

The Poisoned Chalice of Foreign Imposed Regime Change

Written by Dan Reiter

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DAN REITER, FEB 1 2011

When the United States overthrew the Taliban in 2001 and Saddam Hussein in 2003, many hoped that America could repeat its great foreign policy successes of neutralizing Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan following World War II. Overthrowing these last three governments permanently moved extraordinarily grave threats to international stability. Further, these imposed regime changes were embraced by the respective populations, and were followed by stable and healthy democratization.

These past experiences dominated the public debate before the 2003 invasion of Iraq in particular. Observers asked important questions such as: Would Iraq's oil wealth make economic reconstruction even easier than it had been in Japan and Germany? Would religious diversity create problems for Iraq that Japan and Germany avoided? Eight years after the Iraq invasion, we do have some answers to these questions, at least as applied to Iraq. No, the presence of oil did not ensure rapid return to economic prosperity. Yes, the religious cleavages in Iraqi society endangered stability and slowed the construction of democratic political institutions.

Iraq will likely not be the last attempt by a foreign power to impose regime change on another state. Foreign imposed regime change is a highly tempting solution to the problem of rogue regimes. Replace the rogue leadership with a pliable puppet or a pacifist democracy, and it seems you can permanently remove a troubling threat to the international order (Reiter 2009). The 21st century may see more efforts to impose regime change from without. The United States may lose patience with the current regimes in North Korea, Iran, or Burma. Ditto Israel and a Lebanon run by Hezbollah, or Russia and a pesky Georgia.

We need better insights into the utility of foreign imposed regime change as a policy tool, moving beyond debating the appropriateness of this or that historical analogy. In the past few years, scholars have begun to take up this challenge, using statistical methods to analyze decades of international history, improving our understanding the consequences of foreign imposed regime change.

The picture, perhaps unsurprisingly, is mixed. On the plus side, the basic attraction of foreign imposed regime change rests on a solid footing. Foreign-imposed regime change does effectively neuter interstate military threats. Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy were all transformed into pacific, prosperous democracies after 1945. One statistical study looked at the outcomes of all interstate wars since 1914. It found that peace following interstate war lasted significantly longer when the war ended with the victor imposing regime change on the defeated, as compared with war ending under other conditions. Further, imposing regime change is a more reliable means of sustaining postwar peace than other options such as deploying peacekeeping troops (Lo, Hashimoto, and Reiter 2008). This finding is confirmed by America's recent experience. Though contemporary Afghanistan and Iraq certainly present their shares of headaches, neither of them will attack its neighbors anytime soon.

Now, the bad news. Tossing out a leadership through war often means breaking the power of the state. A state's capital, the seat of administrative governance and power, may get wrecked from combat or aerial bombing. The nation's factories, farms, mines, bridges, railroads, and other physical infrastructure may be badly damaged. The defeated state's armed forces and paramilitary may be disbanded. Individuals critical for running mundane aspects

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of the state, such as ministers of public utilities, education, and economics, may be imprisoned or banned from public service if they have political ties to the old regime.

These developments can incite the outbreak of civil war. Insurgency is more likely to emerge and attract the support of the population when the government is unable to meet basic needs, like providing clean water, electricity, and food. This was certainly the case in Iraq, when the dismissal of Baath Party members from their positions in the public sector undermined the provision of electricity and clean water, which in turn fueled the insurgency. Further, when the government loses its power to exercise force in society, it loses the ability to deter and defeat insurgents. Many think that the single greatest American mistake in Iraq was the dismissal of the Iraqi regular army, which made it difficult to maintain order. Degraded state power aside, states imposing regime change often deploy occupation forces on the territory of the defeated, and there are fewer factors more likely to inspire a population to support insurgency than the presence of foreign troops on its soil. This has been a factor of central concern in both Afghanistan and Iraq, as American and other foreign forces often fuel resentment as they try to keep order.

Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq, we now have systematic evidence which demonstrates the relationship between foreign imposed regime change and the onset of civil war. Statistical studies on all civil wars going back to 1920 show that foreign imposed regime change following interstate war has a massive effect on the likelihood of civil war onset, making it eight times more likely to occur (Peic and Reiter 2010; see also Enterline and Greig 2008). Other statistical studies also examining decades of history have shown that democracy imposed from without is not especially likely to survive (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2006).

Aside from whether foreign imposed regime change works, it is usually quite expensive. The United States has lost thousands of dead and tens of thousands wounded in its counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. It has also spent trillions of dollars, a not inconsiderable issue given that the mounting deficit may pose a dire threat to America's economic health, and in the short term will likely mean savage cuts of a number of other programs.

Fortunately, even if foreign imposed regime change is as Shakespeare might say a "poison'd chalice" punishing whomever drinks from it, it does not mean that eschewing foreign imposed regime change means we are helpless in the face of international threats posed by rogue states. Deterrence works quite well at dissuading even nuclear-armed states from attacking their neighbors. Deterrence kept the Soviet Union and China from attacking American allies for decades, and since 1953 has kept North Korea from going to war.

Further, the international community has tools available which have in the past limited and even reversed the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), thereby eliminating the most feared scenarios of rogue aggression. These include policies such as inspections, economic sanctions, diplomacy, and naval intervention to interdict the trade in WMD materials. Argentina and Brazil were persuaded to terminate their nuclear programs in the 1990s. South Africa gave up its nuclear arsenal when it abandoned apartheid. Libya succumbed to international pressure and abandoned its decades-long pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps most famously, the combination of sanctions and inspections essentially eliminated WMD from Iraq by the time of the 2003 invasion. Though such tools do not always work, their success rate is often underrated.

A remaining fear is that rogue states may pass along WMD to undeterrable terrorist groups. However, there are a number of less risky policies that can measurably reduce the risk of WMD terrorism, including securing the world's supply of fissile materials (the Cooperative Threat Reduction program has had considerable success in this regard), improving port security, improving airport and airline security, and active counterterrorism policies undertaken by national governments. There has never been a nuclear terrorist incident, largely because counterterrorism is, to a degree largely underappreciated, quite effective.

More worrisomely, invasions followed by foreign imposed regime change may make the fight against terrorism more difficult. Invading and occupying other states creates an image of the victor as an imperial power, and inspires individuals around the world to join or support terrorist groups. This was clearly demonstrated in the aftermath of the Iraq War. Though foreign policy should not be a popularity contest, we should avoid engaging in actions which make the problem worse.

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