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COMMEN T

Gulf lessons

A

war in the Gulf now looks more likely
than it ever has. Efforts still continue
to initiate talks between the two sides,
but to describe those efforts as "best"
would be to flatter enormously the attitude of some parties.
With a United Nations deadline for Iraq's pull-out from Kuwait less than two weeks away, both sides talk increasingly of the probability of conflict. It is a probability which nobody can relish, and in which nobody should revel. The proximity of the dan-
ger has, however,
served to highlight
flaws in the world's
preparations to meet
such dangers.
Despite the mas-
sive build-up by the
countries working to-
gether under the
United Nations ban-
ner of arms and per-
sonnel in the Gulf
region, it is by no
means a racing cer-
tainty that those
forces could inflict a
quick and decisive
defeat on the Iraqis.
The USA, which to
all intents and pur-
poses leads the UN forces, has been told by its own commanders that it will not be fully ready to fight for some weeks — well into February, in fact. That does not mean that the US forces are incapable of fighting until then — just that they would not be as fully capable at the outset of battle as they would prefer. That applies equally to the USA's allies: Britain, for instance, is still in the process of moving significant parts of its helicopter force and armoured brigades to the region. .
Given that it is more likely than not that the United Nations forces would strike first (after all, it is their deadline, not Iraq's), the desire of those forces to be fully ready before pressing the button is understandable.
Every day of delay, however, endangers the remarkable degree of unity which has been displayed so far by the UN membership. Every day of delay also means another day in which Iraq's forces have been able to prepare for battle, albeit with steadily diminishing resources of fuel and ammunition. The battle plan for which those forces were mobilised envisaged the rapid defeat of a comparatively weak Kuwait, not a prolonged struggle with a massive UN force. Iraq may have had initial surprise on its side,

If there must be a war,

the UN forces may he

placed better militarily for it in six weeks' time.

Politically they will

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than in the run-up to the

15 fanuary deadline"

but then had the surprise turned on it by the UN's response, and it has had to organise a change from an offensive to defensive position as a result.
Militarily, the UN forces may be better placed
in another six weeks' time; politically they will never be better placed than in the run-up to the 15 January deadline. That, ultimately, may be the deciding factor in a decision to fight now rather than later.

The improving preparedness of the UN forces will make this a safer
decision, but the
credit for that im-
provement must lie
partly with the ability
of those forces to im-
provise rather than
with their financers
and planners. Some
Western combat air-
craft have suddenly
acquired radar-absorb-
ent material; battle-
field-support helicop-
ters are now being
equipped with defen-
sive weaponry. Some
of these needs must
have been foreseen
for the equipment to
appear so quickly in
service: the need for desert clothing for the British Army, for instance, obviously was not.

Western forces have long seen the Middle East as a potential area of conflict (and Western nations have long supplied combat equipment to Middle-Eastern users) yet Western equipment taken to the Gulf by Western forces has been found to be acutely vulnerable to sand ingestion. Western planners have been talking increas-ingly of military priorities moving from catering for set-piece conflict in Europe to rapid inter-vention worldwide, yet the equipment necessary for the first truly international rapid interven-tion since peace broke out in Europe is still being embarked from its home bases five months after Iraq invaded Kuwait.
Such short-term lapses will not seem so significant if a war happens and (as seems increasingly likely) drags on for weeks or even months^ for by then it will be attrition and resources which count for more than immedi-ately available technology. Those lapses will
have ritore significance, perhaps, in the happy
instance of a war being averted, for it is the
lessons learned from this frantic mobilisation
which will affect the ultimate outcome of the
(inevitable) next one. •

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