

Will the United States Go to War?

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Brief Analysis

Impatience and doubts about the slow-working process of diplomacy and economic sanctions has led many to call for quick military action against Iraq. While the United States could eventually prevail in such a conflict, the anticipated high cost in American casualties will make President Bush less eager to pursue a military option as long as his political strategy has a chance of success. Saddam Hussein could change the calculus by initiating terrorism or military action against the United States or Saudi Arabia, but unless such aggression takes place the United States appears unlikely to pursue a military option for several months.

In the early stages of the Gulf crisis the United States could have punished Iraq from the air -- destroying key military and economic targets with limited risk to American forces. Such attacks, however, would have been unlikely to push Iraq out of Kuwait. More importantly, they could have led to Iraqi counterattacks on the ground that would have jeopardized the small American presence in the region and could possibly have led to an Iraqi conquest or destruction of Saudi Arabia's oil fields.

Today, the United States and its European and Arab allies are in a much better defensive position on the ground in the Arabian Peninsula. With air superiority and significant ground forces in the theater, the United States and its allies are likely to be able to successfully defend Saudi Arabia against an Iraqi attack. Senior American officials such as Secretary of Defense Cheney and General Schwartzkopf continue to imply that America's deployment of adequate forces to assure the defense of Saudi Arabia will be completed by the middle to late October. Their mission, according to Secretary Cheney, is to deter further aggression, defend Saudi Arabia and the other nations in the region should deterrence fail, and to enforce the UN sanctions.

Completion of this defensive deployment, however, will not provide the United States with an assured capability for a successful offensive operation against Iraqi forces. Several developments in recent days continue to make U.S. pursuit of such an offensive operation unlikely in the near-term:

- According to yesterday's Defense Department briefing, Iraq has increased its troop presence in Kuwait and southern Iraq to about 430,000 troops, 3500 tanks, 2500 armored personnel carriers, and 1700 artillery pieces. While classic theories of warfare mandate that the offense achieve a local superiority ratio of 3:1, American and allied ground forces are in fact, for the time being, outnumbered by about that same ratio by Iraqi forces. The United States may still be able to achieve local superiority depending on where it initiates an attack. But an offensive against a dug-in, militarily competent opponent which vastly out numbers American forces in the region must be considered a costly option.

- The United States and its friends have continued to achieve diplomatic success against Iraq, as indicated by yesterday's Security Council resolution extending the embargo to the air. Moreover, for the first time the Soviet Union has indicated explicitly that it may support military action against the Iraqis if they fail to comply with Security Council resolutions. Such Soviet support, however, has been conditioned on the exhaustion of political efforts, a process that will require additional months. Even if Moscow has grown more flexible toward the use of force, the Soviets -- as well as European and Arab allies -- are not encouraging military action against Iraq at this

time. • Despite press reporting about U.S. contingency plans to open several fronts against Iraq in the event of a conflict (including military operations from Turkey and Jordan), these countries are not likely to permit offensive operations from their soil at this time. In addition, tensions between Iran and Iraq continue to diminish as the prospects increase for a Saddam Hussein visit to Iran and the signing of a peace treaty ending the Iran-Iraq War. This combination of factors will permit Iraq to focus its attention on its southern front, and deploy additional forces to that theater if necessary.

• Despite increases in military deployments to Saudi Arabia on the part of Egypt, Syria, the United Kingdom, and France, there is no indication of a preparedness of America's friends to help build the kind of offensive capability required to deal with Iraq's numerical ally superior forces in the near-term. Even if they were willing to do so, there would remain major problems in coordinating command and control among these forces, and uncertainties about their ability to undertake offensive operations.

• The United States and the anti-Iraq coalition believe that the embargo against Iraq will not only affect the Iraqi civilian population but will eventually damage Iraq's military. The failure to obtain spare parts and the difficulty in supplying such a sizable force may lead both to a reduction in Iraqi military capability and morale over the longer term. Given the current odds against American and friendly forces, it may be worth waiting for a few months more to see how the Iraqis are affected.

For all of these reasons, it is unlikely that the United States will initiate military action against Iraq in the near-term. Saddam Hussein could change this calculus should he decide to unleash his military or terrorist assets against the United States or Saudi Arabia. But even under such circumstances the most likely American response would be to defend Saudi Arabia on the ground while employing U.S. air assets to destroy key Iraqi military and industrial targets. In American eyes, such an air campaign undertaken in response to further Iraqi aggression would pose a limited risk to U.S. forces while enhancing the effect of the economic embargo by weakening Iraqi will and increasing the chances for Iraqi compliance with the UN Security Council resolutions. In any case, such an approach would be far more attractive than a near-term ground assault on Iraqi forces in the south.

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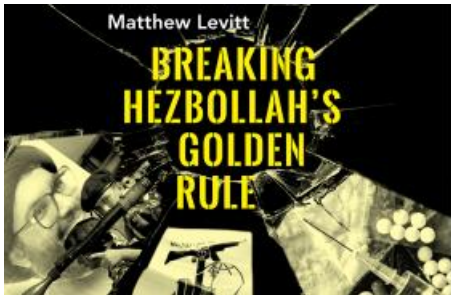


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