

It was against this backdrop that the Bush administration, on 24 July, evaluated intelligence reports of the movement of two Iraqi armoured divisions to its border with Kuwait. In his Revolution Day speech on 17 July, President Hussein had attacked Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates as agents of imperialism who were waging economic warfare against Baghdad. Iraq demanded that Kuwait and the UAE stop violating their OPEC quotas and reduce their production of oil. In response to Iraqi threats, the US dispatched two ships for manoeuvres in the Gulf. At the OPEC meeting that followed, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates agreed to observe their quotas and permit a modest increase in the price of oil.

Hussein was not satisfied: he alleged that Kuwait had promised to observe the quotas for only two months and insisted that Kuwait forgive Iraq's debt that had accumulated during the long and costly war with Iran, that it cease its unfair exploitation of the disputed Rumaila oilfields along their common border, and that it agree to new arrangements for the islands of Bubiyan and Warbah at the top of the Gulf that controlled access to Iraq's only port on the Gulf.

In an effort to prevent a crisis, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt quickly arranged a meeting between Kuwait's Sheikh Saad al-Sabah and the vice-chairman of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council, Izzat Ibrahim, in Jidda on 1 August, with further meetings to follow in Baghdad. After only a single meeting, the talks broke down and Iraq's tanks crossed the border the next morning.

Although the United States had accurate intelligence of the growing concentration of Iraq's forces on its border with Kuwait, its strategy to prevent the crisis was unclear. Uncertain of Iraq's intentions, Washington made only a token and confused attempt to deter Saddam Hussein from acting and instead relied principally on efforts at reassurance. The difference between these two approaches is no small matter.

To deter or reassure – that is the question

A strategy of deterrence uses threats to prevent an adversary from taking an unwanted action – “don't do that or else.” It requires that leaders of state define the behaviour that is unacceptable, publicize their commitment to punish transgressors or deny them their objectives, possess the capability to do so, and communicate their resolve to implement their threats. Deterrence is most appropriate as a strategy of crisis prevention against an adversary that is opportunistic and bent on expansion.

Strategies of reassurance begin from a different set of assumptions. Like deterrence, they too presume the other side is hostile, but root the source of that hostility in an adversary's feelings of acute vulnerability. Reassurance attempts to diminish hostility by trying to reduce the fear, misunderstanding, and insecurity that are so often responsible for escalation to war. Reassurance dictates that countries anticipating the possibility of an attack by a vulnerable opponent would try to communicate their benign

intentions and their interest in alternative ways of addressing the issues in dispute.³

The US first tried to prevent a crisis with a weak and ambiguous attempt at deterrence. On 19 July, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney told journalists that the American commitment made during the war between Iran and Iraq – to come to the defence of Kuwait if it were attacked – was still valid. His press spokesman subsequently emasculated the American commitment by explaining that the secretary had been quoted with “some degree of liberality.”

Margaret D. Tutwiler, the spokesperson for the State Department, was even less forthcoming. When asked on 24 July whether the US had any commitment to defend Kuwait, she replied: “We do not have any defense treaties with Kuwait, and there are no special defense or security commitments to Kuwait.” Asked whether the US would help Kuwait if it were attacked, she said: “We also remain strongly committed to supporting the individual and collective self-defense of our friends in the Gulf with whom we have deep and long-standing ties.”

Even more telling was a meeting on 25 July in Baghdad, at President Saddam Hussein's request, with the American ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie. In discussing the conflict with Kuwait, the American ambassador told Iraq's president:

... we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. I was in the American Embassy in Kuwait during the late 60s. The instruction we had during this period was that we should express no opinion on this issue and that the issue is not associated with America. James Baker has directed our official spokesmen to emphasize this instruction.⁴

After clearly dissociating the United States from a commitment to defend Kuwait, the ambassador concluded the discussion by asking “in the spirit of friendship, not in the spirit of confrontation,” about Iraq's intentions. President Hussein replied that President Mubarak had arranged a meeting between Iraq and Kuwait in Saudi Arabia (he was referring to the meeting that would subsequently end in failure). President Hussein concluded with the warning that Iraq's patience was not unlimited. Ambassador Glaspie did not warn President Hussein of the consequences of the use of force.

The American strategy of crisis prevention was both poorly conceived and badly executed; Washington neither deterred nor reassured effectively. When an Iraqi use of military force against Kuwait became possible, the US first chose to deter and then to reassure Iraq. And the execution of deter-

rence was seriously flawed: the Pentagon first communicated a commitment to defend Kuwait and then drew back; the State Department distanced the US from any commitment whatsoever to Kuwait and reassured Iraq of the benign intentions of the United States.

This confusion in strategy was in large part a function of Washington's uncertainty about whether Iraq was motivated principally by the opportunity to expand or by the vulnerability of its economy. Most analysts across the political spectrum in the West are persuaded that President Saddam Hussein is an opportunity-driven expansionist – the analogy to Hitler and 1939 is often drawn – but a plausible argument can be made that Iraq's leader was motivated by perceptions of ▽

*Through its action,
Iraq has heightened
the strategic
vulnerabilities of every
state in the Gulf
as well as many in the
fertile Crescent.*



Nicholas Vitacco

3. For detailed discussion of these two strategies and their requirements, see Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *When Does Deterrence Succeed and How Do We Know?* (Ottawa: Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, Occasional Paper 8, 1990) and Janice Gross Stein, “Deterrence and Reassurance,” in Philip E. Tetlock, Jo L. Husbands, Robert Jervis, Paul Stern, and Charles Tilly, eds. *Behaviour, Society, and Nuclear War* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.)

4. The transcript of the meeting between President Hussein and Ambassador Glaspie was released by the government of Iraq and published by The New York Times on 23 September 1990. The US State Department refused to confirm or deny its validity.