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THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND STATECRAFT

OF

SADDAM HUSSEIN

CORE COURSE (1) RESEARCH PAPER

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THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY AND STATECRAFT

OF

SADDAM HUSSEIN

INTRODUCTION

Having confronted his enemy on the battlefield, General Norman Schwarzkopf concluded that, "As far as Saddam Hussein being a great military strategist, he is neither a great military strategist, nor is he schooled in the operational arts, nor is he a tactician, nor is he a general, nor is he a soldier. Other than that he's a great military man."¹ If Saddam is judged solely by his performance in Desert Storm, then perhaps Schwarzkopf's appraisal is accurate. However, if Saddam is judged by his actions up to and including his invasion of Kuwait, then his actions reveal after a fashion the intellectual functions necessary to plan and implement a national

¹ Jonathan Gration, "Saddam Hussein: A Disciple of al-Clausewitz?", essay, National War College, 1992, p. 8

security strategy This paper supports this premise and provides a description and analysis of Saddam's national security strategy and statecraft as revealed in his invasion of Kuwait

National Interests and Threats

History has shown that the national interests of a country ruled by a brutal military dictator are sometimes inextricably tied to that dictator's personal interests It was true of a united Germany under Hitler and also true of Iraq under Saddam Hussein He saw defense of the homeland and economic well-being as Iraq's primary national interests which were connected to his own personal and political survival Successful provision for the nation's interests would also serve to keep him in power

The main threats to these interests confronting Saddam came from Israel and Kuwait Israel had previously destroyed an Iraqi nuclear facility which sent the clear message to Saddam that he was subject to attack at any time should circumstances warrant it Would Israel attack more recently constructed research facilities? Furthermore, with the return of thousands of Soviet Jews to the motherland after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, would Israel strike out on new ventures in the Gulf region perhaps? These were questions that Saddam worried about and for which he sought answers

Kuwait presented a threat to Iraq for several reasons Iraq was virtually bankrupt after its eight-year war with Iran and in need of huge sums of money for reconstruction Conservative

estimates place the cost at \$230 billion and a time requirement of twenty years² Saddam also needed OPEC solidarity in order to control oil production and therefore maximize revenues This would help solve his economic dilemma Along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait refused to comply Nor would Kuwait forgive Saddam's \$10 billion war debt or give him an additional \$10 billion that he requested Adding to Saddam's frustration Kuwait refused to either lease or sell two small islands off its coast to Saddam These were critical to ensure that he had open access to the Gulf Saddam believed that his brother Arab nations owed him much for the treasure and blood Iraq sacrificed to oppose the threat of radical Islamic fundamentalism in the Gulf Kuwait's actions were viewed as economic warfare³

Balance of Power and Strategy

Saddam knew that economically he could not support another protracted war However, he still possessed a well-equipped standing army which had the advantage of recent real-war experience Since Iran had refused to deal directly with Iraq at the Geneva negotiation, there had been no clear declaration of victory Therefore, Saddam had not down-sized his forces but rather kept them mobilized Kuwait, although armed with some sophisticated weaponry which may have served more for prestige than real power, would be no match for Saddam's war machine

² Lawrence Freedman and Efram Karsh, The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991 Diplomacy and War in the New World Order, (Princeton Princeton University Press, 1993), p 39

³ Freedman and Karsh, p 46

Historically, Kuwait's power resided in its association with superpowers⁴ Great Britain and the US had both supported Kuwait previously Saddam had used threats to influence Kuwait to distance itself from the US thereby creating a window of opportunity, isolation, which he could exploit

Saddam also knew that his soldiers would be willing to fight a winnable war A cheap victory would be good for morale and his own prestige Kuwait had relied more on its ability to buy its way out of trouble rather than depend on the will of its people to support a war No strong resistance could be offered by such a nation

These factors, a formidable war machine, Kuwait isolation, and willingness to fight, tipped the scales of power in Saddam's favor so that use of the military instrument to achieve national security objectives was inevitable

Opportunities, Constraints and Objectives

As Saddam surveyed the sentiments of his people and the challenges in the international context, he had reason to be anxious Domestically he had not followed through with his promise to reconstruct Iraq's economic infrastructure He had returned part of the military force to civilian life where there were no jobs He failed to obtain a clear declaration of victory at the UN-orchestrated peace talks in Geneva which robbed Iraq of a much-needed opportunity to

⁴ Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf, (New York Times Books, 1990), p 215

celebrate. This made for an unhappy populace which Saddam knew posed a threat to his leadership. Several coup and assassination plots had been foiled during the war.⁵

Saddam saw in public sentiment an opportunity for exploitation. If he could influence his people to blame Kuwait for problems at home, he would gain public support for the invasion. His propaganda machine castigated Kuwait for economic warfare committed in concert with imperialist America against Saddam. Saddam accused Kuwait of glutting the market with oil during the war, a ploy which cost Iraq \$500 billion. By the time the invasion was initiated Iraqis would have little pity for their disloyal brothers to the south.

The international context presented additional constraints to Saddam. Old allies disappeared with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc while Soviet Jews returned to Israel and strengthened an old enemy. He had not developed a successful foreign policy and consequently there was no reliable Arab alliance. Both the US and the French had threatened to withhold foreign aid since he was using it to build up his military force. His nuclear development plan was threatened with the seizure of electrical capacitors and parts of his supergun before they reached Iraq. Saddam blamed this seizure on an emerging Israeli, American, and British conspiracy. Finally, by executing an Iranian-born journalist who carried British papers and threatening to "make fire eat half of Israel"⁶, Saddam fueled tensions.

⁵ Freedman and Karsh, pp 29-30

⁶ Freedman and Karsh, p 38

Given these realities outside his borders, Saddam viewed the situation in terms of balance of power. How could he increase his power in order to be in a better position to operate in the international arena? The three main objectives that Saddam developed would not only answer this question but also solve his domestic woes. He would (1) continue to build a nuclear capability (2) gain control of the Gulf's oil and (3) obtain a better harbor on the Gulf. By achieving these goals, Saddam believed that not only would both he and his country survive and prosper, but also that he would become immensely powerful.

Saddam's Plan of Action

Kuwait was not only part of Saddam's basic problem, ironically it comprised the biggest part of the solution. In one stroke, he could acquire an immediate infusion of wealth, gain control of 40% of the world's oil, and secure a strategically located harbor. Saddam no doubt took a well-rehearsed warplan from the shelf and set it in motion on 15 July 1990.

His plan called for the simultaneous employment of both the military and diplomatic instruments of statecraft. The military campaign began with the gradual build-up of 100,000 troops and weaponry on Kuwait's northern border while special forces exercised their air-borne assault of Kuwait City in central Iraq. Commandos posing as an athletic team waited in Kuwait City until called upon to direct the special force helicopters to predetermined landing zones.

Saddam relied on his well-honed negative diplomacy (deception and denial) to convince the

world and the US in particular that he would not use force against Kuwait. Two key events illustrate his strategy and statecraft. First, he called American Ambassador Glaspie in to explain a planned US exercise in the UAE. He enumerated Kuwait's sins and threatened terrorist retaliation for any US intervention in Gulf matters. During that conversation he received a call from Egypt's Mubarak who had set up a meeting with Kuwait to negotiate a settlement. He returned and assured Glaspie that everything would be fine now as there would be a meeting in Jeddah to negotiate. Relieved and hopeful, Glaspie went back to the states for a vacation and reported the good news, "His emphasis that he wants a peaceful settlement is surely sincere."⁷ The psychological tool was effective.

Second, Saddam's actions surrounding the Jeddah meeting are revelatory. It could be argued that Saddam used the meeting as a smokescreen to hide his real intentions and to gain him the time necessary to finalize plans for the assault. The good news of Jeddah allayed Kuwaiti fears to the point that military forces went off alert. Before the meeting Saddam asked Yasser Arafat to deliver a message to Kuwait that he would ask for \$10 billion and in return reduce his troops on the border.⁸ (During that meeting, he would actually move his forces forward.) Ibrahim, Vice President of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council, represented Iraq at the meeting. When Kuwait showed initial signs of resisting Iraq's demands, Ibrahim called off the

⁷ Freedman and Karsh, p. 54.

⁸ Freedman and Karsh, p. 57.

summit and stormed out totally outraged. When he reported back, Saddam called a meeting of the Council and launched the invasion.

A final aspect of Saddam's strategy was to make his invasion of Kuwait tolerable to the Arab world. He accomplished this through propaganda which portrayed Kuwait as the virtual Harlot of Babylon. Kuwait, he perceived, had prostituted itself to imperialist America and plotted to bankrupt Iraq by breaking OPEC solidarity. But an even higher precedent was the fact that Kuwait historically was a part of Iraq.⁹ A return of the lost son to the motherland was long overdue.

Saddam's Plan, Success or Failure

Up to the point of retaliation by the UN coalition force lead by the US, Saddam's plan from a military perspective was successful. He effectively used deception and denial to create a sense of false security. This gave him time to maneuver his forces into position and to secure the element of surprise. Iraq marched into Kuwait and successfully overpowered the nation. The initial phase of Saddam's perceived "grand" strategy was accomplished.

Saddam ultimately failed on two counts. One, he overestimated the bargaining power gained by Iraq's sacrifice of blood and treasure to counter the Iranian threat to Gulf stability, and two, he underestimated US resolve to protect its vital national interest - the free flow of

⁹ Miller and Mylroie, p 194-195

affordable oil from the Gulf. These false assumptions lay at the very foundation of a plan of action destined for failure.

Would a better strategy or more imaginative statecraft overcome ultimate failure? The answer to this is connected to Saddam's basic character and identity - that of a brutal military dictator whose sole instrument of power and influence was negative diplomacy (i.e., threats and deception) and military force. He was incapable of the art of a higher diplomacy and statecraft which would have dictated an entirely different strategic approach. Selfish ambition and absence of positive diplomatic skill made it impossible for Saddam to plan and act any differently.

CONCLUSION

Lessons

Although Saddam fell far short of the skills normally associated with higher diplomacy and statecraft, his experience in the Gulf does none-the-less leave the world with some valuable lessons. For national security strategy in general, Saddam's ultimate failure underscores the importance of accurate assumptions and analysis to strategy. Saddam believed the US would not intervene because he had fought Iran and maintained a balance of power in the Gulf. This placed the US in great debt to him, he thought. What he discovered too late was that the US considered him to be an even bigger threat and it cost him dearly.

A second lesson is that nations must view themselves in the context of an emerging new world order¹⁰ Regional strife, Saddam failed to realize, has greater impact in a world more socially, economically, and diplomatically interdependent Economics teaches us that as the world develops an open market economy, countries will increasingly specialize in providing goods they produce best Specialization increases interdependence and makes regional tampering in the global village extremely dangerous Additionally, the exercise of force as a last resort in the new world order is best accomplished through coalition effort Independent acts of aggression are likely to be dealt with by multilateral forces as the Gulf war showed Also, Saddam's action in the Gulf brought out another post cold-war reality that nations must deal with in the new world order, namely, without superpower pressure to sanction them, colonially established borders will increasingly be contested

American statecraft can also learn from Saddam's experience The US believed its warning would prevent Saddam from invading Kuwait -- but Saddam was not deterred! Why? Because the US failed to issue a credible warning that would leave no question as to intention Instead the US conciliatory response to support the safety of its allies in the Gulf was ambiguous especially in light of the fact that the US was still courting Saddam even as he amassed his troops Would a clearly stated policy of support for Kuwait have prevented Saddam from invading? Perhaps so, but now the world will never know, or will it? Saddam just may present a

¹⁰ Miller and Mylroie, p 227

similar opportunity in the future for the nation's leaders to exercise a wiser strategy and statecraft

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