U.S. Policy Options toward Iraq

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U.S. policy toward Iraq is at a turning point. Decisions made in the coming weeks and months will affect American interests in the Middle East and the fate of the region for years to come. Unfortunately, there is no clear, obvious solutions to the dilemma Washington faces regarding Iraq; rather, the United States faces the unenviable problem of choosing between bad and worse options.

America's containment policy toward Iraq has -- despite repeated challenges -- been reasonably successful at achieving minimal U.S. objectives: limiting Baghdad's ability to threaten its neighbors or key U.S. interests. Containment during the past seven years rested on four pillars: weapons inspections, sanctions, no-drive and no-fly zones, and the threat or use of force -- to compel Baghdad to cease obstructing weapons inspections or to deter it from threatening its neighbors or U.S. forces in the region.

Weapons inspections and sanctions were at the heart of the containment regime. Having weapons inspectors on the ground in Iraq conducting surprise, no-notice inspections, complicated Iraqi efforts to engage in forbidden weapons development, and kept alive the possibility that smuggled items and forbidden activities might be uncovered. Moreover, sanctions stripped Iraq of the political, economic, and military influence it enjoyed before the 1991 Gulf War. By limiting imports and smuggling, sanctions aided efforts to dismantle and monitor Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) infrastructure. Thus, inspections and sanctions had a mutually reinforcing effect, and without sanctions, the inspections and monitoring effort would have been even less effective than it has been.

However, during the last crisis with Iraq that ended in February 1998, the U.S. apparently took two decisions that marked a major shift in American policy and that have effectively transformed the traditional containment regime.

First, it seems that the Administration decided that it would cease, at least for the time being, employing the threat or use of force to compel Iraq to cease obstructing weapons inspections. This became clear from the lack of an American military response (not even a modest force buildup) to Baghdad's August 5 decision to halt all further weapons inspections and to permit monitoring only at declared facilities in Iraq -- despite the fact that last February U.S. officials warned that such obstruction would be met with firmness. Iraq has permitted weapons inspections only grudgingly, and under duress, and they continued only so long as Saddam believed that obstruction could lead to

military retaliation by the United States. Without a credible threat of force, there will be no effective weapons inspection or weapons monitoring regime in Iraq.

The situation now prevailing following Baghdad's decision of August 5 is reminiscent of the period prior to the 1991 Gulf War, when nuclear inspectors visited only declared nuclear sites -- where of course nothing untoward was occurring. Iraq was thus able to hide a massive nuclear weapons program under the nose of blissfully ignorant inspectors. The cessation of inspections provides Iraq with greatly increased latitude for proscribed weapons development and production activities. Meanwhile, if UNSCOM remains inactive for a protracted period, the best people working for that organization will leave and it will gradually lose its effectiveness.

Second, the creation of the "oil for food" program has transformed the sanctions regime. Prior to "oil for food," the United States denied Saddam income by preventing Iraq from exporting oil (in fact small quantities were permitted in a concession to Jordan and Turkey, who benefitted from this limited trade). Under "oil for food," Iraq is allowed to export nearly as much oil as it did before the 1991 Gulf War (though it lacks the means to do so at this point) and to import equipment for its oil, telecommunications, and transport infrastructure to enable it to meet its new export ceilings. Under these changed circumstances, the United States is relying on the UN's control of Iraqi oil revenues as the main means to keep Baghdad from rebuilding its military capabilities and regaining its former political influence.

However, controlling Iraq's revenues addresses only half the problem; the U.S. also needs to control the flow of imports into Iraq. While Iraq cannot smuggle in major military items such as tanks and aircraft, Washington's ability to prevent the smuggling of equipment and technology that Iraq could use to rebuild its surviving conventional military and WMD infrastructure is limited, and will become more so as the amount of Iraqi imports grow under the "oil for food" program. The small number of overworked and inadequately trained and equipped inspectors now on the Jordan-Iraq border cannot effectively screen hundreds of trucks carrying thousands of items into Iraq daily, nor can they be expected to distinguish banned tank parts from permitted truck parts, or to identify mislabeled crates. And what about the borders with Syria and Turkey, where there are no inspectors? Because of these loopholes in the sanctions regime, it is crucial that UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons inspectors be able to do their job, so that smuggled items relevant to WMD programs might be discovered after they have entered the country.

The effectiveness of U.S. efforts to contain Saddam thus rests to a great degree on the ability of the U.S. to maintain the integrity of the UN weapons inspections regime in Iraq. To do so requires a credible threat of force. As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said after helping defuse the most recent crisis with Iraq last February: "You can do a lot with diplomacy, but of course you can do a lot more with diplomacy backed up by firmness and force." Force and diplomacy are two sides of the same coin and both are necessary if the U.S. desires to maintain an effective containment regime on Iraq.

Now, some have claimed that past U.S. efforts to use force vis-a-vis Iraq have been unsuccessful, and that Saddam cannot be compelled to cease obstructing weapons inspections. Certainly, during the past seven years, America could have wielded the military instrument much more effectively against Iraq than it has. But it is simply incorrect to state that Washington's use of the military option has been ineffective. In fact, experience of the past seven years shows that the threat or use of force against Iraq has in fact been reasonably effective in achieving a variety of objectives: deterring Iraq from again invading Kuwait (October 1994) and possibly continuing its thrust into northern Iraq beyond the city of Irbil (September 1996), and compelling Iraq to cease obstructing UN weapons inspections on several occasions (September 1991, January 1993, and most recently February 1998).

Experience has shown, moreover, that Saddam does not take risks when the stability of his regime is at stake. Air and missile strikes targeting the organizations that constitute the pillars of his regime (the Republican Guard, Special Republican Guard, and Special Security Organization) and that are also responsible for safeguarding Iraq's

retained WMD and missile capabilities, are likely to succeed -- at least temporarily -- in compelling Saddam to cease obstructing weapons inspections.

The strongest argument against the military option in Iraq is not that force will not succeed, but that this option is not politically sustainable, either domestically or internationally. According to this line of thinking, neither the American people nor our Arab Gulf allies will support military action, while the use of force could prompt Iraq to expel the weapons inspectors, produce a political backlash in the Arab world that would further strain already tense relations with America's allies there, and perhaps even lead to the collapse of the sanctions regime.

This argument must be taken seriously -- even if some of the assumptions it is based on are questionable. However, a U.S. policy that eschews the use of force in support of weapons inspections entails some very serious consequences. The weapons inspections and monitoring regime will rapidly collapse. Iraq will be able to rebuild its military capabilities beyond current levels (and if it acquires fissile material on the black market, it might even succeed in finishing the three or more unfinished nuclear weapons it is believed to have built over the past several years). And Saddam will be emboldened by his success in undermining the weapons inspection regime to seek ways to further undermine sanctions.

The Administration can point to one achievement that its current diplomatic approach has produced: the passing of UNSC Res 1194 in September 1998, which freezes further sanctions reviews until Baghdad allows UNSCOM to resume inspections. This resolution, however, will have no practical impact on efforts to contain Iraq, since there was no chance that sanctions would be lifted anytime soon. (Though if this resolution succeeds in provoking Saddam to take some rash step to unites the international community behind the United States, and provides Washington with greater latitude to pursue its diplomatic and military options, the policy shift will merit a more favorable judgement). Moreover, the price paid has been the suspension weapons inspections regime. A major reason offered in February for not using force against Iraq was that Baghdad would respond by expelling UN weapons inspectors. This has now come to pass anyway, without Baghdad paying a price, and without Washington garnering any major benefits.

Some have suggested that the U.S. could conduct periodic limited military strikes to prevent the reconstitution of Iraq's WMD capabilities. However, in light of past experience, the U.S. is unlikely to have sufficiently detailed intelligence to do so effectively; there is no reason to believe that there will be greater political support for these kinds of military operations in the future than there have been in the past; and the possibility that attacks on WMD facilities could produce massive civilian casualties resulting from the release of chemical or biological agents into the atmosphere, are likely to cause the U.S. to eschew such a course of action, in favor of a policy of deterring Iraq. However, as past experience has shown, deterring Saddam is an uncertain proposition. Saddam has twice plunged the region into war through miscalculation -- and it seems very likely that if allowed to rebuild his capabilities even partially, he will do so again.

In sum, we know from the past seven years, that containing Iraq requires an effective weapons inspection and sanctions regime. Ensuring the effectiveness of these measures is difficult and exasperating work, and entails certain costs. It requires the constant attention of senior policy makers, the expenditure of large amounts of political capital, and the maintenance of a large, expensive forward military presence which discomfits our allies and which must occasionally be used -- with or without their support. However, with all its drawbacks and contradictions, there is no other way to contain Iraq but by the approach that America has pursued the past seven years: the reliance on both force and diplomacy to support weapons inspections and sanctions, combined with support for opposition efforts to overthrow Saddam and his regime.

The new approach that the Administration has apparently adopted is simply not a viable long-term approach for containing Iraq, since it denies weapons inspectors the military backing needed to be effective, and emphasizes the

control of Iraqi revenues without addressing the difficult problem of monitoring rapidly increasing quantities of Iraqi imports. This approach will lead to the marginalization of UNSCOM and a further weakening of the containment regime, inviting further challenges by an emboldened Saddam, and setting the stage for a new confrontation with Iraq -- perhaps under less favorable circumstances for the United States.

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