Iraq Policy:

Thinking Beyond Smart Sanctions

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Brief Analysis

August 2, 2001 marks eleven years since Saddam Husayn invaded Kuwait. Given Washington's unsuccessful effort to win UN Security Council approval for a reformed sanctions regime, the Bush administration must now reconsider the options for Iraq policy.

Focus on Arms Control?

While Russia's opposition nixed the imposition of "smart controls" in place of the oil-for-food regime, U.S. diplomacy was able to refocus attention on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). One option, therefore, would be to emphasize arms control inspections-a wasted effort. There is no reason to think that Saddam will allow inspections, nor is there any indication that the Security Council would authorize the use of force to compel admission of inspectors. Furthermore, were inspectors allowed into Iraq, there is no reason to believe that they would be able to do their job, given the considerable Iraqi expertise in hiding its WMD programs. During the first years of the ceasefire, when Saddam was afraid of the consequences of noncooperation, inspections accomplished much. But Europe, Russia, and China have lost the will to authorize compelling Iraqi compliance with UN mandates, and the United States is not prepared to suffer the criticism for hegemonic unilateralism it would receive if it undertook the task.

Rebalancing among the Three Baskets

Secretary of State Colin Powell has spoken often about U.S. Iraq policy consisting of three baskets: UN sanctions, military deterrence, and regime change. His proposal for smart sanctions addressed the UN part of the policy without, in the process, sacrificing the freedom for U.S. action on the bilateral parts of Iraq policy-especially regime change.

Less weight in the sanctions basket should mean more weight in the other two, namely, military deterrence and regime change. Without reinforced actions on those two fronts, those who want to undermine the sanctions regime could feel emboldened, and sanctions could erode even more than they already have.

Numerous steps could be taken to revitalize the regime-change option. One-tenth of Iraq is already under the control

of the opposition, specifically, the two Kurdish parties which have run that region for a decade. They would be more willing to see challenges to Saddam launched from their territory if they were given a U.S. pledge to protect them against Iraqi tank attacks, that is, a "no-drive" zone in the north similar to the one in the south authorized by the UN but rarely enforced by the United States. If provided financial and material support, various opposition groups could launch an active information campaign, including radio and television stations that would reach most Iraqis from the Kurdish-controlled north or clandestine units in surrounding countries.

The U.S. government could end its restrictions on the opposition's use of funds inside Iraq-restrictions that come from an interpretation of the sanctions on Iraq that at best is overly legalistic and at worst is an effort to undermine support for the opposition. The Bush administration could appoint a coordinator of U.S. aid to the opposition, preferably someone at the assistant secretary level backed up by a staff of senior officials from the State Department, CIA, the Defense Department, and the uniformed military (the State Department has left vacant a lower-level position of liason to the opposition). The administration could pick up on expressions of interest in contacts by the main Shi'i opposition group, the Tehran-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

The military deterrence basket also needs reinforcing. The U.S. military has been interested in reconfiguring no-fly-zone enforcement to reduce risk to U.S. planes. Changes should be accomplished in such a way that Middle Easterners understand them to be tactical, rather than a reduction in U.S. commitment (perceptions that the U.S. resolve is weakening are the biggest threat to U.S. interests). For instance, the U.S. military's rules of engagement could be changed to state that when Iraq fires at U.S. planes-as it does frequently, to little effect-assets valuable to the Iraqi regime will be destroyed, such as secret police and Ba'ath Party buildings full of Saddam's lackeys, rather than only anti-aircraft installations.

Coordinating Policies toward Iraq and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The main news item out of the Middle East these days is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not Iraq. Arab publics are often said to be angry about U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It would be easy-but wrong-to conclude that this is not the time for a U.S. initiative on Iraq. In fact, the state of the peace negotiations has little impact on what Arab states are prepared to do regarding Iraq. When hopes for the peace process were high, at the time of the initial 1993-94 Oslo Accords or in 1999-2000 under Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, the United States was unable to turn those hopes to any advantage regarding Iraq. Arab states determine their approach to Iraq policy on the basis of national interest, not on the basis of how frustrated or satisfied they are with the peace process. Instructively, Saudi Arabia recently protested formally to the Security Council against Iraqi incursions across the border, and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah (the de facto Saudi ruler) went out of his way, in two Western publications interviews, to delink the Palestinian issue from other areas of Saudi-U.S. cooperation.

Indeed, the usual formula about Iraq policy being linked to the Middle East peace process has the flow of causality backward. The best opportunities for Arab-Israeli peace come when those like Saddam, who champion the use of force, have been soundly repulsed and when the strength and will of the United States and its allies is unquestioned. When the overall strategic situation in the Middle East is favorable to the United States and its allies, Israel feels most comfortable taking risks for peace, as it did with the Declaration of Principles in 1993; those who resist compromise have to bend, as did Syrian president Hafez al-Asad in finally agreeing to negotiations with Israel at Madrid in 1991. Were the United States to make a breakthrough against Saddam, the reverberations would be felt throughout the Arab-Israeli arena: radicals would lose a friend and financial backer, confrontation with the United States and its allies would look more risky, and the roles of the UN and Europe would appear less consequential.

Keeping Perspective

Although much remains to be done, much has been accomplished by U.S. Iraq policy in the decade since the

ceasefire: many WMD facilities and stocks were destroyed by arms inspectors, Iraq has been able to acquire few weapons or weapons components, it has paid $12 billion in compensation, and the opposition has been able to administer the north of the country for a decade.

Against this backdrop, some may conclude that Iraq is not the most urgent issue for U.S. foreign policy nor the most burning problem in the Middle East. But given the connection to energy policy, WMD, U.S. military deployment overseas, and threats to local allies, Iraq may yet be the most important strategic challenge to U.S. interests in the region. The time to deal with a problem is before it bursts into flame. And the timing is right for the Bush administration to push ahead on Iraq: the staff who would work on supporting the opposition from the Defense Department and National Security Council are in place, making them better able to overcome entrenched resistance which has buried past regime-change initiatives.

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