

Confrontation with Saddam's Iraq:

A Military Assessment

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In-Depth Reports

A little more than a year ago, the most vile terror attack in the history of mankind took place in the United States, devastating the principal symbols of American military and economic power, indeed the very symbols of freedom and capitalism in the eyes of the world. September 11 -- the Pearl Harbor of the twenty-first century -- brought darkness upon the United States, the backbone of the free world, and nothing will ever be the same. The foundations of democracy tumbled when the delicate balance between the freedom of the individual and the security of the country was violated.

Now, the United States is facing its most important fight: maintaining its values while enhancing its national security. America's latest challenge involves balancing the responsibilities of a superpower with the need to take action against what President George W. Bush has called the "axis of evil." The war against terror has become the primary strategic item on the international agenda. The thousands of victims of the September 11 attacks, along with the tens of thousands of terror victims all over the world, serve as a reminder to world leaders that violence should not be allowed to conquer the free man; otherwise, humanity will lose hope.

President Bush's post-September 11 declaration to wage war on terror was a pivotal point in history. As he reiterated in his June 1, 2002, speech at West Point,

the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action.

Indeed, the West and the rest of the free world altered their thinking patterns following the war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan -- the first battle in the creation of a new world order.

Those countries deemed part of the axis of evil represent an unholy trinity -- a combination of extremist regimes, nonconventional weapons, and terror sponsorship. The goal of such a trinity is to create terrorism of global reach through groups such as al-Qaeda, Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. This sort of global terrorism, which may eventually include the use of nuclear weapons, should be the primary target in the design of a new world order.

Dire consequences would result if one member of this axis in particular -- Iraq -- became a nuclear power. The U.S. policy of ousting Saddam Husayn should be a vital interest of the free world. If Saddam is allowed to continue amassing nonconventional weapons, global security and stability will be shaken to their foundations. Over the past two decades, he has made every possible effort to expand his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. It is clear that Iraq possesses vast amounts of chemical and biological weapons of the most lethal kind. A nuclear device in Saddam's hands would be the ultimate tool of extortion.

In 1981, Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin ordered the Israeli Air Force to destroy the Iraqi nuclear reactor near Baghdad, delaying Iraq's nuclear weapons program by some fifteen years. In doing so, Israel changed the course of history. Yet, Iraq now appears to be stepping up its efforts to achieve nuclear capability, and the Western

world must make the right decision for future generations. In particular, the growing correlation between terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has become a most vital strategic challenge. Global terrorists are always looking for opportunities to inflict mass casualties. Although such terrorists are not contained within the borders of individual states, the role of those states that harbor them must not be overlooked.

The Bush administration's message regarding Iraq conveys a clear sense of mission. For a superpower faced with war against such a regime, victory is the only option. The increased attention focused on Baghdad by the United Nations (UN) -- particularly the possibility that the Security Council might set higher standards for Iraqi compliance with arms control resolutions -- is a clear indicator of Washington's determination to take action against Iraq. Given President Bush's September 12, 2002, remarks at the UN, as well as Vice President Richard Cheney's ongoing campaign to garner international support for an invasion, the United States has reached the point of no return. The decision to act has already been made, and rightfully so; the only remaining questions are when and how.

The support of the free world and of the coalitions that the United States is attempting to construct is important, but not obligatory. Rather, the determination of Washington and the American people is the key element for a successful operation in Iraq. In the end, it is not the coalition that will determine the mission, but rather the mission that will determine the coalition. The goals of a campaign against Iraq are clear: ending Saddam's reign, destroying his nonconventional arsenal, improving Iraq's economic situation, and initiating an Iraqi administration that is favorable to both Washington and the Iraqi people. Some of these goals may require an international involvement of several years' duration.

What shape might military action against Iraq take? Although the possibilities for such a campaign are complicated, the modus operandi will be determined first and foremost by the goals that the United States sets. Other factors will play a role as well, including the level of international cooperation (diplomatic and military, direct and indirect), the domestic situation in the United States (particularly the level of public and administrative support for a campaign), the degree of Iraqi military resistance, and the stance of currently neutral countries. In any case, action against Iraq must be powerful and successful, sending a clear message to the other countries constituting the axis of evil and to those countries that are sitting on the fence.

Among the several specific tactical options available for a military campaign in Iraq, two stand out. In one scenario, air strikes and special forces missions could be launched first, with a simultaneous amassing of significant ground troops to be activated in subsequent stages. Although such an approach would have the advantage of surprise, it would also require a great deal of time to achieve the previously mentioned goals. This lag time could result in limited ceasefires, perhaps spurring UN Security Council intervention and giving the current regime in Baghdad an opportunity to negotiate tolerable inspection arrangements.

A second tactical approach would be a combined strike in which U.S. land, sea, and air forces attack en masse, with the goal of reaching a resolution to the conflict as quickly as possible. This approach could increase the chances of Saddam using nonconventional weapons, particularly if he felt completely cornered. If implemented quickly and successfully, however, this strategy would prevent Saddam from fielding such an arsenal.

Whichever modus operandi the United States chooses for its campaign, the operational logistics will be complicated. For example, a strategy that concentrated military efforts against Saddam and his most immediate supporters would require accurate intelligence, especially given his well-protected palace complexes and his frequent use of look-alikes. In contrast, focusing all efforts against Iraq's military (i.e., crippling both its conventional and nonconventional capability) could lead to massive defections that would leave Saddam defenseless.

This latter scenario highlights one of the key questions for U.S. military planners: should Baghdad be targeted first? If so, the end result may be costly doorto-door fighting. Alternatively, U.S. forces could assume control of wide areas

of Iraq while simultaneously surrounding Baghdad, focusing on the nonconventional capability of Saddam's army, keeping him unbalanced, and creating a sense of chaos.

How would Saddam respond to military action? First, it must be remembered that his primary goal is his own survival. When he is under pressure, he invariably attempts to maneuver regional, international, and domestic opinion in order to forestall any action against him. For example, he is currently making a diplomatic effort to increase Arab support for his regime, in part by identifying Israel as the force behind the seemingly imminent American attack. Saddam will no doubt use both the Palestinian issue and Iraq's economic clout as tools for creating an Arab coalition against such an attack.

At the international level, Baghdad is trying to negate Washington's justifications for military action, emphasizing that Iraq was not involved in the September 11 attacks and that it no longer possesses nonconventional capability. Accordingly, Baghdad is attempting to reach a favorable agreement for renewing international inspections.

On the home front, Saddam is likely to increase his control over the Iraqi population in preparation for military suppression of any domestic uprising, especially given Washington's encouragement of the Iraqi opposition. He will also try to strengthen his ties with certain threatening elements such as the Shi'i tribes in the south and the Kurds in the north.

Militarily speaking, Iraq is taking defensive measures in preparation for an attack. If the United States launches an all-encompassing campaign and Saddam comes to feel that the end is near, he may employ nonconventional weapons (e.g., using aircraft or ground-to-ground missiles) in order to make his permanent mark in Arab and Muslim history. Israel could be the first target of an Iraqi counterattack, conventional or nonconventional. The goal of such a provocation would be to drag Israel into a war, which could in turn increase Arab public support for Saddam.

What should be done to minimize the risk to Israel? First, in planning a strike on Iraq, the United States should provide Israel with enough time to prepare for the possibility of nonconventional attack; such preparations would include the completion of adequate civilian protection capability and defense systems. Second, western Iraq should be struck as early as possible in the campaign so that it is under allied control by the time the invasion begins in earnest. Third, the United States and Israel should work to preserve Israel's deterrent capability both before and during such a campaign, keeping in mind Hizballah's interest in opening a northern front and the potential for escalation in the Palestinian arena.

If the United States decides not to attack Iraq in the near future, several negative consequences could arise. For one thing, Baghdad would have more time to work on adding nuclear capability to its nonconventional arsenal. This would in turn increase Iran's regional weight by spurring Tehran to boost its own efforts at developing nonconventional weapons. Meanwhile, Syria would likely expand its role in the Damascus-Tehran-Baghdad triangle, perhaps even attempting to increase pressure on Israel through Hizballah. The Palestinian arena would likely deteriorate further, encouraging the notion that terrorism is an effective tactic and making the prospect of negotiations seem even more improbable. Egypt would likely begin to feel increasingly uncomfortable in its role as the leader of the region's moderate camp, and Jordan's existing economic and stability problems would likely be exacerbated as it faced increasing pressure from the West on one side and from the Palestinians and Iraq on the other.

Saddam, of course, would feel a measure of relief and security if the United States hesitated, and he might in turn develop an inflated sense of power. For example, he could work to erode the sanctions on his country, perhaps even causing the system to collapse completely.

Inaction would also harm America's standing in the Middle East and Europe, with countries such as Russia and

China becoming increasingly influential on the question of Iraq. Moreover, in any future conflict with Iraq, the United States would face an enemy with nuclear capability. The overall campaign against terrorism would weaken as well; as the extremist views represented by the Syria-Iran-Iraq triangle grew stronger, public opinion in the Arab street would deteriorate and terrorism would increase. The diminished sense of restraint among Palestinians and others along the northern Israeli border would likely drag Israel into a regional escalation.

In contrast, a successful campaign against Iraq would signal America's determination to build a new world order against the countries forming the axis of evil. For example, Iran would likely begin to feel as if it were surrounded by the United States, which would serve as extra incentive for Tehran to change its policy of terrorism sponsorship. This could in turn lead to a dialogue with Washington and increase the potential for change from within.

As for other parts of the region, Syria would be forced to decide whether it is on the side of the "good guys" or the "bad guys"; Damascus would face pressure to bring a halt to Hizballah's terror activities, and President Bashar al-Asad would find it difficult to continue his current approach to Israel. Egypt would face a challenge to its dominance and would likely attempt to pressure Israel regarding the Palestinian situation. Jordan would strengthen its ties with the United States while nevertheless exhibiting a certain restlessness.

By succeeding in Iraq, the United States would also strengthen its position as the world's only superpower and enhance its image among free nations through its resolve to act against extremist regimes possessing nonconventional weapons. This would in turn help prevent such regimes from violating individual freedoms and threatening democratic nations around the world. It would also reinforce the U.S. position on such issues rather than the positions of Russia or China.

Iraq's reaction to American intervention would probably unfold gradually. At first, Saddam would try to maximize his maneuvering space, believing in his ability to survive conventional aerial and ground attacks. If the campaign dragged on with no immediate results, Saddam could perhaps deploy conventional ground-to-ground missiles. As mentioned previously, however, once America's ability and determination to complete the campaign became clear, Saddam could well decide that his demise was imminent and that he should leave his mark, perhaps through the use of missiles with nonconventional warheads. Saddam is not known for his predictability, and an extreme Iraqi reaction to American intervention is possible, though not very likely.

America's commitment to the campaign against international terrorism is deep, and Washington appears to have made the decision to take action against Iraq, crossing the point of no return. Beyond military issues, the key will be America's determination and ability to alter the world order. It is of the utmost importance that Washington and its allies do the right thing in the right manner. Saddam's birthday -- April 28 -- has become a national holiday in Iraq. Will Iraqis celebrate his birthday in 2003? We are at a historic point. In our hands is an opportunity to make a global change; it is an opportunity that we should not ignore. ❖

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