

vulnerability as well. Even now, some four months after the fact, the evidence is not decisive.

Why Did Saddam Do What He Did?

It is likely that Saddam Hussein identified an opportunity to assert Iraq's long-standing claim to Kuwait, to establish a commanding position in the international oil market, and that he decided to exploit the opportunity. Most of the available evidence sustains such an interpretation. One critical component of such a "war of opportunity" is the expectation by leaders that the victim state will not be able to mobilize the assistance of powerful outsiders or friends in time to affect the outcome. As we have seen, this condition was met.

A second component is the calculation by leaders, in this case Saddam Hussein and his regime, that the local balance of military capabilities is strongly in their favour. This condition was also met. Iran was still recovering from its eight-year war and no other combination of Arab states in the Gulf could conceivably match the battle-tested Iraqi army. Moreover, Baghdad had received substantial amounts of financial aid from Gulf states and sophisticated military technology and equipment from the Soviet Union and the Western world, who all felt threatened, albeit in different ways, by the Khomeini revolution in Iran.

Iraq's military supremacy in the Gulf was overwhelming. If, indeed, Saddam Hussein was motivated largely by the opportunity he saw to expand, then reassurance from the US and others was an inappropriate strategy against this kind of challenge.

It is also possible that President Hussein was driven in part by the growing vulnerability of Iraq's economy. Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, in an interview after the invasion, explained that Iraq was stunned by Kuwait's insistence that Iraq's debt be repaid; the debt had accumulated during the war with Iran, a war fought to defend the Gulf states as well as Iraq. He then drew an explicit linkage between Iraq's deteriorating economy and the invasion of Kuwait:

The economic question was a major factor in triggering the current situation. In addition to the forty billion dollars in Arab debts, we owe at least as much to the West. This year's state budget required seven billion dollars for debt service, which was a huge amount, leaving us with only enough for basic services for our country. Our budget is based on a price of eighteen dollars a barrel for oil, but since the Kuwaitis began flooding the world with oil the price has gone down by a third.

When we met again – in Jidda, at the end of July – Kuwait said it was not interested in any change. We were now desperate, and could not pay our bills for food imports. It was a starvation war. When do you use your military power to preserve yourself?

To the extent that Iraq was motivated principally by opportunity, only a clear and unequivocal commitment combined with an explicit threat of the consequences of the use of force stood any chance of preventing Iraq's massive use of force against Kuwait. Deterrence had to be forcefully executed. If, on the other hand, Hussein was driven primarily by Iraq's economic vulnerability, then a strategy of reassurance had to address the issues that were central to ameliorating its acute economic problems.

If the United States was uncertain of Iraq's motives and intentions, then it could have used a mixed strategy of a strong and unequivocal commitment to come to Kuwait's defence, and reassurance to address Iraq's pressing economic concerns. Although it is far from certain that a mixed strategy of deterrence and reassurance would have succeeded if it had been tried, Washington did neither effectively. It did not warn of the

consequences of an invasion of Kuwait – on the contrary it distanced itself from an "inter-Arab dispute" – and it did not address Iraq's concerns about its growing debt. Under these conditions, crisis prevention stood little chance of success.

Crisis Management and the Risk of Inadvertent War

Now that the crisis is upon us, the acute dilemmas inherent in managing it are evident if we assume that neither Iraq nor the United States want war, but that both wish to achieve their fundamental objectives: for Iraq, the annexation of Kuwait and for the US, the withdrawal of Iraq's forces from Kuwait. In order to achieve their objectives, both are now manipulating the threat of war to compel the other to back down.

In the short term, as Iraq and the American-led international coalition both 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. War could break out accidentally if some unit, ship or soldier in one of the many national contingents that are now deployed in the Gulf fires mistakenly at a target it considers hostile; the shooting down of the Iranian Airbus by the USS Vincennes in the Gulf in 1988, and the erroneous attack by an Iraqi fighter-bomber on the USS Stark in 1987 are vivid examples of how easily such an accident can occur.

War could also occur if any of the military powers in the region anticipate an attack. Iraq has threatened, for example, to strike first against forces in the Gulf if its economy were strangled by economic sanctions, and to broaden the war to include Israel. In response, Israel's air force was placed on the highest possible state of alert and a significant proportion of its fighters is in the air at all times. In a context of rising tension where the military cost of being attacked first is very high, the incentives to pre-empt rise dramatically.

In the longer term, either side may find that it has so committed itself that despite the heavy costs it sees no political alternative but war. In such a case, Iraq's armed forces are likely to mount strong resistance but suffer massive casualties. The 955,000-man army, organized in fifty-three divisions, varies in quality from the six formidable divisions of Republican Guards to poorly-trained and armed conscripts. In addition, Iraq has reached the limit of its capacity to mobilize forces. Iraq's faltering economy and its infrastructure would be devastated. As Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz recently acknowledged, "This is more frightening to Iraq than eight years of war with Iran."

The consequences of the military options available to the United States are also grave. The option of a swift "surgical strike" against Iraq does not exist. Iraq's nuclear research centres and chemical plants are located in the midst of densely populated areas. The destruction of Iraq's military infrastructure would of necessity involve thousands of civilian as well as military casualties. A more limited attack against Iraq's forces in Kuwait would involve extensive fighting, heavy military casualties on both sides, and the risk of chemical warfare and widespread collateral damage, both to civilians and to the economic infrastructure.

These estimates do not include the consequences of a war that could easily spread throughout the region. Once war begins, it could escalate in scope and intensity with devastating consequences.

The *London Observer* of 30 September reported a claim by a senior officer attached to the armoured brigade the UK has sent to the Gulf that "if they are attacked with chemical gas by Iraqi troops, they will retali-

*Washington made
only a token and
confused attempt to deter
Saddam from acting
and instead relied
principally on
efforts at reassurance.*

