



Some Preliminary Assessments of Powell

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The following is an interim assessment of the emerging changes in Iraq strategy under discussion within the Bush administration. Few details are available, and while administration spokespeople have indicated they want the policy finalized before the Arab summit scheduled for 27 March, it is questionable whether even that deadline will be met. The policy debate is rancorous within the Republican Party, and touches on political 'hot-button' issues, such as the charge of looking "soft on Saddam Hussein" which could threaten the new administration's so-far smooth sailing political agenda. That debate is likely to heat up even more with the 12 March killing of six military personnel in Kuwait (four American, one New Zealander and one unknown) by a bomb dropped by a Hornet F-18 fighter-bomber on a training mission from the USS Harry S. Truman in the Persian Gulf.

As a result, this assessment should be viewed as temporary, based only on what we know so far, and likely to change.

Powell's [New?] Iraq policy -- What we Know

- a) It will not lift economic sanctions
- b) Iraq's oil income will continue to be diverted into the UN-run escrow account
- c) The 661 Committee will retain power to decide what goods will be allowed in
- d) Some additional civilian-use goods will be allowed in
- e) The "no-fly zones" remain intact, and U.S.-UK military attacks in them may continue; Powell acknowledged for the first time that this does not reflect UN resolutions



f) The Bush administration will not attempt to repeal or circumvent the ILA and will continue to fund the INC at some level

Powell's [New?] Iraq policy -- What We Don't Know

a) Whether the U.S. will simply reduce (and for how long?) the number of holds it imposes on contracts in the 661 Committee, or whether the operating procedures of the Committee will actually be changed

b) Whether the U.S. will acknowledge that dual use prohibitions on civilian imports should be replaced by import approval with additional monitoring for items of concern, or will simply avoid imposing dual use prohibitions for a period of time, or will continue applying dual use prohibitions as before

c) Whether the list of items on the notify-but-don't-require-approval list will be expanded, or whether the U.S. will simply make different decisions regarding approval of items not on the list

d) Whether access to the multi-billion investments required for serious infrastructure rebuilding will be facilitated or will remain out of reach

e) Whether the Bush administration is considering any reduction in the current 25% of oil-for-food revenue that is diverted to the compensation fund

f) Whether funding of the INC will continue at currently small-scale levels, or expand, or broaden to involve other opposition forces; whether it will remain limited to propaganda purposes, or will expand to include military support

g) What means will be employed to reduce the amount of oil being shipped out of Iraq not under oil-for-food jurisdiction, and what compensation (for Turkey, Jordan, Syria) will be arranged; whether that new compensation will be funded out of Iraq's oil income or other non-Iraqi sources

h) Whether any serious effort will be made to create an arms inspection regime that would operate in the region outside of Iraq's borders (as hinted at during Powell's Middle East trip), or that would take seriously supplier controls in the U.S. or elsewhere

i) Regardless of which policy direction takes hold, what will be the U.S. response to continuing international (especially Arab and European) demands to lift economic sanctions altogether, and to their continuing efforts to undermine the sanctions' efficacy



- j) What will be the U.S. response to a likely Norwegian proposal in the UN Security Council to lift most economic sanctions, going beyond either U.S. proposal
- k) Whether the Bush administration Middle East primacy on Iraq and ties with Arab governments will translate into a more regionally acceptable Iraq policy or whether Powell's "new" Iraq approach is only spin
- l) Whether the focus on oil, Iraq and relations with Arab states rather than on Israel and the "peace process" may result in a U.S. willingness to accept another outside broker (the UN or Europe) to craft an entirely new peace process.
- m) Whether the Colin Powell-led rebuild the coalition/ease economic sanctions/concentrate on weapons side, or the Rumsfeld-Cheney-Wolfowitz-Armitage arm the opposition/tighten the sanctions/ignore the coalition/overthrow Saddam Hussein approach will emerge victorious
- n) Where does Bush Junior stand on all this?

The Republican Divide

House International Relations Committee Chair Henry Hyde opened the 7 February committee hearing with a question for the Secretary of State. Is the Bush administration's position on Iraq "to contain or to remove Saddam Hussein?" The question reflects both the limits of debate and the currently unresolved decision-making within the administration regarding which of those two options should shape its new Iraq policy, and more broadly reflects a sharply polarized factional debate within the administration's foreign policy team.

That debate, most markedly between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, can perhaps be characterized as one between reliance on a forced or imposed U.S.-dominated multilateralism, always tough and militarized when needed, and a unilateralist assertion of military power as a first-choice option for an unchallenged superpower that needs to pay little attention to its allies.

Along with North Korea, policy towards Iraq has emerged as the sharpest reflection of that highly contentious debate. There is no clarity yet, and little unity within the administration regarding the parameters of a new Iraq policy. Powell is staking out a position that emphasizes re-tooled economic sanctions, continuing or perhaps tightened military sanctions, and continued bombing in the no-fly zones. It is essentially a continued containment policy, and one that prioritizes maintaining some semblance of an allied, especially allied Arab, coalition to support the U.S. Powell's opponents within



the administration include Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Powell's own deputy at the State Department Richard Armitage. They are long-time backers of a much more militarily aggressive policy that emphasizes increased support, including military support, for the so-called Iraqi opposition. Their policy is overtly aimed at overthrowing Saddam Hussein, if not the Iraqi regime, in what is primly known as "regime change;" they care little for the niceties of coalition politics. It is unclear where President Bush stands.

It should be noted that the Bush hawks are toning down their rhetoric from their overheated language during the Clinton years. Wolfowitz, long identified as the most committed to arming the Iraqi opposition, told his Senate confirmation hearing that while he supports U.S. military backing for an opposition force inside Iraq, "I haven't yet seen a plausible plan" for doing so. And Vice-President Cheney, also part of the arm-the-INC contingent during his 1990s years in the private oil sector, told CNN on March 4th that "I don't believe (Saddam) is a significant military threat today ... we want to make sure he does not become one in the future," It remains to be seen whether they lower the temperature of their actual policy proposals to match their more temperate rhetoric.

Cheney also noted that he and Bush had inherited "a mess" in Iraq, and he called for the administration to reexamine Iraq policy "on a regional basis and look at all facets of our policy in that part of the globe." That would imply a willingness to consider the crucial linkage between U.S. Iraq policy and that towards the Israel-Palestine crisis, and the effect both policy strands are having on U.S. credibility and influence in the region, especially among U.S.-dependent Arab regimes. (It should not be forgotten that Cheney, during his years with Halliburton Oil Services industry, played a key role in encouraging an end to sanctions against Iran. It remains uncertain whether his oil-driven free-trader anti-sanctions instincts will emerge publicly in relation to Iraq.)

Powell's Testimony & Sanctions

In his opening testimony before the House International Relations Committee on 7 February, Powell spoke at some length about Canada and Mexico, NAFTA and Plan Colombia, Europe and NATO, North Korea – but mentioned Iraq only in one sentence: "We have challenges with Iraq, and I can talk about that in a few moments."

The questions anticipated from Congressional Republicans eager for a "tougher" Iraq policy and known to be uneasy-to-hostile regarding any change in the sanctions regime did not occur – they were quite deferential and non-combative, with most questioners not asking about Iraq at all. His answers to those few questions were less than detailed. It may or may not be significant that while the Washington Post headlined its story on



the secretary of state's House testimony "Powell Defends Stand on Iraq," and the Wall Street Journal's headline read "Powell Says New Policy Will Save Iraq Sanctions," the New York Times did not run a story on it at all. Neither the Post nor the Times covered the following day's Senate testimony at all. On the weekend before Powell's appearances, the Washington Post had editorialized "There's no question that the Clinton administration allowed the U.S. position to weaken and Saddam's to improve." It argued that the goal of removing Saddam Hussein, as endorsed by members of the Bush team back in 1998, "was the right one," and went on, "now that they [Republican hawks] have the power to act, they should not lose sight of it."

Powell answered Hyde's question as to whether U.S. Iraq policy is containment or regime change with the explanation that there are three components to U.S. strategy: 1) UN sanctions aimed at WMD programs; he admitted the sanctions "have nothing to do with regime change, overthrow... this is not a UN goal."

2) No-Fly zones, which he asserted are designed to protect the Kurds in the North, and for warning and protection of the people in the South.

3) Regime change, based on the idea that "we advocate that the country would be better off without this regime." He said this includes supporting opposition organizations including the Iraq National Congress.

On sanctions, Powell acknowledged that the current sanctions are "on the way to crashing, sanctions are falling apart." He claimed that this was because "Saddam Hussein put the blame on us" for the sanctions impact on civilians. "It's not true," he said, but went on to recognize that Washington's Arab allies, Europe, the Russians, the UN all want economic sanctions to be lifted altogether. His new sanctions proposal is designed "to save sanctions from collapsing."

Powell went on to claim that simply by announcing Washington's intention to craft a new model of a "smarter" sanctions regime, "we have succeeded, because we stopped the talking about Iraqi children, and instead are talking about weapons of mass destruction, not sanctions to hurt civilians." There is no recognition on the part of the administration that the humanitarian crisis caused by sanctions is real – only that it is a spin problem that had to be addressed, and as long as "we stopped the talking about Iraqi children" the new sanctions approach is already a success.

The new proposal is thoroughly spin-driven. But there appear to be two different spin-based assessments possible within the administration, and among Congressional Republicans and other hawks, about its value. For some, particularly the hawks, the bad press is simply not worth worrying about, concerns about Iraqi children or civilian



deaths are issues for soft-hearted and soft-headed liberals and need be of no serious concern for serious policymakers whose framework is U.S. national interest alone. For the relative "moderates" in and out of the administration, and Powell appears to be the primary proponent of this view, the spin problem does not reflect a straightforward humanitarian crisis which must be substantively addressed, but rather reflects a very real political concern regarding the collapse of a strategic alliance, particularly with governments of the Arab petro-states, and to a lesser degree with European governments and other influential UN Member States. The primacy of maintaining (or rebuilding) the anti-Iraq alliance is a key Powell goal; the "regime-changers" are less concerned with international opinion or alliances, and eager for legitimizing their call for overthrowing Saddam Hussein (probably not overthrowing the regime) and escalating the opposition's and potentially direct U.S. military role.

Powell rejected "the characterization that I have sometimes heard, that we are easing up or giving up [on sanctions] is quite incorrect." This reflects his emerging policy's roots in the view that the U.S.-led sanctions regime of the last ten years was actually fine, but that U.S. allies mistakenly blamed the sanctions for something that was all Saddam Hussein's fault. Powell's goal is not to repair the damage sanctions have wrought on Iraqi civilians, or even to re-craft a new sanctions regime that would not do further harm to the population, but rather to "stabilize this collapsing situation and find some basis of stabilization that would bring the coalition back together." That requires a warmer, fuzzier sanctions regime that would appear to do less harm to the civilian population.

One key result that seems virtually certain in any final Bush policy is the maintaining of UN control of Iraq's oil income. That means that any "easing" of economic sanctions will be limited to reducing some restrictions on specific goods Iraq can import – there will be no releasing of Iraqi money back to Iraqi control. In other words, Iraq's oil revenue will continue to be diverted into the UN-controlled escrow account. The "easing" will be in the form of broadening what is allowed into Iraq. That may take the form of the U.S. proposing UN language amending existing resolutions (or proposing new ones) to increase the items included in the "notify but no case-by-case permission required" category, or could be limited to U.S. representatives on the 661 committee simply agreeing informally to pull back, at least for a while, from their current posture of microscopic scrutiny of contracts and cavalier application of dual use bases for placing the contracts on hold.

It's possible either method could allow significant quantitative improvement on the ground in the short term, despite the absence of a longer term potential of rebuilding. But neither version would amount to a qualitative step towards beginning the rebuilding



of Iraq's overall infrastructure; at best either would provide a quantitative easing of some shortages caused by the sanctions regime.

Distinguishing the U.S. from the UN

Powell went significantly beyond Clinton administration figures in acknowledging that U.S. and UN goals, strategies and policies are not one and the same, and in differentiating U.S. actions taken ostensibly in support of UN policies from those taken to implement Washington's unilateral strategy. Powell said "we work within the UN system to make sure he [Saddam Hussein] has not developed and put into his inventory weapons of mass destruction. That is a result of the resolutions he agreed to at the end of the Gulf War. That has nothing to do with regime overthrow. That is not a UN objective, and it is not part of the oil-for-food program or the sanctions program." He thus separated the U.S. commitment to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein from the UN's position and resolutions.

On the no-fly zones, Powell distinguished himself from the Clinton claim that "enforcement" of the zones was somehow a UN obligation for the U.S. After describing the sanctions policy at some length and describing them as part of the UN policy, he identified the no-fly zone enforcement as being "essentially between us and the United Kingdom." He thus acknowledged that the no-fly zones and the bombing of the zones are not authorized by UN resolutions.

However, he reiterated the earlier Clinton view that unilateral military attacks against what the U.S. may claim are weapons of mass destruction sites, are in fact part of "the UN piece" of U.S. policy towards Iraq. Specifically, he said that "we also reserve the right under this policy that if and when we find facilities or other activities going on in Iraq that we believe are inconsistent with our obligations, we reserve the right to take military action against such facilities and will do so. That is the UN piece."

Military Sanctions, Arms Control & Iraq's Neighborhood

Powell did not refer, in his congressional testimony, to his earlier references to the possibility of an arms inspection regime that might extend to Iraq's neighbors. He had hinted at such an arrangement during his Middle East trip, but gave few specifics then and none while on the Hill. He made no reference to Article 14's goal (in Resolution 687) of "establishing a zone in the Middle East free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles to deliver them and the objective of a global ban on chemical weapons."

The only functional references Powell made to surrounding countries focused on his campaign to win Arab state cooperation with U.S. efforts to end Iraqi oil export outside



the oil-for-food restrictions. He referred only in the most general way to the need for Arab state support for tighter inspections on Iraq's borders to deal with civilian needs for dual use items, rather than relying on contract holds in the 661 committee to completely prohibit their entry.

The semi-official Kuwait Times (March 4) indicated that both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had accepted the idea of 'smart sanctions' (now referring primarily to a primary focus on military goods) to replace the current sanctions against Iraq. The two countries also proposed a moratorium on further U.S.-UK bombing strikes, saying the February 16 attacks had "embarrassed" them. The Gulf Cooperation Council, made up of the oil-exporting Gulf Arab countries, is likely to endorse the position on 11 March, and Egypt has taken the same position.

A recent column in a Turkish newspaper, focusing on the particular role of Turkey in U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Iraq, did note that "one of the ways to prevent Saddam's acquiring weapons of mass destruction is to enforce comprehensive controls. In other words, control at the source is as important as checking the weapons sites and facilities in Iraq, so that Saddam complies with UN Security Council resolutions. Therefore, materiel entering Iraq through indirect paths, including the West, should be stopped." The column was distributed internationally by the prime minister's press office, indicating official endorsement of its proposals.

On 12 March the New York Times featured an analysis of the foreign policy divisions in the new administration. It included significant details on the players and advisers of what it called the "more conservative" Cheney-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz-Armitage camp. But although it described in some detail the "cohesive group of foreign policy experts" that Cheney has put together, the Times did not name a single person identified with the "more pragmatic" Powell camp. On the same day, the London Guardian wrote that Powell "is losing the struggle [within the Bush administration] to shape key foreign and defence policies."

It is clear that the shifts Powell is suggesting would not be sufficient even to begin the process of rehabilitating Iraq's shredded social fabric. But they would, if fully implemented, perhaps ameliorate some of the worst sanctions-driven shortages. It remains to be seen whether the secretary of state will succeed at winning over his administration colleagues, let alone congressional critics, to support his so-far unpopular plan. Colin Powell opened his testimony with the claim that the U.S. should "not be afraid of challenges and risks." It remains unclear whether he will be willing to take the political risk, inside and outside the administration, of seriously challenging current Iraq policy.

