree of confidence. Although the United States will still be outnumbered on the ground by Iraqi forces, American forces can achieve local superiority at the point of an attack.

Perhaps more importantly, the creation of an offensive ground option against Saddam Hussein will further the international diplomatic and economic siege. Because Saddam has demonstrated a consistent desire to avoid war with the United States, a serious demonstration of American offensive intentions could persuade Saddam that getting out of Kuwait was in Iraq's best interests. Certainly, without such a demonstration, Saddam will not leave Kuwait any time soon. And, as CIA Director Webster has stated, there is no indication that internal dissent will force a change in Saddam's policy or a threat to his rule.

While the United States prepares for war, a full-scale ground offensive will remain inadvisable until the arrival of additional forces. Iraq has too great a quantitative advantage on the ground and advancing against such a dug-in, competent opponent would be costly. There is no indication that our Arab or European allies -- with the exception of Britain -- are now willing to embark on an offensive or could make a significant contribution in the near term were they to decide to do so.

The State Department yesterday calculated that the international embargo is costing Iraq 97 percent of its oil exports, 90 percent of its imports, a virtual halt to Iraqi development projects, and rationing of basic commodities. This is a serious impact. Yet while sanctions against Iraq may produce their desired result in the long run, Kuwait is disappearing quickly.

Domestic support for military action also seems to be eroding and the anti-Iraqi coalition which appeared so firm in August developed cracks in October. U.S. forces in the Gulf will also have to begin rotating troops within several months. It is unclear from where the Army can draw rotation units for a force the size of its deployment in the Gulf without a major callup of reserve units or an increase in Army end strength -- neither of these are attractive options. In short, an ascending line of military power will cross a declining line of political support some time during this winter. At that point, President Bush will have to make some very tough decisions. Thus, while the additional U.S. build-up supports a strategy of successfully intimidating or militarily defeating Iraq, there is a growing chance that the United States will use military force against Iraq within the next few months.

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