

Air Power and U.S. Policy toward Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Reliance on air power has become the defining characteristic of the "American Way of War" in the post-Cold War world of the 1990s. Prior to the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, U.S. Air Force weapons and tactics were optimized for an air war in Central Europe, taking into account the weather and terrain of that region, and Soviet weapons and tactics. Low-altitude daylight strikes were the norm for fighter pilots, and the weaponry consisted of "dumb" bombs or tactical nuclear weapons. Since the 1991 Gulf War, however, U.S. Air Force weapons and tactics have changed dramatically.

In the beginning of the 1991 Gulf War, low altitude attacks were the norm, though this led to unacceptable losses to ground-based air defenses. As a result, the air force switched to delivering munitions from medium to high altitudes, resulting in a drop-off in losses.

The change in flight altitude profiles required a change from the use of "dumb bombs" to "smart bombs," which are more effective at higher altitudes. This new reliance on precision-guided munitions continues today.

The accuracy of cruise missiles launched from ships and B-52 bombers has also dramatically improved since 1991. This increased accuracy was demonstrated in attacks in Afghanistan and Sudan in August 1998.

The emergence of the air force as a force that operates primarily at night was confirmed during Operations Desert Fox (Iraq, December 1998) and Allied Force (Yugoslavia, March–June 1999). Thanks to modern technology, the air force can operate as effectively at night as during the day. Stealth technology has likewise revolutionized warfare. Though stealth is not invincible, it seems obvious that in the coming years the air force will continue to become increasingly stealthy and reliant on night attacks.

The safety record of the forces operating over Iraq since Desert Storm has been astounding. Coalition aircraft have flown more than 180,000 sorties over Iraq in the last nine years, with only one loss (a French Mirage), due to mechanical malfunction. It must not be forgotten, however, that although the Iraqis are equipped with outdated weapons and insufficient training, they continue to prove themselves determined adversaries. The United States must not underestimate them.

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General Value of Air Power. In Iraq and elsewhere, the United States has come to rely on air power, to the exclusion of other military means, as an instrument of foreign policy. Air power, however, is often more effective when used in conjunction with other military means, and such self-imposed restrictions are often seen by adversaries as a sign of American weakness.

Historically, air power was used as a means of destroying the enemy on the battlefield. Today, air power is used not to defeat the enemy, but to gain concessions from him. In this capacity, the most effective use of air power is to hit the adversary's center of gravity. Yet hitting these centers of gravity does not guarantee success.

Air power is often used when American commitment to an objective is not very great, since Washington knows that

the use of air power often entails relatively few risks. This is due to the fact that America's technological advantage leaves many adversaries unable to effectively counter U.S. air power, making it easier to wrest concessions from them. However, the low risk and cost of using air power often causes the United States to avoid thinking of the long-term consequences of its actions and formulating long-term strategies.

Political Effects of Air Power in Iraq and on Saddam's Regime. Air strikes in Iraq have proven most effective when Iraqi centers of gravity (i.e., Saddam's power elite, specifically military officers, Ba'th party officials, and tribal leaders who benefit from the regime) are struck. When air power is used to attack these, Saddam can be coerced.

Another attribute of air power is Iraq's inability to hit back effectively, which results in a loss of face for Saddam. To be steadily humiliated on a daily basis is very frustrating to him, causes him to make poor decisions, and diminishes his stature in Iraq.

Saddam's Countermeasures. One countermeasure Saddam has employed involves his efforts to hinder U.S. access to basing in the region. He has tried to attack or criticize neighboring states that have hosted U.S. or allied forces. Fortunately this tactic has boomeranged, and threats and insults against Iraq's neighbors have caused them to welcome the presence of the United States.

A second countermeasure that Saddam has employed is offering rewards to anyone who captures a U.S. pilot. While it is unclear whether the capture of a pilot would significantly enhance Baghdad's bargaining power, the loss of a plane would be a symbolic victory for Iraq.

Saddam's best counter is to avoid air power challenges and to counter in other areas, such as terminating weapons inspections. It is difficult to force inspection compliance through the use of air power, and Saddam has figured this out.

The Dangers of Current U.S. Policy. There was never an intention in 1991 to continue air strikes through 1999 and there is no long-term strategy guiding this policy of repeated strikes.

It is uncertain as to whether the United States has any type of propaganda-response plan in the event that Saddam shoots down a U.S. plane. Moreover, efforts to contain Iraq have benefited from blunders and missteps by Saddam. Were Saddam to make a pretense of compliance with United Nations resolutions, international support for containment could evaporate.

Air power has little role to play in solving the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) problem in Iraq. The use of air power to eliminate WMDs would require superb intelligence and frequent air strikes. Should Saddam decide to move north again as he did in 1996 it is questionable as to whether the United States would be able to respond effectively. And, in the event that the Iraqi opposition were to undertake military operations against Baghdad, the United States would most certainly be called upon to use air power in support.

Regardless of these scenarios, it appears that the mystique of air power is gone, and it will be more difficult for the United States to achieve its goals in the next military campaign if it relies solely on air power. Therefore the United States needs to make clear that future military operations will use the full range of its military capabilities—and not just air power.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Erika Reff.

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