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D-Day tomorrow: Is war inevitable?

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Omens Are Ominous

THE prospects for a civilised approach, however, do not look good. Even so-called dove US Secretary of State Colin Powell seems to be chomping at the bit: Arms inspection will not work; action has to be taken to disarm the Iraqis.

The State of the Union address by President Bush the day after Hans Blix reports to the Security Council is expected to give an ultimatum of weeks for the UN arms inspection to be completed and for military action to take place, based on evidence only the Americans claim to have.

Meanwhile, three permanent members of the Security Council with the power of veto - France, Russia and China - have said they would oppose any precipitate military action which does not give disarmament and peace a chance; that such an action would, in any case, require a second Security Council resolution when they are likely to use that veto power.

Germany, which has weighed in with France, to take a strong position against a war on Iraq, takes over the rotating chairmanship of the council from February, and has promised to use that position to get Blix to come back to the council in the middle of that month.

Apart from the war of words between the US on the one side and France/Germany on the other, with Russia and China supporting the European position from the wings, the likeli-hood is that the Americans will turn away from the UN where they cannot find support for their position on Iraq.

The US will turn its back on the world. It's rather like Churchill saying: "Fog in the channel, continent isolated." As the Americans see it, it is the rest of the world that is isolated.

Actually, the impact on the world of a US war on Iraq would be cataclysmic. In no way will the world be spared the consequences of US action. Would it were that the world could be isolated!

That is why no effort is being spared to convince both the Americans and Saddam Hussein to follow the path of peace: the Arab diplomacy to get Saddam to quietly go; the regional diplomacy led by Turkey to get Iraq to co-operate fully with the arms inspectors; the strong words by our own Prime Minister on the grave dangers to the world of an American attack on Iraq in Davos last Thursday; the demonstrations for peace across the globe last weekend.

An attack on Iraq would not only bring terror to the people of that country, but also would bring more terror to the world. In the words of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad: "You cannot out-terrorise the terrorists."

While there is little justification for an all-out war against Iraq just to take out Saddam Hussein, or to secure the oil production and reserves of that country, on the other hand there is the clear threat of terrorist "retribution" should war break out.

In the UK, it is feared Islamic militants are preparing to strike if Britain joins the US in a war with Iraq. These past two weeks the police have made several arrests of suspected Muslim terrorists, representing just three "networks".

Actually, the police have admitted the difficulty of tracing the terrorist groups because of "the rise of a new generation of 'clean skin' extremists - young radicalised Islamic militants with no previous links to terrorism".

The groups are believed to be operating independently of one another, and it is also believed that a couple of the networks at least possess ricin to develop a chemical weapon.

The ever-popular Sun newspaper has already screamed with the headline: "Track them down and kick them out!" Just imagine what the headline would be after a few acts of terror. Hang them? Don't trust any of them? Throw the lot out?

That is just Britain. Multiply it many times over for the world.

Blix has an unenviable role to play tomorrow. He cannot play the unflappable civil servant. He must come down firmly on the side of effective arms inspection and peaceful disarmament - and add to the chorus calling for the Americans to hold back.

And yes, Gong Xi Fa Cai to all Chinese readers.