

## US and Iraq: Immediate Options

Recent events suggest that the US is moving towards military action against Iraq.

### Background

Since the start of the so-called 'War on Terror' the US President has been unwavering in the description of his chosen strategy as an '[Afghanistan first](#)' rather than an '[Afghanistan only](#)' policy. The suggestions that Iraq would be the next country to be targeted in this war started soon after the events of September 11. Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz argued for an early focus on Iraq. President Bush and Vice President Cheney later rejected this approach. This latter position has been reinforced by US allies who have argued against using the attack on New York as an excuse to deal with the Iraqi ruler.

Nevertheless, American rhetoric on the subject has been consistently bellicose, as evidenced by the President's State of the Union Address in which he claimed Iraq belonged to an Axis of Evil, along with Iran and North Korea.

A visit by US Vice President Cheney to the Middle East in March found little regional support for military action against Iraq and an insistence that the US focus first on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The vehemence of the negative reactions suggested that neither Kuwait nor Saudi Arabia would

be available as launching points for a US military action against Iraq.

More recent events, including the alleged plot to detonate a radiological weapon or 'dirty bomb' in Washington DC have led to an apparent reformulation of US strategy. The previous focus on deterrence and containment, has given way to advocacy of pre-emptive strike as the primary tool for global security.

This new strategic approach may be behind the recent signature by President Bush of an intelligence order which directs the CIA to undertake a covert program within Iraq in preparation for a military strike. Specifically, the order will increase CIA support to the divided Iraqi opposition groups, for intelligence collection within the Iraqi armed forces and government, and allow for the use of CIA and special forces teams within the country.

### A Strategic Opportunity

The proponents of military action against Iraq no longer argue a linkage to the events of September 11, but put such action in a larger context of pre-emptive self-defence against the potential wielders of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Indeed, in his State-of-the-Union address, President Bush warned the so-



called Axis of Evil that their WMD programs presented a clear and present danger to the security of the US. Broader strategic considerations make strikes against Pyongyang or Teheran unlikely. This, however, is not the case in regards to Baghdad.

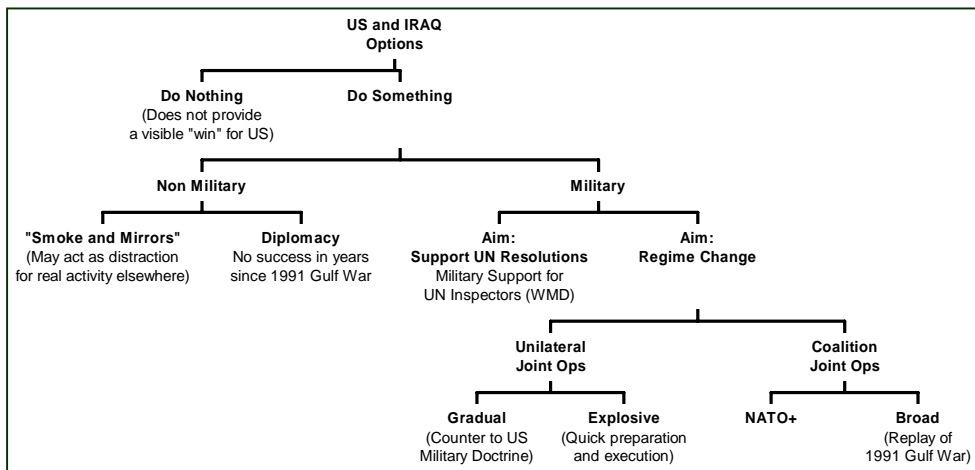
For the US, the current situation presents a tempting strategic opportunity. The successful removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power in Baghdad would remove a thorn in the US side which has remained as the 'unfinished business' of the 1991 Gulf War, and provide a demonstrable success for the 'War on Terror'.

### Options

The diagram above outlines the spectrum of options open to the US regarding Iraq at present.

At this stage the two most likely courses of action for the US appear to be either '*Smoke and Mirrors*' or unilateral joint military operations. The first of these

Figure: US-Iraq Options



would entail maintenance of the public attention on Iraq, whilst the real anti-terrorist work is done elsewhere, such as South East Asia. Recent US commitments of troops to the Philippines for operations against the Abu Sayaff terrorists and the warming of relations between the US and the Indonesian military may represent evidence of such an approach.

The second course of action is the more likely of the two. At present, countries bordering Iraq, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey do not appear disposed to allow an invasion of Iraq from its territory. This suggests that the US may seek to launch its attack on Iraq from the sea. This could be achieved through an attack on the city of al-Basra. The port would then become the launching pad for an invasion of the rest of the country and the removal from office of Saddam Hussein.

A takeover of al-Basra by seaborne assault appears to be consistent with the US doctrine of 'Operational Manoeuvre from the Sea'. The need to bring together the logistic underpinnings for an invasion of the whole country would require an operational pause for the US during which Saddam Hussein could be tempted into offensive action. Any attempt

to deploy the elite Republican Guards would render them vulnerable to air attack by the US, as the Iraqi integrated air defence system is largely static in nature.

It should be noted that an US attack on al-Basra would raise the possibility of Saddam Hussein responding with chemical or bacteriological weapons. Such an attack would have a negative effect in the region and would, of course, be the proof that the US is seeking to justify its continued focus on ridding Iraq of Saddam Hussein's regime.

#### Issues

- How would the current rifts between Secretary of State Powell and the remainder of the Administration affect their decision-making in this regard?
- Who will do the "nation building" after Saddam Hussein is removed from power?
- What are the implications for regional stability of a diminished or dismembered Iraq?
- What forces, if any, could Australia commit in the short-term to any invasion of Iraq, when such forces would likely

be operating in conditions of chemical or bacteriological threat?

- How would our region view any Australian involvement in an invasion of Iraq?

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