The Pinprick President

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President Obama needs to go to war with the Islamic State, or it will go to war with America.

Make no mistake, this is no pinprick. President Barack Obama's decision on Aug. 7 to authorize force in Iraq is a watershed moment for this administration. Or, rather, it should be. That's not to say it's a moment or a mission the president particularly enjoys. Indeed, his reluctance to engage was palpable from the first minutes of his speech, when he made his position clear: "As commander in chief, I will not allow the United States to be dragged into another war in Iraq."

Well, another American war in Iraq is exactly what is going to happen, sooner or later. The president has already slowed the Islamic State's (IS) momentum with his strikes near Erbil, but it is not clear if this is a one-time response or the beginning of a campaign to first contain, then destroy the jihadist force. The sooner we begin such a campaign, the less complicated our involvement will be, the greater our chances of success, and the more likely IS's forces can be defeated before they tear apart the region completely -- and directly threaten America.

The stakes in the struggle with IS are clear. As the president himself said in June, if the Islamic State is allowed a permanent foothold in the center of the Middle East, core American interests are at risk: protecting the region and ultimately America and the West from another wave of 9/11-like terror; keeping oil shipments flowing from the Persian Gulf; and protecting our allies and friends increasingly threatened by the jihadist advance -- the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Turkey, Jordan, Gulf allies, and Israel.

President Obama's strategy has three core elements: 1) counterterrorism, and specifically augmenting our campaign against al Qaeda to focus more on the Islamic State; 2) U.S. military actions to strike IS when its military crosses U.S. "red lines" -- which so far have been limited, officially, to specific humanitarian catastrophes or endangered American personnel, or possibly key infrastructure; and 3) the broader campaign to provide limited military and intelligence support both to a more inclusive Iraqi government that can undermine IS's appeal to Sunni

Arabs and to the moderate Syrian resistance.

What President Obama has gotten right so far is the third element. The political transition now underway in Iraq is the anchor for any broader campaign to eradicate IS. The radical jihadists' rapid advance would not have been possible without support from a disaffected and often abused Iraqi Sunni Arab population; clearing IS out of those Sunni Arab areas will require a sophisticated counterinsurgency campaign as effective as the U.S. military's in 2007 to 2008, but without large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground. The nomination of a Haider al-Abadi, a moderate Shiite politician, as prime minister-designate, and Nouri al-Maliki's resignation, are an important steps forward, and ones facilitated by the Obama administration.

But there are two problems with this strategy. Given Obama's ambivalent views on the efficacy of military force, and America's tortured history in Iraq, he downplays his strategy's second element: direct U.S. military actions. Despite the president's oft-stated belief that there is never any military solution to, well, almost anything, IS's advances into Kurdish and Shiite Arab areas of Iraq are not a political or social phenomenon but a military achievement. And one cannot confront a classic military strategy with diplomatic niceties.

The Islamic State's shocking success is a result of good tactics: To avoid major conflicts on all fronts, it seeks to neutralize one foe after another -- overrunning Syrian Army divisional and brigade bases a few weeks ago, then turning to the Kurdish forces in the north. The next target may be a major push to isolate Baghdad. (The resulting mayhem of which would be intentional, provoking Shiite militias and Iran, with the aim of triggering a wider Sunni-Shiite conflagration.)

With each military success, IS becomes stronger, gains more territory and strategic resources (weapons stocks, dams, electrical generation capacity, oil fields, refineries, and transportation nodes are particularly targeted), and wins more adherents. Meanwhile, its opponents -- the "local boots on the ground" that President Obama has made clear are responsible for fighting and winning this war alone -- grow weaker and more demoralized. Thus the importance of airstrikes to stop IS advances and facilitate U.S. and allied countries' arming of the Peshmerga.

Air power has real limitations when applied in a counterinsurgency. But it can dramatically change the odds in favor of besieged allies on the ground when applied against an enemy like the Islamic State, which is advancing in motorized columns in open areas, without the protection or shelter afforded by a friendly population. We have seen air power succeed under similar circumstances in Libya in 2011, northern Iraq in 2003 and 1991, Kosovo in 1999, Bosnia in 1995, and even in Vietnam in 1972.

But using this tool would require the president to broaden the rationale for bombing missions beyond simply protecting Americans or saving the beleaguered Yazidis in Sinjar. Indeed, to move the needle from a pinprick to something of lasting strategic value, the president must overcome his aversion to using force and realize that, to paraphrase his West Point speech this spring, some problems actually are nails that America's military can and should hammer.

The second problem with his strategy concerns the longer-term third element. Given that U.S. policy is to deny IS a foothold in the region, the Iraqi political morass must be improved enough to enable an effective counterinsurgency strategy. Maliki's resignation and Abadi's nomination are important first steps towards an effective, inclusive government that can win over Kurds and Sunni Arabs, and motivate a frustrated army. But, given the vagaries of Iraqi politics, these positive steps are only a beginning.

Furthermore, there is IS's strength to contend with. This begins with its military prowess and ruthless rule over its conquered populations, but also includes its ideology -- specifically, its unique (even by al Qaeda standards) focus on a war to the death between Sunni and Shiite Islam. While President Obama's emphasis on regional diplomatic efforts to complement any counterinsurgency is on target, IS's appeal -- if not to Sunni governments, then to Sunni

populations -- is a complicating factor.

In the case of small-scale, relatively isolated terrorist movements like that in the Philippines, any failure of local allies in combating them becomes something we regret but can live with, as the direct effect on U.S. vital interests is minimal. But given IS's clearly elucidated threat to America and its growing quasi-state presence, living with that problem is not acceptable. The United States cannot simply sit back and wait for Iraq to solve its political problems. The administration must coordinate rapidly and effectively with any and all potential allies in the struggle against IS, including arming and training the Peshmerga, Sunni tribes, moderate Syrian insurgents, and the Iraqi Army, by providing both intelligence and air power.

But it is not clear from either his announcements or actions whether President Obama is ready to expand his strategy to include much more robust military action against the Islamic State, or to truly partner with those willing to do the fighting on the ground against it. Apart from his own innate reluctance to use military force, his supporters cite an increasingly isolationist U.S. public opinion. The American people indeed are leery of new commitments, but their reluctance has largely been generated by bloody, inconclusive major land combat with murky goals in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The current intervention against the Islamic State is not what is being contemplated here, but rather air operations similar to those taken in the campaigns cited above, such as Kosovo and Bosnia, along with much stronger diplomatic, political, logistical, and advisory efforts.

Do military actions of this sort open the door to a "slippery slope" that could lead to new Iraqs and Vietnams? In theory, yes. But Barack Obama is the least likely president to make a mistake of this sort. Moreover, the reality doesn't equal the fear: Over scores of deployments and combat operations since 1945, the United States has rarely headed down the slippery slope. And let's be clear: The Iraq adventure under President George W. Bush was not a slippery slope but an intentional regime-change strategy gone wrong.

What the president thus must do is to convince first himself and then the American people that our key interests -- oil supply, protecting the homeland and allies from terrorism -- are at stake so long as the Islamic State is rampant. Americans need to understand that if the United States does not stop them, no one will.

The Obama administration just in the past few months has routinely conducted military operations against al Qaeda affiliates in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya -- without incurring the anger of the American public. Why should it not be equally aggressive against the most dangerous of these al Qaeda-inspired groups? If the president's answer is still that Job No. 1 is to avoid more Iraq debacles, then we will have much to answer for, not only today to the innocent people terrorized by the Islamic State, but tomorrow to Americans who will surely be terrorized by these jihadists if we do not stop them now.

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