Strategic Insight

China and the Iraq Question

by H. Lyman Miller

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The Bush Administration's campaign to bring about regime change in Baghdad presents Beijing with a strategic dilemma of the kind that it has faced repeatedly in the post-Cold War period. On one hand, Beijing needs a positive bilateral relationship with Washington for the sake of China's continuing economic development, and so it continues to seek constructive working relations with the Administration. At the same time, Beijing worries about preponderant and relatively unconstrained American strength in the international system and its potential implications for China's security. Beijing's approach to the Iraq question therefore attempts to reconcile these countervailing Chinese interests.

A Recurring Dilemma

The strategic dilemma Beijing perceives regarding the American campaign against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq is similar to the circumstances Beijing dealt with in the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis. At that time, U.S.-PRC bilateral ties were strained by the sanctions Washington imposed in reaction to the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. The administration of President George H.W. Bush sought to maintain a thread of diplomatic contacts. But high-level leadership exchanges between Washington and Beijing were discontinued, military-to-military ties were suspended, and economic ties were subjected to rancorous Congressional debate over whether to continue China's most favored nation trading status--a privilege that had not previously provoked significant dissent since President Reagan first extended it in 1981. In that context, the crisis provoked by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait offered Beijing an opportunity to be useful to Washington as the Bush Administration worked to build an international coalition against Baghdad.

At the same time, Beijing was concerned about the geopolitical significance of an American-led intervention in the Gulf crisis. In a period when Soviet power was visibly in decline, the Bush Administration had begun to talk about a "new world order" as the Cold War wound down. Administration statements at that time were not clear about what precisely the elements of this "new world order" would be. But President Bush's declaration that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait "will not stand" was broadly understood as an important precedent for how that order would operate.

With respect to Iraq and Kuwait themselves, Beijing had had up to that point stable economic and political relationships with both. With respect to the Middle East as a whole, Beijing's interests and its political influence in the region were relatively limited. Its concerns in the Middle East mainly derived from the impact that superpower competition in the region had on the larger global balance of power. That is to say, Beijing's interests in the Middle East in general and in the Gulf crisis in particular had an important strategic dimension. Beijing's best means of addressing this strategic interest were the leverage it held as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Whatever the former Bush Administration meant by its statements regarding a "new world order," Beijing did not want it to mean an order that sanctioned the unconstrained intervention of American military power into crises around the world under the umbrella of the United Nations, an approach that Beijing

itself had faced in Korea in 1950-1953 and that it feared it might again over issues of immediate concern, such as Taiwan.

Beijing's approach to the Gulf crisis therefore reflected the dilemma of reconciling its broad geopolitical implications at a time when Beijing's bilateral relationship with Washington was shaky. Initially, Beijing denounced the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as a violation of the UN charter. But it also called on both the United States and the Soviet Union not to intervene in the crisis, arguing that "superpower" intervention in regional crises only complicates their resolution. Beijing called instead for regionally-mediated negotiations to resolve the dispute. As Washington worked effectively to build a consensus among its allies and at the United Nations on how to respond to the crisis, Beijing then supported a UN-focused response. It voted in favor of all of the UN resolutions condemning the Iraqi invasion and imposing sanctions on Baghdad, but it expressed reservations about the use of military force to evict the Iraqis from Kuwait. In the end, however, it did not vote against the two resolutions authorizing the use of military force—a choice that would have vetoed UN action. Instead, it abstained in the Security Council voting on those two resolutions, reiterating its objections but acknowledging that it did not want to oppose the broad international consensus in their favor. By abstaining, Beijing also gained a modest improvement in bilateral diplomacy with Washington.

Since the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing has faced what it sees as a unipolar international order in which the United States possesses overwhelming military and economic power and in which there are several lesser great powers—Europe, Japan, Russia, and China itself—but none with the capacity individually to balance against Washington or to constrain unilateral U.S. actions in international crises. Beijing has therefore consistently sought to channel resolution of crises since the Gulf War into the United Nations, where it and other great powers whose interests do not always converge with those of Washington may act collectively to constrain U.S. action. Beijing, for example, was alarmed at the American decision to sidestep the United Nations and instead work through NATO to respond to the 1999 Kosovo crisis. It approved of Washington's working through the UN Security Council in prosecuting the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, voting in favor of the Security Council resolution and collaborating in the broader American war on terrorism. In this respect, the emergence of the American "unipolar moment" has made Beijing a believer in UN multilateralism.

The Current Iraq Question

From this longer strategic perspective, Beijing's dilemma regarding Washington's current campaign for regime change in Iraq is familiar, and its approach to dealing with it is of a piece with its approach to comparable crises over the past decade. Specifically:

- Authoritative Chinese statements have expressed Beijing's preference for a "political" rather than military resolution to the problem and for a collective approach through the United Nations rather than by means of unilateral American action. In that regard, Beijing reacted positively to President Bush's decision to present the Administration's case to the United Nations on 12 September, although PRC media commentary have treated the President's arguments skeptically. In conversations with European and Arab representatives to the UN, PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan reiterated that Beijing is "ready to play an active and constructive role in seeking a political solution to the Iraq issue within the framework of the United Nations," according to the official PRC news agency Xinhua.
- Chinese commentary continues to argue that unilateral U.S. military action against Iraq will destabilize a Middle East already in turmoil because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, debilitate the war against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, strain U.S. political ties in the region and among traditional U.S. allies, and introduce new uncertainties into a world economy dependent on Middle Eastern oil.
- To the same end, Beijing received Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri Ahmed on 27-28 August. According to Xinhua, on the 28th PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan told Naji Sabri that "China has always held that the issue of Iraq be resolved through political means and on the basis of the

relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council. China does not approve of the use of force or threatening to use force to resolve this issue. At the same time, China also hopes that Iraq will strictly implement the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council and make additional efforts to maintain cooperation with the UN so as to avoid the emergence of new complications in the Iraq issue." Tang presumably counseled him on the wisdom of opening Iraq to new UN arms inspections. On 18 September, Xinhua favorably reported Baghdad's offer to allow the return of arms inspectors, but it also noted that Washington's skepticism regarding the Iraqi offer indicated that it remains committed to unilateral military action even in the absence of a UN resolution.

- In step with those preferences, Beijing has consulted with and played up in its media comparable reservations on the part of other key participants in international discussions of the issue, especially in Europe and Russia and in Middle Eastern states—such as Turkey—whose bases might be used in an American effort to invade Iraq. Typical of such accounts of resistance to the U.S. campaign, a Xinhua commentary on 9 September suggested that the differences on Iraq between Washington and Europe and Russia focus on the implications of U.S. unilateralism and so reflect differences "with regard to what kind of international political order to establish and how to establish it."

Should the UN Security Council arrive at a compromise resolution regarding Iraq that Washington, London, Paris, and Moscow can all accept, Beijing is likely to go along and vote in favor—or at least abstain, as it did in the past. It will quietly regard the channeling of the American effort against Baghdad into the UN framework as an important political accomplishment and as an important precedent for handling future international crises. It will gain a measure of reassurance in the evident capacity of the other major powers in the international system to constrain American impulses toward unilateral action. It will likely calculate that the costs of voting against such a compromise resolution—in terms of the consequent isolation of Beijing on the issue internationally and of the "constructive" bilateral relationship it has worked to establish with the Bush Administration, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks—are much too high.

Should the UN process to address the Iraq question fail and Washington act unilaterally in using military force to depose the Saddam Hussein regime, Beijing will likely point up the negative consequences of the U.S. action for the region without actually criticizing it. It will undoubtedly continue to lobby with Moscow, Paris, and other major powers and hope that the solidarity established among them in the present effort to constrain U.S. unilateralism endures. It will also seek to cooperate with Washington in those areas that it can, despite its reservations about the strategic implications of the Iraq question, for the sake of sustaining a positive working bilateral relationship with Washington.

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