

# *US Policy on Iraq and Its Implications*

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This Track II consultation takes place at a moment of hectic activity and intense anxiety regarding U.S. policy toward Iraq. For many months a key question has engaged commentators and policymakers in the United States and abroad: Is the United States maneuvering to go to war against Iraq, or is its purpose to maximize the pressure for the government in Baghdad to meet its obligations under United Nations resolutions to rid itself of weapons of mass destruction? With war fears mounting in many countries and thousands of anti-war protesters assembling in the United States and elsewhere, emotions may obscure the central policy disputes and the basic stakes involved in the unfolding crisis with Iraq.

In assessing the crisis one must begin with the profound risks arising from the conduct and objectives of the government in Baghdad. While identifying those risks does not dictate an automatic policy response to them, they are a sound basis for debating appropriate policy options. Most of the allegations offered by the Bush administration against the Saddam Hussein regime are beyond argument:

- The current government in Iraq has launched aggression against two of its neighbors, Iran and Kuwait.

- It has previously acquired chemical weapons, as well as advanced conventional weapons, and employed them against both its neighbors and its own citizens.
- It has undertaken major programs to obtain or develop other weapons of mass destruction, including both biological and nuclear weapons.
- It has effectively defied or evaded its obligations under United Nations Security Council resolutions to terminate its WMD programs and to accept inspections to confirm such termination.

What is not accepted by most other states is the U.S. contention that the threat of Iraqi WMD programs is so substantial or imminent as to warrant immediate military action to enforce Iraqi compliance with the relevant U.N. resolutions.

Disagreements over the magnitude of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein are widespread in the United States, as well as between the United States and other countries. Two aspects of those disagreements are most notable. To many Americans traumatized by the attacks of September 11, 2001, priority should go to the continued pursuit of the campaign against al Qaeda terrorists and their supporters. The Bush Administration's initial success in leading the attack on the al Qaeda forces and their Taliban hosts in Afghanistan was an achievement of historic proportions. Yet no one doubts that enormous effort will be required to build a durable peace in Afghanistan, an effort that will take many years and large resources. Many Americans are wary of initiating action against Iraq, even if warranted, until stability is assured in Afghanistan and remaining elements of al Qaeda are routed from other hiding places. There is much skepticism in the face of intimations by the administration that Saddam Hussein has lent significant

support to Osama Bin Laden's associates, much less that Saddam was a party to the 911 attacks in the United States.

If there are differing views about the relative priority to be accorded Iraq, there is a fundamental fault line dividing the United States from most other international opinion. That fault line was described months ago by an ambassador from one of America's closest allies: "The allies see the problem as getting rid of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction; Washington sees the problem as getting rid of Saddam Hussein." The distinction between those objectives – disarmament or regime change – is one with the most portentous implications. Indeed, as many observers have pointed out, however desirable the goal of replacing Saddam Hussein's totalitarian regime may be, setting that change as the goal may make the disarmament task all the more difficult. Particularly if military action proves necessary to enforce U.N. inspections and disarmament demands, a cornered Saddam Hussein could well elect to use whatever weapons of mass destruction he possesses to inflict massive harm on both attacking forces and all others within his reach. If, as he will surely have concluded from the Bush administration's repeated calls for regime change, he perceives that the real purpose is to remove him from power, it is hard to expect him to cooperate in his own demise. Thus, it is fair criticism to say that U.S. rhetoric about regime change is counterproductive from the standpoint of achieving Iraqi cooperation to implement UN disarmament resolutions.

Yet one needs to place U.S. political moves on the Iraqi menace in a complex and evolving context. Beginning with justified suspicion of Saddam Hussein, President Bush and his colleagues have seen Iraq as part of a more general threat to regional and global stability. The President's decision to frame the challenge to peace as revolving significantly around

what he termed the “Axis of Evil” rested on both real and rhetorical considerations. For purposes of this discussion, there is clear reason to highlight the concern that the three countries he listed as comprising the Axis – Iraq, Iran and North Korea – do pose special challenges to the global attempt to restrain proliferation of WMD. One may question the wisdom of the formulation, but the underlying concern is valid.

Having elevated that concern to the peak of policy debate, and influenced by both the prolonged interruption of inspections in Iraq and recent intelligence indicating further attempts to acquire nuclear weapons capability, the President has found Iraq to be a major factor in crafting important innovations in U.S. strategy. Those departures have involved crucial departures in American nuclear policy, notably accelerated exploration of anti-ballistic missile technologies and the termination of the 1972 ABM Treaty, as well as commitment to sharp reductions in the number of deployed offensive nuclear weapons. They are also reflected in the controversial themes published in the administration’s national security strategy.

One should note that the latter document is considerably more judicious than might appear from press discussions of its emphasis on pre-emptive action and on maintenance of U.S. military dominance. While the tone strikes many foreign readers as arrogant and self-righteous, the strategy also acknowledges the need for multilateral approaches to many issues and offers remarkable U.S. commitments to deal with a number of global problems. Nevertheless, coming in the midst of mounting preoccupation with Iraq, the Bush national security doctrine has been read as foretelling imminent pre-emption against Baghdad, with or without the aid of other countries.

There are several indications that President Bush has in fact reserved judgment on the final course to be taken regarding Iraq. After initially resisting demands that he seek congressional authorization for any military action that might be necessary, Mr. Bush moved to enlist the views and judgment of the Congress. The process through which the administration worked with Congress refined U.S. policy in a number of respects. Unlike the original resolution proposed by the White House, the authorization actually enacted by the House and Senate established more careful guidelines for American action and set more precise restraints on the president's action. It made clear the desirability of acting in concert with allies to cope with the Iraqi situation and narrowed the authority to that specific case, as opposed to offering wide latitude for military action in other countries. Also worth stressing, as signed by the president, the congressional resolution anchored the authority in the War Powers Act with its requirements for timely reporting to Congress of any use of force. Those reporting requirements do not guarantee that Congress would impede presidential use of force against Iraq, if it is undertaken, but they do impose a degree of discipline on an executive that knows in advance it will have to make its case formally and, if operations are protracted, repeatedly before the Congress.

To understand what Congress has done in granting the President the essence of the authority he sought, one needs to gauge more than the words on paper. To many, if not most members of Congress, the decision to approve the resolution hinged on a complex calculation blending judgments about how to maximize pressure on Saddam Hussein and on the United Nations to display similar determination to enforce its own resolutions. In short, Congress's implied readiness to support unilateral action by the

United States was designed to bolster U.N. readiness to endorse multilateral action. The prevailing judgment on Capitol Hill was that advertising American unity and resolve was the best way to coax strong action from the U.N. Security Council.

Thus, President Bush has enlisted Congress in a form of coercive diplomacy aimed at engendering stern international action against Saddam Hussein. A dispassionate analyst must point out that this diplomacy is not an exercise in American self-importance. Mr. Bush's sober address to the United Nations posed grave and urgent considerations about the Security Council's willingness and capacity to make its will effective. While views obviously differ about the immediate seriousness of Iraq's WMD pursuits, there are no good omens in a situation marked by an aggressor state's overt refusal to conform to Security Council requirements. The stakes here are great and the administration's determined engagement at the United Nations – again an instance of tempering its earlier apparent preference to move without further recourse to the Security Council – places the responsibility where it should be. Holding open the threat of U.S.-led international action outside of U.N. channels is problematic, but it may be the only way to energize the Security Council to protect its own future role by taking decisive steps now to bring to heel the errant leader in Baghdad.

At this writing the most hopeful prognosis would anticipate vigorous direction in the form of a Security Council resolution that sends UNMOVIC inspectors into Iraq with a strengthened mandate and resources. Ideally, from the perspective of those who are most deeply committed to successful inspections, one would prefer that the inspectors have readily at hand military forces to assure their access to any and all sites in Iraq. One doubts that the Security Council will provide for such coercive inspections, but it is

likely that the United States, the United Kingdom and perhaps others will continue to build up military capabilities in the neighborhood. Those forces may well enter a hovering mode, ready to act on short notice if UNMOVIC or other credible sources report continued non-compliance or interference by Iraq with the measures authorized to rid the country of WMD. This posture could continue for a protracted period.

As the Security Council enters advanced negotiations on a resolution to govern the return of inspectors, it will take exceptionally creative labor to resolve the tensions over whether the process should involve one resolution with some degree of implied authorization to take military action, if necessary to enforce the inspections arrangements, or two resolutions, with the Council reserving its decision on potential military action until it has received UNMOVIC reports of further Iraqi defiance.

One option that deserves consideration could serve both the French purpose of a two-step sequence of resolutions and the American purpose of emphasizing to Saddam Hussein that “serious consequences” will follow if he persists in frustrating the Council’s orders. One or another member of the Security Council could publish the text of an action resolution that will be presented for immediate action in the Security Council upon receipt from UNMOVIC or other credible sources of information that the Iraqi government remains non-compliant with its obligations or is cheating the inspectors. In the face of continuing Iraqi violations, the language of such a resolution should provide explicit authority for member states to take appropriate action to enforce Security Council resolutions and direct other states to lend assistance to that enforcement. Without requiring the Council to reach a decision on that second resolution in advance, placing the text on the public record with a commitment to present it in the Security Council, if

needed, would deny Saddam Hussein any comfort from the notion that he can engage in endless procrastination.

Writing this commentary in the midst of Security Council deliberations on Iraq, one cannot offer a definitive verdict on the American – or the international – approach to the matter. One can acknowledge that the United States has addressed the subject at times in language that is too personalized and too insensitive to the views of other countries. Yet, to be fair, President Bush’s extraordinary address to the General Assembly went a long way to compensate for those excesses and to provide a focused, measured call to action by the international community. There are those who believe that the president was merely “going through the motions” in his reluctant decision to work for congressional and United Nations consensus on a firm response to Iraq. The president has no doubt made forging that consensus more difficult by his administration’s frequent references to regime change – even by the implication that a “single bullet” in Baghdad would be the cheapest way to bring such change. With those comments as backdrop, few credit the president’s more recent statements that, if Saddam Hussein actually accepts the intrusive inspections being demanded, the regime will in effect have changed.

The crucial reality lies beyond these distracting remarks. Inaction in the face of the current Iraqi government’s pursuit of WMD will impose two intolerable costs on world order: subversion of the still-fragile norm against proliferation of such weapons and blatant undermining of United Nations authority. Neither price should be paid.

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