

It's time t



By Henry A Kissinger

A call for an international conference would be an important step in dealing with a striking anomaly of contemporary international politics

THE time has come to begin preparing for an international conference to define the political outcome of the Iraq war. Whatever happens, a diplomatic phase is necessary. Iraq will have to rejoin the international community in some manner. Its internal tensions will continue to tempt outside intervention, and these cannot be resisted effectively

in the absence of some agreed principles. The conflicting interests of various countries must be restrained by a combination of a balance of power and an agreed legitimacy to provide an international sanction.

A call for an international conference would be an important step in dealing with a striking anomaly of contemporary international politics. America is widely condemned for its conduct of the Iraq war, while no country has been prepared to participate in a serious exploration of the political implications of foreseeable outcomes.

Yet none will remain impervious. If America fails to achieve its immediate objectives — if terrorist camps or terrorist regimes emerge on the soil of Iraq, backed by its huge oil resources — no country with a significant Muslim population will be able to escape the consequences: not India, with the second largest Muslim population in the world; not Indonesia, with the largest; not Turkey, already contending with incursions from the Kurdish portion of Iraq; not Malaysia, Pakistan or any of the countries of

Western Europe; not Russia, with its Muslim south; nor, in the end, China.

If the Iraq war culminates in a nuclear Iran (as an indirect consequence) and an Islamic fundamentalism that can claim to have ejected Russia from Afghanistan and America from Iraq, a period of extreme turbulence verging on chaos is unavoidable, and it will not be confined to the Middle East. A threat to

The political framework no outcome. These would include Iraq's neighbours; key Islamic Malaysia; and major

global oil supplies would have a shattering impact on the world economy, especially the economies of the industrialised countries.

Yet none of the potential victims of these trends has been required to contribute even ideas, much less been enlisted in the quest for a political solution.

Instead, what is most frequently

to start talking

Iraq

debated is whether diplomacy should be invoked at all. The administration, following one strain of American attitudes towards diplomacy, has implied that it is not yet ready to negotiate over Iraq — especially not with Iran and Syria, which are accused of fomenting the conflict and stirring up the violence.

From the beginning of the controversy in 2002 about whether to use force against

almost mythic quality to the desirability of bilateral negotiations with Syria and Iran as the key to an Iraqi settlement.

But this has not altered the long-term power relationships. Wise leaders on all sides are needed to establish an international order that provides security to all participants and respect to all religions. But only a few of the objectives of the United States, Syria and Iran can

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Iraq and afterwards, I have supported the decision to overthrow Saddam, but I have also argued that no outcome in the middle of the Arab world could rest on imposition by military force alone. Diplomacy should always have been treated as an integral part of Iraq strategy.

The contemporary debate over ending the Iraq war has ascribed an

be fulfilled via bilateral negotiations.

Syria's role in Iraq, for better or worse, is limited. The problem of Iran's nuclear ambitions cannot be solved, except in the context of the multilateral framework that already exists or some alternative that involves the other nuclear powers.

Any agenda for a purely bilateral negotiation over Iraq excluding the Sunnis

will appear in the Sunni world as a potential American-Iranian condominium or the beginning of American abandonment. It may thus trigger a rush to acquiesce in Iranian hegemony.

The best impetus to a serious diplomacy over Iraq is by way of the international conference.

The political framework needs to be created by countries with a stake in the outcome. These would include the permanent members of the Security Council; Iraq's neighbors; key Islamic countries like India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia; and major oil consumers like Germany and Japan.

These countries have many conflicting interests, but should have a common concern in preventing jihadist fanaticism from driving the world towards an ever-widening conflict.

The international conference should be the occasion, as well, to go beyond the warring factions in Iraq to moving toward a stable energy supply. It would be the best framework for a transition from American military occupation. Paradoxically, it may also prove the best framework for bilateral

discussions with Syria and Iran.

American military policy in Iraq must be related to such a diplomatic strategy. Unilateral withdrawal on fixed timetables, unrelated to local conditions, is incompatible with the diplomacy described here. The willingness of other countries to participate in such an effort depends importantly on their assessment of the balance of power in the Middle East after the end of the war in Iraq. A successful diplomacy requires that American power remain relevant and available in support of a coherent regional policy.

After the Thirty Years' War, the nations of Europe organised an international conference to set rules for ending the war, after the continent had been left prostrate and exhausted.

The world now has a comparable opportunity today. Will it seize it while it still has a margin of decision, or must it wait until exhaustion and despair leave no alternative? COURTESY INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

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