

It's the Only Way

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If there was any doubt that diplomacy had run its course on Iraq, President Bush's speech to the country has put that to rest. Saddam Hussein has precious little time left to choose exile -- and the odds are he will choose wrong once again.

Prior to the president's speech, the administration's diplomacy left something to be desired. Though we were unlikely to achieve a second U.N. Security Council resolution -- and, given the administration's interpretation of Security Council Resolution 1441, one wasn't necessary -- we pursued a second resolution nonetheless.

Sure, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said he needed a second resolution. But the absence of a second resolution was certain to be better for him than either the defeat of such a resolution or a high-profile failure to produce one.

And, for us, the last thing we needed on the eve of going to war was the appearance that we could not muster international support and instead were proceeding over its opposition. The summit in the Azores provided improved imagery for us, but did not change the reality of a Security Council in opposition to our resort to force.

Unfortunately, though unsettling, the recent diplomatic setbacks do not alter the basic reality that Saddam Hussein must be disarmed, and the administration has been right to doggedly pursue this objective.

The United States and Britain announced Monday that they would not seek a vote on the resolution, and President Bush later set a 48-hour deadline for Mr. Hussein to get out of Iraq or face invasion.

Mr. Hussein is a threat, even if he is not an imminent threat. For 12 years he should have disarmed, but he has clearly been determined not to do so. That remains the case, even in his response to what was supposed to be his last chance.

He does not do so because he is determined to have weapons of mass destruction. He seeks them to feed his megalomania. He seeks them to pursue his regional ambitions. He seeks them to wreak vengeance. He believes that nuclear weapons, in particular, would be a shield behind which he could again threaten or occupy his neighbors. He sees nukes as permitting him to stop us from stopping him as he goes back to the business of engaging in regional coercion.

Given his colossal capacity for miscalculation -- recall that he thought war with Iran would be quick and easy, that

the world would simply accept his absorption of Kuwait and that later we could not defeat him in war -- we cannot afford for him to acquire nuclear weapons and the long-range means to deliver his chemical and biological weapons. Sooner or later, Mr. Hussein, with nukes, would miscalculate again, making the unthinkable in the Middle East all too likely.

Some might reasonably argue that there are better ways to ensure he does not acquire nuclear weapons. Enhanced containment, with open-ended and intrusive inspections, could prevent Mr. Hussein from acquiring or developing these weapons.

True, but is such a regime realistic? When the Bush administration came to power, the existing containment regime was fraying.

The alternative of war has made France a convert to enhanced containment for the time being. It has also provided Mr. Hussein an incentive to grudgingly, and always at the last minute, take the minimal steps required to keep us at bay.

Does anyone believe that in the absence of more than 200,000 U.S. troops in the area Mr. Hussein would be taking even his minimal steps? How long would he continue to "cooperate" if the troops weren't there? How long would the French insist on intrusive inspections if we weren't on the brink of war? And how long can we keep such a large military presence in the area?

The unfortunate truth is that we cannot maintain a war footing indefinitely. The paradox is that our large-scale military presence creates the potential to contain Iraq, but it is sustainable neither from our standpoint nor from the standpoint of the region. Either we will use it to disarm Mr. Hussein or we will within the next few months have to withdraw it. And once we began to remove it, several new and dangerous realities would emerge.

Iraq would stop even the semblance of cooperation.

France, and no doubt others, after a few months of the inspectors reporting that they have not found anything meaningful -- something that is almost a certainty given Mr. Hussein's determination to keep the crown jewels of his weapons of mass destruction hidden -- would go along as they did previously with Iraq's call to end the inspections and the sanctions.

Arab leaders who have adjusted to the reality of our going to war, and removing Mr. Hussein and Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, would know that our words mean little and Mr. Hussein's threats (and the threats of those most hostile to us) must now be accommodated.

While many fear that war will destabilize the region, the real destabilization would come when we withdrew our forces and Mr. Hussein and his WMD and related scientific infrastructure remained intact.

As someone who has been and remains committed to pursuing peace in the region between Arabs and Israelis, I wish there were a believable alternative to war with Iraq. Regrettably, there isn't. ❖

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