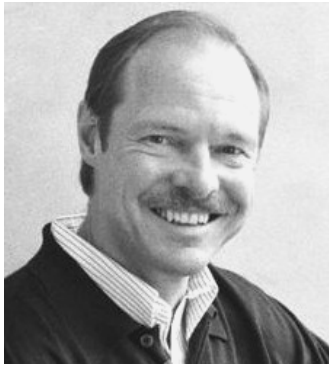


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Perspectives



Iraq: Seven Viewpoints That Matter

It's hard to look past the holiday season without thinking of Iraq. Every few days, the US and others reassure us that war is not necessarily imminent, but the geo-political realities suggest that it's inescapable. So widespread is the popular conviction that Iraq will be attacked within the coming three months that an announcement by Washington to the contrary would be met with utter surprise.

One of the most interesting things about the media coverage of the Iraq conflict is how one-sided it's been. America is accused of being the world leader in self-absorption and parochialism, but I'm equally critical of others. The European press, which I closely follow, has presented an equally biased viewpoint and, even though I don't read any Asian news services on a daily basis, I imagine Japan's, Korea's or China's media are partial to the Oriental viewpoint.

In short, the folks from Tokyo, Beijing, Paris or Frankfurt might be more aware of the world around them than New Yorkers or San Franciscans are, but their judgments and conclusions are generally based on their own needs. What really matters is not a cursory knowledge of geography or languages or political borders, but the ability to understand how others think and see things. And that, unfortunately, is lacking everywhere—to a large extent thanks to the distillation of complex subjects into one-liners by the global media.

Iraq one of the most complex subjects

There are few current topics that are more complex than that of Iraq. I'd like to discuss in this article how perceptions and realities shift, as different vantage points are considered. One of the most important and least thought-of positions is that of Iraq itself, which is why I want to start with Saddam Hussein.

Iraq's position: From Baghdad's viewpoint, the American stance is completely schizophrenic. On the one hand, Saddam is being told to table a list of his weapons of mass destruction in order to avoid war. On the other, Washington keeps saying that nothing short of a regime change will satisfy the United States. The legitimate question that arises is this: why would Saddam have the slightest interest in complying with US and UN demands? Not only would it be the first time in history that a dictator (or, for that matter, any other head of a government) voluntarily gives up his military might and thus exposes his country to attack, but in this case, the dictator is being told in advance that he'll be removed the moment he does so.

Russian position: Moscow's position is probably the most important other than that of the two warring parties, mainly because no one wields as much influence in the region. Ever since the days of the Great Game, the world's leading powers had to compete with Russia for influence in a host of nations like Iraq, Iran, Turkey or Afghanistan. When George W. Bush became president of the US, Vladimir Putin began placing major bets on his relationship with Washington, overriding his generals, who urged caution. In the wake of September 11, 2001, Putin accommodated America by supporting the US-led war in Afghanistan, raising oil exports and annihilating Russia's doctrine to oppose an eastward expansion of NATO.

But foreign policy is not a business in which favors are returned. In spring, Washington introduced punitive trade tariffs against Europe, Russia, Canada and others. And by summer, it was clear that America's much-touted coalition effort consisted largely of unilateral initiatives in which other powers were bullied to participate. For Russia, things became worse: George W. Bush officially declared Iraq his next target, a development that could undermine Putin's regime, plunge Russia into economic turmoil and diminish its international status further.

Putin's main challenge will be to convince the US to guarantee Moscow's interests in Iraq, which include royalties on huge oil reserves and some \$7.6 billion in outstanding loans. Washington, not eager to have one of the largest Iraqi oil fields under Russia's control, has so far elegantly dodged the issue and maintained that such assurances need to be obtained from the Iraqi opposition groups which may form Baghdad's next government. Putin's tried, but that's only made things worse. This week, Saddam tore up a lucrative multi-billion dollar contract under which Russia's Lukoil was to develop a sizeable Iraqi oil resource. "Russia went to Washington to protect itself after the removal of the Iraqi regime," Saddam's side-kick Tariq Aziz explained. "Such conduct cannot be accepted." The result is that Russia is now sustaining economic damage because it talked to possible successor-regimes, but may not get any offsetting rewards from doing so.

Vladimir Putin is in a difficult situation. His only remaining hope is George W. Bush, the very man that's not trusted by his military, the Communists and a number of other Russian opposition groups. If Bush can't get those who want to form Iraq's next government to uphold Baghdad's commitments to Moscow, or if he doesn't want to, Putin's political future will dim. And if even with guarantees, an invasion of Iraq will pose major risks for Russia. If US military objectives are met, oil prices may well crash, falling by perhaps half. In that case, Moscow's budgets, which are premised on current prices (of about US\$25/barrel) will implode, and the country's ambitions to aggressively develop its oil reserves will be delayed by years. The risks of a US invasion of Iraq for Moscow are considerable.

Europe to question its destiny

Europe's position: The term "European policy" is almost an oxymoron; the old continent, after all, remains a quagmire of conflicting opinions. The one thing that is clear is that there are two major power structures: Europe's sovereign nations (some of whom matter a lot more than others) and the Eurocrats in Brussels. The former stand divided on the subject of what should be done about Iraq, while the latter oppose military action against Saddam. Why do they do so? Primarily, because it would bring US influence over the world to a new high and, by doing so, diminish Europe's relative standing.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, Europe has wanted to become a superpower. The way it's gone about that is nothing short of remarkable: no doubt influenced by the legacy of two all-consuming wars during the past century, the continent's leaders have been reluctant to project power militarily and instead relied on the expansion of the European Union's territory and trade, and on diplomatic clout. An Iraq showdown would challenge Europe's convictions in a most direct way. Not only would it change the face of the Middle East, an area where Europe believes it has influence, but it would do so on America's terms and with purely military means. Thus, if the US goes to war (and especially if it does so without the blessing of the continent's key players), Europe will be forced to stare at an historical reality, namely that no world power has ever emerged or survived without military power projection. The bureaucrats at the EU, as well, will be forced to question their mindset and, under pressure from their sovereign constituents, the continent's destiny.

Among Europe's major powers, only Britain is firmly on the American side. Apart from the fact that during the past half century, the Anglo-Saxon nations have generally been able to better relate to the US than their continental European counterparts, London's stance is also uniquely reflective of Britain's recent history. The Europe across the channel has always been a threat to British sovereignty, but military superiority generally made it possible to counter the emergence of a dominant continental power. When Germany, during World War I and World War II, upset the balance, London allied itself with America. In today's context, the European Union does not pose a military threat, but Brussels' growing political ambitions *are* disconcerting. London understands that it needs to maintain an equilibrium to retain independence. It does so by carrying on significant trade with and investment in the United States, staying outside of the European currency regime, and siding with America on most military matters.

China's position: Beijing is politically and economically more isolated from the threat of Al Qaida, the Iraq conflict or other shock waves emanating from the Middle East. Nevertheless, the Chinese hold claim to part of Iraq's oil reserves, which complicates matters. Also, China is in need of ever greater imports of oil and has ambitions to gain control of some of the Middle East's production capacity. Hence, the largest risk to Beijing is a "go alone" US move against Baghdad, which could leave Washington in charge of deciding the shape of post-war arrangements. The best scenario for China would be a long engagement of US troops in Iraq and, in turn, other parts of the Middle East. Such an outcome could preoccupy Washington for a decade or two and allow the Chinese leadership to exert full hegemony over much of East Asia.

Hoping for minor failure

In short, the world's truly important players, China, Europe and Russia, all have a considerable stake in how the US proceeds with Iraq. To them, the least loss of power would result if Washington could be prevented from acting against Saddam altogether, although the odds for that are quickly diminishing. Next best would be a minor US failure, i.e. a regime change in which the world gets rid of Saddam but the successor regime is not merely America's pawn. The fact that continental Europe, Beijing and Moscow all openly lobby against a unilateral action by America suggests that they're afraid Washington might actually succeed, bringing the US superpower status to new heights and sharply curbing their ambitions.

Having said that, it's important to draw a distinction between US plans for Iraq and the US War On Terrorism. While China and Russia harbor outright hostility towards politicized Islam and Europe views Muslim discontent with great unease, no one sees Iraq as an immediate key threat. Hence, the Bush War On Terrorism would have been capable to draw on support from the key powers on an ongoing basis, but Washington's preoccupation with Baghdad is causing bad blood with most would-be allies. The direct result is that US policy objectives in the war on Al Qaida and its sister-organizations have been undermined.

All of which evokes the question why it is so important for America to go to war against Iraq at this particular time. The American position is that Saddam is a threat to US interests on a par with Al Qaida. It's important to understand that this is not only an official line, as is often reported in the media, but a core tenet of US policy thinking. Those who criticize Washington for interfering with a hateful but emasculated dictator or those who argue that other rogue nations (such as North Korea) pose an equal threat, miss the point. The US view is simply this: no one capable of destabilizing the Middle Eastern region can be tolerated.

That Saddam is prepared to do just that is already a matter of historical record. Saddam the dictator has proved to be one of the most ruthless oppressors domestically, Saddam the aggressor brazenly invaded Kuwait and openly talked about taking Saudi Arabia next, and Saddam the environmental terrorist set ablaze every oil field he could lay his hands on. Whether he plans a repeat performance is a matter for discussion. British and US intelligence assure us that several of Iraq's weapons programs are steadily progressing, while France, Russia and China say they are unconvinced of such developments. (Note that the three loudest voices are those who hold the largest ownership positions in Iraqi oil reserves). Which viewpoint is the factually correct one will probably never be known.

There are other advantages to the US if it moves on Iraq and most of them, intriguingly, lead back to Al Qaida. Again, the predominant line we get fed by the media, namely that Iraq and Al Qaida have nothing to do with each other, is incorrect. There may not be any direct link between the two, but US policy considerations on Al Qaida must by definition include Baghdad.

Let me explain why. Recent events have clearly illustrated that the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular are being viewed as sanctuaries by groups which are sworn to the overthrow of Israel, the corrupt regimes in key oil producing nations and their protector, the United States. Three developments have made this state of affairs unacceptable to Washington. First, September 11, 2001 illustrated that the terrorist groups will no longer restrict themselves to Middle Eastern locales—the US itself is now a prime target! Second, the growth of the terrorist groups, in size, geographic reach and financial backing has reached alarming proportions; and third, substantial financial support is being provided by Middle Eastern nations. In response to these realities, the United States decided to go on the offensive, changing its friendly relationship with several “client states” in the region into a more confrontational one. Instead of asking for cooperation, Washington is now making demands that directly interfere in the affairs of sovereign nations. Some of the affected regimes have cooperated with Washington, but others, like Saudi Arabia, have complained and obstructed US efforts. By doing so, they've achieved the opposite of what they wanted: they've demonstrated to the Bush administration that a brutally tough line is not only advisable, but imperative. (In this context, it's interesting that while there are widely diverging views on the merits of a war against Iraq, the Saudi Arabian regime is now almost unanimously viewed as a pariah, whose overthrow would be a good thing).

Destabilization is the key

What does this have to do with Saddam Hussein? Actually, a lot. As the British before them, policy makers in Washington are finding the Arab world difficult to deal with. Only extreme regional destabilization, as the war on Afghanistan demonstrated, yields the type of climate where Middle Eastern regimes are forced to hedge their rhetorical hysteria with covert assurances that they might support a US move against one of their own. If continuous destabilization is the key, Saddam seems a logical next target.

By picking him, a known lunatic, as the focus for the current installment of the US destabilization campaign, America hopes to bring on board similar support as it managed to get when it took on the mad mullahs of the Taliban. So far, Washington has not garnered a meaningful following, but time may still alter that. My suspicion is that, once an attack is imminent, a number of countries will tone down their opposition. The biggest surprise will be the support of Arab nations, which leads me to the final segment of my analysis.

The Arab position: There are three groupings within the Arab world: those friendly to Arab interests (which the Arabs say includes all Muslim nations), the roughly 20 nations of the Arab League, and the countries which comprise Iraq's neighborhood. Anyone who's studied the topic knows that talking about unity while making backroom deals is the hallmark of the Arabic culture. Nothing has changed. Bahrain would be as happy to stab Saudi Arabia in the back as the Saudis would be to overthrow the Sultan of Oman. Egypt pledges Arabic solidarity but will support the US in virtually anything, primarily because it gets immense American aid; Jordan officially opposes a move on Saddam, but will accommodate a US attack when the time comes. In short, while talking about the virtues of upholding anything Arab and Muslim, the Middle Eastern players are as pragmatic as their Western counterparts.

The Arab nations have two major difficulties with the US position. To begin with, America is now openly interfering in the sovereign affairs of several Middle Eastern nations. This is not only incompatible with the basic concept of nationhood, but it also creates enormous social problems. Any accommodation of Washington will worsen tensions between the restive, increasingly militant and virulently anti-American population that inhabits the Middle East and the regimes currently in power.

The second problem for Arab nations is the fact that the US has been very silent on the subject of its post-war strategy. For the US, planning the war itself and looking for a diplomatic cover absorbs most energy, but for the most would-be allies in the region, what the next Iraq will look like is more important. After all, to nations like Turkey, Iran or Kuwait, a world with Saddam Hussein may be far better than the regional chaos that could ensue after the departure of a US occupation force. To shore up regional support for a US-led attack, Washington not only has to explain its plans for the end-game in Iraq, but also guarantee that it will oversee and be accountable for its implementation. Such a commitment by the US is crucial, given Iraq's difficult ethnic profile.

In a way, it's fair to say that there is no such thing as an Arab position. In the end, the US determines what will happen and once US intentions become completely transparent, each Arab nation will go where it must. The name of the game for each of the Middle Eastern nation will be survival—which is exactly how Washington wants it!

The United Nations and Israel

Much has been written by the media about the Arab world's justified anger with Israel. As I'm sure you do, I mourn the seemingly unstoppable loss of life in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but the Western media are once again on the wrong track. The Arab world at large is galvanized by what it believes to be Israel's illegitimate existence, or in the case of a few moderate Arab nations, the illegitimate occupation of lands which don't belong to Israel—but not the plight of Palestinian people. As a matter of historical fact, Palestine has never ranked high on the pan-Arab agenda, other than as a propaganda vehicle against Israel. None of the many recent attempts to get Arab nations to accept Palestinian refugees (even temporarily) has succeeded; on the contrary, at the recent conference of the Arab League, the subject was specifically barred from discussion.

Many who've written on this topic have suggested that if the Israel-Palestinian conflict were resolved, all the other problems in the Middle East would go away. I completely disagree. The Middle East's dominance by despotic client states of the resource-hungry industrialized West is the central problem. It's a problem that will not go away, no matter what happens in Israel; on the contrary, the onslaught of Muslim resentment will mercilessly push against the ramparts of the West's power structures. The pundits say that an Iraq war will only make things worse and they're right; at the same time, it could also be said that doing nothing will only make things worse.

Also peripheral to this central issue is the United Nations. I hardly read an article on Iraq in which Secretary General Anan's and Chief Weapons Inspector Blix' words aren't analyzed in enormous details. The truth is that neither of the two gentlemen has any bearing on the outcome of the current battle. The United Nations has effectively been served notice of termination by the US—unless it can actually demonstrate that it will stand behind its resolutions. Unfortunately, the United Nations cannot do that, because it is no more than the voice-piece of the permanent members of its Security Council. At best, this makes the UN an ineffective mechanism; at worst, an entity whose existence cannot be justified. My advice on Israel and the UN: both will play their roles on the way to and during the Iraq war, but neither will matter.

Finally, I want to touch on the morality of a war on Iraq, or the lack thereof. Even though my newsletter's mission is to analyze geo-political, social and economic developments, I've learned that when I touch on the topic of war, there are always a number of readers who comment on its moral aspects. I view this as a good thing; it gives me hope that while the grey eminences in the world's capitals play games of dominance and plot wars, many ordinary citizens ask questions.

The Moral Aspect

The scriptures of most of the world religions are fairly clear on what's moral and what isn't—even when it comes to war. And none, by the way, automatically sanction pacifism. In the Buddhist view, which is fairly typical, the key question is whether “you can do this task [i.e. the killing of another in war] as an upholder of safety and justice, focused on love of those who you protect, rather than on hate for those you must kill.” I think it's fair to say that none of the modern powers follows this simple tenet. If they did, the world would be a better place.

The two nations which claim the moral high ground are the US and Britain. As they contemplate the details of the coming attack on Iraq they might ask themselves what, apart from Saddam's almost certain demise, they will accomplish. Will the misery of ordinary Iraqis be brought to an end, or will a new strongman hold sway and continue the oppression? What will be done to keep Shiites and Sunnites, Kurds and Arabs from warring against each other? And when the war ends, who will guarantee the peace? These are the real questions the media should ask about Iraq. Instead, we get statistics on Scud rockets and Patriot missiles and maps of where Saddam's palaces are situated.

Almost a hundred years ago, the philosopher Max Weber predicted that by the end of his century, ethics would be replaced by aesthetics. He was right: today's issues are determined on the basis of gloss and texture—substance is rarely considered.

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