

Air Strikes and American Strategy toward Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Iraqi president Saddam Husayn is undoubtedly watching events in the Balkans quite closely. Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic's continued defiance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) proves that the Western alliance continues to misunderstand dictators. Milosevic, like Saddam, does not care about his people but only about his own power. He is thus unmoved by the suffering caused by airstrikes or sanctions. Moreover, if Milosevic continues to defy NATO, it will further weaken Western confidence in the effectiveness of air power. This would bode well for Saddam in his defiance of the West.

> Saddam must similarly be encouraged by Russia's stand on Kosovo. Russia may be able to thwart the West in its initiatives. Moreover, if the fissures in NATO continue to widen, as they have in the United Nations Security Council, France may end up in some sort of loose alliance with Russia. Such an alliance will only help Saddam in his efforts to stymie U.S. policy against him.

Finally, as long as the United States is preoccupied with Kosovo, Saddam will have an unusual level of freedom. This may give him the opportunity to do something big, such as invading Iraqi Kurdistan. It may allow him time to develop chemical and biological weapons.

There are, on the other hand, a number of trends in the Kosovo crisis unfavorable to Iraq. Saddam has reason to be concerned by NATO's continued targeting of Serbian regime targets. With the exception of Operation Desert Fox last December, the coalition has largely refrained from attacking regime targets. If, however, the world grows accustomed to such targeting in Serbia, the tactic could be more readily transferred to Iraq. Also, the Kosovo Liberation Army's record is far from clean, and if the West can support the KLA, they will have little trouble supporting the Iraqi opposition. Moreover, if NATO successfully uses ground troops in Kosovo, opposition to the use of such troops in Iraq may weaken (of course, Saddam would be very happy if a ground campaign in Kosovo were to fail).

> Most disturbing to Saddam is the world reaction to the crisis. Europe, which had wavered in its support for U.S. policy on Iraq, may feel that the United States deserves its support in Iraq in return for America's helping Europe with Kosovo. Worse yet, moderate Arabs have been generally supportive of NATO's campaign against Serbia. Saddam has long fed off a notion in the Arab world that the United States has a double-standard with regard to Iraq and Israel: The United States bombs Iraq, a Muslim country, for its violation of United Nations resolutions but does

nothing to Israel, a non-Muslim country, for its trespasses. Saddam used this notion to convince other Arabs that he was the victim of anti-Muslim bias. Now that the United States has come to the aid of the Muslim Kosovars against the Christian Serbians, the double-standard argument has been shattered.

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Replacing Saddam Husayn has become official U.S. policy. The question is how this might be done, and how NATO military operations in Yugoslavia might affect such efforts.

> Some see support for the opposition as the main mechanism for achieving a change of regime in Baghdad. This approach, however, is unrealistic. The weak and divided opposition is unlikely anytime soon to create a military force capable of threatening Saddam Husayn, even if supported with U.S. air power. Others see support of the opposition primarily as a means of strengthening the containment of Iraq -- limiting Baghdad's ability both to threaten its neighbors and to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Yet, this approach is insufficiently ambitious and does not acknowledge the urgent need to take risks to change the regime in Baghdad either before Iraq rebuilds its WMD capabilities or containment collapses.

If efforts at regime change are to succeed, they must harness the potential inherent in the four principal policy levers the United States holds -- military action, covert operations, reducing Saddam's unsupervised oil income, and support for the opposition -- to foment a coup or a popular uprising that will sweep Saddam and his regime from power. Taken separately, each of these levers is probably insufficient to achieve this objective. Taken together, however, synergy among them could not only reinforce the containment of Iraq, but might lead to Saddam's overthrow.

> As long as Iraq's Special Republican Guard, Special Security Organization, Republican Guard, and secret police remain intact and loyal, coup attempts and uprisings are likely to fail. Air strikes on Saddam's internal security apparatus that cause these units to disperse, disrupt their communications, and force them temporarily to focus on their own survival -- and not the protection of the regime -- are probably a necessary condition for a successful coup or uprising. Air strikes might also cause Saddam to lash out verbally against Arab governments and Turkey (as he did after Operation Desert Fox), thereby deepening his political isolation. Covert operations could at the very least, force Saddam to divert resources to deal with internal security, leaving him fewer resources available for clandestine technology procurement or trouble-making elsewhere, in turn bolstering containment.

Renewed efforts to halt illicit Iraqi oil sales via Syria and Turkey, to wean Jordan off Iraqi oil, and to stop kickback schemes under the "oil-for-food" program could reduce the flow of unsupervised income -- amounting to several hundreds of millions of dollars a year -- that Saddam uses to ensure the loyalty of his power base.

> Support for the opposition could put the lie to the widespread belief in the Arab world that the United States really wants Saddam to remain in power, and could help to foster the perception that the tide is turning against Baghdad. In the event of an uprising, moreover, trained members of the opposition could be inserted into the country with communications equipment, to help catalyze and coordinate an uprising.

The prospects for regime change are uncertain, but by publicly identifying "regime change" as a policy objective, the United States has already put its prestige on the line. With U.S. forces tied down in the NATO war in Yugoslavia for the foreseeable future, however, it seems unlikely that the United States will have the political will or the military wherewithal to pursue this option anytime soon. Moreover, even success in Yugoslavia might not necessarily spawn a willingness to engage in new military operations elsewhere (such as in Iraq), as the armed forces will likely seek a breathing spell after the war.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Harlan Cohen.

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