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VIEWPOINT

How Far Can You Go?

The world's bad boys need a real threat to keep them in line

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WHY DON'T YOU COME AND GET ME?" IS SADDAM Hussein's message to Bill Clinton and the rest of the world. There is a taunt in his voice and a slight smirk on his lips because he knows that his cards are hard to beat. The challenge he threw down last week may be the worst since the Kuwait grab in 1990, but it won't be the last. It is no longer "You can't search my palaces," or "You have to get rid of this or that American inspector." It is simply a brutal no—to inspections and cooperation with UNSCOM, the special U.N. commission that is to search out and eliminate his weapons of mass destruction.

Why would he even dare? Easy. He can read. He has followed the sorry story of the last American attempt to assemble an international posse against him in January. He could tally up the enormous political capital Washington had to expend to rustle up allies and to outmaneuver the Russians and the French in the U.N. Security Council.

During the next crisis, in August, there was not even talk of a military response. Instead, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote: "It is up to Mr. Annan and the Security Council to make sure that Saddam reverses course." Note the subtle shift in the burden of responsibility: This was a "confrontation" not with the U.S. but "between Iraq and the United Nations."

And the U.S. response this time? Says Defense Secretary William Cohen: "Everybody is getting weary of dealing with Saddam Hussein." Indeed. And that is precisely his long-term strategy for winning the entire match.

You could call his tactic the rubber band romp. The trick is to pull a bit harder each time, but not to overstretch. Each provocation has to remain just this side of the breaking point—when the U.S. has no other choice but to respond with force while would-be protectors like France and Russia grudgingly go along.

The strategic advantage is evidently Saddam's. It is the U.S. that must harness a rickety coalition anew each time. Saddam is here while the U.S. is over there, having to expend a billion dollars or so for each attempt at power projection. Playing with rubber bands is cheaper.

Nor is Saddam the only master of this game. Belgrade's Slobodan Milosevic, ethnic cleanser extraordinaire, has executed the same strategy in Kosovo. He waited literally until the last minute—just before NATO's planes were to take off—before promising to pull back his troops and to accept international observers in this blood-drenched Balkan region.

Milosevic, too, knows that the rubber band game is easier than coalition building. Ask special envoy Richard Holbrooke about this wearying business. Or go back to *High Noon*, where in the end Gary Cooper had to slug it out with the bad guys all by himself.

So what is the "last remaining superpower" to do? The game is a bit easier in Europe, where the allies have a more acute interest in holding Milosevic's feet to the fire. Butchery in Kosovo, after all, translates into hundreds of thousands of refugees who run westward—into societies none too happy about foreigners of any stripe.

Iraq is more difficult. France and Russia are eyeing the oil riches of Iraq, and they are always ready to thumb their noses at the U.S. precisely because it is No. 1, hence always suspected of hegemonistic hanky-panky. Predictably, they watered down last Thursday's Security Council resolution; the use of force was not even mentioned.

The problem is finding a sustainable strategy that brings costs in line with objectives—that prevents Saddam executing the rubber band gambit. What is the goal? It is to keep Saddam separated from weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. That is surely a purpose everybody shares.

The West's best card is to deny Saddam the use of his vast oil riches. If he continues to hamper inspections, let the oil embargo stay in place while allowing him to feed his nation through the "oil-for-food" deal concluded with the U.N. If he refuses to tap these ample funds, then let the world know who is starving his own people.

Will this work without the threat of force? No, just as it won't work in Kosovo. Saddam and Milosevic have to remain convinced that the rubber band might just break—for otherwise they will be home free. Yet the way to do this is to deny them the pleasures of the puppet master's game.

Defense Secretary Cohen should not have interrupted his Asian trip to pay homage to Baghdad's mischief. Instead, there should be a clear, standing threat: "Here is the line; if you cross it, punishment will be swift and painful."

To make the threat credible, it is better to forgo the advantage of the largest possible coalition in favor of the determination generated by the few. Spending weeks trying to corral allies is playing into Saddam's hands. Conversely, deterrence will soar if he faces a like-minded duo such as the U.S. and Britain. The more credible the threat of force today, the less likely the fire next time. ■

KURZ-GAMMA/FSP (LEFT); AP