

ate with battlefield nuclear weapons." The armoured brigade normally operates with howitzers designed to fire shells filled with conventional or nuclear explosive. Prime Minister Thatcher later said "she knew of no authority" for such a claim. While governments routinely hedge on such matters, the fact that the use of nuclear weapons is the subject of open discussion dramatizes the possibility of escalation.

The economic consequences of war are likely to be grave as well. If oil fields in Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia are badly damaged, the international price of oil would soar. Many of the industrialized economies would be pushed into a cycle of stagflation and the economies of the developing world would suffer even more seriously.

As for the political consequences of a regional war in the Gulf, these are almost inestimable. The political landscape of the Middle East is likely to be changed beyond recognition. The shape of a post-Hussein regime in Baghdad is unclear and would not necessarily be an improvement as far as the international community is concerned. Arab governments in the Gulf that fought against a fellow Arab state in a war initiated by the American-led international coalition would be at risk, as would the shaky regime of King Hussein in Jordan.

Such an earthquake in the Middle East could also create severe aftershocks in the nascent international order that is emerging in the wake of the Cold War. It is far from certain that the coalition forged between the US and the USSR would survive a war initiated by the United States without approval by the UN. In early October, General Mikhail A. Moiseyev, Chief of the Soviet General Staff, explicitly warned that force should not be used in the Persian Gulf unless it was approved by the United Nations.

Yet if the UN publicly debates and then authorizes the use of force before military action is taken, at best the advantage of surprise is lost and at worst, a cycle of pre-emptive logic is set in motion throughout the region – knowing that war is coming, each side will be strongly tempted to attack first.

If war is a bad choice for both, retreat is also very difficult. Unless he is compensated politically and economically, a retreat for Saddam Hussein would be very costly. In addition, Iraq's resolve is in part a function of the expectation that it is prepared and equipped to suffer far greater casualties for a much longer time than is the American-led coalition. As President Hussein told Ambassador Glaspie at their meeting in July: "Yours is a society which cannot accept ten thousand dead in one battle."

Finally, President Hussein may be convinced that there is no exit, that even the withdrawal of Iraq's forces from Kuwait will not satisfy the minimum demands of the forces deployed against him and that they seek his removal from office. Under these conditions, he may deliberately provoke Israel to military action in order to split the Arab members of the international coalition that President Bush has assembled, and unify the Arab world in a war against the US and Israel.

George Bush has committed the United States to secure the withdrawal of Iraq's forces. If, as time goes on, President Hussein does not withdraw, a retreat by the United States would be politically costly at home. It would also have serious consequences in the Middle East. Even without major armed conflict, through its action Iraq has heightened the strategic vulnerabilities of every state in the Gulf as well as many in the fertile Crescent. If Kuwait's borders are illegitimate, then so are those of almost every state in the region. When fears of Iraq's ambitions are reinforced by its relatively sophisticated military capabilities,

including its nascent nuclear weapons capability, an acute perception of threat spreads beyond the Gulf throughout the region.

Compounding these dilemmas are the high costs to the United States of a prolongation of its large military deployment in the Gulf – not only the obvious economic and political consequences at home, especially if the recession deepens – but the impact of the deployment on the politics of the Middle East.

The deployment is large, visible, and intrusive, and for the first time since the death of President Nasser of Egypt, a leader has won the widespread sympathy and support of Arab opinion in the Middle East. He has done so in large part because of the explosive appeal of his amalgam of Arabism and his attacks against Western imperialism and those Arabs who do its bidding. The longer the stalemate continues, the more powerful Saddam Hussein becomes in Arab streets.

Choosing the Lesser Evil

This analysis suggests that there is no desirable resolution to this crisis. Political leaders consequently must focus on achieving the least damaging outcome. Given the large and ultimately unpredictable costs of war, compelling a negotiated withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait through sanctions seems preferable. If this fails, a war – most likely a high-intensity and destructive war of unprecedented scope – will change dramatically the military and political configuration of the Middle East.

Even if war is avoided through the withdrawal of Iraq's forces from Kuwait, the post-crisis strategic order will be built around a permanent American military presence in the Gulf. Under these conditions, President Hussein will threaten not only the military security of the Gulf, but also the political security of governments throughout the Middle East as he exploits the intrusive character of foreign military forces and the weaknesses of Arab governments. And the heightened vulnerabilities of governments in the Middle East will be shared by the world as a whole.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait precipitated the first post Cold War crisis. At its deepest level, the crisis is about the shaping and management of the new international order. On this, ironically, Baghdad, Moscow, and Washington are all agreed. Iraq acted as it did in order to prevent the consolidation of what Saddam Hussein considers imminent American pre-eminence in the Gulf. At the first meeting of the National Security Council in Washington after the invasion, the crisis was defined as the first test of American ability to maintain global and regional stability in the post Cold War era.

Yevgeny M. Primakov, a member of Mikhail Gorbachev's Presidential Council and one of his closest advisers, offered a strikingly similar analysis: "However dangerous the Gulf crisis may be in itself and however important it is to settle it, I think we should proceed from the fact that it offers a kind of laboratory, testing our efforts to create a new world order after the cold war."

The Gulf crisis is so grave because it involves the intersection of political, economic, and strategic vulnerabilities throughout the Middle East. How the crisis is resolved will indeed tell us a great deal about the resilience of the new order in the making. What is already apparent is that priority must be given to crisis prevention. In the new order, as in the old, finding the safest way through a crisis is difficult and fraught with grave dangers; the challenge is to prevent a crisis in the first place. Once in a crisis, there are often no good options, only a choice among lesser evils. □

As Iraq and the American-led coalition wield the threat of war, each risks losing control of events through accident, or because the other side anticipates an attack and decides to strike first.

