

SADDAM DILEMMA FOR THE WEST

He's the only power standing in the way of Iranian expansion

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By DANIEL PIPES

Saddam Hussein's multiple provocations in recent weeks raise several questions: Are these acts — harassing U.N. officials, sabotaging relief trucks, raiding Kuwait, placing missiles in no-fly zones — aberrant or part of a recurring pattern? Should we tolerate them or take drastic action to stop them? Will they keep Iraq a pariah state or do they help Saddam win back international acceptance of his regime?

We should plan on Saddam being around for many more years. He's young (only 55), healthy, exceedingly well-protected and he faces no domestic rivals. His ability in 1991 to withstand crushing military defeat and mass insurgency suggests two things: Many Iraqis support him and nothing short of a foreign invasion will oust him from power.

We should also expect that Saddam will continue to provoke the United Nations and thereby bring destruction on Iraq. Not because he is stupid — how could he be, born in a mud house, son of a landless peasant, yet the strong man of Iraq by the tender age of 33 — but because he has an extremely limited under-

standing of the outside world. This requires some explanation.

Saddam fought his way to the top of the heap (and stays there) by being tougher, more duplicitous and more strategic than anyone else in Iraq. Repeatedly, he has used the same ploy: Pretend to ally with an opponent, lull him into inaction, then turn on him and destroy him.

Unhappily for Saddam, what works so well in the anarchic and brutal world of Iraqi politics translates poorly on the international scene. Like the peasant that he in fact is, Saddam displays arch craftiness on his own turf but makes terrible mistakes away from home. The contrast is astonishing. The same schemes that won him absolute power within Iraq have lost Iraq two major wars, destroyed the country's infrastructure, impoverished its population and ruined its reputation.

Worse, Saddam seems stubbornly incapable of learning from his mistakes. Limited by a pathological personality and profound ignorance, he sees the world as but a larger version of Iraq. George Bush he treats like a rebellious Iraqi governor or an insubordinate general. Stranger yet,

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he ignores the advice of those aides whom he pays to interpret the West. While Iraq's Foreign Ministry urges Saddam to welcome Bill Clinton with a charm campaign, with an eye to getting U.N. economic sanctions lifted, Saddam instead reverts to his habitual lull-and-kill methods.

It appears that Saddam will continue to make petty trouble, probing to see what he can get away with, always looking for ways to reassert his unfettered sovereignty over Iraq. Why not? Should the U.N. forces respond

— shooting down Iraqi jets, destroying its missiles — he loses little. Should the United Nations let him get away with it, he expands his power. Iraqi provocations are likely to become an irregular but semi-permanent feature of Middle East politics. They could continue for months, even years, and maybe even for decades to come.

The United States can tolerate this flailing by a weak tyrant. Despite their unpleasantness, Saddam's provocations neither threaten large numbers of lives nor disrupt oil supplies. As often as he acts up we can slap him

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down. Indeed, Saddam's antics actually bring us benefits. They compel Saudis and Kuwaitis to seek American protection and we are delighted to station American troops in the Persian Gulf, which



SLAPPING HIM DOWN:
Iraq's Saddam Hussein

contains three-fourths of the world's oil reserves.

There's just one major problem, and that's Iran, which under the Rafsanjani regime shows an intent to dominate the Persian Gulf. For example, Iranian troops landed in 1992 on three disputed islands of the Persian Gulf, expelled several hundred residents of the United Arab Emirates from there, and declared Iranian sovereignty over the islands. Tehran began developing an oil and gas field predominantly in waters belonging to Qatar. Just two weeks ago, a Tehran newspaper claimed Bahrain, an independent country, to be part of Iran. Iranian aggression scares virtually everyone: Neighbors worry about being conquered, Muslim states worry about Tehran's promotion of fundamentalist Islam, and the industrial countries worry about the disruption of oil supplies.

Sad to say, Iraq is the local state best suited to stand up to Iran. And so, as in the 1980s, building up Iraqi power offers the most direct and painless way for Middle Eastern and Western governments to contain Tehran's belligerence. The Middle Eastern states that participated in Operation Desert Storm all stayed away from last week's air strikes because they care less to limit Baghdad's power than to keep it strong enough to counter Iranian expansionism.

Of course, turning Saddam into a bulwark against Iran means permitting him to regain full power in Iraq. That in turn revives the likelihood of Saddam, yet again, assaulting his neighbors. To avoid this dismal prospect, the West needs vigilantly to ensure that Iran does not acquire the means to prosecute its ambitions. The key to keeping a lid on Iraq, in other words, lies in maintaining controls over Iran's military buildup.

Fortunately, Congress passed the Iran-Iraq Non-Proliferation Act of 1992, which applies very stringent export restrictions to both these countries. Unfortunately, the Europeans, Russians and Japanese sell to Tehran virtually everything it wishes, including dual-use machinery, nuclear technology and Kirov-class submarines. In the long term, helping Iran provides Saddam with another chance.

As is so often the case, noisy and obvious events (U.S. military strikes on Iraq) matter less than quiet and surreptitious ones (arms sales to Iran). Ironically, only by restraining Iranian power can Saddam Hussein be prevented from once again becoming a menace to his neighbors.