

Coalition Coercion:

Will It Work?

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Brief Analysis

American strategy in the Gulf crisis has now entered a new phase of "coercive diplomacy." Sanctions backed by force have a better chance to coerce Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait than the alternative of a long-range, sanctions-only strategy. For the strategy to work, however, three basic and difficult requirements will have to be fulfilled:

- A clear, unmistakable threat will have to be conveyed that the United States is willing to go to war. The message to Baghdad is: "Leave Kuwait or you will be forced out."
- Saddam will have to be convinced that if he chooses war he will lose.
- Saddam will have to be persuaded that submission is preferable to war. If these requirements are met, Saddam is likely to back down. But if they are not fulfilled, war seems inevitable. The apparent paradox is that the only way to avoid war is to be fully determined to go to war.

Sending a Clear Message

Successful U.S. brinkmanship requires convincing the adversary that you are ready to drag him into war rather than back down. The dispatch of up to 100,000 additional troops and heavy armor units to the Gulf, the Administration's tough tone and expression of concern about American hostages, the passing of harsher UN Security Council resolutions, the visit of Secretary of State James Baker to the region, and the consultations with congressional leaders and regional allies all indicate presidential resolve. Yet this impressive orchestration may not translate into a clear message to Baghdad. The United States is also part of a coalition whose other members seem less willing to go along with the use of force. With Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev speaking about the unacceptability of war at the very moment that President Bush is threatening to use force, it is entirely possible for Saddam Hussein to believe that the coalition is bluffing.

By hinting at negotiations, Saddam can hope to split the coalition by exploiting Soviet, French, and Arab feelers. Similarly, he may be convinced that congressional criticism and election losses will constrain President Bush.

Time is also an important factor. After a few months, the President's continued talk about using force, without action, will make Baghdad see the threat as a bluff. And over time, domestic criticism about the war option will grow. Thus, Saddam will become more convinced that he can outwait the Americans, concluding, as he told his troops in Kuwait, "Bush can't do it." If the U.S.'s Arab allies reach a similar conclusion, they may start to move away from the coalition by seeking to appease Iraq and to offer it better bargaining terms.

The only way to deal with these challenges is to keep increasing the pressure on Iraq. Rhetoric is important in rallying the American public as long as the opinion polls do not "Bush can't do it." If the U.S.'s Arab allies reach a similar conclusion, they may start to move away from the coalition by seeking to appease Iraq and to offer it better bargaining terms.

The only way to deal with these challenges is to keep increasing the pressure on Iraq. Rhetoric is important in rallying the American public as long as the opinion polls do not show a further drop in support and as long as the rhetoric remains credible. Yet there will also be a time limit on the credibility of this process.

It will also be essential to continue to rally the international coalition. Britain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Israel remain very much in line with the President's approach. France's penchant for maverick diplomacy appears to have been neutralized for the moment. Baker will need to persuade the Soviet Union, when he meets with Shevardnadze next week, that its shuttle diplomacy and statements are becoming counterproductive. This should not be too difficult, partly because of Moscow's dependence on good relations with Washington and partly because if Gorbachev fails to fall in line he undermines the effectiveness of the threat of war and therefore makes war more likely.

Convincing Saddam He Will Lose

In interviews during the crisis, Saddam has made clear that he believes the United States cannot accept suffering 10,000 casualties and that air power cannot decide the war. He thereby demonstrates an acute understanding of our key vulnerability to loss of life and our preferred strategy of massive air strikes. Saddam has no experience with the kind of air strikes that U.S. air force could make and may delude himself into believing that their effect will be minimal. If he believes these assessments, he may not fear our threats. He has already exhibited a preference for settling problems by force and would have no compunction in sacrificing thousands of Iraqi lives.

Short of demonstrating what air power can achieve, it may be impossible to disabuse him of these notions. He, however, will have to weigh other factors before calling our bluff. Iraq has no significant foreign support; it faces the world's most powerful army which is backed by formidable Middle Eastern and European powers; and its economy is embargoed. He may have to fight a two-front war and he always must worry about the Israeli factor. Airpower may not be able to decide the war but air superiority will have a significant impact on the ground war and the morale of Iraqi troops. Finally, Saddam has to worry that his precious industrial infrastructure -- the main achievement of his 22-year rule -- will be in ruins. In short, he has more reason to worry about the outcome of war and less reason to be sanguine about its outcome than we do. This gives us a key advantage.

War or Submission

Even if our resolve and power persuades Saddam that he faces a choice between destruction and withdrawal, he might still prefer war to risking the consequences of retreat. Deputy Prime Minister Sa'dun Hammadi has said as much. The uncertainties of war may be preferable to the fear of being overthrown after a humiliating political defeat.

The best way to alter Iraq's calculus in this regard is to hold out the prospect of some gain if he does retreat. But this is a very dangerous option, rewarding his aggression. And if Iraq withdraws from Kuwait without a war, its military capabilities would still be intact and we will still have to find a way to curb its weapons systems. The most we can afford to offer in this regard is negotiations after his total and unconditional withdrawal.

Although the task is difficult and obviously dangerous, coercive diplomacy can work. The Administration is already picking up signs of nervousness and indications of some rethinking

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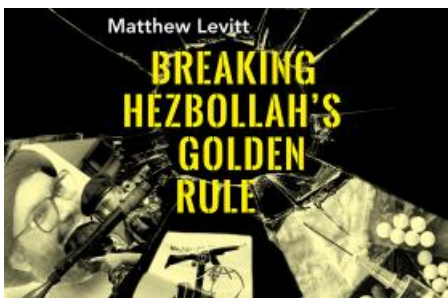
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