

# Can the United States Liberate Kuwait Today?

Sep 6, 1990



Brief Analysis

**M**any commentators and policy-makers in Washington are calling for U.S. military action to dislodge Iraq from Kuwait. While this option may be attractive in principle, today it is impossible in practice. Indeed, according to Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, the U.S. military still has some way to go before it can be confident of its ability to repel even an Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia.

How long? Given the deployment's size and distance involved, the U.S. military would be pleased if it can complete its defensive deployment by mid-October. This deployment will presumably place around 100,000 ground forces in the Arabian Peninsula able to block an Iraqi attack should one come when sanctions begin to bite.

Did the Defense Department under-invest in the mobility assets necessary to move U.S. forces to the Mideast? Hardly. Critiques of Defense Department procurement practices miss the problem we face in deploying and sustaining forces to distant regions.

With the 1980 Carter Doctrine, the United States committed itself to defending Persian Gulf nations against a possible Soviet invasion. The Reagan Administration initiated or supported a wide range of programs to improve U.S. capability to deploy forces to the Persian Gulf in years of real defense budget growth.

Many steps were taken to improve U.S. airlift capability, leading to a nearly 75 percent increase over 1980 in inter-theater capability and a doubling of capacity to move outsized equipment:

- Procurement of 50 C-5B and 57 KC-10A aircraft. The C-5B increased ability to move tanks, self-propelled howitzers, and helicopters without dismantling them. The KC-10 added flexibility to the airlift force because of its capability to operate as a transport aircraft, a tanker, or both simultaneously.
- In September 1983 the Reagan Administration began a program to enhance the Civil Reserve Air Fleet by adding cargo-convertible features to existing wide-bodied passenger aircraft.

Eighty-five to ninety percent of equipment and munitions must be carried over long distances by sea-lift. U.S. capacity was enhanced by:

- Acquisition of eight SL-7 container ships capable of speeds up to 30 knots. The U.S. also converted these to a "roll-on/roll-off" configuration to shorten unloading time. These ships moved the 24th Mechanized Division's equipment early in the crisis.
- Chartering 13 ships loaded with equipment and supplies for three Marine Brigades, located around the world.
- The National Defense Reserve Fleet and the Ready Reserve Force were increased from 26 ships in 1980 to 151 in 1989.

The United States undertook extensive pre-positioning programs in Southwest Asia, most notably at Diego Garcia. The U.S. also reached access or pre-positioning agreements with several Mideast states but regional political sensitivities limited U.S. presence. Despite these large investments in mobility, the United States was still unable to deploy major ground forces to the the Persian Gulf for many weeks after the decision to commence Operation Desert

Shield. But this should have come as no surprise. Given distances of more than 10,000 nautical miles by sea and 8,000 miles by air, Iraq would have enjoyed overwhelming local military superiority under virtually all foreseeable conditions.

Will the U.S. armed forces have offensive options to drive Iraq out of Kuwait? Perhaps over time. In the near-term the United States would be able to mount air strikes against strategic military and economic targets in Iraq that conceivably could lead to an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. This outcome, however, is unlikely. Saddam Hussein is quite right in telling Dan Rather that air power has never been the decisive factor on the ground. Nonetheless, this "aironly" option may prove attractive to those who would like to destroy a good part of Iraq's military capability and reduce Iraq's ability to expand its aggression.

Within several months, the United States could build-up forces necessary in the region to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. However, this would probably require a far more extensive build-up than has been planned. Iraq has reportedly deployed 25 divisions to Kuwait and southern Iraq. Any offensive would clearly entail serious American casualties, potentially undermining the very basis of America's activism. The idea of a quick, low-cost strike to liberate Kuwait may be politically attractive but militarily impossible.

Given the likely survival of Saddam Hussein's regime, working out post-crisis security arrangements are vital. This issue is already on the table in order to assure local allies which might otherwise hesitate to help the United States now to risk facing Iraq's revenge later. The difficulty of moving U.S. forces to the scene makes it likely that a long-term placement of American troops and equipment in the region be part of these security arrangements.

If it takes the United States so long to deploy our forces, can we hope to deter future aggression in the Middle East or elsewhere? Yes. Despite clear military superiority in early August, Saddam Hussein did not attack Saudi Arabia or U.S. forces. It is possible that he did not do so because Iraq had no further aggressive intentions. But even assuming that Saddam would have liked to attack such an inviting target, he was likely to have been deterred by U.S. statements of intent and the major air and naval intervention undertaken at the crisis' outset.

The United States would have deterred further Iraqi aggression because of its escalation dominance. While Iraq might have defeated the U.S. forces arrayed against it at that particular moment, it could not have expected to defeat the United States. By contrast, the United States had a clear capability to employ the force necessary to destroy Iraq's economic and military infrastructure.

The danger point for the United States will come in a few years when mid-level powers like Iraq develop the nuclear capability to strike vital American targets. This danger highlights our interest in preventing Iraq's attainment of that capability.

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