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# IDSS COMMENTARIES (08/2003)

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## THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE US-IRAQ WAR

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24 March 2003

At the end of the first week of the US led war against Iraq, some aspects are becoming clearer. First, it **has taken** about a week for the Coalition forces to arrive at the outskirts of Baghdad. Second, the Iraqi resistance is far stronger than expected. Third, in my view, the battle for Baghdad will end in a negotiated surrender by some general, after the disappearance of Saddam Hussein. We need to consider various aspects of this conflict and their implications for Singapore.

The Iraqi conflict can be considered a defining issue in post-Cold War international relations. It is the first test of the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war. The heavy costs, in terms of finance, casualties, diplomatic strains, negative world opinions, must surely cause US policy makers to rethink the implications and modus operandi of the Bush Doctrine. Is there a better and less costly way of resolving problematic issues and states? Those who decry US methods should consider the consequences if the US decides to walk away from the world's problems and retreat into isolationism. Will they have the political courage to confront dictators, terrorists and nuclear proliferators?

In considering the possible endings of the Iraq war, we need to understand why and how there is much more Iraqi resistance than expected. First, the invasion has triggered off a high degree of Iraqi nationalism and national pride. Whatever Saddam's brutality and ruthlessness, ordinary Iraqis may take some pride in his ability to stand up to the world's only super-power, to defy the US where other Arab states would only offer rhetoric. Second, there are some convinced supporters of Saddam Hussein, like there were die-hard Nazis who were prepared to die with Hitler. Third, there are some Iraqis who draw support from the wide-spread world and Arab protests against what they believe is an unjust war, and so are prepared to resist alien invaders, even if they are not regime supporters. They are encouraged by what we can call the AL-Jazira factor, the mustering of Arab support by television coverage.

As for Saddam Hussein, as the end draws near, his options are narrowing. Surrender is probably not an option, since it would imply a humiliating show trial on charges of genocide and other heinous crimes, much like Milosevic is being tried at the Hague. Suicide is another possibility, like Hitler. But a third intriguing possibility is for

Saddam to quietly disappear, like Osama and Mullah Omar in some remote location. This might have some attraction for Saddam, as it would create a legend of the great leader who disappeared mysteriously, only to reappear when his country needs him. This will seal Saddam's place in Iraqi and Arab legends, a factor of great importance to Saddam. The benefit for the Coalition forces, if Saddam disappears, is that some succeeding general can then negotiate a quick surrender of Baghdad and avoid mass casualties. It is better for the US to win the battles on the road to Baghdad, and not to lose the war by upsetting Arab hearts and mind via a brutal massacre in the capital. But in the end, no one really knows Saddam's mind, and he could still pull off a surprise by applying for asylum in some sympathetic state. Paradoxically, by losing, Saddam could still win by making a defiant last stand or by a mysterious exit into legend. He will thus create a myth which his supporters can cling to. This martyrdom complex could be his last card.

#### Implications for world

For the rest of the world, there are also some important implications of the Iraq war. The US has compelled various states to decide what policy or stance they should adopt on US dominance and power. On a critical issue to the US like the Iraq war, some have played their cards wisely. For instance, some have criticized and opposed the US, but they have not painted themselves into a corner and have wisely left room for post-Iraq reconciliation. Others have followed the courage of their conviction and declared their stand; others have kept a discreet silence, mindful of the multiple sensitivities. **Singapore has openly identified itself as a member of the Coalition for Immediate Disarming of Iraq to distinguish it from those willing to send forces to Iraq.**

Another consequence of the Iraq war is that this is the first full demonstration of a war fought under the doctrine of Revolution in Military Affairs. Great powers are carefully studying how the US conducts its operations, using the latest technology, and will draw lessons from it to apply to their armed forces.

A further consequence of the Iraq war is the impact on relations between states. The US, if it decides to be magnanimous after the war, and decides to repair strained relations with some allies, will certainly be perceived as wise and big-hearted. Relations within regional groups like the EU will certainly need a lot of hard work in repairing severe strains. As for ASEAN, it has wisely chosen not to let differences of opinion affect its ability to cooperate in various fields. ASEAN countries remain on good terms with the US overall.

#### Singapore's position

In the case of Singapore, it is mindful of domestic, regional and other sensitivities. The message to its people is that its support for the Coalition led by the US is based on carefully considered national interests. Religion is kept outside this calculus. However, there is a need to explain to the people that its support for the US-led action against Iraq is not anti-Islam or anti-Iraqi people, in order to clarify and to reassure their doubts. Mindful of the differing stances of neighbours, as a sovereign and independent state, Singapore has chosen a different position, for its own, good reasons. Of course, there are dangers in so publicly identifying with the US, for

instance from terrorist groups, but this is a calculated risk, which can be managed by tough security measures. As for our neighbors, they have long ago known and understood our realist position vis-à-vis the US.

Singapore has always adopted a principled foreign policy, and follows what it believes to be correct and to be in its national interests, to be pro-Singapore and not to be swayed by pressures. As a small state, Singapore has great interest in all states upholding the rule of international law as well as the health and efficient functioning of the UN system. Against these interests, it has to balance its numerous ties with the US in economy and finance, communications, defence, technology, markets, investments etc. Singapore also has to accurately assess where the locus of power will be in the next decades.

What is a correct policy for Singapore depends very much on reading accurately the most probable end-game in Iraq. If we have analysed that the US will most likely be able to achieve a reasonably quick and peaceful end to the Iraq war, then Arab opinion will become less antagonistic towards the US, especially if the US/UK starts delivering humanitarian aid and enables the rapid reconstruction of Iraq. Then Singapore's support for US over Iraq will be less problematic. But if the end game is messy and costs heavy casualties, then we would be seen as having backed a losing horse. Victory has a thousand fathers; defeat is an orphan.

Lastly, the big question on what will be the shape of the post-Cold War world has now been answered. It is a world system based on the US as the System-Hegemon, a super-power which is willing to act even if the UN is divided and paralysed. We all may be very uncomfortable with US unilateralism. But consider the alternative, wherein the US retreats into isolationism, and tells the rest of the world to solve the world's problems, without its help? For better or worse, the US is indeed indispensable, in terms of investments, markets, technology, political power and influence, and it is pragmatic to work with the US than against it.

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