



Marking Gulf War anniversary in Baghdad, January 2000.

AP/Wide World Photos (Ali Hayder)

# Postwar Strategy: An Alternative View

By TED GALEN CARPENTER

**T**he attack on *USS Cole* in the port of Aden was a reminder of the dangers inherent in the U.S. role as a stabilizer in the Persian Gulf. Even though the region was regarded as strategically relevant during the Cold War and increased in military prominence after the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979, America did not establish a significant ongoing presence

until the events of 1990–91. Today the Navy typically keeps a carrier battle group in the area. Dozens of planes patrol the no-fly zones over Iraq from bases in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Kuwait. Military equipment is prepositioned in several countries. Overall, there are normally some 20,000 personnel in the region, with tens of thousands ready to deploy to the theater if a serious crisis arises.

Such a sizable presence supports the policy of isolating two so-called rogue states, Iraq and Iran. This objective has existed in substance since the

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M1A1 tank at check point in Kuwait.

Fleet Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Jeff Viano)

and embark on a renewed program to develop nuclear weapons. After air strikes in December 1998 responding to Iraq's decision to expel U.N. weapons inspectors, that justification was abandoned, but no alternative rationale has been clearly articulated.

The hardline policy toward Iraq is unraveling. International support has steadily eroded. Desert Fox, the air campaign in December 1998, was conducted by American and British aircraft with other coalition members blunt in opposition. Criticism of U.S. policy has grown and the coalition has shrunk to the United States, Britain, Kuwait, and at times Saudi Arabia. The most recent blow came in October 2000 when Turkey dispatched a new ambassador to Baghdad and secured an agreement to pump more Iraqi oil across their common frontier.

### Interests Ignored

Defenders of U.S. policy invariably emphasize two justifications beyond facilitating arms inspections: protecting access to oil supplies and

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preventing Iraq from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. While both justifications have superficial plausibility, they are flawed.

Economists as disparate as Milton Friedman and James Tobin point out that the oil rationale was unsound at the time of the Gulf War and is still erroneous today. Despite the modest price spike that has occurred since spring 1999, world prices for oil, adjusted for inflation, remain below peak levels of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Moreover, the current hike—reflecting a rapid economic recovery in East Asia and resulting increases in energy consumption combined with the temporary ability of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries to restrain production—is likely to be relatively short-lived. Advances in discovery and extraction technologies suggest that

the trend of lower prices will likely resume and perhaps accelerate.

Although preventing Iraq from getting nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons is a more serious objective, it is also suspect. Iraq is not alone in its ambitions. U.S. intelligence agencies admit that some two dozen nations possess or are acquiring chemical weapons, and at least a dozen have biological weapons or will soon, including several neighbors of Iraq. After tests by India and Pakistan in 1998, it is clear that eight nations, including Israel, are nuclear-weapons states, and several others are only a screwdriver-turn away. That raises the question of how many wars of nonproliferation the United States is willing to fight.

It is unlikely that Iraq would use such weapons against the United States. Baghdad has neither long-range bombers nor intercontinental ballistic missiles. Besides, Saddam knows that any attack with weapons of mass destruction would result in a counter-strike. Likewise Iraq would be reluctant to use weapons of mass destruction against Israel, because that country reportedly has 150 to 300 nuclear warheads. Saddam may be brutal and devious, but he has shown no suicidal impulses. If America managed to live with the likes of Stalin and Mao who had nuclear weapons, it should be able to deal with a relatively small and weak Iraq.

The more probable danger is that a free-lance terrorist (perhaps with the encouragement of Iraq) might detonate nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons in the United States. But a policy of coercion against Iraq makes such an incident—and the prospect for thousands of casualties—more likely rather than less. America is widely perceived, especially in the Islamic world, as a bully that abuses a population which has suffered from the U.S.-led embargo. That perception might feed the rage of terrorists and create incentives to inflict massive American casualties at home.

final years of the Bush administration. For most of the Clinton years it was characterized as dual containment. The policy now reveals signs of fraying. Control of Iraq receives most of the attention from pundits and overwhelming support from Congress and the American people despite less than stellar results. Indeed, to the extent that criticism exists, it tends to be that the Clinton administration was not harsh enough. Yet a look at the record casts doubt on the wisdom or sustainability of either component of dual containment.

### Dubious Record

For almost a decade an economic embargo and intermittent bombing have devastated the Iraqi populace while failing to dislodge Saddam Hussein. The country's per capita income is less than a fourth of prewar levels, and infant and early childhood mortality rates have soared. Throughout most of this period the explanation for inflicting misery on innocent civilians was that such pressure was needed to compel the regime in Baghdad to cooperate with weapons inspections. Otherwise Iraq may rebuild its chemical arsenal



USS Cole after terrorist attack in Aden.



F-15 taking off from Doha international airport, Qatar.

U.S. Air Force (Frank Rizzo)

USS Cole (Lyle G. Becker)

**Annulling Containment**

The United States should end its role as Saddam’s jailer. It should especially question why Baghdad’s neighbors are not sufficiently alarmed at the alleged threat to support a coercive policy. If states in the region are not unduly worried, it is not clear why the United States—thousands of miles away—should feel threatened. Pursuing a policy that is unneeded and increases exposure to retaliation is not justified strategically.

For Iraq the elements of a containment policy are already being run

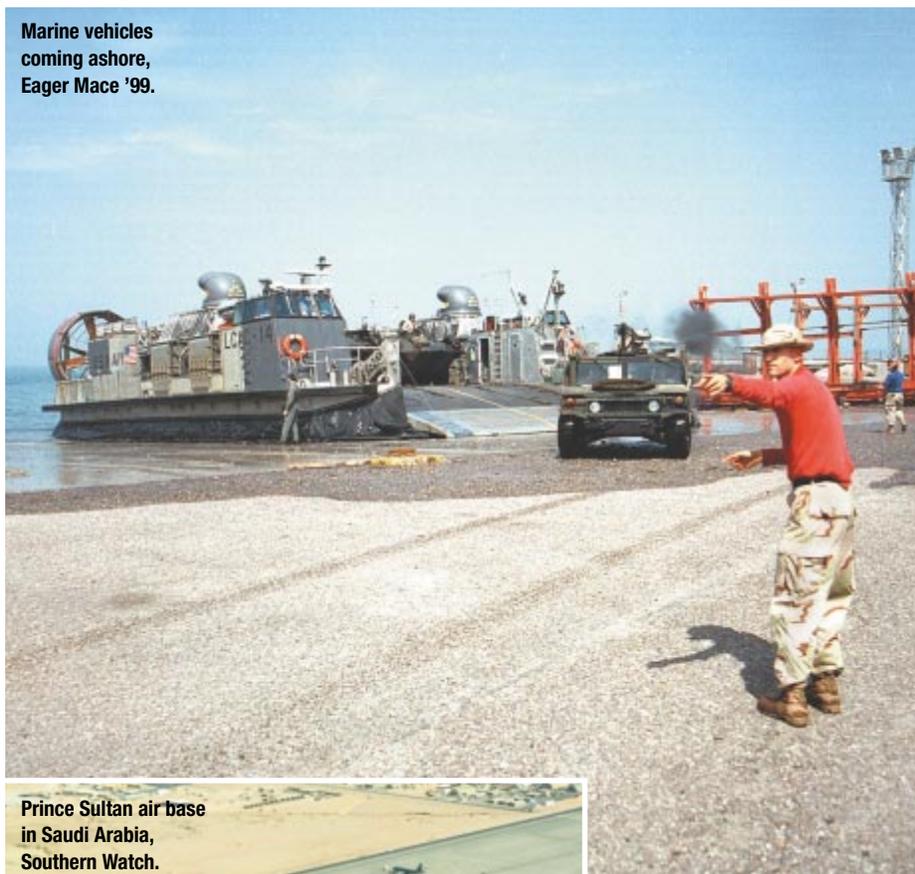
by its neighbors. Even in 1990–91, some observers tended to exaggerate Iraqi capabilities and minimize those of neighboring states. But as the outcome of the war demonstrated, the military was more an extension of Saddam’s domestic repression apparatus than an effective fighting force.

Today the disparity is more dramatic: Iraq’s neighbors—Jordan, Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey—have 1,990 combat aircraft while Baghdad has 400. They have 12,600 tanks to Iraq’s 2,200 and 1.68 million active military personnel to Iraq’s 429,000. And those figures do not begin to account for qualitative disadvantages confronted by Iraq. Pilot training, for example, has been minimal and sporadic for years, and spare parts for aircraft and other systems have been in such short supply that as

many as half the planes are not operational. Both its aircraft and tanks are increasingly obsolete. Two other countries, Iran and Syria, have similar problems—but not to the same degree—and the remainder have been modernizing forces as the Iraqi military has deteriorated.

In sum, neighbors of Iraq have the wherewithal to contain another episode of Iraqi aggression. Indeed, military forces exist for a local balance of power that would prevent any state from exercising hegemony. Lacking are diplomatic and institutional mechanisms for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. As long as the United States is determined to remain an international gendarme, other states will have fewer opportunities to explore alternative security measures.

Marine vehicles coming ashore, Eager Mace '99.



13<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, Combat Camera (Don L. Maes)

Prince Sultan air base in Saudi Arabia, Southern Watch.



1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Sean M. Worrell)

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## Strategic Options

As frustration over containment has mounted, there are growing calls to shift the emphasis to ousting Saddam Hussein from power. No matter how gratifying the thought of removing such a thug may seem, such a course of action is fraught with difficulties. It would likely make America responsible for the political future of Iraq, entangling it in an endless nation-building mission beset by intractable problems.

Barring a coup against Saddam Hussein by one of his equally brutal and corrupt cronies, U.S. forces would

probably have to dislodge him. Optimists argue that so-called Iraqi democratic opposition in exile—especially the largest umbrella group, the Iraqi National Congress—can achieve the task with minimal assistance from Washington. That apparently was the logic that motivated Congress to pass the Iraq Liberation Act and funds to support efforts to undermine the regime. But few knowledgeable analysts take the opposition seriously.

General Anthony Zinni, USMC (Ret.), a former Commander in Chief, Central Command, commented that anti-Saddam forces are rife with factionalism and show little independent initiative. Indeed, the Iraqi opposition

is an assortment of groups which run the gamut from Marxist revolutionaries to Islamic fundamentalists. Thus far, the principal goals of these groups appears to have been bickering and raising funds rather than waging a liberation struggle against Baghdad.

The above realities underscore the first major problem with a commitment to oust Saddam. Not only would American troops be required to install a new government, but they would have to protect it from authoritarian elements and cultivate democratic institutions strong enough to survive the eventual departure of occupation forces. Otherwise, another dictator—a new Saddam—would emerge, and America would face a renewed threat to peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. Installing and preserving democracy would entail nation building of indefinite duration that would dwarf efforts in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The unpromising prospects for a stable Iraqi democracy should dissuade those who argue that U.S. forces should have swept on to Baghdad in 1991 and who ponder ways to rectify

that supposed error. But there are other equally daunting problems. Most notably, there is the issue posed by a persistent regional secession movement, the Kurds in the north. If Saddam were removed either by Iraqi insurgents operating under U.S. sponsorship or by direct U.S. military action, America would have to decide whether to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq or give its blessing to secessionists. Both options have downsides. To hold together a post-Saddam Iraq would not be easy. Attempting to force Kurds to remain under Baghdad's jurisdiction could provoke ferocious resistance. It could lead to the unenviable task of explaining to the American people why U.S. troops were dying in campaigns to suppress the aspirations of movements that sought to throw off the shackles of Iraq's Sunni elites. Yet endorsing an independent

Kurdish states has drawbacks. The United States would have to preside over the dismemberment of Iraq, which Sunnis and others in the Islamic world would resent, and which would also eliminate a major regional counterweight to Iran.

Moreover, an independent Kurdistan would create a vexing issue for Ankara. A Kurdish republic would be a political magnet for Kurds in Turkey—more than half of those in the region. Ankara has waged a bloody war for over 16 years against a Kurdish faction in the southeast. Turkey would find its difficulties multiplied if these rebel forces had sanctuary in a neighboring state, and their incursions would violate international law.

This situation would not matter if the United States had not declared that peace and stability in the region was a vital national interest. Attempting to stabilize one of the most politically turbulent parts of the world has already proven to be frustrating and an open-ended commitment.

The other component of dual containment is especially detached

from reality and has come under increasing fire from foreign policy experts. The triumph of reform elements in Iran's recent parliamentary elections presents both a new opportunity and a new urgency for the United States to abandon its policy of isolating Tehran. If America can deal with a Stalinist North Korea, it should certainly be willing to confer with a quasi-democratic Iran. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made conciliatory remarks that were a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done.

A decade after the Persian Gulf War, the United States finds itself in a strategic cul-de-sac. If the current policy is continued, there is little more than the depressing prospect of a mission with no clear objective and steadily eroding support from regional powers and principal allies in Europe and elsewhere. America is itself largely alone in its attempts to isolate Iran. Support for containing Saddam is somewhat greater, but it too is ebbing. If Washington does not adjust its strategy soon, it may find itself in the worst possible position. Allies and client states would still want to maintain U.S.

military presence as insurance against regional aggression. Yet those same parties are likely to undermine major portions of U.S. policy by trying to further normalize relations with Baghdad and Tehran. Such hedging might make sense for them but offers few benefits for Washington.

There is a way out of this apparent dead end, but it requires dramatic change. It will mean ending the policing of the Persian Gulf and acting as permanent regional stabilizer. It will require adopting a lower-profile role and relying on the emergence of a formal or informal regional balance of power to maintain a tolerable degree of stability. It may require accepting occasional short-term spikes in oil prices if turbulence occurs. Most difficult, it may mean accepting further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The Middle East-Southwest Asian area would not have remained untouched by proliferation in any case, as the emergence of Israel, India, and Pakistan as nuclear powers has confirmed. Relinquishing the U.S. role as regional policeman may increase the pace of proliferation marginally, but that is all.

Adopting a much lower military profile and relying on a local balance of power is not without risk. But it is a decidedly better option than continuing a policy noted for its unattainable goals and eroding support. It will also reduce the danger of having forces on the front lines of a violent region. **JFQ**



U.N. weapons inspectors  
leaving Baghdad.

AP/Wide World Photos (Peter Dejong)