

Air Power against Iraq:

An Assessment

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Brief Analysis

Last week's Operation Desert Fox by British and American air forces against Iraq was more or less comparable in size to Operation Deliberate Force against Serbian forces in 1995. The 1991 Operation Desert Storm was much larger, but it included a tremendous effort against Iraqi ground forces that was not repeated in Desert Fox. Furthermore, Desert Fox benefited from seven years of collection and analysis of intelligence about Iraq, which allowed American decision makers to choose their targets more precisely.

> An interesting continuity between Desert Storm and Desert Fox can be seen in the constraints that the United States put on itself. One is the time of day when operations were conducted. In Desert Storm, after an F-16 was lost over Baghdad during a daylight operation in the first days of the war, all subsequent missions against strategic targets were flown at night. Likewise, in Desert Fox, all missions were flown at night. The U.S. forces could have accomplished more in daylight, yet things might have looked very different in terms of human and material cost. Another similarity is the sensitivity to both military and civilian casualties. This high degree of sensitivity is extremely problematic. The U.S. sensitivity about its own casualties restricts the military to using only a narrow band of military force, rather than the full range of capabilities for which U.S. forces are designed.

Desert Fox was ostensibly devoted to degrading Saddam's weapons of mass of destruction (WMD) and his capabilities to threaten his neighbors. Yet, it would appear that some of its goals were never explicitly acknowledged, namely, shaking the Iraqi regime's hold on power and restoring American prestige and credibility. The unwillingness to be straightforward about the operation's real objectives caused a strategic self-deception that must have confused those who had to plan and implement such a daring military campaign.

> The priority given to avoiding Iraqi casualties caused some oddities. The hidden U.S. objective to destabilize Saddam Husayn's power base could be successfully achieved by killing the right people in Iraq, like the Republican Guards, the Special Security Organization, and ultimately Saddam himself. The direct and unavoidable linkage between achieving such objectives and causing casualties should be realistically recognized.

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Desert Fox was beset by the contradictions that characterize U.S. policy toward Iraq. With the containment regime tottering, and without domestic support for a major ground war to unseat Saddam, policymakers had to settle for half-measures (i.e., degrading Iraq's military capabilities) that probably would never yield more than partial results. Likewise, policymakers were understandably reluctant to admit that one of the objectives of the operation was to destabilize Saddam's regime, as this goal may not be attainable, and such an admission might further undermine international support for sanctions -- the main remaining cornerstone of containment.

> U.S. and British forces apparently did not go after Iraq's chemical and biological weapon production capability, which is constantly shuttled around the country in civilian vehicles and is therefore almost impossible to find. Rather, those forces focused on destroying the means for delivering these weapons: missile production facilities, which are located at large, fixed sites; L-29 trainer aircraft modified to deliver biological agents; and helicopters. The full damage done to the targets still remains to be seen and will depend on whether Iraq had sufficient time to evacuate personnel and materiel from these sites. Yet, we know from World War II and Desert Storm that many types of machine tools and heavy manufacturing equipment can survive bombing attacks and may be recovered and pressed into service again, though they may not function as reliably as before.

Desert Fox highlighted the fact that the U.S. military's force structure still reflects Cold War planning assumptions and requirements that are inappropriate for current post-Cold War realities. Although American society is increasingly casualty sensitive, the military still relies heavily on manned aerial platforms such as combat aircraft, and it lacks sufficient numbers of cruise missiles. Furthermore, the refusal of allies to allow U.S. forces to use airbases for combat, owing to political sensitivities, has forced the United States to rely increasingly on carrier airpower at a time when it has made major cuts in naval carrier aviation. Finally, the military lacks weapons capable of dealing with emerging threats, such as special weapons capable of destroying WMD-related targets without endangering nearby civilians. The United States thus needs to reorder its defense priorities, investing more in special weapons for dealing with WMD, procuring more land-attack cruise missiles, strengthening naval aviation, and developing a mindset that would allow for the use of systems -- such as the B-2 stealth bomber -- that the United States has avoided using to date in conventional military scenarios.

> In the aftermath of Desert Fox, the United States has two possible options with regard to Iraq. The first option is continuing containment with the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) or some similar organization. The return of UNSCOM as currently constituted seems unlikely for now. Some changes may be necessary to make the organization politically acceptable to Iraq's allies in the UN Security Council, though this could boomerang on the United States. Washington should agree to such changes only in return for a UN resolution that ensures that Iraqi oil revenues continue to flow into a UN escrow account for as long as Saddam remains in power. Yet, even such an alternative arrangement might require occasional military strikes in support of inspections or other violations of American "red lines." The second option is containment without an arms monitoring regime, in which sanctions are the main pillar of U.S. policy, supplemented by occasional missile and air strikes on Iraqi WMD-related targets when the United States obtains actionable intelligence indicating Iraqi efforts to rebuild or deploy WMD. Yet, it is an open question whether the United States will be able to obtain sufficiently reliable and accurate intelligence on a consistent basis, and whether a policy predicated on occasional military strikes is politically sustainable.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Sulay Ozturk.

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