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**Confronting Iraq: US  
Policy and the Use  
of Force Since the  
Gulf War**

Dan Byman and Matthew Waxman

**- Excerpt -  
Summary**

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### **- EXCERPT – SUMMARY**

Successful coercion, a cornerstone of an effective foreign policy, depends on the proper application of military force. Despite its overwhelming military power, however, the United States often fails to coerce successfully. To help understand this problem, this study assesses attempts to coerce Iraq since the end of the Gulf War in 1991. Although Iraq remains hostile to the United States and its allies, Baghdad has also repeatedly compromised, and at times even caved, in response to U.S. and allied pressure. The story behind this mixed record illustrates Baghdad's strengths and weaknesses and highlights general lessons about limits on the U.S. ability to bring its full power to bear when coercing foes.



### **AN ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK**

Coercion is the use of threatened force, including the limited use of actual force to back up the threat, to induce an adversary to behave differently than it otherwise would. Coercion is typically broken down into two categories: deterrence (stopping an undesired action from occurring) and compellence (reversing an undesired action). In practice, however, distinguishing between these two is difficult. This report draws on both these categories to inform its overall conclusions about coercion.

Coercion is a dynamic process. Just as the United States or another coercer tries to shape Iraq's or another adversary's behavior, so too does Iraq try to reduce the pressure imposed on it. Adversaries typically try to counter-coerce the United States, inflicting military, political, or diplomatic costs to force the United States to drop its threats. Any assessment of the U.S.-Iraq confrontation must focus equally on the U.S. capacity to apply pressure and on Iraq's capacity to neutralize or reverse it.

Coercive success is often difficult to measure. The same action can have both positive and negative effects, particularly when long-term ramifications are taken into account. Many past studies of coercion have paid inadequate attention to the range of goals pursued by the coercing power. With the same action, the United States can succeed in forcing Iraqi troops off the Kuwaiti border even as it fails to stop Iraq's nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) programs. Any study of U.S. attempts to coerce Iraq must recognize the many, often competing, U.S. goals in the region—both short-term and long-term.

Taken together, these points suggest that successful coercion has as much to do with constraints on the coercer as with vulnerabilities of the adversary and that the balance of constraints and vulnerabilities can change over time. Coercing Iraq is not just about threatening it with air strikes and sanctions but about the interaction of two political systems within a broader international context.

### **IRAQ AS AN ADVERSARY**

To understand why coercion succeeds or fails in a given case, it is necessary to understand what drives an adversary's decisionmaking. Iraq is thoroughly dominated by Saddam Husayn and his

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henchmen: their vulnerabilities and aspirations are, for the purpose of coercion, Iraq's vulnerabilities and aspirations.

Saddam ruthlessly maintains his hold on power, and keeping power is the dominant concern that drives his regime's decisionmaking. All positions of importance are in the hands of carefully selected individuals, who are usually from trusted Sunni Arab tribes or families.

Using his numerous and overlapping security services and select military units, the Iraqi dictator has eliminated any potential rivals. These services and units suppress popular unrest and guard against a coup or assassination attempt.

In addition to fear and repression, Saddam uses political measures to solidify his rule. He tries to curry favor with core Arab nationalist supporters by pursuing Iraqi hegemony in the region and Sunni Arab domination within Iraq, objectives that Saddam believes in but also supports for instrumental reasons. Saddam also uses financial rewards to co-opt leading tribal figures and employs the media to trumpet his identity as a powerful leader to impress supporters.

Iraq's strategic objectives reflect both Saddam's personal ambitions and the desires of his core supporters. Four related goals drive Iraq's strategy today: maintaining the current regime's hold on power, ending UN sanctions, achieving regional hegemony, and building an NBC weapons capability. These goals reflect Saddam's desire to end pressures that highlight Iraq's current weakness and his ambition to lead the Arab world.

## **THE HISTORICAL RECORD**

The United States has pursued several, often-competing objectives with regard to Iraq. First, the United States has tried to prevent any Iraqi aggression by keeping Iraq weak and maintaining a strong regional presence. Second, it has sought to reverse Iraq's NBC programs. Third, it has pressed to change the Iraqi regime. A fourth, negative objective has also shaped U.S. policy: preventing instability among its allies that might result from U.S. actions. These four objectives underlie U.S. attempts to coerce Iraq since the Gulf War.

The United States, however, does not have a free hand in its Iraq policy. Washington has long feared that the sudden collapse of Saddam's regime would lead to chaos in Iraq and provide an opening for Iran to increase its influence. Washington seeks to keep its regional and international allies behind its policies, and they often differ on the correct way to confront Saddam. The United States also is ambivalent about its commitment to Iraq's Kurds and Shi'a. Although Washington feels a humanitarian interest in their well being, it does not want its regional policies tied to these communities. Similar ambivalence can be found in U.S. attitudes toward sanctions. Sanctions are viewed as an effective tool for squeezing Baghdad, but the United States has tried to reduce their impact on the Iraqi populace. Finally, domestic politics shape U.S. actions: no administration can afford charges that it is "soft" on Iraq. Political pressures provide U.S. decisionmakers with military flexibility, but they also limit policy options during crises and when planning for future dangers.

With these objectives and constraints in mind, a close look at the following eight attempts to coerce Iraq or to deter hostile Iraqi actions, sometimes in response to coercion, reveals a mixed U.S. track record:

- Saddam's acceptance of the initial UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) inspections at the end of Desert Storm in 1991.
- The imposition of a protectorate over Kurdish-populated areas of northern Iraq in 1991.
- The creation of a no-fly zone over southern Iraq in 1992.
- Saddam's 1992–1993 defiance of both the no-fly zone and UNSCOM.
- The U.S. response to the 1994 Iraqi buildup near Kuwait.

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- Saddam's 1996 incursion into the protected zone in northern Iraq.
- The 1997–1998 standoffs over UNSCOM inspections.
- U.S. strikes in response to Iraq's defiance of UNSCOM in December 1998.

Among the positive results, Saddam accepted intrusive UNSCOM inspections for many years after the Gulf War, a safe haven in northern Iraq, and no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq. More broadly, Iraq has generally refrained from aggression against its neighbors. But despite these concessions, Saddam at times defied the no-fly zones, invaded the northern safe haven, and systematically deceived inspectors.

Coercive threats have contributed to the successful containment of Iraq. Iraq's regional influence, while increased from 1991, remains limited. A robust U.S. regional presence, a rapid surge capacity, and a willingness to use limited force probably have convinced Saddam that regional aggression will not produce results. Coercive threats contributed to containment by maintaining no-fly and no-drive zones and demonstrating regional unity in the face of Iraq's attempts to intimidate its neighbors.

Stopping Iraq's NBC programs has proven far more difficult, but coercive threats have achieved some success. Iraq probably has not attained a nuclear weapons capability, and progress on its biological and chemical programs has probably halted—making this effort at least a partial success when we recognize that, without UNSCOM inspections, sanctions, and other measures, Iraq would probably have a nuclear weapon and a range of biological weapons. Nevertheless, the broader U.S. goals of discovering the extent of Iraq's programs, destroying them, and preventing Iraq from reconstituting them in the future have not been met. Inspectors never discovered the true scope of Iraq's programs, much less destroyed them. Effective inspections ended early in 1998, and even the pretense of arms control has now been abandoned. Although information is scarce, Saddam is probably trying to continue some programs already and certainly will do so once sanctions and isolation end. While threats of force have persuaded Saddam at various times to accept inspections and instances of force have knocked out some of his NBC program resources, the various U.S. actions have not substantially induced a change in Saddam's long-term policies towards acquiring such an arsenal.

Maximal U.S. goals regarding regime change were not met, but Washington's efforts did not destabilize U.S. regional allies as some policymakers feared. Efforts to change the regime—by encouraging Iraqi elites to support a coup or the Iraqi populace to overthrow Saddam—probably are farther from success than at any time this decade. Saddam's position at home appears stronger than in the past, and the Iraqi opposition is fragmented. Coercive threats nevertheless made this goal more realistic. The protected zone in the north, and the humiliations of air strikes, contributed to disgruntlement among Saddam's followers, though not enough to induce a regime change. The United States avoided instability among its regional allies while making the limited progress described above. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, while hardly tranquil, remain loyal U.S. allies. They have supported several U.S. operations in the region without suffering domestic unrest.

U.S. domestic support has been strong with regard to the use of force against Iraq. In general, both the Bush and Clinton administrations enjoyed considerable support from Congress and the U.S. public for their efforts to punish Iraqi aggression and end Iraq's NBC programs. In addition to supporting a large U.S. military presence in the region, the American people have strongly backed policymakers' calls to combat proliferation among rogue regimes. If anything, the American people and U.S. Congress are often more hawkish than the administration leadership. As a result, the President at times has been criticized for not threatening or using enough force.

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Allied and international support proved far less consistent than U.S. domestic support and posed a major challenge for U.S. policy. Although U.S. allies in Europe and other major powers initially strongly supported attempts to coerce Iraq, over time France, Russia, and China became increasingly critical of U.S. policy in the region and sought to end or curtail sanctions and inspections. Regional allies often did not support U.S. strikes on Iraq or sought to limit their extent to avoid criticism at home. Lack of consistent regional or allied support undermined the credibility of U.S. threats, encourage Saddam to defy U.S. ultimatums, and restricted U.S. military options.

#### **IRAQ'S VULNERABILITIES AND COUNTERMOVES**

The various U.S. attempts to coerce Iraq reveal that Saddam is most vulnerable, and therefore most likely to give in, when his power base is effectively threatened. Maintaining the support and loyalty of key tribes, Baath party officials, military officers, and other elites is Saddam's overriding concern. When Saddam's power base can be effectively targeted, he is more likely to limit his foreign policy provocations, unless restraint would jeopardize his position at home. After Operation Desert Storm, Saddam's domestic position was weak, and he feared that another blow from the anti-Iraq coalition would shatter it. His response to subsequent threats and weak air and missile strikes in the following years exposed his fear that coalition military strikes might discredit his regime. U.S. military strikes and other forms of pressure that risked humiliating Saddam, demonstrating his inability to respond to U.S. pressure and threatening his control over his power base, proved effective at forcing concessions from the Iraqi regime.

Fear of elite dissatisfaction also helps explain instances when Saddam has issued provocations or refused to back down in the face of U.S. pressure: Saddam was most intransigent when acceding to U.S. demands would decrease support among his power base. In 1996, for example, Saddam saw an opportunity to regain stature in the eyes of core supporters by ordering incursions into northern Iraq against Kurdish and other resistance forces. Perhaps the most important issue related to elite dissatisfaction is Saddam's commitment to Iraq's NBC programs. Although Saddam's initial defiance on this score may be explained by his belief that deception would triumph over UNSCOM and that sanctions would soon be lifted in any event, eventually the possession of NBC became a source of Saddam's prestige in the eyes of his core supporters.

Saddam is somewhat sensitive to the threat of popular unrest. This sensitivity is largely indirect, though, and arises mostly when unrest risks discrediting him with his power base. Saddam is committed to firm control over Iraq, with his Sunni Arab nationalist brand of chauvinism dominant. The predecessors to the Baath government fell, in part, because they failed to achieve peace at home. Moreover, as Saddam has portrayed himself as the defender of Iraq's integrity (and Sunni Arab hegemony), continued Shi'a, Kurdish, and tribal unrest undercut this source of strength.

The prospect of defeat on the battlefield shapes Saddam's tactics and the nature of his provocations—sensitivity reflected in what Saddam does *not* do rather than in observable Iraqi behavior. Saddam has not threatened his neighbors with military forces since the October 1994 buildup, which the United States countered with Operation Vigilant Warrior. The rapidity of the U.S. buildup, the strong ongoing U.S. regional presence, and the continuing weakness of Iraq's conventional forces probably led Saddam to conclude that another buildup would at best result in an Iraqi withdrawal and at worst in the attrition of his forces. The prospect of military defeat also heightens the chances of both elite dissatisfaction and popular unrest, making Saddam even less likely to issue challenges that could be met on the battlefield. Strikes on military forces could lead officers to become dissatisfied with Saddam, seeing his continued rule as a threat to their lives and prestige.

Saddam does not respond passively to U.S. attempts to target his vulnerabilities and press his regime. Rather, he tries to tailor his response to exploit U.S. weaknesses whenever possible and he takes countermeasures to minimize U.S. pressure. These countermeasures include exploiting

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domestic suffering, complying incompletely with demands, trying to fracture coalitions, and repressing dissent. These countermeasures (most notably attempts to fracture coalitions) have at times failed or even backfired, but in general the Iraqi leader has managed to offset U.S. coercive pressure.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR COERCION

The Iraqi experience is rich with general lessons for coercing major regional powers in critical regions. When designing coercive strategies, policymakers must pay particular attention to the following issues:

- *Recognizing adversary “centers of gravity.”* When planning a coercive strategy, policymakers should strive to identify the target’s “center of gravity”—that which, if destroyed, would cause the enemy’s resistance to collapse. For Iraq, this appears to be Saddam’s relationship with his power base. When coercive threats placed pressure on Iraq’s center, they proved far more likely to move the regime. A center of gravity, however, will vary by regime and must be assessed and understood accordingly.
- *Recognizing the dynamic nature of coercion.* Coercion is a process, not an event. Planning must acknowledge that just as the United States is (or should be) performing a “center of gravity” analysis on the adversary, the adversary is likely doing the same on the United States or the coalition aligned against it. Because of overwhelming U.S. military capacity, many adversaries may try to undermine public support or fracture U.S.-led coalitions to offset coercive pressure.
- *Understanding what cannot be affected.* The United States can affect only the level of pain it inflicts, not an adversary’s willingness to accept it. Adversary regimes are particularly loath to give up power, and coercing populations to revolt or elites to carry out a coup is extremely difficult.
- *Improving long-term planning.* Policymakers and analysts did not anticipate Saddam’s survival, and U.S. policy suffered as a result. In future confrontations, the United States should conduct more low-probability, high-impact analysis and “red team” measures to explore the range of possible outcomes and make U.S. policy more robust.
- *Recognizing self-imposed limits.* The attempts to coerce Iraq reveal the degree to which self-imposed constraints, especially those generated by political and diplomatic concerns, limit the quantity and type of force the United States can threaten or use. These self-imposed limits often are far more effective in undermining coercion than are any measures taken by an adversary.

Adopting this framework when confronting adversaries in the future will make coercive threats more sustainable, more robust, and ultimately more effective. Equally important, it will help decisionmakers recognize limits on the use of force and avoid situations where coercive threats will fail in the short-term and undermine U.S. credibility in the long-term.

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