

In the Gulf, Both Superpowers Are in the Same Boat

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If there is a bright spot in the tragedy of Iraq's rape of Kuwait, it is the coordinated U.S.-Soviet response to the crisis. Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein has posed the first challenge to East-West efforts to build a stable post-Cold War global order, and so far the superpowers are stepping up to the test.

In a very real sense, the danger posed by Iraq's aggression goes well beyond its effect on Kuwait and the international oil market. The larger issue at stake involves the struggle to define and shape what the world of the next century -- the post-Cold War world -- will look like.

Will the United States, the USSR, and their allies succeed in establishing a new international society grounded in structures of mutual security and economic cooperation? Or will thuggish pariah states like Iraq, armed with weapons of mass destruction, be permitted to fill the vacuum left by the Cold War's demise to realize their hegemonic ambitions through the use of blackmail, extortion and military force?

On at least two other occasions this century, the United States has confronted similar moments of transition between one world order and another. The first came in the late 1930s, with Hitler's takeover of Austria and Czechoslovakia. The West failed to respond, and the rapid descent into the anarchy and destruction of World War II followed.

The second occasion came a decade later, when Stalin overthrew the government of Czechoslovakia and imposed the Berlin blockade. This time the United States acted forcefully to counter the Soviet challenge, ultimately creating military and political structures, such as NATO, that succeeded in keeping the peace for 40 years.

In its own way, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait represents a moment of truth no less critical than that posed by the earlier aggressions of Hitler and Stalin. Hussein has in effect thrown down the gauntlet, telling Washington and Moscow that they can take their new, more peaceful international order and shove it. The rules will simply not apply to Iraq.

As in the earlier periods, a failure by the great powers to respond in a coordinated and forceful manner to this first serious challenge could endanger their entire effort to erect a more stable post-Cold War world. Hussein's law of the jungle will have won out over the law of civilized international society.

The initial reaction of the superpowers has been extremely encouraging. Both voted at the United Nations to condemn Iraq's invasion. Both issued statements calling for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi troops. The United States, Iraq's largest trading partner, froze Iraqi and Kuwaiti assets and imposed a ban on Iraqi imports; the USSR, Baghdad's most important supplier of military hardware, immediately slapped an arms embargo

on Iraq. Within 36 hours after the crisis began, in an unprecedented display of superpower cooperation in crisis management, Secretary of State James Baker and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze issued a joint statement of condemnation, calling for international action to force an Iraqi withdrawal.

A further deterioration in the situation in the Persian Gulf could require even more far-reaching U.S.-Soviet coordination. As American forces in Saudi Arabia prepare for the possibility of fighting Iraqi troops, the USSR could provide invaluable intelligence on the structure and tactics of the Iraqi army, as well as the capabilities of sophisticated Soviet systems in Iraq's arsenal. The possibility of using air bases in the southern Soviet Union as launching sites for American warplanes might also be explored. Finally, the possibility of creating an international naval or ground force that includes a Soviet contingent -- an idea that just a year ago sounded fanciful -- could prove extremely useful.

It will serve the interest of the entire world if the superpowers are able to successfully follow through on their initial cooperation. First, it could spur the creation of new East-West mechanisms that could be used to manage -- or prevent -- future threats to international stability. And second, it will send a very strong message to other Third World despots contemplating a transgression of international norms.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall last November marked the death of the Cold War. With time and a little luck, we will be able to look back on this current dark episode as the moment when the Cold War was buried and a secure new order was forged.

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