As UN-Iraq deal stalls US bombing

Clinton issues new war threats

The WSWS Editorial Board
24 February 1998

The agreement between UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Saddam Hussein, announced February 22, is a political setback for American imperialism and the Clinton administration's plans for an air war against Iraq. It by no means, however, ends the danger of US aggression in the Persian Gulf, or a general growth of militarism among the major capitalist powers.

Clinton and his top national security and military aides could not conceal their bitterness and disappointment as the president announced tentative acceptance of the UN-brokered deal at the White House Monday afternoon. In response to press questions suggesting his administration had caved in to Iraq and the UN, Clinton reaffirmed that American troops, planes and warships will remain in the Persian Gulf and that attacks will be ordered "at a time of our choosing ... unilaterally" if and when a new confrontation with Iraq arises.

Annan reached the agreement to resume inspections by the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) in the face of US opposition to his mission. The State Department initially sought to block Annan's trip to Baghdad, then tried to sabotage the negotiations by threatening a US veto if an "unacceptable" deal was reached with Saddam Hussein.

In this instance the UN became the vehicle for sections of the European bourgeoisie whose imperialist interests in the Gulf have brought them into conflict with American policy. They, in turn, were backed by most of the Arab bourgeois regimes, which fear the social upheavals that might be unleashed within their own borders by a new US assault on the Iraqi people. Over the weekend, even before an attack, there were protests in Egypt and riots in Jordan, as a US air strike with heavy Iraqi casualties appeared imminent.

Annan's trip was taken at the urging of France in particular, and Paris hailed the deal with Iraq. French transnational corporations have large investments in Iraq's oil industry and stand to benefit enormously from a lifting of UN sanctions. Similarly, the Yeltsin regime in Russia, the other major sponsor of Annan's mission, has definite economic and strategic interests in Iraq, a country whose northernmost oil fields are only 200 miles from the Russian border.

Erosion of US hegemony

Washington's failure to prevent an agreement reflects the deterioration in the world position of American imperialism in the seven years since the Persian Gulf War. It has proven impossible for Washington to maintain the US-led coalition of the major capitalist powers, the Arab states and Israel, with the tacit backing of Russia and China, which George Bush assembled in 1990-91.

That coalition was cobbled together by means of threats, opportunist maneuvers and outright bribery, under conditions in which the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union was disintegrating but the old US-led Cold War alliance of the major imperialist powers was still in place. These exceptional historical circumstances gave the United States a virtually free hand to operate in the Middle East.

The past seven years have seen the steady erosion of the political hegemony which American imperialism enjoyed over its capitalist rivals during the Cold War. The European countries as well as Japan have begun to pursue their own agenda in one sphere after another: trade and monetary policy, relations with the former Soviet Union, and diplomacy in global hot spots such as Bosnia, the Middle East and Cuba.

Serious political miscalculations, concerning both the strength of American imperialism's position internationally and the level of popular support for its war policy at home, also played a role in forcing the US, for the present, to pull back. To a considerable extent US policy makers, entranced by the firepower of their military hardware, came to believe that they could settle all questions simply through force of arms. In the end, this simple-minded infatuation with the military option left the US with little room to maneuver.

At the same time, the Clinton administration, the Republicans and the media were all taken aback by the demonstration of deep hostility to military action against the Iraqi people which surfaced at the Ohio State University "town meeting" last week, and continued in the form of protest demonstrations and confrontations with administration officials thereafter.

Even more than the signs of American imperialism's isolation abroad, the indications of social and political dissent

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within the US began to prompt warnings from within the political establishment over the explosive implications of Washington's bellicose policy in the Gulf.

The deep divisions within the American ruling class were expressed, in part, in criticism of Clinton by fellow Democrats. Former President Jimmy Carter denounced the planned bombing of Iraq, saying that as many as 100,000 innocent civilians might be killed. Carter's former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski attacked the administration's demonization of Saddam Hussein, saying that it was "demagogy ... to speak of a dictator of a third-world country of 22 million people that has been pulverized and impoverished as a new Hitler."

Neither Carter and Brzezinski nor the French and other European imperialists have opposed Clinton's war plans out of sympathy for the plight of the Iraqi people. What they do share, however, is anxiety that the reckless use of American military force can produce unforeseen and explosive consequences.

The threat of war remains

The latest diplomatic maneuvers do not mean that war in the Persian Gulf is off the agenda. The huge US military force in the region is being maintained at full alert for the next several months, and US officials emphasized that air strikes against Iraq could be ordered on a few hours' notice if the administration decides that Iraq is not carrying out its agreement with the UN. Secretary of Defense William Cohen, who denied earlier in the week that any reservists would be required for the Gulf, announced Sunday that some transportation and support units were being activated.

Clinton emphasized the necessity to verify Iraqi compliance in practice as soon as possible, by sending UNSCOM inspectors to every disputed site. Given that the majority of UNSCOM personnel are military and intelligence officers on loan from the American and British governments, there will be plenty of opportunity to stage new provocations as a pretext for war.

More fundamentally, the danger of war is implicit in the crisis-ridden state of international relations, as well as the deepening social contradictions within the US and every other capitalist nation. The present war buildup has exposed both the fragility of world "peace," and the extraordinary degree of political instability, not only in the Middle East but also in the centers of world capitalism, above all the United States.

The outcome of the present stalemate in the Persian Gulf will be an exacerbation of international tensions and a deepening of the political crisis of the Clinton administration at home.

American imperialism, frustrated and angered over the immediate situation in the Gulf, is bound to become even more bellicose. For Washington, war is not merely a means, but an end. American capitalism, facing mounting foreign competition and a deepening social crisis at home, sees its unchallenged military superiority as the decisive card which must be played while there is still time.

Hence the venomous tone of the recriminations that have already begun over Clinton's failure to carry through on his threats to bomb Iraq, and his subordination of military action to UN diplomacy. "It is ridiculous for us to make a serious matter of national interest hostage to negotiations conducted by the secretary general of the United Nations," said right-wing columnist William Kristol. Congressmen, both Democratic and Republican, declared that the lesson of the UN agreement was the need for the US to get rid of Saddam Hussein once and for all.

At the same time, the political crisis of the Clinton administration is certain to escalate in the aftermath of the UN-Iraq agreement. The Monica Lewinsky scandal will once again come to the fore, and the combined assault of the independent counsel and the media on the White House will be stepped up.

Whether in the Persian Gulf or somewhere else, the next military crisis is not far off, and at some point the growth of imperialist rivalries and social tensions will explode with incalculable and tragic consequences. Events such as those unfolding in the Persian Gulf must serve to remind workers everywhere of a profound historical truth—the root cause of war is the insoluble character of the contradictions of the capitalist system.

There is only one social force that can counter the growth of imperialist militarism and, ultimately, a new world war, and that is the international working class, armed with a socialist perspective.

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