More than a Family Business: US Military Interventions in Iraq in Perspective

Within slightly less than three years of the withdrawal of the last US combat troops, America is carrying out a new military campaign in Iraq. Once again the Persian Gulf country tragically makes the headlines because of its unstable government and the risk of collapse of the entire state under pressure from extremist insurgents.

We're often tempted to think of US military efforts in Iraq as a sort of family business – the Bush dynasty and a bunch of ideologues against Saddam Hussein. As a matter of fact, however, since the end of the Cold War no American president has found a way to avoid military interventions in Mesopotamia. Massive oil reserves, a fragmented ethnic and sectarian composition, a bad neighborhood, and a troubled history have made Iraq a focal point of instability in the Middle East as well as a source of concern for a global power such as the United States.

This article sketches out the key features of post-Cold War US military interventions in Iraq, with special attention to the broad geopolitical and diplomatic framework that has characterized American policy towards the area. The purpose is to examine how the current crisis fits into the larger picture, and how past experiences can be relevant to policymakers now engaged in planning and implementing a new military campaign in the region.

The Gulf War of 1991: Military triumph, opportunity lost

Saddam Hussein's invasion and takeover of Kuwait in August 1990 not only posed a challenge to the vision of a liberal "new order" in international affairs promoted by Washington in the aftermath of the Cold War, but also threatened the long-standing US interest in the stability and free flow of oil supplies from the Persian Gulf region. Thus, the crisis commanded an unprecedented, massive deployment of US troops in the Gulf, and set President George H.W. Bush on a war footing. The process through which the first Bush administration assembled a large and comprehensive international coalition and won UN Security Council approval for the implementation of a military solution to the Gulf crisis was a masterpiece in diplomacy, and the swift and amazing success of the US led military campaign against Iraq put the US in a position of unquestioned authority within the international community. A prolonged US-led strategic air campaign degraded Iraq's military infrastructure as well as Iraqi units deployed to Kuwait. Then, a massive outflanking ground offensive managed to liberate the tiny oil monarchy in a matter of days (Freedman and Karsh, 1993; Gordon and Trainor, 1995). These impressive diplomatic and military achievements, however, were not supported by a coherent long-term vision for Iraq and the region.

As seen from the White House, the outcome of the crisis should have been a new balance of power in the Gulf. On the one hand, Iraq's military power should be downgraded, and Iraq should be deprived of any non-conventional military capability – in order not to represent a threat to the US-friendly, oil-exporting Gulf Arab monarchies. On the other hand, Iraq should remain strong enough to serve as a bulwark against Iranian influence in the region (Haass, 2009: 129-131; Schwarzkopf with Petre, 1992: 543-544; Baker with De Frank, 1995: 410). It is open to question whether both objectives could be achieved. Yet the first Bush administration ended up believing it could do it. The White House calculated that if the US military machine inflicted a blatant defeat on Saddam, someone within his own regime, possibly someone from the military, would raise against him – as suggested by the president himself during the Gulf War (Baker with De Frank, 1995: 438-442; Bush, 1991a). Thus, as argued by Gideon Rose (2010: 218),

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"the administration decided that hope could indeed be a plan." Kuwait would be liberated through a massive military intervention. In the process, Saddam's power base would be destroyed, and the US would wait for his regime to collapse (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998: 433).

In the aftermath of the smooth liberation of Kuwait it became clear that the first Bush administration was endowed with enormous political capital that could be invested not only in the pursuit of a more stable and inclusive security arrangement in the Gulf, but also in the advancement toward the solution of many of the Middle East's most intractable conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. Bush and his advisers, however, decided to focus on bringing Iraq "back into the family of nations" (Bush, 1991b), which, in retrospect, meant waiting for the optimist scenario imagined in the run up to operation *Desert Storm* to unfold. As it became clear that Saddam would not be overthrown in the short term, however, Bush and his advisers were forced to imagine and gather international support around continuous adjustments to their plan. The administration refused to commit to a policy of regime change, yet promoted an intrusive system of international inspections to monitor the dismantlement of the Baghdad regime's non-conventional arsenal, and refused to normalize relations with Iraq and lift the sanctions regime that had been put in place during the crisis as long as Saddam Hussein remained in power. The White House thus wasted most of its political and diplomatic capital on an effort to transform Iraq according to its wishes, at the expenses of exploiting in full the opportunities to negotiate a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East. As a paradoxical result, by the time the George H.W. Bush administration left office, in January 1993, Saddam was still in power in Iraq, the Middle East remained an unstable region and a large and visible US military presence was required to "contain" the Baghdad regime and ensure the stability of the Gulf area.

Clinton in Iraq: frustrating containment, ineffective interventions

George H.W. Bush's successor, President Bill Clinton, was not fond of major foreign policy commitments. Furthermore, the new President and his top military advisers were rather reluctant to deploy US troops overseas. (A trend that became even more remarkable in the aftermath of a military débâcle in Somalia in October 1993.) As far as the Persian Gulf was concerned, however, the Clinton administration decided to expand the policy it had inherited. The result was a "Dual Containment" approach, intended to use American power to prevent both Iraq and Iran from threatening the stability of the Persian Gulf and to ensure the free flow of oil in the area (Indyk, 1993; Lake, 1994). Under pressure from hawkish constituencies in Washington, the Clinton administration even ended up endorsing the idea that regime change in Iraq could be a legitimate objective of US policy (Chollet and Goldgeier, 2008: 199). Thus, in the 1990s US policy toward the Gulf became increasingly based on the assumption of American primacy as well as on the idea that the US had the power and the authority to marginalize those "rogue regimes" that didn't fit into Washington's vision of world order. This new strategy lumped together bitter enemies such as Iran and Iraq instead of exploiting rivalries or trying to ease tension, and progressively eroded international support for US policy in the region. Furthermore, in spite of Clinton's reluctance to engage in military commitments, it required an intermittent but open-ended US-led military effort to "keep Saddam in a box" through the use of air power – which at times resulted in larger scale but strategically ineffective campaigns such as operation *Desert Fox* in December 1998 (Chollet and Goldgeier, 2008: 201-204; Gordon and Trainor, 1995: 460-461; Haley, 2006: 87-88). The result, once again, was an incremental US military and political commitment to the security and stability of the Persian Gulf which was not actually followed by a reduction of regional tensions.

The Iraq War: the zenith of hubris

By the late 1990s the policy of containment toward the Gulf had become increasingly frustrating. It was definitely shattered by the tragedy of 9/11. A strong interest in dealing with Saddam Hussein had emerged since the inauguration of the presidency of George W. Bush, and the case for invading Iraq was actually introduced in the immediate aftermath of 9/11(Woodward, 2004: 9-10, 24-25). Al-Qaida's appalling and unjustifiable terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., were met by virtually unanimous condemnation on the part of the international community. The American leadership was in a position to assemble, through a shrewd use of diplomacy, a strong and comprehensive international coalition – as the George H.W. Bush administration had done a decade earlier – and use US power and authority to counter the challenge of terrorism and create a more stable and sustainable order in the Middle East (Alfonsi, 2007: 384-385; Borgwardt, 2005: 11; Ikenberry, 2001; Packer, 2005: 385-395).

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Confident in their understanding of America's exceptional role in international relations as well as in the country's unchallenged military power, however, George W. Bush and his advisers opted for the unilateral pursuit of a "Global War on Terror" (Bruni, 2001; Dueck, 2004: 527-530; Suskind, 2004; White House, 2002; Woodward, 2004: 85-88). Thus, the "GWOT" became an opportunity to settle the long-standing conflict between the US and Iraq on Washington's terms, by invading the country and overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein. At first this was on the basis of an unlikely connection between the Baghdad regime and Osama bin Laden's terrorist network, which appeared ungrounded even before the invasion, and then on the basis of very weak evidence concerning Iraq's covert pursuit of non conventional weapons – which turned out to be false in the aftermath of the invasion.

As it had been the case in 1991, the performance of the US light and lethal military units employed in the invasion of Iraq was outstanding (Boot, 2003; Keegan, 2005; Murray and Scales, 2003). Although Saddam's regime didn't collapse on its own, Baghdad did quickly fall under pressure from the US Army and Marine forces. This time, however, contrary to expectations, the main enemy turned out to be a combination of irregular militias, rather than conventional Iraqi army units (Gordon and Trainor, 2007: 424-427, 478). The post-conflict phase turned out to be quite different than expected as well. According to the plan, American forces should be engaged in the reconstruction effort for a very short period, yet as soon as the occupation authorities set up office in Iraq it became clear that more troops would be needed to reestablish order throughout the country (Gordon and Trainor, 2007: 531-533). A combination of lack of planning for the post-conflict phase and short-sighted decisions in the early stages of the American occupation – such as the disbandment of what remained of the Iraqi army and the administrative structure of Saddam's regime – contributed to set in motion a spiral of violence and then a civil war which soon assumed an inter-sectarian dimension (Gordon and Trainor, 2007: XXXIV, 597; Rose, 2010: 248-251). Although the President and his top foreign policy advisers persistently maintained that a smooth transition to a new Iraqi government capable of sustaining itself was possible, American forces found themselves stuck in a costly and bloody effort to prevent Iraq from collapsing. In early 2007 George W. Bush himself was forced to recognize this when he announced a new approach based on a "surge" in American troop numbers and an explicit commitment to the stabilization of the country (Bush, 2007; Ricks, 2010: 122-124; Rose, 2010: 271-272). The surge and a status of forces agreement negotiated in the last phases of the second Bush presidency created the basis for the progressive withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq which was successfully completed under the administration of President Barack Obama by December 2011 (Gordon and Trainor, 2012: 690-693).

The prospects of a new US military campaign in Iraq

By the time the Obama administration took office in January 2009, the project that saw the invasion of Iraq as a critical way station along the path of transforming the political and strategic balance in the Middle East had been abandoned. Even during the last phases of the American occupation, the main preoccupation of top military and political officials within the Beltway had become the preservation of a relatively stable and united Iraq, rather than the spread of democracy (Ricks, 2010: 327-334). Even that more limited objective, however, has proved elusive. The generation of leaders that has ruled Iraq since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime has failed to develop truly democratic and inclusive political institutions. As a result, instability and violence have become a persistent feature of Iraq's politics, and the country has remained a fertile ground for extremist militias and terrorist networks ("Sovereignty without security," 2011; "The slow road back," 2013).

Confronted in the summer of 2014 with the prospect of a massive humanitarian crisis and the risk of a collapse of the Iraqi state, the Obama administration opted for a new military effort intended to "degrade and ultimately destroy" Islamic State (a.k.a. ISIS/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIL/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), a brutal religious extremist and terrorist movement currently operating with alarming success across Syria and Iraq (Salman and Coles, 2014; "Two Arab countries fall apart," 2014). As recently announced by the President, the strategy to achieve this objective rests on four main points: a US-led air campaign, support for local forces capable of engaging Islamic State on the ground, a more sustained and comprehensive counter-terrorism effort, and humanitarian assistance to civilians threatened by the militants (Obama, 2014).

This strategy appears to reflect some lessons learned from the experiences of Obama's predecessors. Contrary to George W. Bush and his foreign policy team, Obama and his advisers appear to have resisted the temptation to

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engage in a new military campaign based on rigidly ideological and excessively optimistic assumptions (Georgy, 2014). They also seem to have understood the importance of using force within the framework of large and comprehensive multinational coalitions, a pattern followed with remarkable results by the George H.W. Bush administration during the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 (Kerry, 2014; Packer, 2014; Stewart and Ponthus, 2014). Finally, Obama and his advisers seem to share the Clinton administration's reluctance to deploy combat troops overseas and its preference for relying on air power and local ground forces (Mason, 2014). This is an approach already tested with some success during the crisis in Libya in 2011 (O'Hanlon, 2011), and appears to be a good way of minimizing the risk of getting bogged into quagmires. The experience of the Gulf War of 1991 and US military interventions in the 1990s, however, suggests that military power is most effective when deployed and used overwhelmingly, while the mere reliance on air power hardly produces decisive victories and often leads to frustrating incremental engagements.

Given the fact that Iraq's security forces lack the capabilities to effectively withstand the Islamic State offensive without external support (al-Sinjary, 2014; Fraiman, Long and Talmadge, 2014), in the short term a sustained, US-led, multinational military effort appears the only way to prevent Iraq from collapsing and to reestablish a modicum of security and stability in the country. From a longer term perspective, however, US leaders – and, for that matter, their coalition partners as well – must not limit their concerns to the military balance on the ground in Iraq or to the political situation in Baghdad. They must also pay attention to the broader regional strategic framework. As the administration acknowledges, the crises in Syria and Iraq are strongly connected (Obama, 2014; Wright, 2014). The persistence of conflicts, moreover, has turned the two countries into the theater of a proxy confrontation between the region's major political and economic actors – the Persian Gulf's oil monarchies and Iran (Abouzeid, 2014; Crooke, 2014; Nabli, 2014: 120-121; Stephens, 2014). In fact, it may be argued that efforts to promote better relations among those powers is a *sine qua non* of any serious plan to achieve a long term stabilization of both Iraq and Syria. Thus, as it plunges into a new military effort to improve stability in the area, the US must also expand efforts to encourage greater mutual understanding and improved cooperation among the region's most influential actors. Short of that, any US or Western military intervention appears condemned to end up into either a short term and almost irrelevant fix or an open-ended quagmire.

Conclusion

The first three post-Cold War American presidents expressed different interpretations of America's role in international affairs, and adopted different operational styles. Their outlook was nonetheless remarkably similar as far as their responses to the challenges coming from Iraq and the Persian Gulf are concerned. They all saw America's unchallenged military power as the most effective instrument in dealing with instability in that region, though they were not ready to fully acknowledge the implications and risks of its use. They all eventually came to believe, to the point of deluding themselves, that reliance on that awesome tool could spare them from confronting difficult political and strategic dilemmas. In the process, they all consistently wasted precious opportunities to promote a more inclusive, stable, and sustainable regional order. The current crisis in Iraq is a new opportunity to foster greater cooperation among the Gulf's powers on the basis of their common interest in containing – and possibly defeating – aggression-prone forms of religious extremism in the region. This time, US leaders must do their best to seize it.

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