

# The U.S. Strategy Debate over the Gulf

Sep 4, 1990



Brief Analysis

**T**he danger of a U.S.-Iraq military confrontation may be receding for the time being. But now the debate in the administration, Congress, and the public faces a new issue: will the Bush Administration's multilateral strategy prevent it from taking unilateral military action if Saddam Hussein refuses to withdraw from Kuwait?

With Congress returning this week, arguments about defining U.S. objectives should come to center-stage. Different views within the State and Defense Departments will be reflected on Capitol Hill and in media leaks.

One line of thought, apparently advocated by Secretary of State Baker, is committed to a collective, UN-led effort to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait through economic sanctions. Supporters of this view argue that once Iraq is forced to retreat by multilateral diplomacy, it can be contained by collective security efforts. This view equally believes that Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons facilities can be controlled or dismantled by the new international order's pressure. The Bush-Gorbachev summit is likely to have this arms control idea high on its agenda.

The other standpoint, whose main supporters come from the Defense Department, prefers a unilateral, military strike to knock out Iraq's air power, strategic weapons facilities and missiles. This blow would leave Iraq's occupation forces exposed and with little option but to withdraw. Advocates of this view fear that sanctions will take too long to work while time would weaken the anti-Iraq alliance. Saddam Hussein would use this delay to cut an Arab deal leaving him -- at least -- with army and strategic weapons intact and bountiful compensation to boot, and -- at most -- with effective control of Kuwait as well. Mistrustful of UN or Arab-brokered diplomatic solutions, this school of thought considers naive any belief that diplomatic/economic pressure alone can contain Saddam. Within a few years -- the lifetime of the Bush Administration -- he will be back with an arsenal of crude nuclear weapons to impose his will on the Persian Gulf.

This debate has two levels: on objectives there is the question of whether U.S. interests can allow Saddam Hussein's military might to remain intact even if he is forced out of Kuwait; on means there is the issue of a multilateral diplomatic response or a unilateral military response. The choice made could set the pattern for U.S. policy in the new post-Cold War era.

At the outset, President Bush chose a highly successful, multilateral response via the UN Security Council and personal diplomacy. But its very success may now constrain a unilateral response and, if a diplomatic deal is cut, leave Iraq's strategic weapons programs in place. In short, the process is beginning to determine the outcome. The more successful the Bush Administration is at orchestrating international efforts to blockade and besiege Iraq, the less possible becomes a unilateral resort to force to push Saddam's army out of Kuwait and destroy his strategic weapons facilities.

This week's diplomacy is a case in point. It focuses on actions which will, at least temporarily, constrain U.S. options. Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady and Secretary of State Baker are seeking money and support from other nations which will, in turn, expect a say in how the money is spent. Similarly, President Bush will meet President Gorbachev on Sunday to ensure continued Soviet support for the multilateral effort. Given Gorbachev's clear opposition to using

force to resolve the crisis, a concerted superpower policy will reinforce the commitment to multilateral diplomacy. The timetable looks something like this: by the end of September, the U.S. force deployment in Saudi Arabia should peak; by October, however, if the Bush Administration's multilateral diplomacy has borne fruit, sanctions should start to bite Iraq deeply. There will come a critical moment when Washington will have to decide whether or not sanctions are working. If they are not producing Saddam's reconsideration of his aggression, will we then be so enmeshed in a web of commitments and obligations to a multilateral response that we will be unable to resort to force?

Of course, Iraq may yet provide sufficient provocation to produce multilateral approval for a resort to force, but so far this seems unlikely. Saddam has ordered his ships not to challenge the blockade, his air force to keep far from U.S. planes, and his troops to dig into defensive positions. Tariq Aziz, Yasser Arafat and King Hussein are generating smoke-and-mirror diplomacy. Hostages are being released to gain time and publicity.

Meanwhile, U.S. policy is tightening the ring around Iraq:

- King Hussein will be pressed to meet his commitment to comply with sanctions in return for large compensation.
- Egypt will get \$7 billion of debt forgiveness for sending more troops and continuing to back Saudi Arabia's so far resolute demands for restoration of the status quo ante.
- U.S. diplomatic objectives are likely to be broadened to demand an internationally supervised dismantling of Saddam's clandestine nuclear facilities and destruction of his chemical weapons. This will probably be coupled with an effort to tighten and broaden the international technology control regime to prevent Saddam's acquisition of technology he still needs for his nuclear weapons and missile programs.
- Egypt, Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia will be fortified with new weapons deliveries with an eye on a U.S. orchestrated, post-crisis containment policy for the Iraqi menace.

In sum, the immediate trend is away from the military option to destroy Iraq's army. The advantage is that this could avoid war now, the danger is that it might lay the basis for a more destabilizing Middle East conflict in the near future.

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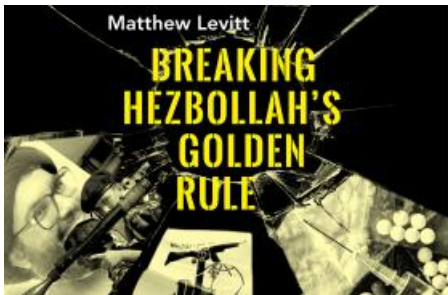
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