

The UN and the Gulf War

Iraq-Kuwait (1990-1)

In the UN's first major test after the Cold War, the Security Council authorized the use of force against Iraq in a similar manner as it had done in the Korean case. It also generated similar disagreements within the UN over whether military action was an appropriate response. After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, the Council delegated its Chapter VII powers to the US-led coalition and did not take up the matter until Operation Desert Storm had finished and a ceasefire agreement had been formulated (see Freedman and Karsh 1995).

Initially, the Security Council adopted 12 Chapter VII resolutions on different aspects of the crisis in an attempt to force Iraq to withdraw through the use of sanctions (Urquhart 2000: 82). In order to deter Iraq from invading Saudi Arabia as well, on 8 August US President George Bush announced that US troops would be deployed there. Four US objectives were articulated for what was labelled Operation Desert Shield: Kuwait's liberation; the restoration of Kuwait's government; the security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the entire Gulf region; and the protection of US citizens (Haass 1999: 32). Eventually, Desert Shield involved over 500,000 US troops and over 200,000 thousand from 27 other states. In spite of these deterrents, by late October a consensus emerged between the US and the Soviet Union that the use of military force against Iraq should be authorized. This generated considerable criticism because the Council had not formally identified the inadequacy of the sanctions before Operation Desert Storm was launched (Urquhart 2000: 84).

Following a series of disagreements over the appropriate terminology between US Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, Security Council Resolution 678 was passed on 29 November 1990. This authorized

‘Member States co-operating with the Government of Kuwait, unless Iraq on or before 15 January 1991 fully implements ... the foregoing resolutions, to use all necessary means to uphold and implement resolution 660 (1990) and all subsequent relevant resolutions and to restore international peace and security in the area’ (para. 2). The phrase ‘all necessary means’ became the most obvious signifier of UN enforcement actions throughout the 1990s. In addition, Resolution 678 depended on the willingness of certain states to undertake and fund a military operation; it conferred discretion on how the mandate might be attained to the states involved; it limited Council involvement to a vague request to ‘keep the Security Council regularly informed’; and it failed to specify an end-point for the mandate (Chesterman 2001: 164). When Iraq failed to comply with the necessary requirements, a 28-state military coalition went into action and quickly expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait. From 16 January until 24 February 1991, the coalition used airpower to achieve its objectives, at which point a land offensive began that was suspended on 28 February after allied forces occupied the whole of Kuwait and part of southern Iraq. Saddam Hussein was subsequently required to comply with Resolution 687 (3 April 1991), which amongst other things demanded the destruction or removal of all weapons of mass destruction, the payment of reparations and the return of Kuwaiti property. Sanctions would be maintained until these and the resolution’s other provisions were fulfilled. In addition, on 9 April 1991 a UN observation mission, UNIKOM, was created to monitor the demilitarised zone between Iraq and Kuwait that had been set up in the aftermath of the war.

Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm highlight at least two important issues regarding peace enforcement. The first is that while Resolution 678 undoubtedly came to represent an important template for several other enforcement

actions throughout the 1990s, the Gulf case did not turn out to be a harbinger of the shape of future conflict after the Cold War. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was the first, and remains the only, occasion where a member of the UN had the whole of its territory occupied by another state (Roberts 1996: 324). As a result, it gave few useful guidelines about how to address the problems caused by internal wars with international dimensions. In addition, the rapid success of Operation Desert Storm encouraged unrealistic (Western) expectations about the ability of air power to shape the behaviour of a recalcitrant opponent (see Pape 1996; McInnes 2001). The second issue was that the Gulf War offered further evidence, if further evidence were required, that military enforcement measures on this scale required the participation of the US. And where the US was inclined to participate, it was also inclined to want command and control of the operation.

References

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