Giandomenico Picco responds to questions

GiANDOMENICO PICCO is renowned for his negotiating skills and knowledge of people and politics in the Middle East. Five nations have honored him with their highest civilian awards. A 20-year senior official of the United Nations, Picco was the secret U.N. negotiator who ended the Iran-Iraq War, and convinced the Soviets to leave Afghanistan. He led the negotiations with Islamic Jihad that resulted in the release of Tom Sutherland and the hostages. After leaving the U.N. a number of years ago, he founded GDP Associates, a strategic consulting firm that helps companies set up operations in the Middle East.

What do you think the U.S. can do to rebuild our waning influence in the Middle East, as a result of the actions of Prime Minister Netanyahu?

My view is that the majority of Israeli people object to the Prime Minister. It seems that the intelligence is not with him. The army is not with him. It was during his predecessor's term that Israeli intelligence began to work out agreements with Palestinian intelligence. Now these things have just stopped. So I don't think we have to invent what to do. I think we just have to follow the common sense of what I believe has now become the majority of the Israeli population.

If there is a change in Israeli leadership, do you think that will regenerate some of the influence we had with our allies in the Middle East?

Absolutely! Nobody has asked for anything but that which was reached in the agreement by Rabin, and Rabin was far from being a weak person.

The Oslo Agreement is based on the assumption, not declared, that Israel won and the Palestinians lost. The Palestinians pragmatically accepted this fact. So I think that's what we are to go back to.

What is the current status of the relationship between Iraq and Israel?

The possibility of a link between Iraq and Israel was at one time strategically valid to Israelis. But I'm glad to see it is a thought that is not alive in Israel today.

Saddam is giving us nothing other than what he was supposed to do in the first place. How do you interpret this as anything other than a great success for Saddam?

We have to see how UNSCOM will be allowed to work. If UNSCOM is going to discover other weapons of mass destruction, and destroy them, then we have been able to get something more out of it. Not everything, but something.

UNSCOM's work will be a continuous operation until the end of time. That is the best we can expect because I think eventually the solution to nonproliferation in that country is really a change of regime.

Is there any substance to the report that Iraq has actually moved these weapons out of Iraq and into Libya and Sudan?

I don't have any confirmation from people I know. So I do not have an answer for you.

Does Turkey have any role in the evolution of events in the Middle East?

Yes, but I don't think that Turkey will play a leading role. I think the interest of Turkey is to retain its own territorial integrity, and not to begin a new policy in this region. They are continuing their efforts to build political relationships with the Turkish republics of the former Soviet Union, but so far they have had mixed success. There are a number of places where there is tremendous resentment of the Turks.
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From a cultural point of view, they have a tremendous role, economically, to a lesser extent.

How have the French conducted themselves during this phase of negotiation?

Basically, the European governments, with the exclusion of Britain, are infected by a germ called appeasement. It's a result of this very useless concept called impartiality, which is a way of covering up for the lack of decisions.

The French believe that if Saddam goes as a consequence of an American operation, it will hurt their chances of getting the oil they need. So what we're looking at is a battle for Iraq between Russia, France and America for the future of Iraq's oil. That battle has much less to do with politics than with oil.

This germ you talk about in Europe explains their lack of involvement in Yugoslavia and Bosnia?

Sure. Europe is a culture that is based on two philosophers, Kant and Descartes. The idea is that the world is never black and white; there are two sides to every story. You cover your risk by never going 100 percent for or against one position, because you never know how the world will change tomorrow.

The British government is founded on exactly the same premise as the U.S., the philosophies of Locke and Hume, which champion the choice of good over evil.

In three to five years, if we are still haggling with Saddam, do you think Iran will accelerate its signals of cooperation with the U.S., both public and private, which will even further isolate Saddam?

Both Iraq and Iran know that the first to recognize Israel will put the other out of business. If Saddam were to see that Iran was moving closer to the West, you can bet that he would do his best to come into the race and to build bridges with America. That is why I'm very much in favor of provoking Saddam, so to speak, by engaging Iran. Saddam will be sure he is not left behind.

What was Saddam hoping to gain by refusing to allow palace inspections?

To detract attention from where he put the weapons of mass destruction. You know eventually you're going to give in to U.N. demands because what matters is something else. And if people believe that what matters is what you're shouting about, so much the better.

What do you think is going to happen with the U.S.-Cuba relationship, and if the Pope's recent visit to Cuba will have any effect on that?

Yes, the Pope's visit has an effect for two reasons: It was very well organized, and very well discussed with this Administration. It was not something the Pope did without discussing with Washington. The visit is another tactic which has been tried to see if the monolithic power can melt without asking this Administration to change its policy.

The first result we are seeing is the freedom of the political prisoners. I think we will see more happening, and it will be a melting down process. Don't expect that the Pope has gone there just for a week and that's it. He has left a lot of homework to be done by his bishops there. They are going to be pushing the human rights agenda, and they intend to receive satisfaction on that.