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North Korea Update

MEDLEY GLOBAL ADVISORS

Geopolitics Special Report

Iraq: Speedbumps Won't Stop Tanks

March 3, 2003

Lost in the flurry of reports on this weekend's multiple potholes on the road to war with Iraq is the fact that the Bush Administration is primarily focused on the post-war exit strategy, not the entrance strategy. Complications in opening a northern front from Turkey, a concerted French drive to forestall a vote on a new resolution, and the blurry shape of post-Saddam political arrangements will not reverse President Bush's decision to disarm Saddam Hussein by force.

"This ship is moving," a senior White House official tells us, reiterating that if the US is unable to line up the nine necessary votes to pass a new UN resolution against Iraq, then it won't submit the resolution for a vote at all -- and start an invasion under the legal umbrella of UNSC Resolution 1441. That tactical decision, however, will wait until after UNMOVIC chief Hans Blix's next report to the Security Council -- and the Council remains so bitterly divided now that even agreement on the date of Blix's briefing remains elusive.

The Turkish parliament's refusal (for now) to authorize the deployment of 62,000 US troops and Iraq's new concessions to UN inspectors should not be viewed as setbacks to any war, but rather as potential complications to its aftermath. Key governments in the region have resigned themselves to understanding that a war is inevitable: the call by the United Arab Emirates for Saddam to step down, a plea backed openly by Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar and tacitly by Saudi Arabia, is an unprecedented break of an Arab taboo on open interference in brotherly nations, and a step unlikely to have been taken unless those governments truly believed the die had been cast.

And France's veiled threat to use its UN veto stems from its recognition that war is inevitable. France's tactic, UN diplomats say, is primarily aimed at preventing the US/UK proposed resolution from ever facing a vote -- a strategy that would spare Paris the indignity of appearing powerless to stop an inevitable war, while preserving both its fundamental opposition to a US-led invasion as well as its room for maneuver to participate in post-war reconstruction efforts.

And it appears that even the most committed anti-war activists are succumbing to the inevitable. Western volunteers to serve as "human shields" in Iraq are starting to pack up and leave, once they started to grow uncomfortable with Baghdad's requirement they squat near sensitive military sites or leave the country.

US scoffs at Iraqi tactics

Administration officials expected Iraq would start the slow process of destroying its al-Samoud missiles in a bid to avert a UN green light for war, and could only shake their heads in disbelief when Iraq's "discovery" of a handful of aflatoxin-filled munitions and promises of a new inventory of VX and anthrax stocks appeared to pass French muster as successes in the disarmament effort.

For Washington and London, of course, the latest Iraqi maneuvers are transparent "cheat and retreat" tactics aimed at splitting the Security Council and forestalling "serious consequences." The tactical strategy the rest of this week, diplomats say, is to convince UN waverers that Iraq's concessions so blatantly lack credibility that they reinforce their argument that Baghdad failed the two tests of Res. 1441: proactive disarmament and a final and accurate weapons declaration.

The US is reaching deep into its bag of diplomatic tricks to win over the "middle six" nonpermanent members of the Security Council. For example, Washington enlisted the help of an ultra-Orthodox Israeli diamond merchant to try and secure Angola's vote. Pakistan and Mexico are making some pro-US sounding noises, but they, like other waverers, have not committed their votes amid a bitter split among the UN's Permanent Five.

"We are not getting anywhere fast," a P-5 diplomat tells us this morning. "People are still just talking past each other in the Council, hammering on their own arguments without shifting any votes." The diplomat said the US and UK remain steadfast in their opposition to compromise proposals for a resolution that would give Baghdad slightly more time while stiffening demands Iraq meet specific disarmament benchmarks.

"Benchmarks are useless without active cooperation," a UK diplomat said. "And we have zero cooperation. The resolution is about 1441, period." Lobbying efforts to round up UN votes remain intense, and the Security Council will reconvene on Tuesday for a closed session. Diplomats say a date for Blix's next update, which had been tentatively set for this Friday but which Washington wanted to move forward by a day or two, will likely be determined by the Council tomorrow. The date for a vote on the resolution remains up in the air, but no one expects the studiously neutral Blix to take a stand one way or another.

White House officials are sticking to their assessment that neither France nor Russia will veto a new resolution, especially if the US lines up nine yes votes. The US is prepared to withdraw the resolution and roll forward under the authority of Res. 1441, but that is an assessment Bush will make only after Blix's update, a senior White House official tells us. "If a couple of weeks beyond that will be desperately needed by Blair, that wouldn't exactly put us into the blazing summer heat. But this game is basically up."

Turkey: A big complication, but not a roadblock

A more serious wrinkle to US war plans than a dithering UN system was the Turkish parliament's unexpected rebellion in rubber stamping a deal to deploy US troops. The clearly embarrassed Turkish government says it will give a vote another shot, but no date has been set and is unlikely before a March 9 regional by-election. In a clear sign the US military has not scrapped its Turkish war plans, the Pentagon has not moved to reroute an armada waiting in the eastern Mediterranean to the Suez canal. If re-deployed, it would take at least a week for those troops to reach Kuwait, where Kuwaiti ports are already clogged with existing US forces.

But US military sources are stressing to us that this is not the "serious blow" to US war plans it is made out to be in the press. Pentagon sources make clear that while the Turkish route to the northern oil fields of Kirkuk and Mosul would be preferred, it is one of the "nice but not necessary" elements to the current war plan drafted by Third Army Command in Kuwait and Centcom in Qatar. As we wrote last week (MGA 2/26/03 Update "Iraq: Turkish Delight In Kurdistan"), the plans to deploy the US Fourth Mechanized Division to the Turkish "northern front" is as much political as it is military, namely, to keep the Turkish military forces from taking the

initiative to push too deep into Iraq or clash with the extremely anxious but heavily outgunned Kurdish Peshmerga forces. And the delays in the deployment and pre-positioning of the US troops on the Turkish-Iraqi border could also provide a tactical element of surprise on the actual launch date of a ground invasion if the Iraqis come to believe the Turkish problem implies a postponement of any conflict.

And the Turkish-based "northern front" option in fact entails some unattractive logistics, namely the long supply line from the Turkish ports across the mountains to the Iraqi battlefield, while, ironically, the highways from Kuwait all the way to the north are excellent for a fast moving armored advance that could skirt the main concentration of Iraqi military defense around Baghdad. The current plans, which call for an air-based operation to take control of the northern oil fields using elements of the 82nd Airborne Division could be just as easily relieved by the heavier armored and mechanized forces coming from the south rather than the north if the "air head" option is utilized. In addition, the northern operation would also be supplied from a similar "air head" to be established in the western desert.

But this "southern plan" entails some risks, according to military planners, something like the Second World War "Market Garden" operation in which a three pronged air assault on German positions resulted in a "bridge too far" failure when air power alone was unable to provide adequate protection before the main advancing forces could relieve the furthestmost air head at Arnheim. The working assumption behind a southern approach is that close and massive air power can destroy any movement by heavier Iraqi armored forces to counterattack what would be the relatively lightly armed forces holding the oil field regions of Kirkuk and Mosul.

The drawbacks of democracy

If the Turkish surprise indicates anything, diplomatic sources say, it is that Washington should not expect that bringing democracy to the Middle East means the region's nations will just line up to salute the Stars and Stripes. One US-allied diplomat said that Bush's speech last week extolling a "positive domino theory," where a free Iraq will solve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and usher in liberty across the region, may actually make his job at the Security Council much harder. "The focus at the UN is on disarmament. When US aims are tied to regime change and regional transformation, even other nations who agree Iraq is not cooperating on disarmament become nervous and question the administration's sincerity and motives," this diplomat said.

This sentiment is important, because the hard work really begins once the shooting stops.

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Update

North Korea: That Pesky Axis of Evil Speech

March 3, 2003

Despite all of this weekend's noise on Iraq, the real confusion within the Bush Administration remains over North Korea, and there is little indication it is getting any less confused. Now there are reports that indicate part of President Bush's tough response to early tentative North Korean outreach attempts rested on CIA-driven intelligence that the Dear Leader was on the brink of losing control to more moderate internal military and political forces -- only for the CIA to quietly tell the White House two weeks ago that, well, they no longer have confidence in the source that drove their "Kim is weakened" conclusions.

In other words, the CIA says to the President: now that you're on the brink of an "explosive" moment when reprocessing facilities are about to be restarted in North Korea as a reaction to moves to force Kim Jong Il's nuclear hand, in ways that brought a predictable set of escalation responses, we thought you'd like to know that we are wrong. So what now? The response by one senior US official bluntly summarizes what we have been hearing and reporting. "We have a serious problem with no good options." Check.

Direct talks are a chit not to be given away for nothing

And if you are Kim Jong Il, it's going to be pretty easy to determine which end of the stick you get in late spring. "If Iraq turns out to be long and protracted then the administration will not have the stomach for another confrontation. But if it goes smoothly and quickly, perhaps it emboldens us to get tougher. After all the swift success in Afghanistan gave us the impetus to go after Iraq," one senior administration official tells us.

Until then, the US is determined to hold off any decisions to see how the Iraqi chips fall. That's why Washington is busily fuzzing the "red line" of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel, a step that, for lack of better options, would accelerate a push for some type of sanctions, or, down the road, some kind of naval blockade which one White House official admits Pyongyang would see as an "act of war."

But US officials are quick to defend their tough stance against bilateral talks with the North (something President Bush feels very strongly about. If you don't believe us, take a look at Dick Armitage's backside after freelancing to Congress on this. We understand it is still stinging). Administration officials argue that weaker-kneed allies don't understand that one reason not to go straight to direct negotiations is "direct talks are themselves a chit for negotiations -- we shouldn't give that away for nothing."

As another senior official told us, "Our refusal to talk with the North directly is not as pig-headed as it seems in some ways. There is of course the 'we won't be blackmailed' part of it, because when you sit down directly it invariably quickly becomes a question of what are you going to pay them. And I think consensus is growing here that the North will never give up its nuclear program. So what are we going to do? Pay them just not to sell it?" Well, yes, is the response to that question in most other capitals.

The really odd component of this extremely odd story is that Japan may emerge as the linchpin. If you think the US hates the idea of North Korea going nuclear, triple that and you have some idea how much the Chinese and South Koreans hate the idea of Japan going nuclear. Yet this is the most likely response to the idea of Pyongyang acquiring more than the 1 or 2 nukes everyone seems to think they already have.

Bottom Line: the situation with North Korea sucks. There are lousy options. And the administration hasn't figured out a policy yet.

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