Airpower and a Decade of Containment

By PAUL K. WHITE

AWACS aircraft at Saudi air base.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Sean M. Worrell)

Tracking Iraqi fighters in no-fly zone.

39th Communications Squadron (Matthew Hannen)

Before the Gulf War, Iraq had one of the largest and most powerful militaries in the world. With 750,000 men under arms, 5,800 tanks, 3,850 artillery pieces, and 650 combat aircraft, Iraq wielded political and military influence throughout the region. But Operation Desert Storm left that military in shambles. Iraq lost 2,633 tanks, 2,196 artillery pieces, and 300 aircraft. Some 15,000 to 20,000 Iraqi soldiers died, 120,000 to 200,000 deserted, and 86,000 were captured. A policy of containment, supported by U.N.-imposed sanctions and inspections backed by a strong military presence, has prevented Iraq from significantly rebuilding its forces and threatening its neighbors.

And yet ten years after Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein is still in power and Iraq continues to challenge America and the international community. He has instigated four military crises since the coalition victory and has continuously forced the United

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Iraqi tank on Basra-Kuwait highway.

DOD

States to react militarily and diplomatically at tremendous fiscal and political cost. The use of airpower, whether by demonstrations, enforcing no-fly zones, or air strikes against select targets, has been the primary response to provocations by Baghdad. Because of a perception of limited liability and a high probability of success, airpower is increasingly the weapon of first resort. After a decade of continuous engagement, how effectively has coalition airpower restrained Iraq?

a direct challenge to Kuwait resulted in Operation Vigilant Warrior in 1994

Boxing Saddam

The United States and the United Nations instituted a broad policy of containment after Desert Storm. The objectives were to keep Saddam Hussein weak politically and limit his military ambition by supporting opposition groups inside Iraq and in neighboring states, constrain attempts to rebuild conventional forces, prevent the building or acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, and carefully monitor and if necessary degrade the Iraqi economy to accomplish these objectives. Accordingly, the Security Council passed Resolution 687 in 1991 to support such measures.

To the surprise of many observers in the West, the Iraqi regime did not self-destruct. The victory prompted immediate uprisings by Kurds in northern Iraq and Shi'as in the south. Baghdad responded with helicopter attacks which resulted in an international demand for the coalition to intervene. U.N. Resolution 688 provided the rationale to establish no-fly zones: to prevent Saddam from attacking his own people and contain his military. The first zone was instituted in northern Iraq by Operation Provide Comfort (later Northern Watch) in April 1991, then in the south by Southern Watch in August 1992. Washington took on the job of containing Iraq to both enforce U.N. resolutions and live up to the mission statement of U.S. Central Command: to promote and protect U.S. interests, ensure uninterrupted access to regional resources and markets, and assist regional friends in providing for their own security and regional stability.

Containment depends on various tools: a lethal forward presence with a threat to use force, a rapid response capability through pre-positioned equipment, an active sanctions and weapons inspection regime, enforcement of no-fly and no-drive zones, and bilateral security relationships with area partners.

Crises in Review

Iraqi forces have tested U.S. and U.N. resolve on four occasions since Desert Storm. The first followed the downing of a MiG–25 that had penetrated the southern no-fly zone in late 1992. Saddam then moved surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries into southern Iraq and continued aircraft incursions in the no-fly zones. After allied pilots reported that SAM radars were targeting fighters, President George Bush issued an ultimatum that Iraq remove the missiles or risk retaliation. When the demand was ignored, coalition forces reacted in January 1993 with air strikes into the south, cruise missile attacks, and then more air strikes. On January 19, the day before President Bill Clinton was inaugurated, Iraq announced a unilateral cease-fire.

In this first crisis Saddam learned that coalition forces would use airpower to enforce U.N. resolutions. At the same time, the strikes were limited and the targets had little value; thus he also learned that the United States was reluctant to risk the lives of its servicemembers or Iraqi civilians to achieve its political and military goals.

A direct challenge to Kuwait resulted in Operation Vigilant Warrior in 1994. On October 7, some 20,000 mechanized troops of the Republican Guard reportedly moved within thirty miles of the Kuwaiti border, where 40,000 Iraqis were already stationed. The United States threatened to mount a preemptive strike on Baghdad if the Iraqis did not withdraw and also immediately began to deploy thousands of ground troops, heavy armor, and hundreds of fighters. Saddam moved the newly-arrived forces north of the 32d parallel and the crisis was ended by October 15.

This crisis led to U.N. Resolution 949, which established a no-drive zone in southern Iraq. The massive and

Northern and Southern No-Fly Zones

timely deployment of additional coalition troops demonstrated the seriousness of American intentions to defend Kuwait. Iraq probably expected a slow buildup like Desert Shield. But the speed and determination of U.S. deployments surprised and intimidated Baghdad and may have deterred an incursion. However, the United States spent billions of dollars responding to the threat while Iraq risked little.

The third crisis, Desert Strike, was a response to a skillful attack against the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Irbil. Iraqi forces surrounded the city, smashed the Kurdish forces, and destroyed a protracted covert operation funded by the Central Intelligence Agency to destabilize the regime. American officials vowed retaliation and in September 1996 launched two waves of cruise missiles against targets in southern Iraq. In addition, the United States announced the unilateral extension of the southern no-fly zone to the 33d parallel, depriving Iraq of two air bases and moving the zone closer to Baghdad. Saddam began aggressively rebuilding air defenses damaged by cruise missile strikes as more allied fighters were deployed. SAMs engaged coalition aircraft during the following weeks, but tensions subsided and the crisis was over by mid-November.

Damaged Kurdish town in northern Iraq.

DOD (Theodore J. Koniares)

This confrontation was a victory for Iraq. Weakened by economic and political turmoil, Saddam performed some internal housecleaning. He settled a grievance with a Kurdish faction and annihilated U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts in the north. He also drove another wedge into coalition strategy as Turkey and Saudi Arabia decided not to allow air strikes from their territory (hence the cruise missile strikes) and France suspended its participation in Southern Watch. The attack on Irbil also highlighted the limits of containment in the north. Because of its distance from land- and carrier-based assets and the inability to employ forces in Turkey, the coalition had few options to stop the attack on Irbil other than an all-out assault on Baghdad.

The fourth crisis, culminating in Operation Desert Fox, resulted from inspection incidents that nearly led to U.S. and coalition air strikes in November 1997 and in February and November 1998. In all three instances Saddam instigated confrontation by halting or hampering inspections, accusing U.N. team members of espionage, and demanding an end to U–2 reconnaissance flights. In each case, air strikes were averted at the last minute by concessions on both sides, but constant cheat and retreat tactics by Iraq were wearing thin. By December 1998 U.S. forces had increased their presence in the region in preparation for an armed response. On the evening of December 16, with an impending vote to impeach President Clinton, Operation Desert Fox commenced.

The President ordered a series of air strikes that lasted four nights. For the first time since Desert Storm, the targets included Republican Guard units and facilities in downtown Baghdad. In seventy hours the coalition flew 650 sorties against 100 targets and sustained no casualties. A total of 415 cruise missiles were launched, including 325 Tomahawk missiles fired by the Navy and 90 heavier cruise missiles from B–52s. The strikes hit 80 percent of their designated targets, which analysts calculated set back the Iraqi ballistic missile program by up to two years.

Low-Level Attrition

The weeks following Desert Fox proved that the operation had a decisive impact. Saddam lashed out at perceived enemies inside and outside the country, called for the overthrow of several neighbors, and threatened bases in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait that facilitated aircraft flying no-fly zone patrols. Following a familiar pattern, Iraq announced it would fire on coalition aircraft that entered its airspace, including no-fly zones, and offered a bounty to air defense units that shot them down. In late December, F–15s and F–16s patrolling the northern no-fly zone responded to the launch of a SA–3 missile near Mosul with a series of almost daily cat-and-mouse confrontations between SAM operators and coalition aircrews.

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Sailors conducting maritime interdiction operations.

USS The Sullivans (J.B. Keefer)

In reaction to this challenge, the United States altered the rules of engagement. Previously, aircraft responded when threatened by missiles, artillery, or radar illumination, against the site making the threat. By mid-January 1999, the coalition was prepared to respond to any threat with a preplanned course of action. A perceived threat could be an aerial no-fly zone incursion by Iraqi fighters or target tracking radars. The allied response evolved from a reactive to preemptive approach. Pentagon officials said air strikes would continue as long as no-fly zone patrols were contested.

Ten years after Desert Storm, the United States finds itself in a stalemate. Air strikes still occur almost weekly, a humiliating reminder that Iraq does not have sovereignty over 60 percent of its airspace. Yet Baghdad undoubtedly continues to develop weapons of mass destruction unhampered by U.N. inspectors. The Armed Forces have struggled with readiness and retention problems due in large part to an increased and unrelenting operations tempo. Public fatigue, humanitarian concern for civilians, Iraqi oil, and the absence of viable opposition groups have left policymakers with fewer options, making the no-fly zones the cornerstone of containment.

Saddam's Strategy

Reactions to air strikes by Iraq since Desert Storm follow a pattern. During military action, the Iraqi military braces, accepts the blows with little resistance, and waits out the attacks. Then Saddam announces publicly that any aircraft entering the no-fly zones will be shot down, followed by clashes between SAM or antiaircraft systems and planes on patrol. He reacted the same way after each air strike, including claims of success. Some speculate that his response is an attempt to remain defiant, proving to the Iraqi army and the people of the region that he is not cowed by the Western powers with their prowess and technology.

The sight of a coalition pilot on CNN, being paraded through the streets of Baghdad, could have great impact on the American psyche and will to sustain air operations. Iraq has the capability to shoot down coalition aircraft. On occasion it has shown surprising situational awareness. Even though its air defense forces continue to be hampered by antiquated weapons and lack of training, it is an able adversary. As the period since Desert Fox has demonstrated, Saddam seems prepared to occasionally risk elements of his air defense system to bring down a U.S. fighter. Baghdad is also willing to prompt air strikes for propaganda purposes, particularly when civilian casualties are involved.

Tomahawk lifting off *USS Shiloh* during Desert Strike.

U.S. Navy

It would be a mistake to underestimate the continuing threat.

The safety record during enforcement of the no-fly zones has been phenomenal. Coalition aircraft have flown more than 280,000 missions with only one loss in hostile territory since Desert Storm, a French Mirage which crashed near Irbil after engine failure in June 1992. Rescue forces quickly retrieved the pilot without incident. But Saddam believes that the odds are in his favor and that eventually the allies will lose a fighter, either by a fortuitous intercept or aircraft malfunction. The extraordinary emphasis placed on limiting both friendly and adversary casualties, as evidenced in Kosovo, reveals U.S. vulnerability on this subject. How the Nation reacts to an aircraft being downed will be crucial in dealing with Saddam Hussein.

Airpower and Containment

Analysis of a decade of peace operations yields clear conclusions on the utility of airpower and prospects for regional stability. The concept of no-fly zones emerged as a new dimension of airpower following Desert Storm, specifically because of U.S. objectives in Iraq. The zones have exerted a constant, credible military threat against Saddam. The risk of retaliation by air strikes has been key in preventing Saddam from threatening his neighbors. In addition, coalition air presence provides intelligence, reconnaissance, and early warning information on Iraqi forces.

The concept of no-fly zones has matured and expanded since their first use to protect Kurds and Shi'as. Their enhancement by creating the southern no-drive zone gave no-fly zones greater utility in reducing the Iraqi threat to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In effect, the zones have evolved from protecting oppressed minorities to defending border nations.

International sympathy for Iraqi civilians makes a repetition of Desert Fox improbable. It is also highly unlikely that a revived U.N. weapons inspection program will be effective in the near future. Continued enforcement of the no-fly zones and retaliatory air strikes allow the coalition to maintain the status quo of a beleaguered containment policy.

Containing Saddam is one issue, but deterring him from further misadventure is another. He took power and has retained rule largely through force. In such a regime, the personal survival of a dictator and his immediate political base is paramount, so external threats aimed at the welfare of the population have little effect. Similarly domestic public opinion and economic sanctions have limited impact. History indicates that deterrence must be immediate and direct. Damage must not be aimed at the values of a people but at its ruling elite. That is why Desert Fox threatened Saddam while retaliatory air strikes have not.

It is clear that no-fly zones, already the longest sustained military operation since Vietnam, will continue until there is a change in containment policy or the regime in Baghdad. Saddam has proven himself a resilient adversary. He continues to exploit opportunities presented by changing world opinion, increasing sanctions fatigue, and diplomatic blunders. It is not beyond possibility that the United States, out of a lack of domestic and international support, could simply allow the containment policy to gradually fade, much like dual-containment toward Iran. But as one senior U.S. official remarked in October 1994:

This is not over. I think Saddam will try to find a way to say to the United States and the international community that neither we nor he can win the game according to its existing rules, so that we must change the rules and give him what he wants.[1]

At the same time, despite flaws, containment has preserved national interests. Persian Gulf security has been maintained as has access to regional resources and markets. America must be prepared to stay the course, much as it has done in Korea for fifty years. In the absence of viable alternatives, containment, now more than ever dependent on the U.S. aerospace advantage, has proven to be a policy that works. **JFQ**

NOTE

[1] Nancy Gibbs, "A Show of Strength," *Time*, vol. 144, no. 17 (October 24, 1994), p. 17.