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Why Pollack is Wrong: We Have Contained Saddam

By Joseph Cirincione and Dipali Mukhopadhyay

Ken Pollack is a gifted analyst. But in his lengthy February 21 New York Times op-ed <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/21/opinion/21POLL.html>> , he assembles a house of cards to prove that (1) Saddam Hussein may soon get a nuclear bomb, and (2) if he does, we cannot deter him from using it. For Pollack to be correct, all of Saddam,s efforts to build a bomb must work perfectly and all of our efforts to thwart him short of war must fail miserably. Here are six of his key errors:

1) *Pollack charges that in 1995 defectors from Iraq reported, contrary to the IAEA assessment at the time, that „outside pressure had not only failed to eradicate the nuclear program, it was bigger and more cleverly spread out and concealed than anyone had imagined it to be.*

Some may read this to say that in 1995 there was still an extensive nuclear program. This is not true. The IAEA had completely dismantled all the manufacturing and production elements of the program, including the removal of all the uranium fuel (beginning in November 1991) and destruction of all uranium enrichment capabilities.

If Pollack means that the defectors showed that the original program was bigger than had been known, this is true, but beside the point. Defections are a key part of the inspection process, not a reflection of its failure. The 1995 defections pressured Iraqi officials into disclosing the details of the „crash program“ to the IAEA during high level technical talks in August 1995. These talks enabled the IAEA to thoroughly investigate Iraq’s plans to extract HEU material from research reactor fuel. Ultimately, the IAEA concluded that this „crash program“ never got off the ground: once the Iraqis realized that all of the research reactor fuel would be shipped out and placed under IAEA

safeguards, the program was aborted. Because the IAEA was able to account for all of the research reactor fuel, experts concluded that Iraq never successfully retrieved any of the HEU material.

2) Pollack charges that another batch of defectors told western intelligence services that after the inspectors left Iraq in 1998, Saddam had „started a crash program to build a nuclear weapon.“

There were defectors who said that former nuclear scientists and engineers who had worked on the nuclear program had been instructed by Saddam to restart the program. These defectors, stories may well be true, but there is no evidence that the resurrection of a weapons program has progressed very far. The IAEA said in 1999 that its „verification activities have revealed no indication that Iraq possesses nuclear weapons or any meaningful amounts of weapon-usable nuclear material or that Iraq has retained any practical capability (facilities or hardware) for the production of such material.“

Nor have any of the inspections under Resolution 1441 yet discovered any evidence of a sustained nuclear weapons program. Pollack gets around this lack of evidence by simply dismissing the IAEA, saying that its inspections cannot be trusted. But then we are left with just a fear, an uncertainty, not reliable, credible evidence.

Some may feel that defector tales are evidence enough. But even those who repeatedly cite defectors must acknowledge that defectors sometimes tell tall tales. For example, defectors have told intelligence officials that Iraq actually conducted a secret nuclear test in 1989.

Others said in 2001 that Iraq has two fully operational nuclear bombs and continues to make more. (Nuclear Control Institute, „Overview of IAEA Nuclear Inspections in Iraq, June 2001.) There is no evidence to support these claims and few believe them. So Pollack and others pick and choose the defector tales that fit their argument. This is not solid methodology. Defector information must be verified, as was the case with the 1995 defectors, before any conclusions can be drawn.

3) Pollack says, „the American, British and Israeli intelligence services believe that unless he is stopped, Saddam Hussein is likely to acquire a nuclear weapon in the second half of this decade.“

Putting aside the embarrassing problem of the basis for the British intelligence dossier, Pollack,s presentation of their conclusions is

misleading. What the CIA actually says is that „In the absence of inspections, most analysts assess that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear program, unraveling the IAEA,s hard-earned accomplishments.“ (CIA, Iraq,s Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs, October 2002). But now inspectors are back in the country able to detect and stop any new activity.

The US Department of Defense concluded that „Iraq would need five or more years and key foreign assistance to rebuild the infrastructure to enrich enough material for a nuclear weapon.“ (DOD, Proliferation Threat and Response, January 2001) But this is in the absence of any sanctions, inspections and with major help from other nations. Today, we have sanctions, inspections and no one is helping Iraq. We have stopped him, at least for now.

4) Pollack says, „Nor do we know to what extent the inspectors, presence is slowing the Iraqi program.“

Not true. We know that we have inspectors on the ground who can go anywhere and inspect any thing. We have just begun flying U-2 reconnaissance planes and soon will have drones circling suspicious sites. Making nuclear weapons requires a highly visible infrastructure.

It is impossible to hide this activity from determined inspectors equipped with high-tech gear and the full and active support of leading intelligence agencies. All the intelligence sources Pollack cites can now be used in support of actually stopping the activities they detect or suspect. They no longer have to be limited to writing speculative reports or warnings; the intelligence can be linked directly to action teams sent to investigate and dismantle any suspicious activity.

This is a key point. In order to strengthen their argument for war, war hawks must deride and dismiss the inspection process. Then, it would be true that the only recourse to stopping Saddam would be war. But the inspections are working now to prevent any large-scale production of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons or missile systems. With increased resources and authority, they can work to find and destroy hidden weapons caches.

5) Pollack spends the second half of his article arguing that Saddam cannot be deterred. He cites Saddam,s invasion of Kuwait and subsequent attempts to assassinate the emir of Kuwait and former President Bush as examples of his reckless behavior in the face of

American warnings.

But Pollack, himself, presents a clear example of the American ability to deter Saddam without the use of force. In demonstrating Iraq's propensity to aggress, Pollack cites Saddam's alleged intention in 2000 to move his military through Syria and into the Golan Heights. Pollack concludes that „only American and Saudi diplomatic intervention with Syria, combined with the Iraqi military's logistical problems, quashed the adventure.“ Evidently, diplomatic intervention successfully deterred Saddam.

6) Pollack says that not only would Saddam be undeterred, but, equipped with a nuclear weapon, he would consider the United States sufficiently deterred from responding to his future acts of aggression. Pollack says Iraq is uniquely aggressive in its posture. He argues, „America has never encountered a country that saw nuclear weapons as a tool for aggression. During the Cold War we feared that the Russians thought this way, but we eventually learned that they were far more conservative.“

Here Pollack slips into the convenient historical revisionism now in fashion in conservative circles. This view looks back fondly on the „good old“ days of the Cold War, when the US confronted a knowable, deterrable foe. But that was not at all how it was seen at the time.

The entire basis, for example, of the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars), launched twenty years ago, was that the Soviets would not be deterred and that we should and could build a missile defense shield to destroy the first attack of 5,000 Soviet warheads. Typical of the view then was the Defense Department's „Soviet Military Report,“ of 1987: „The Soviets have developed extensive plans for using nuclear weapons first to preempt any use by other states.“ Saddam's aggression seems minor compared to the threat of a Soviet Union under Gorbachev still „committed to the long-term objective of establishing the USSR as the dominant world power.“

We have no real way of knowing how Saddam would behave if armed with one nuclear weapon when faced with a United States with 10,000 nuclear weapons. Rather than engage in a debate with no valuable conclusion, we should stick to the facts: Iraq does not have a nuclear weapon and it is in our best interests to make sure Iraq does not acquire one. With inspectors on the ground, equipped with the necessary gear and intelligence, Iraq will not be able to re-ignite a nuclear weapons program without detection.

The inspectors are not fools. In a 1999 letter to the Security Council, the IAEA acknowledges that there is an inevitable degree of uncertainty in any country-wide verification process that seeks to prove the absence of readily concealable items or activities. „It is this uncertainty,“ the agency says, „which makes it essential for on-going monitoring and verification to be a continuous process.“ The United States and other members of the Security Council must uphold and implement the intention of Resolution 1441 and, through the IAEA, verify the complete elimination of Iraq,s nuclear program, compel answers to the open questions, and establish a permanent monitoring system to keep Saddam under house arrest for the rest of his life.

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