

Amid mixed signals, war plans roll on

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Colin Powell's speech [1] at the beginning of this week, that regime change in Iraq might not be necessary if there is unequivocal evidence of disarmament, is part of a longer-term stance within the Bush administration that suggests the State Department to be the most conciliatory arm of government – and as such unexceptional. Much more of a surprise was that President Bush appeared to take a similar line a couple of days later.

Is this the first clear sign of a possible change of policy? Could it even mean that there is now a serious possibility of war being avoided? The answers do not come easy, not least because there seems to be something of a state of 'policy flux' in Washington just now. It is also becoming clear that there are a number of external factors involved that have made the move to war less clear-cut. Yet in an overall assessment of the likelihood of war, the most powerful indicator may still be whether there has been any scaling back in military preparations.

The US's softer tone: expediency or policy change?

One issue has been the recognition that al-Qaida and its often loosely associated groups remain active and that their capabilities may even be increasing, having largely recovered from the disruption caused by the conflict in Afghanistan. It is not just the appalling costs of the bombing of the Sari Club in Kuta but the many other incidents of the past three weeks including the killing of US soldiers in Kuwait and the Philippines, the attack on the French oil tanker and the two bombings in the Philippines (see last week's column [1]).

The Kuta bombing on the Indonesian island of Bali has an added significance, not widely recognised. Although only two Americans were killed in the attack, the Sari Club was a favourite haunt of US military personnel, especially with sailors and others on local leave from bases or ports in south-east Asia. The bombers may have known there were few Americans there last week; indeed security might otherwise have been tighter, making the placing of the bomb more difficult. What they would certainly have been aware of is that the attack will have sent a powerful message to Washington – anywhere that US personnel gather, even for rest and recreation, is now a potential target.

More generally, Western security agencies have warned of the risks to Westerners in several countries in south-east Asia, and the CIA has issued a warning of possible attacks across the world, including in the continental United States itself. All of this has served to remind people in the United States that the 'war on terror' goes on, tending to add support to those voices previously on the margins that have seen Iraq as a diversion.

Then there is the issue of North Korea. Its open admission [2] that it is developing nuclear weapons, and the near total assumption that it already has chemical and biological weapons, makes it difficult for the Bush administration to present Iraq as the greatest threat. Most analysts accept that North Korea already has one or two nuclear weapons based on its very limited stocks of weapons-grade plutonium, and is now developing more nuclear weapons focusing on

highly enriched uranium. Iraq, on the other hand, is still some years from developing its own nuclear weapons.

The administration points to Iraq's previous record of regional aggression and its use of chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and its own Kurdish population, but these issues cut little ice in the region. Iraq's use of chemical weapons in the late 1980s was scarcely condemned by the Reagan administration, which was then backing the country in its war against Iran. In any case, a typical Arab view would be that Iraq's posture is not too different from that of Syria (possessing chemical weapons), which has had forces in Lebanon since the 1970s, and not remotely on a par with Israel (with nuclear, chemical and biological weapons) whose control of former territories of Syria, Jordan and Egypt stretches back thirty-five years.

All this leaves a distinct impression in the region, and elsewhere in the world, that Iraq is the threat not because of what it is doing but because of its location and resources – in other words, it is largely about oil. On occasions, some of President Bush's business associates readily acknowledge this, but it is a less easy line to sell to the electorate as a whole – sending US soldiers to a war against a declared despot who threatens national security is one thing, doing so to enhance the interests of oil companies is quite another.

Is this enough to encourage the Bush administration to tone down its war rhetoric and seek an alternative path? Here, the signals are mixed, and the entanglement with the United Nations (UN) is becoming problematic. It is worth recalling that when George W. Bush made his UN speech [3] several weeks ago, it was confidently expected that a singularly tough UN resolution would be forthcoming within a week at the most. Three weeks later, it is only just taking shape. There is every likelihood that it will be somewhat toned down even if it is still capable of selective interpretation as a basis for war.

The end result of all of this is that domestic and international circumstances make it desirable to appear to take a softer line with Iraq. Such an orientation maintains reasonable relations with the UK and even with France; Russia stays just about on board and the effects of North Korea's inconvenient behaviour are moderated. What is more important, though, is whether the war preparations themselves are being scaled down. If they are, then there might well have been a policy change. If not, then perhaps it is purely a matter of temporary political expediency.

The regional presence of the US

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the response was a quite extraordinary build-up of US and coalition forces in the region over a period of five months. There were already large under-used air bases and plenty of port facilities, a legacy of cold war planning against a possible Soviet intervention in the Gulf, but there were very few troops, aircraft or warships in the region at the time.

Over 600,000 troops, 1,000 aircraft and scores of warships were assembled in the region, and moving all their supplies took a veritable armada of ships sailing from the US and Europe. Many of the supplies actually came from US bases in Europe where they had been stockpiled for years in case the cold war ever became hot.

With memories of this extraordinary operation still around, there has been a tendency to assume that the US is not currently engaged in real preparations for war. If it is, then where are the ships? True, there are reports of ships being chartered and indications of an increase in troop numbers, but it seems as nothing compared with the rush to the region late in 1990.

This is all thoroughly misleading, for the last decade or so has seen a fundamental change in strategy that makes it much less necessary to engage in such a process. Put simply, much of the equipment is already there, and has been for years. In Kuwait and Qatar, for example, nearly 600 armoured fighting vehicles, including main battle tanks, are stored in more than 30 large warehouses. They are regularly serviced and used in exercises, with army units continually rotated from the United States.

For more than five years, the US Navy has maintained a reconstituted Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, usually including an aircraft carrier. For the US Marine Corps, which is much larger than the whole of the British Army, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean have also been a focus for overseas deployments, with much of the pre-positioning of supplies being undertaken using ships at sea or storage at the key base of Diego Garcia.

In the case of the US Air Force (USAF), the 1991 Gulf War never really ended, and there have been more or less continual air operations over the no-fly zones. Moreover, the air force as a whole has re-formed itself into a number of Air Expeditionary Wings, each of which is like a small self-contained air force and is designed to be moved overseas to bases that have been previously prepared. To cater for possible Saudi opposition to the use of their bases, the USAF has rapidly expanded other bases, especially a huge facility in Qatar.

What this all means is that the United States could airlift sufficient forces for an attack on Iraq into the region in the space of a very few weeks, joining up with the substantial forces already there. This, in turn, means that it is not easy to be precise about US military intentions.

Preparations for war continue

There are, though, three clues, all of them pointing to a readiness for war by early in 2003. The first is the recently reported decision to begin the rapid training of up to 10,000 Iraqi exiles for combat operations in Iraq. Up to 5,000 Iraqis will begin training in November in a programme eventually expected to cost \$92 million, following a National Security Presidential Directive signed by George W. Bush on 3 October.

The second indicator is that a large number of exercises have been scheduled for the region around the end of the year, bringing in many more thousands of troops. Indeed, some analysts believe that with such forces in place, it would take barely a month to bring to the region the additional troops required for an invasion.

It is the third trend that is perhaps the most indicative – the deployment of carrier battle groups to the region. The aircraft carriers of the US Navy are far larger and more powerfully armed than those of any other country. Moreover, they operate as part of a small fleet of ships termed a carrier battle group that includes cruisers, destroyers, supply ships and at least one nuclear-powered submarine. Many of the escorting ships are themselves heavily armed so that a single carrier battle group could be armed with 60 or so strike aircraft together with refuelling tanker aircraft and reconnaissance planes and with as many as 500 Tomahawk land attack cruise missiles.

At present there are two carrier battle groups in the region. The *George Washington* left its home port for a six-month deployment on 20 June and the *Abraham Lincoln* went to sea with its escorts four days later. Next month, the *Constellation* heads for the region and, in December, a fourth aircraft carrier, the *Harry S. Truman*, does the same. These two carriers are scheduled to relieve the other two, but could readily overlap for two to three months, giving a force of four carrier battle groups with some 250 strike aircraft and 2,000 cruise missiles available for war with Iraq.

That is not all. Yet another carrier battle group, centred on the San Diego based *Nimitz*, is available to reinforce the others in the region by late December, and it is possible that a sixth carrier, the *Kitty Hawk*, based at Yokohama in Japan, could be deployed as well.

In practice, this means that the US Navy will be able to utilise six carrier battle groups, about half its total aircraft carrier strength, and this would enable it to have at least four groups actually in the region from late December onwards. This is broadly similar to the 1991 war when six carriers were available but four were normally operational for use against Iraq at any one time.

While these naval deployments are not conclusive, they do represent the clearest visible sign that the US armed forces are preparing for war with Iraq, and will be ready to go to war within about ten weeks from now. In spite of President Bush's recent speech, and bearing in mind the deep commitment of his security advisers to regime termination in Iraq, it still looks probable that we will see war by February, or just possibly earlier.

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