

The Problem of “Smart Sanctions” Against Iraq

By Anthony H. Cordesman, Arleigh A. Burke Chair, CSIS

Secretary Powell’s call for “smart sanctions” against Iraq is long overdue, and can help to correct a critical weakness in the Clinton Administration’s foreign policy. It was clear by the mid-1990s that broad economic sanctions were not going to bring down Saddam Hussein, halt Iraqi efforts to proliferate, or cripple the ability of Iraq’s military and security forces to repress the Kurds, put down Iraq’s Shi’ite opposition, and threaten Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. It was equally clear that they continued to impoverish the ordinary Iraqi, and block Iraq’s economic development.

Nearly half a decade later, sanctions have eroded to the point where Iraq has over one billion dollars of uncontrolled income from smuggled petroleum exports. Its “legal” oil revenues in 2000 are estimated at \$21.6 billion, which is 89% higher than in 1999, and more than 150% higher than in 1988. Iraq can now use a combination of this income and the holes in the UN oil for food program to buy the loyalty of the elite around Saddam, the security forces, and Republican Guards.

It makes good, and long overdue, sense to refocus the sanctions effort on ensuring Saddam cannot import conventional arms and the technology and equipment to produce weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, it is equally clear that “smart sanctions” are not enough and that the Bush Administration could easily repeat some of the most chronic failures of the Clinton Administration. The US needs more of a strategy than can fit on a bumper sticker, and more thought than can fit in a fortune cookie. To be specific, “smart sanctions” can only work if they are part of the following seven major changes in US policy towards Iraq:

First, the US must be prepared to confront potential and actual suppliers. It is uncertain that the US can get even pro forma Security Council agreement to refocusing sanctions in ways that give them real teeth. The waters and borders of Iran, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey are not going to be sealed, and dual-use items and military spare parts are notoriously hard to police. It will take a massive intelligence effort and confrontational diplomacy with suppliers, and the nations on Iraq’s borders, to make “smart sanctions” work. Talk and good intentions are cheap; effective action is difficult and costly.

Second, the US must come to grips with the failure of the UN inspection effort and the fact UNMOVIC might do more harm if it did return to Iraq than good. Effective UN inspection really halted in late 1997, and Desert Fox did virtually nothing to really inhibited Iraq’s effort to proliferate. Iraq has had years to create an effective network of cells and dual use efforts to develop a break out capability in chemical and biological weapons, improve its nuclear weapons designs, and develop a missile program. UNMOVIC is still banned from Iraq, but if it did return, it might well operate under so many political constraints that it would end up certifying Iraqi compliance, rather than act as an effective deterrent to Iraqi action. The Clinton Administration dodged this issue for its last two years in office, but “smart sanctions” require a clear and detailed plan of action.

Third, the US must get real about the ineffectiveness of the Iraqi opposition, and the continuing need for military containment. The Bush Administration threatens to repeat the mistakes of the Clinton Administration and Congress, and go on backing weak and unpopular elements of the Iraqi opposition like the Iraqi National Congress. These movements have no meaningful support from any friendly government in the region, and they have no military potential beyond dragging the US into a “Bay of Kuwait” or “Bay of Kurdistan” disaster. The Turks fear them as a way of dividing Iraq and creating a Kurdistan, and the Arabs fear them as a way of bringing Iraq under Shi’ite control and/or Iranian influence. Worse, they are no substitute for a major covert effort to overthrow Saddam from within, and overt US funding of such movement tends to label the Iraqi opposition as US sponsored traitors. We need to understand that containing Iraq is far more important than legislating the funding of a forlorn hope.

Fourth, the US must launch an active truth campaign to confront Saddam on oil for food and all of the other issues where he relies on lies and exploitation of tensions in the region. The Clinton Administration committed a massive foreign policy mistake by failing to engage Saddam over his lies and propaganda. Aside from some sporadic and truly inept press efforts, it allowed him to capture Arab and world opinion in lying about the problems in oil for food and the true causes of the suffering of the Iraq people. It did not engage him actively on human rights inside Iraq, his attacks on Iraq’s Shi’ites, his continuing claims to Kuwait, or his threats to Iraq’s Kurds. It postured about palaces to the American media, and allowed Saddam to turn UN reporting into a propaganda defeat. “Smart sanctions” will not work without a massive and continued truth campaign to fully explain the true character of the Iraqi regime that is tailored to Gulf, Arab, and world audiences.

Fifth, the US must think now about the ultimate future of Iraq’s Kurds. The erosion of sanctions poses immediate threats to Iraq’s Kurds. While the Clinton Administration chose to ignore it, Iraq has been “cleansing” oil-rich areas in Northern Iraq of Kurds and forcing them into other areas or the Kurdish security zone. It is not clear we can prevent this, but getting support for “smart sanctions” and protecting the Kurds means we need a clear US policy on the future of the Kurdish security zone and a definition of Kurdish autonomy that will set policy goals to protect the Kurds while defusing fears Iraq will divide or break up.

Sixth, the US must have a clear energy policy towards Iraq. Iraq is a nation that has some 11% of all the world’s oil reserves and that has no had any coherent energy development efforts since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. US government projections call for Iraqi oil production capacity to more than double from around 2.8 million barrels a day to 6.2 million barrels in 2020. These increases in Iraq’s oil exports are also critical to any hope of its economic development. Massive energy investments are required, and they years to a decade to pay off. They also can provide the Iraqi regime with major new resources. “Smart sanctions” must be coupled to a clear energy development policy.

Finally, the US must revitalize the other aspects of military containment. The true subtext of a “smart sanctions” policy is that we will need a major forward military presence, rapid deployment capability, and war fighting ability to check an Iraqi attack on Kuwait or threat to use weapons of mass destruction indefinitely into the future. The Clinton Administration “nickel and dimed” its use of force to contain Iraq, issued a series of abortive threats over UN

inspections, launched Desert Fox, and then halted it before it could be effective. Two years of pin-prick strikes over the “No Fly Zones” have done as much to give Saddam a propaganda victory as they have to hurt his air defenses.

We need to say quite clearly that Gulf security and the flow of oil is a vital national security interest and that we remain committed to military containment and close cooperation with our allies. We need to define the kind of Iraqi action that will lead us to launch military action, and when we do it, we need to strike so hard and so decisively that the military and personal cost to Saddam is so unaffordable that any political propaganda gains he makes are minor in comparison. The one round of half-successful strikes the Bush Administration launched on February 16th is Clintonesque at best. “Smart Sanctions” require a clear Bush Doctrine and a clearly defined commitment to decisive force.

Anthony H. Cordesman is the author of [Iraq and the War of Sanctions](#) (Praeger 2000). His detailed analysis of Gulf Policy issues is contained on the CSIS Web Site in “Gulf in Transition” and an up-to-date assessment of Iraq’s military capabilities is available in the “Military Balance” section.