

These steps have been followed scrupulously by the Security Council and by the member-states acting under its authority, but there is a huge and legitimate question as to whether and when they will work and where they may ultimately lead. Uncertainty on these scores has been heightened by the rapidity and level of the military build up, and by the "war talk" that has sometimes accompanied it in Washington, London, among Kuwaitis and elsewhere.

It is, however, worth examining that talk carefully. It may well have been a conscious strategy for Washington to exaggerate the American readiness to take direct military action against Iraq in the early days after the Kuwait invasion when the forces on the Saudi Arabian border were still inadequate for deterrent or even "trip-wire" purposes.

It is now legitimate to reiterate the availability of the option of offensive action against Iraq for at least two reasons. First, the sequence of actions envisaged by the UN Charter does culminate in the use of military enforcement action, if sanctions do not bring the aggressor's retreat or if other developments should justify it. Secondly, the credible possibility of rapid and massive retaliation is probably necessary to deter Saddam Hussein from undertaking further military action that might be calculated to fragment the coalition against him -- e.g. by trying to draw Israel into the fray.

Although they now have substantial defensive depth and huge capabilities for retaliatory or punitive strikes, the overall configuration and posture of the international forces arrayed against Iraq is still not essentially offensive, and it would take a great deal of planning and training to forge its disparate contingents into an adequate offensive force. It is still true, however, that Iraqi actions or the escalation of some localized skirmish could lead to a major military exchange, even if that is not now the international forces' intention.

The chances of war are heightened by Saddam's proclaimed annexation of Kuwait, a claim which lies at the polar extreme from the UN's non-negotiable demand of full