Baghdad's Security Cooperation Dilemma: Military Assistance to Iraq in 2012 and Beyond

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On August 20, 2012, General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressed hopes for greater U.S.-Iraqi security cooperation (see U.S. hopes for strong military ties with Iraq despite Iran: general.) However, his calls may fall on deaf ears. Although Iraq's lack of military capacity makes military cooperation with the U.S. vital, its close proximity to Iran makes accepting American military aid an almost insurmountable dilemma

From 2003 to 2011, the U.S. military presence in Iraq had a number of responsibilities. In addition to providing internal stability and external defense, U.S. forces had the important job of building and training a new Iraqi military (the Iraqi Security Forces, or ISF) from the ground-up. When the last U.S. forces departed Iraq at the end of 2011, serious capability gaps in the ISF remained. Rebuilding the Iraqi military will remain a decades-long challenge.

One of the only countries that is willing, interested, and most importantly capable of providing the type of military assistance Iraq needs is the United States. But even if Iraqi policymakers recognize the necessity of American aid, being in close proximity to Iran, the Iraqi government remains chained by regional geo-political considerations. Baghdad's policymakers have to maintain some modicum of relations with Tehran, but they cannot ignore the zero-sum state of affairs between Tehran and Washington. It may be argued that U.S.-Iraqi security cooperation remains limited by domestic considerations, and the politically sensitive line that Iraqi policymakers have to walk in seeking closer cooperation with the U.S. However, the deeper, long-run element that will continue to limit U.S.-Iraqi security cooperation will most likely be geo-strategic considerations.

Security Cooperation and the Iraqi Military: Back to the Future?

The history of external military assistance to Iraq can be divided into four phases. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Great Britain created, trained, and maintained the first national Iraqi military. The United States also provided military assistance to Iraq during that period. The 1958 Iraqi revolution transformed that country from a monarchy to a republic and began the second phase in Iraq's military relations with outside power. Soon after the revolution, Iraq's primary military supplier became the Soviet Union, which until 1990 provided most of Iraq's military equipment, training, and advising (though other countries, such as France, also contributed). In the 1980s, the Iraqi military was one of the strongest in the world, benefiting from a rise in oil prices and almost unlimited access to military equipment from abroad. During this period, Iraq developed the fifth largest fleet of combat aircraft. External assistance was in large part made possible by Iraq's decision to take on the post-1979 regime in Tehran, a revolutionary government whose ideology of 'neither east nor west' left it feared or despised by nearly all.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 began the third phase, one marked by economic and military isolation. Not only was Iraq's military defeated in the 1991 Gulf War, but the sanctions that resulted from its invasion led to a slow deterioration in its military capacity, as Iraq was barred from procuring outside military support. In the fourth and final phase, Saddam's military was destroyed in 2003 by the U.S./UK-led military intervention. As in the first phase, in this period, between 2003 and 2011 it has largely been the responsibility of the U.S. and the UK (as well as other NATO allies) to retrain a new and demographically more representative military. Training an entirely new military under the threat of fire was not an easy task. Progress was slow, and the task remained incomplete when the last foreign

troops departed Iraq in 2011. The question remains, who will Iraq seek greater military relations in the future?

Baghdad's Modern-Day Military Dilemmas

Prior to 2003, Iraq was a Sunni-dominated dictatorship, a strong but repressive state. The post-2003 U.S. presence in Iraq tried to create an American-style balance of power between the political institutions (i.e. between the legislative and judiciary branches) and between Iraq's various ethnic groups. This had an impact on several fronts. First and foremost, it created a weak central governance structure, contributing to greater internal instability. It also resulted in a government and military officer corps which was dominated by Iraq's Shia community – which makes up about two-thirds of Iraq's population. The Shia community was previously marginalized under the Saddam regime. The domestic composition of Iraq's political landscape had impact on the country's foreign policy. The Shia cultural links between Iran and Iraq enabled greater political ties between the two, something unimaginable in decades past when the two countries were at each other's throats.

Iraq's status in the international political landscape has changed completely during that decade, more so than Iran. The former was presented with an opportunity to re-enter the international stage: its sanctions were lifted, outstanding debts were forgiven. There was an international recognition that not only was Iraq no longer a threat in the post-2003 world, but it was so weak that it needed outside help. Meanwhile, Iran's status in the geopolitical landscape took a different turn. Although displaying isolated instances of pragmatism, Tehran has largely stayed on a radical course in its foreign policy, not least of which include its pursuit of full mastery of the nuclear cycle. The result has been an ever increasing economic, military, and diplomatic isolation.

Schizophrenic in Baghdad

Today, Iraq does not face any ideal foreign policy options. It is and will always be Iran's neighbor. As a smaller country that is in its nascent stages of rebuilding, Iraq will not risk aggravating its relationship with a much large neighbor that can undermine its interests (overtly or covertly.) However, Tehran's revolutionary rhetoric, combined with its apparent ambitions to build a nuclear weapons capability, means that if Iraq caters to Iran, it is siding with a pariah state. This is not in Iraq's interest if it wants to reintegrate into the international community. Meanwhile, a third set of actors in the Gulf region, the Arab Gulf countries, are paranoid about a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. These states seem to have given up on incorporating Iraq into the main Gulf Arab bloc, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Even in an ideal world, where Iraq is run by technocrats (i.e. people who are in a position of power because of merit, not corruption or religious or ethnic affiliation), the foreign policy dilemmas that they will face may seem insurmountable.

Given the challenges inherent in Iraq's foreign policy, policymakers will likely continue to send mixed messages to the United States, Iran, and the international community. Baghdad will seek American political, military, and economic to reintegrate into the international community, rebuild the Iraqi armed forces, and grow its economy. At the same time, Iraq will not always side with U.S. policies on Iran, not because of ideological differences, but because of geostrategic realities. (Evidence the recent controversy over allegations of Iraq helping Iran evade economic sanctions.) Washington's best long-term strategy in Iraq is to seek economic, political, security, and other forms of cooperation while recognizing the difficulties in Baghdad, as Iraqi policymakers attempt to rebuild a country caught up in a larger geopolitical tug-of-war.

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