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EXTRACT FROM MY ASSESSMENT OF 21-2-03 ^[1](AVAILABLE AT WWW.SAAG.ORG)

" Would the Americans follow the cautious policy of the first Gulf war and their operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, by relying initially on air and electronic warfare to damage the morale of the Iraqi forces and people before moving on the ground or would they start the ground operations in the beginning itself in conjunction with the air strikes? It would be difficult to answer these questions definitively, but it is very likely that this time the ground operations would start much earlier than they did in Kosovo and Afghanistan. " (End of Citation)

ASSESSMENT AT THE END OF D-DAY PLUS ONE

The medium-intensity sandstorm, which was blowing across the deserts of West Asia, has subsided and weather forecasts predict tolerable, armour and aircraft friendly weather for 7 to 10 days.

2. Contrary to media predictions, the Bush Administration made a radical departure from the battle plans of Kosovo and Afghanistan, which were marked by intensive air action for days before the ground troops ventured into battle. Now, the ground troops have gone into battle in Iraqi territory right from the word go, with simultaneous air action designed to weaken the morale of the Iraqi political and military leadership. The new strategy reflects the US anxiety to achieve their ground objectives as rapidly as possible before another serious sand-storm sets in and a willingness to suffer casualties in the process. Reports from Baghdad speak of confusion and declining morale in the Iraqi political and military leadership, including in the much-vaunted Republican Guards.

3. The predictable anti-US demonstrations have resulted in violence only in Yemen. In other places, such as Amman and Cairo, the demonstrations were newsworthy, but not uncontrollable or worrisome. The streets of Pakistan have been reassuringly (for the Americans) far from volatile. This should be encouraging for the US-led coalition because the ground offensive coincided with a Friday, when Muslim emotions tend to be high. There are indications of stepped-up action by Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Gulbuddin Heckmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami in Afghanistan, but the Americans should be able to deal with them.

4. The British, who know Iraq and its terrain better than the Americans and who are less suspected of partisanship by the Shias of the South, have been playing a more active role in the South, while the Americans, who have a better equation with the Kurds of the North, have been more active in the North. But, the Americans are having problems controlling the Turks, who are already reported to have sent 1,500 troops into Iraqi territory disregarding US requests not to do so.

5. A rapid-action US contingent is making a dash towards Baghdad preceded by intensive air action in order to reach there before another sand-storm starts. If the Iraqis put up stiff resistance at Baghdad, the Americans will need to reinforce the advancing contingent considerably through air before they step into Baghdad and get involved in street fighting there. However, there is a strong possibility of Saddam, if still alive, caving in thus obviating the need for messy action in Baghdad.

6. A careful reading of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's statements and remarks at Brussels, where he had gone for an European Union summit on March 21,2003, indicates that while he whole-heartedly stood behind the US and supported its unilateral military intervention in Iraq, he has probably started marking his distance from the Bush Administration in so far as the post-occupation management of Iraq is concerned. He seems to be thinking on the lines that the unilateral military action should be followed by multilateral UN-led post-occupation political and economic management of Iraq.

7. He appears to be uncomfortable with the ideas of the conservatives advising Bush in Washington, including Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, who want an unilateral US-led management of Iraq after the occupation with little or no UN role. Blair, on the contrary, has been throwing hints that he would like the UN to be brought in straightaway after Iraq is occupied and given the leadership role, through a special resolution, in the post-occupation management. What Blair has been hinting to Washington DC seems to be: Thus far with you, but no further.

8. However, President Chirac of France continues to be petulant and has been dismissing out of hand the hints coming from Blair. He has also indicated that France would oppose any resolution which might have the effect of legitimising the military action against Iraq.

9. One has to keep one's fingers crossed as to whether Blair would stick to this approach of resumed multilateralism after the occupation or he would cave in to US pressure for following the US lead even after the occupation. It would be in the interest of India and other non-aligned countries to encourage Blair on the new road which he apparently sees for himself instead of letting themselves be cajoled by the US.

NOTE: As the writer would be out of station from March 23 to 27, there would be no more assessments till March 28 .

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