

Doubts about the Diplomatic Strategy

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Brief Analysis

As the President nears his moment of decision in the Gulf crisis, he is being urged by many policy experts to adopt a long-term, diplomacy-only strategy for dealing with Iraq's aggression. But Secretary of State Baker's dismissal of "partial solutions," the President's refusal to rule out force, and reports of the movement of additional troops to the Gulf, suggest that the administration is not willing to adopt this approach. This does not mean that the administration has decided on war. Abandoning the threat of force as backing for his diplomacy, however, would leave the President with a strategy which is much less likely to succeed in reversing Iraq's aggression.

Punitive Deterrence?

Zbigniew Brzezinski made the strongest argument for the no-war route in an October 7, New York Times op-ed piece. The former National Security Adviser argued that war would be costly in casualties, economically devastating and unpredictably destabilizing to the region. War should therefore be ruled out as an option in favor of a strategy of "punitive deterrence" -- the patient and prolonged application of international sanctions to punish Iraq while credible force is maintained in the region to deter any Iraqi military counter-moves. Eventually, Saddam.Hussein might be persuaded by the impact of sanctions to negotiate withdrawal from Kuwait. But Brzezinski contends that the international coalition would in turn have to agree to financial and territorial concessions. Iraq's military capabilities would be left intact, but regional security talks could curb Iraq's strategic weapons programs while a continued U.S. military presence deterred any further Iraqi aggression.

Problem #1: Shifting Objectives

This approach has important flaws. First, the President would have to shift his objectives. Rather than reversing Iraq's occupation in the short term, we would be attempting to use sanctions over time to punish Saddam for his aggression. At best, if the sanctions held, Saddam Hussein might negotiate a partial withdrawal. But it would not be the total and unconditional withdrawal to which the President has committed the United States and the international community. And it could not be achieved in any reasonable time frame (current estimates suggest that it will take at least a year for the sanctions to bite).

If the President had adopted this strategy, with its more modest objectives, from the beginning of the crisis, it might be viable now. But to adopt the strategy at this point -- after 200,000 troops have been dispatched to the Gulf -- would effectively hand Hussein a victory. For at least a year, he would be seen in the Arab world to have succeeded in absorbing Kuwait. And in the long run, even if he is eventually persuaded to negotiate withdrawal, he would be compensated with treasure and territory. The image of an Iraq weakened over time by the economic and military embargo would be less impressive and visible than the ongoing perception of Iraq's obliteration of Kuwait as a case of successful aggression. If Saddam looks like a winner, he will be treated like a hero in the Arab world.

In these circumstances, Egypt and Saudi Arabia would find it particularly difficult to maintain their support, even for a reduced American military presence. They have been among the strongest advocates of military action in the short term precisely because of nervousness about their own staying power. As long as the objective is the liberation of

Kuwait -- a sister Arab state -- they can justify their dependence on foreign forces. But if the objective shifts to deterrence of further Iraqi aggression, requiring a prolonged ground presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, our Arab allies will be increasingly vulnerable to the charge that they have surrendered control of Arab oil and holy places to the infidel while also failing to roll back Iraq. This would have serious consequences for regional stability. Egypt's leadership role would be undermined, the Gulf states would come under intense pressure to seek the best deal possible with Saddam, and Israel would feel more threatened. U.S. credibility would also be seriously damaged, having dispatched such a large force only to fail to achieve its stated objectives.

Problem #2: Coalition Cohesion

Because the diplomacy-only strategy requires time to work, it runs the considerable risk that the international coalition will be undermined in the process. The longer the time required, the more likely that cheating will occur, rendering the sanctions less effective in the process. Differences over the terms of a diplomatic settlement are also bound to weaken the coalition's resolve. Already, France has indicated that it would settle for much less than the United States can accept. The Soviet Union, with concern about its 5,000 citizens in Iraq uppermost, might also seek a compromise formula before the sanctions achieved their full potency. Saddam Hussein has already shown an awareness of this vulnerability by hinting to French and Soviet envoys that he might be ready to compromise. Since the diplomatic strategy places him under no military pressure to withdraw, he would be free to exploit cracks already appearing in the coalition.

The volatile nature of the Middle East ensures that other issues will also intrude on the coalition's agenda, be it assassinations, terrorist attacks, the intifadah or instability in Jordan. In each case, coalition solidarity will be tested because the interests of our partners will be affected in diverse ways.

American public support for a prolonged troop presence in the Gulf is likely to dwindle as no visible progress is made on the President's stated objectives, allies begin to go their own way and American troops swelter under the desert sun for an uncertain purpose. Moreover, if the coalition is undermined by all of these factors it is unlikely to be in any position to curb Iraq's strategic weapons programs after the issue of Kuwait is resolved.

In sum, the longer it takes for sanctions to work, the harder it will be to hold the coalition together and the more confident Saddam Hussein will become that he can wait us out. Far from persuading him to withdraw, the diplomatic strategy may thus only encourage him to stay.

An Alternative?

This is not to suggest that the military strategy is free of serious risks and drawbacks. However, if the President's objectives are to be achieved short of war, he will have to be ready to go to war. Saddam Hussein has demonstrated that he only speaks and understands the language of force. Coercive diplomacy -- the application of sanctions backed by the threat of force -- is therefore likely to be the only effective way of liberating Kuwait. As both the Soviet and British foreign ministers have made clear, Saddam Hussein is only likely to leave Kuwait at the point of a gun. If we insist on keeping our gun holstered, he will be sure to stay.

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